

**LYRICAL BALLARDS:
THE WOUNDED ROMANTICISM OF J. G. BALLARD**

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Abstract

This thesis aims to provide a new account of the post-war British author J. G. Ballard (1930-2009) and his work, and in particular of his complex engagement with and critique of Romanticism. As such it represents an original contribution to knowledge in the areas of both J. G. Ballard criticism and in the study of Romantic legacies. Ballard's ambivalent response to the legacies of Romanticism is seen to form a part of his overall ambivalence and ambiguity as a writer. In addition to the traditional 'high Romantic' aesthetic and ideology of Romanticism, Ballard is seen to draw upon Gothic, decadent and symbolist strands of Romanticism. After introducing the key Romantic echoes which I observe in Ballard, and the critical and cultural legacies of Romanticism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries which he is responding to, I trace these elements through selected works covering the breadth of his oeuvre. Rather than offering a survey of the entirety of his work, of which there are several in print, the thesis considers a selection of key texts at different stages of Ballard's career in order to bring out the evolving Romantic resonances of his work. In chapter 1 I examine the apocalyptic bard figures in a number of Ballard's short stories published between 1956 and 1964; in chapter 2 I focus upon the marriage between mind and world in *The Drowned World* (1962); chapter 3 considers *The Atrocity Exhibition* (1970) and *Crash* (1973) as the urban and suburban sites of the wounding of a Romantic sensibility; chapter 4 concentrates upon *The Unlimited Dream Company* (1979) and *The Day of Creation* (1987) as meditations upon the role of the imagination in a multiply-mediated modernity; and chapter 5 investigates

Millennium People (2003) and *Kingdom Come* (2006) as postmodern detective stories that draw upon the tradition of the visionary urban and suburban wanderer.

Abbreviations

Ballard, J. G. *The Wind from Nowhere* (London: Penguin, 1974 [1962]). **WFN**

Ballard, J. G. *The Drowned World* (London: Fourth Estate, 2014 [1962]). **DW**

Ballard, J. G. *The Drought* (London: Fourth Estate, 2014 [1964]). **D**

Ballard, J. G. *The Crystal World* (London: Fourth Estate, 2014 [1966]). **CW**

Ballard, J. G. *The Atrocity Exhibition* (London: Fourth Estate, 2014 [1970]). **AE**

Ballard, J. G. *Crash* (London: Fourth Estate, 2014 [1973]). **C**

Ballard, J. G. *Concrete Island* (London: Fourth Estate, 2014 [1974]). **CI**

Ballard, J. G. *High-Rise* (London: Fourth Estate, 2014 [1975]). **HR**

Ballard, J. G. *The Unlimited Dream Company* (London: Fourth Estate, 2014 [1979]).

UDC

Ballard, J. G. *Hello America* (London: Fourth Estate, 2014 [1981]). **HA**

Ballard, J. G. *J. G. Ballard* eds. V. Vale and Andrea Juno (San Francisco: Re/Search Publications, 1984). **R/S JGB**

Ballard, J. G. *The Day of Creation* (London: Fourth Estate, 2014 [1987]). **DC**

Ballard, J. G. *Rushing to Paradise* (London: Fourth Estate, 2014 [1994]). **RP**

Ballard, J. G. *A User's Guide to the Millennium: Essays and Reviews* (London: Flamingo, 1997 [1996]). **UGM**

Ballard, J. G. *Cocaine Nights* (London: Fourth Estate, 2014 [1996]). **CN**

Ballard, J. G. *Super-Cannes* (London: Fourth Estate, 2014 [2000]). **SC**

Ballard, J. G. *The Complete Short Stories: Volume 1* (London: Fourth Estate, 2014 [2001]). **CSSI**

Ballard, J. G. *The Complete Short Stories: Volume 2* (London: Fourth Estate, 2014 [2001]). **CSS2**

Ballard, J. G. *Millennium People* (London: Fourth Estate, 2014 [2004]). **MP**

Ballard, J. G. *Kingdom Come* (London: Fourth Estate, 2014 [2006]). **KC**

Ballard, J. G. *Extreme Metaphors: Interviews with J. G. Ballard, 1967-2008*, eds.

Simon Sellars and Dan O'Hara (London: Fourth Estate, 2012). **EM**

Introduction: Romanticisms Past and Present

The work of the post-war British author J. G. Ballard (1930-2009) has fascinated and frustrated its readers and critics in equal measure over the years. His writing career began in the 1950s, producing short stories for science fiction magazines like *Science Fantasy* and *New Worlds*, and continued until his death in 2009. Ballard was the author of some eighteen novels, over one hundred short stories, an autobiography, and numerous reviews, essays, manifestoes and pieces of journalism. He also wrote a novella (*Running Wild* (1988)) and was a prolific interviewee. A prominent member of the British science fiction ‘New Wave’ of the 1960s and 70s,¹ he achieved a wider popularity and critical recognition after the publication of his semi-autobiographical novel *Empire of the Sun* (1984), which was adapted for the big screen by Stephen Spielberg in 1987.² His novels *The Atrocity Exhibition* (1970) and *Crash* (1973) attracted prosecutions and censorship in both the United States and Britain for obscenity, and David Cronenberg’s 1996 film adaptation of *Crash* was banned in the city of Westminster.

The *Collins English Dictionary* defines the second sense of the adjective ‘Ballardian’ as follows:

¹ Descriptions of the British ‘New Wave’ tend to cluster around the three authors who worked together on *New Worlds* during the 1960s and 70s – Brian Aldiss, J. G. Ballard and Michael Moorcock. This was a science fiction that sought to investigate the present and the near future in psychological and sociological terms, and which was more interested in the media landscape and the artistic avant-garde than in space travel and the distant futures of ‘hard’ science fiction. See, for instance, ‘New Wave’, *The Encyclopaedia of Science Fiction* (April, 2015), <http://www.sf-encyclopedia.com/entry/new_wave>, [accessed September 15 2015].

² Ballard wrote that it took him twenty years to forget the events that inspired *Empire of the Sun*, and twenty years to remember them. See J. G. Ballard, ‘Look back at Empire’, *The Guardian* (Saturday 4 March 2006) <<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2006/mar/04/fiction.film>> [accessed: 23 September 2015].

resembling or suggestive of the conditions described in Ballard's novels and stories, esp dystopian modernity, bleak man-made landscapes, and the psychological effects of technological, social or environmental developments³

This definition is arguably indicative of what has been a mainstay of much Ballard criticism as well as representative of popular opinion of his works. Certainly Ballard's nightmare marriages of sex and technology; his twentieth-century version of ennui, 'the death of affect'; and the fact that almost all of his novels and most of his short stories are concerned with some kind of disaster – whether personal, societal or environmental – speak to a powerful strain of pessimism or even nihilism running through his oeuvre.⁴ But Ballard's work has always resisted unifying explanatory theories, aesthetic or generic containment; the bleakness described above is very often and paradoxically delivered in lyrical passages of highly seductive prose that call upon the symbols, metaphors and works of Romanticism, and which engage with common Romantic tropes such as transcendence, beauty, myth and limitless desire. This seeming dichotomy in Ballard's work has led to an undulation in critical responses over the years, which have tended to privilege either one or the other, reading Ballard as either essentially nihilistic or positively transcendent. My aim in this thesis is to account for these antithetical elements in Ballard which I argue result in a state of 'contraplex' – a perpetually unresolved dialectic which seeks to both harness and preserve the productive, though frequently

³ The first sense denotes 'of James Graham Ballard (1930-2009), the British novelist, or his works'. *Collins English Dictionary Online*. <<http://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english>> [accessed: 23 September 2015]. The *Collins* is the only major dictionary to recognize the word.

⁴ 'The death of affect' is a recurring Ballardian trope which I explain in more detail below.

equally destructive, tension of opposites. As I discuss at greater length below, there are clear parallels to be drawn between what I call Ballard's contraplex and the great Romantic dialectician, William Blake.⁵ As against wholly dystopian readings of Ballard, and naively Romantic ones, my thesis seeks to understand the preponderance of Romantic imagery, quotation, and passages of lyrical intensity, through a thoroughgoing appreciation of the complexity of both Romanticism and Ballard's engagement with it. It is my contention that these elements are part of a sustained continuation with and interrogation of the twentieth and twenty-first century legacies of Romanticism. I am not the first to notice the Romantic strains in Ballard; some of the earliest major critical studies of his work sought to privilege the presence of transcendent imagery and symbolism in Ballard's ostensibly bleak and pessimistic narratives. David Pringle, Colin Greenland, Gregory Stephenson, and Warren Wagar have all offered readings of Ballard which recognize, amongst others, the influence of Romanticism. However, the invocation of Romanticism by these scholars was arguably overly simplistic, and left their work open to charges of ideological perpetuation and even tautology. Subsequent criticism has seen the pendulum swing back towards a grittier, dystopian, postmodern Ballard for whom Romanticism was at best the subject of satire, or else provided a layer of seductive distraction from the real intent of his works. I wish to revive an interest in the Romantic legacies in Ballard's work, but in a sufficiently nuanced manner, and one that is capable of accounting for the simultaneous presence of transcendent and dystopian moods, themes and aesthetics in his work. In my reading, Ballard's

⁵ There are many more similarities, such as the pioneering combinations of image and text which were integral to Blake's works; Ballard would experiment with image and text in his *Project for a New Novel* (1958), as well as in the original plan for *The Atrocity Exhibition* (1970). See 'Reading *The Atrocity Exhibition: A History of Forms*' in Jeannette Baxter, *J. G. Ballard's Surrealist Imagination: Spectacular Authorship* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2009), pp. 59-98.

engagement with Romanticism is both deliberate and critical, and an understanding of its complexity can help to account for the studied ambiguity and ambivalence of his texts. As already indicated, in order to describe Ballard's oscillation between Romantic and anti-Romantic, Enlightenment and anti-Enlightenment, transcendence and despair, I use the metaphor of a 'contraplex', which describes the simultaneous passage of oppositely charged signals or currents within a system or circuit. Such a symbol is happily capable of incorporating road traffic travelling in opposite directions, ascent and descent, progress and decline, evolution and devolution. Romanticism is always at work in Ballard's productive dialectic which, in true Blakean fashion, refuses resolution.

In his early career Ballard's defying of generic boundaries alienated many fans of science fiction, whilst that same generic taint denied him access to the literary mainstream of fiction.⁶ Generic uncertainty is not the only kind of ambiguity to be found in Ballard's fictions: through the proliferation of explanatory theories and allusions which they self-supply, they can be thought of as 'overdetermined' – anticipating and undermining critical readings even as they form in the reader's mind. This has led one eminent Ballard scholar to label parts of the oeuvre as 'unreadable'.⁷ Nonetheless, there have been readings of Ballard which have sought to privilege the transcendent and what I call the lyrical in Ballard, and in so doing they have invoked Romanticism and its modern descendants. The proliferation of Romantic symbols, tropes, passages of lyrical description, and the overriding

⁶ For a full discussion of the problematics of Ballard and genre see 'J. G. Ballard and the Catastrophe of Genre' in Roger Luckhurst, *The Angle Between Two Walls: The Fiction of J. G. Ballard* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2007), pp. 1-28.

⁷ Luckhurst, p. 173

epistemological concern of Ballard's works certainly suggest this line of enquiry, and my thesis seeks to build upon the foundations laid in the thematic studies of J. G. Ballard's work by David Pringle, Colin Greenland and Gregory Stephenson. However these studies, as I shall briefly outline below, do not demonstrate a sufficiently nuanced understanding of Romanticism, instead using what is a highly contentious term as though its explanatory power is such that it merely needs to be registered in order to account for these echoes and legacies in Ballard's writing. My thesis will give a much fuller account of what I see as Ballard's complex and critical response to the legacies of Romanticism.

David Pringle was perhaps the first to point to the persistence of a Romantic strain in Ballard's work:

[T]he main influences on Ballard's writing were to come from outside the SF field. Romanticism, Symbolism, Surrealism, and the whole "modern movement" in literature and the visual arts have left their marks on Ballard.⁸

Pringle goes on to list Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner* and Edgar Allan Poe as particular influences, but Pringle's primary concern is with the modern descendants of Romanticism: Jungian psychoanalysis, anti-psychiatry, Symbolism and Surrealism. Despite constructing an elaborate fourfold symbolic interpretation of Ballard's recurrent imagery in his fiction of the first twenty years – worthy, one

⁸ David Pringle, *Earth is the Alien Planet: The Fourfold Symbolism of J. G. Ballard* (California: Borgo Press, 1979), p. 6.

might say, of William Blake – Romanticism was merely invoked as an explanatory label and precursor rather than a complicated and complicating factor. Colin Greenland, though primarily concerned with detailing the British New Wave's fascination with the forces of entropy, also took time to consider Ballard's literary antecedents:

The destruction of the self liberates a purer, inner being that flies straight to another plane, the reality beyond the catastrophe. Whether Ballard describes this release in terms of religion, psychology, or biological atavism, it becomes apparent that the notion is principally romantic.⁹

But such comments were part of a broader discussion of the nihilism of the British New Wave, expressed through entropy. Indeed, as I outline below, the entropic in Ballard might be read as a further Romantic echo in the form of a belated decadence. Gregory Stephenson built upon Pringle's thematic work to offer a detailed account of the influence of C. G. Jung, Aldous Huxley, R. D. Laing and the centrality of the archetypes of myth, in order to establish Ballard in what he calls 'the visionary tradition'.¹⁰ This collection of thematic inspirations is compared with 'English Romanticism', but Stephenson, like Pringle and Greenland before him, offers no detailed account of the term, nor of the ways in which Ballard's drawing upon Romanticism might be said to be critical – both extending and undermining its central tenets. Gregory Stephenson does offer a more sustained consideration of the thematic correlations between that amorphous entity that we call Romanticism and

⁹ Colin Greenland, *Entropy Exhibition: Michael Moorcock and the British 'New Wave' in Science Fiction* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983), p. 100.

¹⁰ Gregory Stephenson, *Out of the Night and into the Dream: A Thematic Study of the Fiction of J. G. Ballard* (London: Greenwood Press, 1991), p. 154.

Ballard's oeuvre. It is worthwhile quoting Stephenson at length here, both because what he has to say is a good starting point, and because I think that it demonstrates what is at stake in a too-simplistic mapping of an insufficiently nuanced understanding of Romanticism onto Ballard's fictions:

Ballard's work also evinces kinship with the central elements of the English Romantic tradition. Some general attributes common to Ballard's art and to that of the Romantics include: a preoccupation with the infinite and the transcendental; a sense of the spiritual correspondence that exists between humankind and the natural world; an intense concern with perception and the nature of reality; and a recognition that the visionary imagination represents a link with the realm of the eternal. Likewise, Ballard's work shares with the spirit of English Romanticism a fundamental distrust of scientific and technological progress, of existing social and political institutions, as well as commercial interests; and an enmity toward all forces and agencies that seek to control and to manipulate, and toward all that perpetuates custom, convention, and habit, that limits and distorts perception, and that causes oppression or sustains illusion in any form or at any level.¹¹

Stephenson begins here by outlining some of the broad parallels that can be drawn between Ballard's epistemological concerns and those of Romanticism, but from the second half of this passage, he allows his preconceived ideas about the term to belie the specificity of different 'Romanticisms' and of Ballard's critical and ambivalent responses to them. Of particular note is the assertion of Ballard's mistrust of science

¹¹ Stephenson, p. 149

and technology. As will become clear, Ballard's exploration of the meeting of the human and the technological in the twentieth century is complex and ambiguous to the last, and his attitude towards technological change cannot be unequivocally expressed as 'fundamental distrust'. Stephenson fails to register the deep ambivalence at work in Ballard's fiction, such that almost no subject or object can be said to be taken up unproblematically. Stephenson's concept of illusion in his study is revealed to be too shallow here, too; what is very often so paradoxically liberating about reading Ballard, it seems to me, is the prominent place that personal illusions have in his fictive world, and that his characters overcome the proliferating fictions of what he calls the 'media landscape' with powerful idiosyncratic projections of their own.¹² Stephenson appears to have fastened upon one facet of Ballard's thought and elevated it to predominance in such a way that it does away with one of the most fascinating aspects of his work: its all-pervading sense of ambiguity. Stephenson's generalist invocation of Romanticism is unable to account for this extreme undecidability – itself a Romantic echo – a point which will be returned to and discussed in more detail in the chapters to come.

In a more recent study, *Mythic Thinking in Twentieth-Century Britain: Meaning for Modernity* (2013), Matthew Sterenberg has considered Ballard in the light of twentieth-century myth-making.¹³ Ballard called William S. Burroughs the 'Myth

¹² I unpack Ballard's concept of the 'media landscape' in more detail later in this introduction. Suffice to say that it is composed of the modern communications network, advertising, cinema and television, and it bears comparison to Guy Debord's 'society of the spectacle', also discussed near the end of the introduction on pages 64-6.

¹³ See 'Coping with the Catastrophe: J. G. Ballard, The New Wave, and Mythic Science Fiction' in Matthew Sterenberg, *Mythic Thinking in Twentieth-Century Britain: Meaning for Modernity* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 97-122.

Maker of the Twentieth Century' in his 1964 review of *Naked Lunch* (1959) for *New Worlds*, and the fashioning of new myths for modernity, capable of responding to what Ballard calls the media landscape, is a central concern of his work.

Sterenberg's focus on the therapeutic intent of Ballard's myth-making is interesting, but I think he sometimes misses the disquieting palliative aspect of his care: Ballard is as likely to be easing our transition into death as he is creating the psychological conditions for survival. Sterenberg seems to duplicate Gregory Stephenson's argument in many ways – replacing 'transcendence' with 'mythology' in the relevant places, wishing to prioritise the broadly positive in Ballard over the negative. The equivocality of Ballard's fictions, then, is insufficiently registered by Sterenberg, especially considering that the preservation of possibility is something that the rich symbolism and core irreducibility of myth could be said to keep in play. The Romantics also turned to myth – to the popular mythology of the British Isles as against classical myth, but also to early classical mythology as against Augustan celebrations of the mythology and culture of imperial Rome. There was a repurposing and reinterpretation of older mythologies as well as the fashioning of new mythologies. But the inheritance of classical antiquity was not taken up uncritically by the Romantic poets, and as Gillen D'Arcy Wood has shown in his reading of John Keats' Elgin Marbles poems, the resonance of mythology was vulnerable to the historical fact of ruins and remains.¹⁴ To Ballard, writing in the mid-twentieth to early twenty-first centuries, the inheritance of Romanticism is a part of the mythic heritage upon which he draws.

¹⁴ See 'Ruins and Museums' in Gillen D'Arcy Wood, *The Shock of the Real: Romanticism and Visual Culture, 1760-1860* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), pp. 121-171.

Roger Luckhurst's *The Angle Between Two Walls* (1997) is the seminal exploration of ambiguity and ambivalence in J. G. Ballard's fiction, and this study draws upon his thinking in order to understand the complex interweaving of the Romantic in and amongst the proliferation of what he calls 'frames', which Ballard's overdetermined works present to the perplexed reader whilst simultaneously undermining and interrogating their interpretive power.¹⁵ Luckhurst does not himself consider the possibility of a Romantic frame, dismissing those that have (David Pringle, Gregory Stephenson, Warren Wagar) for producing 'idiomatic readings' that 'embroil themselves in the repetition of that which they seek to catalogue'.¹⁶ For Luckhurst, then, it would appear that the proliferation of Romantic imagery, allusion and even direct reference in Ballard's texts are merely the desiccated husks of a denied literary sensibility, and therefore are devoid of interpretive meaning except as the antithesis of their original. But if Ballard's lyrical panoply is in that sense often parodic, Luckhurst himself recognizes that the thievery and ridicule of parody also inescapably monumentalizes its sources through its dependence upon them.¹⁷ Luckhurst writes of Ballard's texts as unsettling boundaries and undoing binary opposites,¹⁸ and part of what my study will do is to look at how they both propose and interrogate the commonplace opposites of Enlightenment and Romantic worldviews. The either/or equation of literal death and transcendence that Luckhurst perceives in the criticism of Ballard's catastrophe novels may also prove amenable to a framing in terms of Romanticism. I am arguing, then, for the rightful place of a sufficiently nuanced Romantic frame, one which can be put in productive

¹⁵ Luckhurst, pp. xi-xix

¹⁶ Ibid p. 169

¹⁷ Ibid p. 177

¹⁸ Ibid p. 30

conversation with those others that Luckhurst discusses such as Imperial, Jungian, Existentialist, Freudian and, thanks to Jeannette Baxter, Surrealist.

Jeannette Baxter's *J. G. Ballard's Surrealist Imagination: Spectacular Authorship* (2009) was the first sustained consideration of J. G. Ballard's repeatedly self-professed obsession with Surrealism. Baxter's study was the first, to my knowledge, that was capable of accounting for the extreme visuality of Ballard's fictions, and her invocation of Ballard's 'transformative imagination' as the key to understanding 'the historical, cultural and political significance' of his works seems eminently compatible with my approach.¹⁹ Moreover, her treatment of Surrealism as a complicated and complicating factor with which Ballard critically engages provides a model for my approach to the role of Romanticism in his work. I do not propose Romanticism as an ur-influence that can somehow provide an interpretive key to all of the mysteries of Ballard's work, but I do think that an appreciation for the Romantic inheritance of the Surrealists, as well as in Ballard, can enhance the historicized picture that Baxter's work has begun to paint.

The loose way in which the term Romanticism has been used by some critics of Ballard, then, as though it were an explanation in itself – the end of enquiry, rather than the beginning – may in part be responsible for this aspect of Ballard's work being largely overlooked in criticism after Stephenson's *Out of the Night*.

¹⁹ Jeannette Baxter, *J. G. Ballard's Surrealist Imagination: Spectacular Authorship* (London: Ashgate, 2009), p. 10.

Nonetheless, the spectre of a possible Romantic reading appears briefly in more than one recent critical appraisal. Andrzej Gasiorek suggests that in *The Crystal World* (1966) Ballard 'draws imaginatively on the resources of Romanticism, and perhaps especially on Wordsworth's iterations of a childhood sense of joy and wonder in face of the natural world', and also notes the many intriguing echoes in Ballard of William Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, whilst Alistair Cormack has further considered the troubling presence of William Blake in *The Unlimited Dream Company* (1979).²⁰

Samuel Francis, although his study is concerned with Ballard's interest in psychoanalytic theory, also makes the connection between Ballard and Romanticism, noting Ballard's 'Romantic fondness for speaking of "spirit"', and a 'kind of sensibility' discernible in the narrator of *Crash*'s 'romantic responsiveness to the "pathos" of the technological environment'.²¹ Moreover, he recognizes the inheritance of Romanticism as transmitted perhaps through Surrealism:

Ballard is a writer of the imagination, and deserves to be seen in the context of developing conceptions of that faculty from the Romantic period onwards, and indeed in some senses as quixotically reasserting the Romantic heritage of the Surrealist imagination in the context of the postmodern world of

²⁰ Andrzej Gasiorek, *J. G. Ballard* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), pp. 48, 10; Alistair Cormack, 'J. G. Ballard and William Blake: Historicizing the Reprobate Imagination' in Jeannette Baxter and Rowland Wymer eds. *J. G. Ballard: Visions and Revisions* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp. 142-159.

²¹ Samuel Francis, *The Psychological Fictions of J. G. Ballard* (London: Continuum, 2011), pp. 3, 107.

simulation; Ballard was in many ways, as he himself acknowledged, a writer of fantasy as much as science fiction.²²

Though I obviously agree that the legacy of Romanticism is an important context for the consideration of Ballard's work, I take issue with the notion that Ballard's engagement with Romanticism is quixotic. I aim to demonstrate that Ballard's employment of Romantic tropes – his invocation of Romantic symbols, and his interrogation and yet perpetuation of the myths of Romanticism – are both deliberate and informed. Among recent Ballard criticism, Jordi Costa in his 'Ballardoscope: Some Attempts at Approaching the Writer as a Visionary' (2013), comes closest to articulating the ambivalence that I wish to explore:

The imagination according to Ballard is the source of redemption and transcendence – what makes us fly – but it also contains the dangers of obsession and self-destruction – what absorbs our identity and reduces it to nothing.²³

Costa describes here the contraplexual movement of Ballard's texts – a movement that, in its ambivalent treatment of the imagination, is anticipated by the canonical Romantic poets. Costa, though, does not go on to make the link back to Romanticism, and it is precisely that which this thesis sets out to examine. Before launching into an exploration of the Romantic legacies at play in some of Ballard's novels and short stories, however, I discuss in the next part of this introduction the

²² Ibid p. 185

²³ Jordi Costa, 'Ballardoscope: Some Attempts at Approaching the Writer as a Visionary' in Rick McGrath ed. *The J G Ballard Book* (Toronto, Canada: The Terminal Press, 2013), p. 170.

changing shape of Romanticism – a term which has been contested to the extent that it may make more sense to talk about ‘Romanticisms’. Initially, a popular understanding of Romanticism will be useful as a foil against which the ostensibly unromantic qualities of Ballard’s fictions can be measured. The popularity of William Blake and his adoption by the drug culture of the 1960s – a response in some ways to the saturation of the media landscape – echoed Romantic reactions to the spectacle of visual culture in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Such popular notions of Romanticism are arguably indebted to the 1950s and 60s school of (largely) American criticism centred around such figures as M. H. Abrams, Harold Bloom and Geoffrey Hartman. These critics looked to the purity of the Romantic apocalyptic vision as a wholesome alternative to the popular visual culture of their time. Out of these discussions will arise a complication of both Romanticism and its persistence and denial throughout Ballard’s oeuvre. When such ‘healthy’ or ‘high’ Romanticism meets the sublime, the nature of the subject tends to overrun its boundaries and so segues into the darker currents of the Gothic, and of decadence, which it had sought to deny or displace onto other literatures. After outlining both ‘high’ and ‘dark’ strains of Romanticism, I will discuss some modern criticism of both, which has sought to recognize the latter as an ever-present current within the stream of the former. In the final section I will discuss some of Ballard’s own statements about Romanticism and decadence in interviews and essays, and I consider his aesthetic manifesto ‘Which Way to Inner Space’ (1962), before outlining the five chapters of my thesis.

Romanticisms Past

As conventionally conceived, and widely taught, what we call Romanticism began in the late eighteenth century and has been seen as in many ways a reaction against the perceived rationality and classicism of the Enlightenment, and against the eighteenth-century dominance of the neoclassical aesthetics of the Augustan poets, such as John Dryden, Alexander Pope and Samuel Johnson.²⁴ Romantic poets were seen to be reacting against the strictures of a mimetic aesthetics which privileged the unities of time, place and action, and valued the sanctity of the genres. On this view, eighteenth-century aesthetics valorised art that imitated nature in its perfected form so as to ‘delight and instruct its consumers’.²⁵ Romanticism, by contrast, championed the human imagination as ‘potentially divine, capable of creating a unique world’ and aimed to develop a poetry that reflected a poet’s ‘unique emotional as well as intellectual engagement with the universe.’²⁶ Romanticism heralded a new ‘expressivist’ turn in the concepts of the self and in aesthetics;²⁷ it ushered in new understandings of the role of the poet/artist; and it sought to revolutionize the relations of mankind to one another and to nature (very often capitalized and personified as ‘Nature’). However, the terms ‘Romanticism’ and ‘Romantic’ were rarely used by the two generations of canonical poets that we now call Romantic – William Blake, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, William Wordsworth, John Keats, Percy Bysshe Shelley and Lord Byron – and they do not seem to have referred to themselves as being part of a movement called Romanticism. Nor – excepting Byron, who was to become one of the greatest celebrities of the age – were

²⁴ Martin Travers eds. *European Literature from Romanticism to Postmodernism: A Reader in Aesthetic Practice* (London: Continuum, 2001), p. 3.

²⁵ Anne K. Mellor, ‘Feminism’ in *Romanticism: An Oxford Guide* ed. Nicholas Roe (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008 [2005]), p. 190.

²⁶ *Ibid*

²⁷ See ‘The Expressivist Turn’ in Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012 [1989]), pp. 368-390.

these poets necessarily the best-selling or most famous writers of their period (roughly 1760-1830).²⁸ The terms are further complicated by the sheer range of authors, periods, works and ideas that are supposed to be encompassed by ‘Romantic’ and ‘Romanticism’, a problem that led the historian of ideas A. O. Lovejoy to famously declare, in ‘On the Discrimination of Romanticisms’ (1923), that there is no such thing as Romanticism, only ‘Romanticisms’.²⁹

Before invoking the Romantic in the work of J. G. Ballard, then, we must be clear about what the term has meant, what we mean by it now, and what Ballard might be said to have understood by it. In order to give some sense of this I will begin with the post-war Romantic criticism of René Wellek, and his hugely influential answer to A. O. Lovejoy’s polemic, in the 1949 essay ‘The Concept of Romanticism in Literary History’. I will then move on to the privileging of the apocalyptic imagination in the 1950s and 60s ‘high Romantic’ criticism, which is characterized by the work of M. H. Abrams, Harold Bloom and Geoffrey Hartman. Although Ballard would have missed out on the seminal works of these critics during his year of studying English Literature at Queen Mary’s College, London in 1951,³⁰ he would very likely have come across the ideas of Lovejoy and Wellek, and the major criticism of the American high Romantic school would be published in the years leading up to and

²⁸ See, for example, Iain McCalman ed. *An Oxford Companion to the Romantic Age: British Culture 1776-1832* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001 [1999]); Marilyn Butler, *Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries: English Literature and its Background 1760-1830* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981); Gillen D’Arcy Wood, *The Shock of the Real: Romanticism and Visual Culture, 1760-1860* (New York: Palgrave, 2001); and Jerome McGann ed. *The New Oxford Book of Romantic Period Verse* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), which includes verse published between 1785 and 1832.

²⁹ A. O. Lovejoy, ‘On the Discrimination of Romanticisms’ in *PMLA*, Vol. 39, No. 2 (Jun., 1924), pp. 229-253. This is an intellectual idea that has proven extremely influential, it now being commonplace to refer to Modernisms, Postmodernisms and even to Renaissances and Enlightenments.

³⁰ J. G. Ballard, *Miracles of Life* (London: Harper Perennial, 2008), p. 151-7.

following the writing and publication of Ballard's first short stories; it is these critics, then, who are most likely to have formed Ballard's understanding of Romanticism and the 'Romantic'. Lastly, I will outline some of the critical responses to high Romantic criticism, in the work of Paul de Man, Jerome McGann, and social theorists such as Colin Campbell. These later critics would come to see Romanticism as something onto which we project the concerns of our own time, and as reflective of the problematic origin of a peculiarly modern sense of the self and of subjectivity. Arising out of an undermining of the purity of the aesthetics envisaged by the high Romantic critics is a recognition of its darker 'Other' or others. In the final movement of this discussion of Romanticisms I will look to the inclusion of Gothic and decadent literatures in the legacies of Romanticism, and to how those legacies are transmitted through Modernism and Postmodernism. I hope to demonstrate that Ballard draws high Romantic as well as Gothic and decadent aesthetics into his contraplexual works, both critiquing and perpetuating their legacies.

The period of high Romantic criticism, associated with American scholars such as Abrams, Hartman and Bloom, was one which sought to purify and distil something uniquely transcendent and apocalyptic in the works of the above-named canonical Romantic poets, who were seen to be reworking biblical cycles of prophecy and revelation in a secular fashion. This project seemed to desire a clean and healthy Romanticism from which the darker and more troubling aspects could be dispelled, perhaps in part because of the threat of fragmentation posed by Lovejoy's 'Romanticisms'. Their work drew upon René Wellek's classic formulation of the cohesion of European Romantic thought: 'imagination for the view of poetry, nature

for the view of the world, and symbol and myth for poetic style'.³¹ As we shall see, parts one and three of this statement seem to chime very well with Ballard's statements about the imagination and aesthetics, and with the textual evidence which I will be unpacking in the following chapters. Part two, 'nature for the view of the world', is more problematic however – Ballard being as likely to lavish a motorway overpass with lyrical description as he is the resurgent nature of *The Drowned World* (1962) or *The Unlimited Dream Company* (1979). Conversely, Ballard is equally likely to respond to the horror and terror evoked by both man-made and natural environments. As I hope will become clear, these ambivalences are already at work in Romanticism, though they were repressed in the work of the American high Romantic critics. I shall build upon the three main components of Wellek's Romanticism when discussing their exploration in the Romantic criticism of the 1950s and 60s, but first it is important to recognize an omission in Wellek's statement: the Romantic concept of the self from which all might be said to flow.

Apocalyptic Literature and Romantic Bardism

Romantic literature was sometimes considered by its creators to be apocalyptic in the biblical sense of a revelation, disclosing a prophetic future world in which both mankind and nature are perfected. In this sense apocalypse also met its derivative connotation of a cataclysm or disaster which would forever change human society. For the canonical Romantics both the historical events of their age and their poetic

³¹ René Wellek, 'The Concept of "Romanticism" in Literary History II. The Unity of European Romanticism' in *Comparative Literature*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (Spring, 1949), pp. 147-172, 147.

productions presaged a new world, and although this was very often seen as a victory of the bardic imagination, in their darker moments they were also capable of imagining a world changed for the worse. For the first generation of Romantics – William Blake, William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge – the French Revolution represented a cataclysmic event, an apocalypse heralding a new relation of man to man and man to world. As the revolutionary hope gave way to the Terror, and as the reactionary Pitt government in Britain tightened its grip, Coleridge and Wordsworth increasingly looked inwards to the deep resources of the self and the imagination as the font of personal and quietist apocalypses. As I aim to show, the compensations and dangers of this turn inwards are explored anew in Ballard's concept of 'inner space', which he described as 'a middle ground [...] between the outer world of reality on the one hand, and the inner world of the psyche on the other' (*EM* 6). As I explain below, such a reciprocity between mind and world is itself indebted to Romantic theory and poetry.

The Romantic Self

The self is central to Romantic thought and practice, forming the core and focus of a cultural phenomenon which sought to plumb the depths of an inner world, at a time when science was mapping and measuring the outer world with unprecedented accuracy and speed. Anne K. Mellor describes the Romantic self succinctly as: 'A permanent, even transcendental, ego that endures beyond the limits of matter, time and space.'³² The great turn inwards of Romanticism has been seen as a reaction

³² Anne K. Mellor, *Romanticism and Gender* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 157.

against the empirical and industrial colonisation of the external world; as an instinctual grasping for something magical, mythical, immeasurable – something that remained shadowy, complex and hidden from the all-embracing light of the Enlightenment, a movement which the poets and philosophers we call Romantic felt had revealed a cold, dead, mechanical world. For M. H. Abrams, the cornerstone of the Romantic myth of selfhood is its revitalized relationship with nature. In childhood the self is seen to be closest to nature, and it is unadulterated contact with the natural world that gives the memories of those early years their heavenly glow and lingering effect, before the intervention of culture and society, experience and disillusionment, serves to sever that virgin connection. In Romantic thinking, the earliest childhood memories may be precious or even terrifying, but they are marked by an unfettered connection and response to the external world which leaves its indelible mark upon the adult self. Wordsworth, in the first book of his Romantic autobiographical epic *The Prelude* (1805, 1850), looks back to a formative experience of the sublime: as a young boy he had ‘borrowed’ a Shepherd’s boat from its mooring beside a willow tree and rowed it out onto a moonlit lake. The sudden apparition of a dark cliff face deluges the boy’s fertile imagination with ‘huge and mighty forms that do not live / Like living men’.³³ Delight, hope and fear colour Wordsworth’s childhood recollections and he is schooled in both beauty and the sublime by these experiences which stimulate ‘the growth of mental power / and love of Nature’s works.’³⁴ According to Wordsworth, the purpose of the journey of our lives is to reconnect with these early experiences of visionary apprehension, bringing with us the accumulated wisdom of our experiences and reflection in adult

³³ William Wordsworth, *The Prelude* 1799, 1805, 1850 eds. Jonathan Wordsworth, M. H. Abrams and Stephen Gill (London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1979), *The Two Part Prelude*, First Part, ll. 424-5.

³⁴ *Two Part Prelude*, First Part ll. 256-7

life, so that we may once again enjoy a closeness with nature that the struggles of the world have sundered, but that we may also do so on a higher level, enriched by the experience and wisdom gained through living. The story of the Romantic self, then, is teleological in nature, leading to a wished for transcendence of time and place – a performance which may only be achievable briefly, in what Wordsworth called ‘spots of time.’³⁵ Whether these moments can be sustained or no, they are considered to be what makes a life worth living:

then the calm

And the dead still water lay upon my mind
 Even with a weight of pleasure, and the sky,
 Never before so beautiful, sunk down
 Into my heart and held me like a dream.³⁶

To realise this perfect integration of mind and world, if only fleetingly, is the lifelong quest of the Romantic self, but it is not merely passive reverie: Wordsworth has flexed his creative power and autonomy to imaginatively bring down the sky and possess it, even as it holds him like a dream. 1797 saw the first use of the word ‘autobiography’, but Wordsworth was to work on his great Romantic *bildungsroman* throughout his life, leaving it incomplete at his death in 1850. This speaks to the enormity of the task which he had set himself, but also reflects the very nature of the Romantic self as something which is always in the process of becoming, ever more about to be. This journey of the self can also be seen to follow the pattern of the

³⁵ *The Fourteen Book Prelude*, Book 12 ll. 208-218

³⁶ *The Two Part Prelude*, Second Part ll. 210-4

biblical fall of Adam and Eve from the paradise of Eden, and Abrams reads this as a secularisation and internalization of theological, biblical ways of conceiving of history. The journey of the self is one of estrangement from and finally reconciliation to the natural world, so that the fall from paradise is seen as necessary and fortunate, though not without real and irrecoverable loss. The journey of the individual self stands too for the story of the history of humanity, the fall from a mythical primitive state of paradisiacal harmony with the natural world, through the alienation of culture, society and technology, and back once again to ‘a rebirth in which a renewed mankind will inhabit a renovated earth where he will find himself thoroughly at home.’³⁷ Allied to this narrative aspect of the Romantic self, and to the idea that each person has an irreducible core of being, is the notion that each individual is in fact unique, possesses a quiddity that is theirs alone, and has their own specific destiny to fulfil. The destiny of the prophet-poet in this Romantic formula is to lead themselves and their reader/followers on an internal odyssey to the promised land of an apocalyptic visionary. The faculty that will make all of this possible is that of the imagination – promoted in Romantic epistemology from handmaiden of reason to partner in creation, ‘a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM’.³⁸

Imagination

³⁷ M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1973 [1971]), p. 12.

³⁸ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria* (1815-17), Chapter XIII in H. J. Jackson ed. *Samuel Taylor Coleridge: The Major Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008 [1985]), p. 313.

At the higher level of this narrative, which is symbolized by the ascending spiral of a return, the mind plays an active role in the representation of that which it senses, such that the bard's imagination recombines that which it 'half create / And what percieve'.³⁹ Here the mind joins with nature to create the world anew, although this is not so much a new creation as the happy remembering of what is already there: the beauty and sublimity of the natural world perceived through the lens of the properly integrated and 'realised' self. The 'half' for which the self is responsible in this collaborative world has recourse to a transcendental realm. Even in this supposed equality, in a Platonic echo the Romantic mind is reaching beyond the natural world to something eternal.

Wellek underscores the difference in the conception of the imagination for the English Romantics, for whom it became more than the mediating faculty between sense and reason of eighteenth-century thought, granting apocalyptic insight into the true or deep nature of the universe.⁴⁰ This elevated position of the imagination, though stimulated by the phenomenal world, nonetheless reads that world as symbolic of a higher order of being. Wellek describes Wordsworth's understanding of imagination as:

[A]n insight into the nature of reality and hence the basic justification of art.

The poet becomes a living soul who "sees into the life of things". Imagination is thus an organ of knowledge which transforms objects, sees through them,

³⁹ William Wordsworth, 'Lines Written a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey' (1798), ll. 106-7, in Stephen Gill ed. *William Wordsworth: The Major Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008 [1984]), p. 134.

⁴⁰ Wellek p. 159

even if they are only the "meanest flower" or the humble ass, an idiot boy, or simply a child: "mighty prophet, seer blest".⁴¹

Wellek travels quickly through Blake, Coleridge, Shelley and Keats' conceptions of the imagination and finds them to be 'fundamentally the same' or 'almost identical'.⁴² Such a view of the imagination is seen to be incompatible with the 'mechanistic universe of the eighteenth century', Romantic poets conceiving of nature as an organic whole and analogue of man.⁴³ For Wellek, William Blake is the extreme example of this reciprocity between inner and outer worlds:

In [Blake's] *Milton* especially, nature appears as man's body turned inside out. The ridges of mountains across the world are Albion's fractured spine. Nothing exists outside Albion; sun, moon, stars, the center of the earth, and the depth of the sea were all within his mind and body. Time even is a pulsation of the artery, and space a globule of blood.⁴⁴

The precise calibration of the mental faculties in relation to the imagination and the natural world differ between the major Romantic poets and theorists of the period, but the important thing to note here is its transformative capacity, whether largely passive (as in Keats' 'negative capability') or active (as in Coleridge's 'esemplastic imagination'), its products were understood to be real – perhaps more real, in a

⁴¹ Ibid

⁴² Ibid pp. 159, 160

⁴³ Ibid p. 161

⁴⁴ Ibid p. 162. In this description of Blake's *Milton* we can see a clear precursor of Ballard's spinal landscapes, and of the radical overrunning of the boundaries between both physical and psychological self and world that occur, for example, in the 'Pool of Thanatos' chapter of *The Drowned World*.

platonian sense, than the phenomenal world.⁴⁵ This is the radical Romantic epistemology, founded upon the imagination, ‘which came close to dissolving the external world entirely’.⁴⁶ In *The Romantic Imagination* (1950), C. M. Bowra describes the Romantic poets’ visionary exercise of the imagination as divine:

Since for them it is the very source of spiritual energy, they cannot but believe that it is divine, and that, when they exercise it, they in some way partake of the activity of God.⁴⁷

This pure and high Romantic criticism, then, views the apotheosis of poet and poetry as that which made of the Romantic poets messianic and bard-like figures, capable of revealing a new world to their readers and followers. The potential would seem to exist for this incredible power to be used for ill, or at least for the poets to lose control of their emboldened imaginations, but Bowra distinguishes between what he calls German decadent concepts of the imagination and those of the purer English Romantics. After quoting Novalis on the decadence of the imagination: ‘I know that imagination is most attracted by what is most immoral, most animal; but I also know how like a dream all imagination is, how it loves night, meaninglessness and solitude’, Bowra goes on to disavow this ‘nihilistic delight’ in the thinking of the English Romantics:

⁴⁵ See Keats’ ‘Letter to George and Tom Keats’ (1817) in John Keats, *John Keats: The Major Works*, ed. Elizabeth Cook (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008 [1990]), pp. 369-70; Coleridge’s *Biographia Literaria*, Chapter XIII in Jackson, pp. 307-13.

⁴⁶ Travers, p. 7

⁴⁷ C. M. Bowra, *The Romantic Imagination* (London: Oxford University Press, 1950), p. 3.

This is not what the English Romantics thought. They believed that the imagination stands in some essential relation to truth and reality, and they were at pains to make their poetry pay attention to them.⁴⁸

More recently, scholars of Romanticism have been at pains to reincorporate those darker Gothic and decadent strains and to read them alongside the purer Romanticism described here, and I shall return to this complex interaction later in this introduction.

The messianic and apocalyptic qualities of Romantic aesthetics were further elaborated by M. H. Abrams in *The Mirror and the Lamp* (1953) and *Natural Supernaturalism* (1971). For Abrams, the gaze of the Romantic bard had a transformative effect upon its object: '[t]he habitual reading of passion, life and physiognomy into the landscape is one of the few salient attributes common to most of the major romantic poets.'⁴⁹ The power of 'the light reflected as a light bestowed' was necessary in order to heal the breach that had occurred between man and nature, and in order to suture the wound of separation between subject and object.⁵⁰ For Abrams the Romantic poets assumed:

⁴⁸ Ibid pp. 3-4

⁴⁹ M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971 [1953]), p. 55.

⁵⁰ Ibid p. 65

the persona of a prophet-poet who writes a visionary mode of poetry; and [used a] poetic 'symbolism' [...] deriving from a world-view in which objects are charged with a significance beyond their physical qualities⁵¹

The disharmony which had come to exist between man and nature was the result, according to this model of Romanticism, of the Enlightenment projects of empiricism and scientism; the mechanistic world views of Locke and Hulme had robbed the natural world of the numinous, and the Romantics sought to shine their imaginative lights upon it, not in order to understand it in the scientific sense, but rather to re-imbue it with a natural mysticism that pointed to something beyond the physical and rationally explainable. If the scientific, rational outlook of the eighteenth century had robbed the world of its mystery, then the new medias of technology – the printing presses and manufactories of the new cities – had intervened between man and nature with a deadening array of mass-produced spectacle. Wordsworth, in the 'Preface' to the 1800 edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, describes the condition of the city-dweller as benighted by an 'almost savage torpor' and a 'degrading thirst after outrageous stimulation'.⁵² Again, and in a Blakean echo, Wordsworth writes of the need for poetry to cleanse the perception of those afflicted by the spectacle of modernity.⁵³ High Romantic transcendence thus has manifold

⁵¹ M. H. Abrams 'neoclassic and romantic', in M. H. Abrams and Geoffrey Harpham, *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (2005), quoted in Aidan Day, *Romanticism* (London: Routledge, 2012 [1996]), p. 2.

⁵² William Wordsworth, 'Preface' to *Lyrical Ballads* (1802), in *The Major Works*, p. 599.

⁵³ William Blake's 'If the doors of perception were cleansed everything would appear to man as it is, Infinite' from *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790), is being recalled here. This, in part through Aldous Huxley's *The Doors of Perception* (1954) – an account of the author's controlled experimentation with mescaline, the hallucinogenic active ingredient found in the Peyote cactus – was a factor in Blake's adoption by the drug-fuelled counter-culture movement of the 1960s. In 1994 Ballard wrote an introduction for a new edition of the book, currently published by Vintage (2004), in which he characterizes Huxley's 'inward passage' as 'the last journey waiting for all of us' in a world 'girdled [by] an entertainment culture more suffocating than anything visualized in *Brave New World*' (p. viii).

meanings in that it seeks to go beyond the physical and phenomenal world of nature, which may include our physical bodies, but it also seeks to break through the skein of culture that has supposedly occluded our vision.

One of the ways in which the Romantics sought to shrug off the accumulations of society and modernity was through an appeal to primitivism. This line of thinking came perhaps from the French autobiographer and philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau and his invention of the ‘noble savage’, and it romanticized the primitive state of mankind as a period of oneness with nature. Of course such states of being were impossibly long ago for Western man, if they ever existed, and they seemed impossible to attain. This is where emerging concepts of the special place of childhood came to the fore; if one could gain access to the memory of simple and blissful oneness with nature that was supposed to have pertained in childhood, then each of us could be said to carry within us that which would be necessary for a reintegration with nature. As we shall see in chapters 2 and 4, the invocation and yet despoliation of the Romantic notion of childhood, and the idea of a racial or even cellular memory, is a subverted Romantic echo in Ballard’s fictions.

The symbols and metaphors that signalled this kind of visionary transportation in Romantic poetry and theory are almost all of the natural world, though some are ‘second nature’ human constructs too. Central metaphors of the aesthetic practices of the Romantics are those of the lamp, the fountain, the natural growth of trees and flowers, the movements of the weather, and – perhaps most importantly of all –

symbols of birds and of flight. These replace, for a time, the neoclassical symbol for art of the mirror; instead of holding up a mirror to life this literature introduces a second nature, born of the imagination, which vies with the 'real' world.⁵⁴ These symbols recur throughout Ballard's oeuvre, and are accompanied by some of his most lyrical prose. The sense, too, of the discovery of a superior reality, discernible through the power of the imagination, returns in Ballard's writing in surprising ways. I discuss an extreme example of this in chapter 3, in the deep sense of dissatisfaction and even outrage at the bare fact of the phenomenal world in *The Atrocity Exhibition*.

Nature

'Nature for the view of the world' is the second part of Wellek's three unifying Romantic concepts, and the Romantics were to a very great extent inspired by landscape. Abrams, in *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (2005), describes the Romantic turn to nature thus:

To a remarkable degree external nature – the landscape, together with its flora and fauna – became a persistent subject of poetry, and was described with an accuracy and sensuous nuance unprecedented in earlier writers. It is a mistake, however, to describe the romantic poets as simply 'nature poets'.

While many major poems by Wordsworth and Coleridge – and to a great

⁵⁴ Peter Otto, '41: Literary Theory', in Iain McCalman ed. *An Oxford Companion to the Romantic Age: British Culture 1776-1832* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001 [1999]), p. 378.

extent by Shelley and Keats – set out from and return to an aspect or change in the landscape, the outer scene is not presented for its own sake but as the stimulus for the poet to engage in the most characteristic human activity, that of thinking...⁵⁵

The natural world, perhaps keenly observed, was primarily the impetus for ecstatic reverie and transcendent experience, and the union between poet and nature was very often figured in conjugal terms. Nature, then, is seen as feminine – both nurturing and motherly (in Wordsworth) and capricious and unfaithful (in Blake). ‘Natural’ meant all that had been lost over the centuries of civilization, and over the years which separated the adult from the child; nature governed all that makes us most human but was under threat from Enlightenment rationalism and empiricism: the emotions, the imagination and spirituality.

Under the broad heading of nature can be collected the vast array of symbols which the Romantic poets used to signal their apocalyptic visions, but I shall confine myself in this short list to those which recur most frequently in Ballard’s works. As noted above, birds and flight are the surpassing Romantic symbols of transcendence, imagination, freedom, hope, poetry and of the poets themselves. Concomitantly, dead, injured or imprisoned birds signal that these high aspirations are in abeyance, lost or denied due to some great crime, sin or catastrophe. There are variations in terms of the type of bird so that the skylark and the nightingale can mean quite

⁵⁵ M. H. Abrams ‘neoclassic and romantic’, in M. H. Abrams and Geoffrey Harpham, *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (2005), quoted in Aidan Day, *Romanticism* (London: Routledge, 2012 [1996]), p. 2.

different things, but the sound of birdsong in a Romantic poem is usually a call to heed the lessons of nature and to tune in to a symbolic language of transcendence and apocalyptic vision. The sea, rivers, streams, waterfalls and other bodies of water are another recurrent Romantic symbol of transcendence, time, memory, origins and ends – death and rebirth, as well as for the vast and unknowable in nature and the self. The creativity of the poet and the faculty of the imagination become bound up with images and sounds of the ebb and flow of the tide or the meandering course of rivers, the sublimity of a stormy sea and the deep calm of placid lakes. The wind and its subordinate metaphors, such as the Aeolian harp, are harnessed by Romantic poets to invoke the relationship between poet and nature, which can take the form of a ‘correspondent breeze’ or a howling tempest, the imagination responding in kind.⁵⁶ The wind heralds change which may bring destruction or creative renewal (or both); it is the spirit of nature active in the world. Less protean symbolic aspects of the Romantic landscape include mountains, deserts, valleys and forests – the traversal of which is always a journey on at least two levels: the external and the internal, both physical and spiritual. There are a great many more symbols which individual poets invested with resonant power, such as William Blake’s sunflower and tiger, but most come under the controlling metaphor of nature.

Closely allied to the symbols of nature are the symbolic roles of the female and the feminine, and the male and the masculine in canonical Romantic poetry. Nature is invariably figured as female, the spousal counterpart to the male self whose goal is

⁵⁶ M. H. Abrams, ‘The Correspondent Breeze: A Romantic Metaphor’ in *The Kenyon Review* Vol. 19, No. 1 (Winter, 1957), pp. 113-130.

nuptial reunion. The Romantics tended to privileged the symbolic over the allegoric because they believed that a symbol in some way partakes of that which it is connected with, whereas an allegory is a mere substitution. Thinking of this in terms of their organicist as opposed to mechanistic view of nature, the symbol is alive and active, the allegory dead and lifeless. This concept will be important when considering Ballard's exploration of the media landscapes of modernity, in the desperate attempts of his protagonists to incorporate the images of advertising and cinema into their lives in both a physical and an emotional sense.

Supernatural Bardism

M. H. Abrams, in *Natural Supernaturalism*, defines what he calls the 'high Romantic words' as: 'life, love, liberty, hope and joy', and it is these 'interrelated norms' which are said to appear whenever the Romantics discuss the 'first principles of life and art'.⁵⁷ Abrams sees in these tropes the natural expressions of Romanticism, invoked 'without unease and with no sense that these commonplaces have outworn their relevance.'⁵⁸ Consigning the darkness that shadows the high argument of Romanticism to aberration and immaturity, Abrams constructs a movement remarkable in its wholeness and consistency. At the centre of this understanding of Romanticism stands the poet as prophet and seer – an ancient bard-like hero who will lead his people to the promised land of apocalyptic transformation, a world renewed through the limitless power of the imagination. For

⁵⁷ *Natural Supernaturalism*, p. 431.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*

Abrams, such figures act partly in history but also on a cosmic and mythological level, and the apocalypse that they bring is not religious or political but rather takes place in the imagination as a 'total revolution of consciousness'.⁵⁹ Again the parallels with 1960s counter-culture are easy to appreciate, and they speak readily to Ballard's concept of 'inner space' too. The apocalypse heralded by these messianic bards is accessed through self-knowledge and the imagination, which in turn are empowered by aesthetic contemplation, giving this revolution a uniquely artistic and individualistic cast. For Abrams, the turn inwards to seek a quietist apocalypse of transformed perception is precipitated by, and compensatory for, the profound disillusionment that the Romantic poets experienced as the French Revolution descended into terror and war.⁶⁰ Abrams' exemplary apocalyptic bard is Wordsworth:

[I]n his ability to perceive the inherent sublimity in the common and the lowly, and the charismatic power of the trivial and the mean, lies his essential originality as a poet; his poetry of the lowly sublime and of the heroism of meekness and fortitude will replace, and transcend, the traditional epic of heroic prowess; to express this vision of life and the world constitutes his particular mission as a chosen son, a poet-prophet of his age; his discovery of this mission was essential to his recovery from despair after the French Revolution, and served to replace his faith in the promise of the Revolution by more solid and durable grounds for hope; and in giving up the role of political radical, he had assumed the role of poetic radical, with the task of

⁵⁹ Ibid pp. 332, 334

⁶⁰ Ibid p. 338

subverting the corrupted values which his readers had inherited from a class-divided and class-conscious past.⁶¹

The importance of recognising the sacral in the quotidian, and even ugly, objects of everyday life is also an aspect of the aesthetic revolution which Romanticism heralded; by rejecting neo-classical dictates upon form and the proper subjects for art, the power of the imagination was invoked to make art whatever the artist, or the audience, believed or wished it to be. However, for most Romantic poets, and often for Wordsworth too, the visionary bardic state was achieved through the contemplation of the sublime and/or the beautiful in nature.

The urge to reach after, touch, or convey in words that which is beyond the human grasp, forever just out of reach, is a major component of high Romantic aesthetics, infusing works with a melancholic yearning, a pathos, but also a spirit of fire and struggle in the face of the insurmountable. This apprehension of the numinous is traditionally represented by the lone, male poet in the wilderness confronted by the power and majesty of nature, atop a mountain or staring into a bottomless abyss – at once an awe-inspiring demonstration of the vastness of nature, and a projection of the fathomless depths of the self. The sublime sensation of awe mixed with terror at the impossibly vast or incomprehensibly numerous in nature, or in abstract ideas, is the pinnacle of the theorising of the wholesome and high Romanticism that I have been outlining in this section. But the extremity of the sublime, a precarious and potentially overwhelming state, can also be seen to exceed the boundaries of the

⁶¹ Ibid pp. 391-2

1960s conception of Romanticism, leading ineluctably to the darker elements which it sought to exclude.

Modern Romanticisms

The account of Romanticism just given reflects the standard view of Romanticism in criticism and popular culture when Ballard's career was just beginning. More recently, however, this understanding of Romanticism has been challenged by criticism that has been keen to explore the complex interrelations of high Romanticism with the darker Gothic and decadent strains which, arguably, have always accompanied it. With its concern with both overreaching and falling short, the sublime seems a good hinge for this discussion of Romanticism to turn upon. It is at the point that the transcendence suggested by the sublime appears to be instead mere immanence, or an artefact of language which constrains all thought, that the Romantic transcendent sublime begins to turn to the Gothic paradoxes of the self, and to the sickly consolations of decadence.

In 1983 Jerome McGann called time on the high Romantic criticism of the 1950s, 60s and 70s in his seminal study *The Romantic Ideology*. For McGann, the Romantic critics we have been discussing so far were too invested in what they saw as the Romantic project, and had blinded themselves to contradictory currents at work in the major Romantic poets' aesthetic theory and verse. In addition, they were held partly responsible for the creation of a skewed canon of Romantic writing that excluded the most popular authors of the era and almost entirely ignored the work of

women writers. In order to address this problem, McGann championed a New Historicist approach to the period, one which considered the major Romantic texts as no more worthy of consideration than the huge range of possible intertexts which included historical records, newspaper articles, as well as the work of less well known poets and novelists. The major Romantic poets and their works, McGann argued, should be considered as both products of their specific historical, social and cultural conditions, and also implicated in the production of those conditions. In 1993, McGann edited the *New Oxford Book of Romantic Period Verse*, a collection which puts into practice his call to broaden the view that we take of the period by including long out of print poems by women and men writing between 1785 and 1832. The criteria for inclusion was specifically not conformity to the high Romantic aesthetic.

At a similar time the American critic Paul De Man was subjecting Romantic theory and poetry to deconstructive readings which sought to prove the instability, and self-contradictory nature, of the high Romantic argument. For De Man, the Romantic argument's claim that the symbol, through language, can represent the noumenal world was a grave error in epistemological thought that urgently needed to be set right. De Man reverses the priority of the symbolic in favour of the allegorical which Coleridge had rejected, seeing the deferral of meaning that takes place in the allegorical substitution as more 'honestly' reflecting the endless deferral of meaning that takes place in the poststructuralist view of language. In his readings of Romantic literature, de Man sought to demonstrate the moments of crisis in texts where the half-conscious realization of the nature of language and the impossibility of

transcendence is disguised or disavowed. In works such as 'The Resistance to Theory' (1982) de Man was to explore what he called the irreducible 'undecidability' of texts which he argued had led critics to subsume difference in order to make coherent statements about their rhetorical intent and effects. De Man's discovery of a core 'undecidability' in the texts of Romanticism is reminiscent of Roger Luckhurst's assertion that Ballard's *Vermillion Sands* (1973) collection is unreadable, discussed above, and allows us to consider Ballard's studied ambiguity and ambivalence as a technique indebted to Romanticism. In 'On Romantic Irony, Symbolism and Allegory' (1979), Anne K. Mellor proposes a possible reconciliation between what she calls the 'constructive' symbolic approach of Abrams' *Natural Supernaturalism* and the deconstructive approach of Paul de Man.⁶² In her reading of Romantic irony, Mellor reveals a self-awareness at work in the poetry which is capable of constructing transcendent symbolic systems in the full knowledge that they are and will always be untenable. On this reading Romanticism seems to prefigure of the cosmic irony of Albert Camus' 'Myth of Sisyphus' (1942). In Mellor's work there can also be read an acknowledgement of a much wider range of interests, positions, theories and aesthetics that the Romantics were drawing upon, and her conception of Romantic irony is helpful when considering Ballard's invocations of visionary transcendence.

Modern Romantic criticism has also found fault with the uncritical acceptance of the Romantic conception of the self, and the perceived tendency of Abrams et al to think

⁶² Anne K. Mellor, 'On Romantic Irony, Symbolism and Allegory' in *Criticism: a Quarterly for Literature and the Arts* (Summer 1979), Vol. 21, issue 3, article 2.

of this construction of selfhood as a moral and healthful example to follow. Colin Campbell, in *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism* (1987), has linked the emergence of the Romantic self at the end of the eighteenth century with the rise of consumerism and consumer society. Ironically, what he calls ‘modern hedonism’ – the taking of pleasure in the imagining of the consumption of products or future events – he sees as arising out of a Protestant strain of ethical conduct. According to Campbell, for the modern hedonist, it is what the object of desire symbolically represents that matters, so that it does not have to be a materially different object, but must make available a locus for pleasurable daydreaming. We can link this idea to that turn inwards noted above so that consumerism too becomes a matter for imaginative contemplation. There is a cruel correlation between the limitless desire of the consumer drive, the way in which ‘the modern consumer is characterised by an insatiability which arises out of a basic inexhaustibility of wants themselves, which forever arise, phoenix-like, from the ashes of their predecessors’, and the Romantic quest for self-realisation and union which is only ever achieved in fleeting moments.⁶³ Campbell writes that ‘it is a central fact of modern consumer behaviour that the gap between wanting and getting never actually closes.’⁶⁴ How like the hoped for reunion of the sundered self and world this is, which in Romantic literature is ever more about to be, just beyond reach. Campbell questions the assumption that whilst this may not be morally good behaviour, that it is at least normal, seeing a ‘deep-seated ethnocentricity’ in such an attitude.⁶⁵ Indeed, the absorption of Romanticism as a cultural force might point to one way in which this ever-quest has become normalised. Campbell highlights the irrational nature of the

⁶³ Colin Campbell, *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism* (London: Blackwell, 2005 [1987]), p. 37.

⁶⁴ Campbell, p. 50

⁶⁵ Ibid p. 39

consumer who forgoes existing products which have previously satisfied their needs in order to spend limited resources upon new products which may or may not continue to satisfy them, thus linking Romanticism and consumer irrationalism.⁶⁶

We can compare this inexhaustible wanting of consumerism, most tragically perhaps, with Shelley's 'Star of infinite desire', in W. B. Yeats' famous formulation.⁶⁷

Further undermining the idea of the 'perpetual self-thrusting, perpetual self-creation' of the Romantic self, a number of social-historical critiques of modernity that have laid bare the ethnocentric foundations of the Abrams school of Romantic criticism.⁶⁸

Not the least of these has been twentieth-century anthropological studies which have shown just how contingent the emergence of a particular type of subjectivity in Europe towards the end of the eighteenth century was. Identity for, for instance, Michel Foucault, is relational to a degree that it has not been commonplace to assume in the West since the eighteenth century. What is perhaps most interesting about Foucault's decidedly anti-Romantic, mechanistic conception of the self, for the purposes of this discussion at least, is that he sees in our acceptance of the brutal fact of our non-agency, the possibility of freedom. Foucault's anti-Romantic social history of radically unfree human beings can be seen then as an answer, or at least the hope of an answer, to the tyranny of the self of which the Romantics, in their darker modes and imaginings, were very much aware. Foucault seems to wish to

⁶⁶ I will be drawing upon this theory in discussing Ballard's consumerist apocalypse *Kingdom Come* (2006) in chapter 5.

⁶⁷ W. B. Yeats, 'The Philosophy of Shelley's Poetry' (1900) in *W. B. Yeats: The Major Works*, ed. Edward Larrissy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001 [1997]), p. 351.

⁶⁸ Isaiah Berlin, *The Roots of Romanticism* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2001 [1999]), p. 120.

escape from the Hegelian spiral which falsely promises ‘the certainty that time will disperse nothing without restoring it in a reconstituted unity’.⁶⁹ Colin Campbell paints a compelling picture of just how hard this mode of being, once instantiated, is to escape; one would either have to be a ‘traditionalist’, or else relinquish day-dreaming for ‘pure fantasy’. Both are extremely hard to achieve because the pleasures of day-dreaming, once experienced, might only be repressed rather than abandoned altogether.⁷⁰

Gender criticism

Another important strand in revisionist studies of Romanticism has been interventions by feminist critics who have looked to reclaim neglected women authors of the period, and to unsettle the masculine figure of the prophet-poet and the gendered sublime which was seen to be their preserve. The Romantic symbolism which aligned women with both the motherly and the destructive aspects of nature, and as the objects of impossible desire for male ‘speakers’ and poets, has been shown to be both resisted and exploited in the poetry of women authors of the period. In the Gothic novels of Ann Radcliffe, for instance, her heroines are seen to draw upon the supposedly masculine sublime as a source of spiritual and moral strength in times of dire need. Of the symbolic roles that women play in Romantic literature, perhaps the most problematic is the monstrous lamia of Greek legend,

⁶⁹ Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (London: Routledge, 2002 [1969]), p. 13.

⁷⁰ Campbell, p. 95

which resurfaces in the poetry of Coleridge and Keats in particular, but throughout Romantic literature as what Coleridge calls ‘The Night-mare Life-In-Death’:

Her lips were red, her looks were free,
 Her locks were yellow as gold:
 Her skin was as white as leprosy,
 The Night-mare Life-in-Death was she,
 Who thicks man’s blood with cold.⁷¹

Such ‘fatal women’, as Adriana Craciun dubs them, partake of many mythological and symbolic resonances from classical and Christian traditions, as well as contemporary intertextuality with the waxing Gothic literature of the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries.⁷² Pale, ethereal, driven by powerful sexual desire and/or blood lust, these women haunt the imaginations of male Romantic poets, and can be seen as to some extent the obverse of female images of nature as nurturing, motherly and pure; they are projections of male desire and instances of the Gothic and decadent currents in Romanticism. Craciun, in *Fatal Women of Romanticism* (2003), argues against seeing the women of the male Romantic imagination as projections of male fantasy, embodiments of their own feminine aspects. Instead she draws attention to the use to which women writers of the Romantic era put such figures as the lamia, the Mermaid, the queen, and the muse. The complicity of criticism with the ideology of Romanticism extends to the representation of women

⁷¹ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798, 1817), in *The Major Works*, p. 55, ll. 91-4.

⁷² See Adriana Craciun, *Fatal Women of Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003). Craciun’s focus in the book is on the representation of *femmes fatales* in the poetry of women writers of the Romantic period.

too, as will become clear in the discussion of Mario Praz's *The Romantic Agony* (1933) below. Another way to view the seeming misogyny and patriarchy of male Romantic poets' depictions of women is to read them in the light of Romantic irony, such as is suggested by the tone of certain of Blake's poems, and by Keats' 'Lamia' (1820). The high Romanticism of the Abrams school had excluded some of the most unsettling aspects of Romantic theory and practice, and it is to these which I turn now.

The Gothic and Romantic Decadence

Tilottama Rajan in *Dark Interpreter* (1980) sees at work in Romantic poetry a choice not to step over into the modern, rather than a naïve insistence upon the reality of its imaginative constructs.⁷³ Writing about the competing constructive and deconstructive schools of criticism, Rajan proposes a third way that recognises the specificity of Romantic discourse:

[T]he model of discourse eventually developed by the Romantic countertradition [...] while fundamentally different from the one attributed to the Romantic period by critics such as Abrams and Frye, is also significantly different from the one developed by a criticism directed to the deconstruction of logocentric humanism. In other words, the current debate between organicist and deconstructionist critics over the nature of Romanticism was

⁷³ Tilottama Rajan, *The Dark Interpreter: The Discourse of Romanticism* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1986 [1980]), p. 16-18.

originally waged by the Romantics themselves and was not resolved in favor of either side.⁷⁴

This is an important reading of the conscious ambivalence already at work in Romanticism and which, as I will be arguing in this thesis, is revisited by Ballard. Arguably one of the clearest indicators of the Romantic ‘countertradition’ is the intrusion of Gothic tropes and symbols into the rarefied air of high Romantic poetry. The Gothic has been inseparable from Romanticism since the mid-eighteenth century beginnings of both literary movements. As we have seen, the high Romantic criticism of the mid-twentieth century sought to separate the darker aspects of Romanticism from a ‘healthy’ or ‘high’ Romanticism of apocalyptic transcendence. Coleridge’s three major Gothic poems, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798), *Christabel* (1798) and ‘Kubla Khan’ (1798), bear witness to an acknowledged darkness which shadowed the loftier heights of Romanticism, and modern critics such as Rajan have sought to reclaim this aspect of the canonical Romantics’ works. Indeed, the bard-like prophet-poet of ‘Kubla Khan’ seems as much a warning of the inherent dangers of as a celebration of the transformative imagination:

And all should cry, Beware! Beware!
 His Flashing eyes, his floating hair!
 Weave a circle round him thrice,
 And close your eyes with holy dread,
 For he on honey-dew hath fed,

⁷⁴ Rajan, p. 19

And drunk the milk of Paradise.⁷⁵

Like a suspected sorceress at the Salem witch trials, Coleridge's prophet-poet is feared and perhaps even despised, the circling indicating worship and/or confinement. The poem is of course a paradoxically complete fragment, and so is emblematic of that endless desire which Bowra had sought to displace into the theory of the German Romantics. Coleridge's fragment paradoxically invokes the yearning for a transcendental realm only to recoil from it, both in despair at ever being able to faithfully reproduce it in language, and in terror of the products of the engorged bardic imagination.

There is a similarly dark side to the self-formation story which was discussed in the forgoing section, with particular reference to Abrams' high Romantic theory. A contradictory current of desire is at work in Romantic individuation which would seek to transcend and/or dominate the natural world in a realization of the creative power of the artist/poet self. Often intertwined with this is a further complicating drive towards dissolution and oblivion: a sense that consciousness is too much to bear and that the innocent bliss of the primitive, or the unconscious animal or child, or even death, is preferable to a world that is 'too much with us'.⁷⁶

⁷⁵ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 'Kubla Khan' (1798), in H. J. Jackson ed. *Samuel Taylor Coleridge: The Major Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008 [1985]), pp. 103-4, ll. 49-54.

⁷⁶ William Wordsworth, 'The World is Too Much With Us' (1807), in *Major Works*, p. 270, l. 1.

The Gothic is a symbolically overdetermined literature which harnesses the obscure, the dark, the mysterious, the horrifying, the terrifying and the uncanny in order to represent that which is unrepresentable. The symbols that it employs to do this have traditionally included castles, monasteries, cathedrals and ancestral homes, all of which tend to feature some or all of the following: hidden passages, ruined areas, dungeons, secrets, sexual taboos, ancestral portraits, and ghosts, but the Gothic also makes itself known through the entrapment of its protagonists or narrators in subjectivist paradoxes of the self. The Romantic poet-prophet, empowered by the imagination to create a world or worlds, may simply be projecting evidence of psychological disturbance in themselves, their audience, or both, and cannot guarantee the reality of their own creations. Similarly, the golden store of childhood memory, or more broadly the past in general, may turn out to be an inescapable nightmare rather than Wordsworth's great source of consolation and creative energy. As Romanticism's repressed 'Other', the Gothic resurfaces to transform Hegel's ascending dialectic spiral of consciousness into a never-ending repetition, or a descent into regression and decline.

In the essay 'Concept of "Romanticism" in Literary History II', Wellek describes the work of the French Romantic novelist Victor Hugo in the following terms:

[T]he reconciliation of opposites, the stress on the grotesque and evil ultimately absorbed in the harmony of the universe, is particularly clear and was clear even in his early aesthetic theories⁷⁷

⁷⁷ Wellek, p. 156

This is an acceptance of the grotesque and the evil as the inseparable other of Romanticism that later disciples of Wellek would seek to downplay or separate from high Romanticism. His reading of Shelley and Byron is similarly nuanced:

In the highest ecstasy, all individuality and particularity are abolished by the great harmony of the world. But in Shelley, in contrast to Blake or Wordsworth who calmly look into the life of things, the ideal itself dissolves; his voice falters; the highest exaltation becomes a total loss of personality, an instrument of death and annihilation.⁷⁸

This is the dark side of infinite longing that was denied or repressed by the Romantic criticism of the 1950s and 60s. Of Byron Wellek claims:

[G]enerally Byron is rather a deist who believes in the Newtonian world machine and constantly contrasts man's passion and unhappiness with the serene and indifferent beauty of nature. Byron knows the horror of man's isolation, the terrors of the empty spaces, and does not share the fundamental rejection of the eighteenth-century cosmology⁷⁹

More recent criticism, though, recognizes the Gothic and decadence as part of the complexity of Romanticism – cross currents in a movement that, however hard it strove for unity and sublime wholeness, was populated by fragments and

⁷⁸ Wellek, p. 164

⁷⁹ Ibid p. 165

fragmentation, and remained fascinated by dissolution, melancholy, death and despair. These strains emerge as properly Gothic or decadent when Wellek's reconciliation is either impossible or refused, when these darkneses are pursued and celebrated for their own sake. This pursuit of paradoxical pleasure in pain, degradation and terror is already discernible in ideas of the sublime as an experience that combines both terror and joy, and appears to differing extents in the works of the canonical Romantic poets, and in contemporary novelists such as James Hogg, Sir Walter Scott, Mary Shelley and Charles Maturin, and in the night wanderings and autobiography of Thomas de Quincey. William Blake and Thomas de Quincey are important in the history of the figure of the urban walker, whose journeys across the terrain of the modern metropolis of London are transformed by the workings of memory and the imagination. Blake's ambivalent relationship with a London whose smoke, smog and degradation he despised, and yet pined for when he was away for any length of time, is a model for the kind of creative friction experienced by the modern psychogeographer – for Iain Sinclair's preference for shades of minatory grey as opposed to green.⁸⁰ Blake needed his dark satanic mills to stimulate his wayward imagination, and Thomas De Quincey's nightwalking was fuelled by ambiguous motives, taking him on pilgrimages into the labyrinthine streets of London where he found sexual exploitation, poverty and drug-induced despair; but these same streets and experiences wrung from him the Romantic-Gothic of his *Confessions*, and continued to lure him from his home at Grasmere.⁸¹ Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein* (1818) is worthy of particular note for its status as progenitor of the science fiction genre, and for its terrifying portrayal of the Gothic double, which

⁸⁰ See Iain Sinclair, *London Orbital* (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 88.

⁸¹ For a treatment of William Blake and Thomas De Quincey, amongst many others, as 'nightwalkers', see Matthew Beaumont, *Night Walking: A Nocturnal History of London, Chaucer to Dickens* (London: Verso, 2015).

Ballard will revisit most memorably, perhaps, in *Crash*.⁸² Shelley's nightmare marriage of technology and sex (in the sense that Dr Frankenstein is effectively able to reproduce asexually, and according to psychoanalytic readings of the novel is driven by a deep sexual pathology) foregrounds the potential dangers of the Romantic, transformative imagination.⁸³

Edgar Allan Poe is a later nineteenth-century inheritor and perpetuator of these dark Romantic traits, and a favourite of Ballard's.⁸⁴ Poe is the dark Romantic poet and short story writer of American letters, the Gothic alternative to the purity and wholesomeness of the American Transcendentalists. It is as though the tradition and countertradition of British Romanticism each found poets of their own to inhabit across the Atlantic, freeing their ideas from the dialectic stalemate of inhabiting the same consciousness. Poe takes Wordsworth's fascination with extreme psychological states, and Coleridge and Keats' interest in death, decay, and lamia-like women to a proto-decadent extreme. It is his marriage of Gothic themes to the transformative imagination of Romanticism that makes of his work something more than penny dreadful ghost and horror stories. Charles L. Crow in *American Gothic* (2009) writes of Poe's 'dreamscapes, or stories that take place on the disquieting border between sleeping and wakefulness', and describes Poe's symbolism as

⁸² In a 1984 interview, Ballard recognised the significance of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* for the whole of science fiction, and for his work in particular: 'I think of SF in a much wider context, as an important tributary to the river of imaginative fiction, a tributary that has been flowing strongly since Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*' (EM 208).

⁸³ Ballard's phrase is 'the nightmare marriage between sex and technology' in *C* vi.

⁸⁴ In a 2007 interview with Werner Fuchs and Sascha Mameczak, for a German science fiction publication, Ballard speaks of being 'fascinated' by Edgar Allan Poe. J. G. Ballard, "'I really would not want to fuck George W. Bush!': A Conversation with J.G. Ballard", trans. from the German to English by Dan O'Hara for Ballardian.com < <http://www.ballardian.com/i-really-would-not-want-to-fuck-george-w-bush> > [accessed 24 September 2015].

‘insinuating meaning without revealing it.’⁸⁵ In stories like ‘William Wilson’ (1839) and ‘The Cask of Amontillado’ (1846), Poe recalls classics of Gothic fiction, such as Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, by invoking the figure of the double. The double, as the disturbing emanation of the painfully self-aware Romantic consciousness, dogs the literature of both Romanticism and the Gothic.

Poe was also a significant inventor of new genres and modes of writing. Of particular import for this study are the closely aligned crime and detective stories which represent some of the first of their kind, as well as the figure of the urban walker. Along with the writings of William Blake and Thomas de Quincey, Poe’s ‘The Man in the Crowd’ (1840) presages the figure of the flâneur, which would resurface in the writings of Charles Baudelaire, and in the twentieth century as the ‘psychogeographer’ of the Lettrist International and the Situationist International. De Quincey’s night-walking narratives, and Poe’s urban wanderer, put into action a purposive purposelessness across the terrain of the city in a mode that would later be theorised by Guy Debord as the ‘dérive’. Such peregrinations tend to work against the flow of the city, following sexual or narcotic desire rather than goal-oriented commuting or task-driven efficiency. The flâneur reads the city through the exercising of the combinatory powers of the imagination, juxtaposing signs and imagery in order to construct an alternative poem of the city, a psychological map of its topography. Such figures, associated with vagrancy, criminality and political malcontent, have been described by Will Self as part of the ‘counter-enlightenment’,

⁸⁵ Charles L. Crow *American Gothic* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2009), p. 46.

a tradition of irrationality that must also include Romanticism.⁸⁶ Poe's detective stories are romances of the disturbingly congruent psychology of the policeman and the criminal. What is most unsettling about them, perhaps, is the tendency for sympathy existing between the two types; the ratiocination of the detective in the Auguste Dupin stories is problematically appreciative of the criminal minds that it comes up against, his imagination enabling an empathy with the criminal, purportedly irrational, mind. In chapter 5 I explore the emergence of the postmodern detective in Ballard's final quartet, where detective fiction meets the figure of the flâneur.

Poe's dark Romantic aesthetics are defiantly celebrative of the decaying and the sickly, once again emphasizing a recurrent if not fully acknowledged strain in Romanticism. In the pronouncement that:

the death then of a beautiful woman is unquestionably the most poetical topic in the world, and equally is it beyond doubt that the lips best suited for such topic are those of a bereaved lover⁸⁷

Poe is drawing upon the Romantic infatuation with pale-faced lamia-like women, and with the tragic beauty of an untimely death, the decadent ancestor of such elegiac performances as Wordsworth's 'Lucy poems'.⁸⁸ Bringing the aestheticizing

⁸⁶ Self calls Matthew Beaumont's recent *Night Walking: A Nocturnal History of London* (2015) 'Nothing less than a grand unifying theory of the counter-enlightenment.' See Beaumont, p. 10.

⁸⁷ Edgar Allan Poe, 'The Philosophy of Composition' (1846) in *Edgar Allan Poe: Essays and Reviews*, ed. G. R. Thompson (New York: Library of America, 1984), p. 19.

⁸⁸ Wordsworth's enigmatic elegies to a mysteriously absent 'Lucy' are of enduring strangeness.

gaze to the ordinarily reprehensible is in part a consequence of the Romantic insistence upon the expressive turn in art; if art is whatever the artists or audience choose to believe it is then even taboo subjects such as incest and necrophilia are available for imaginative transformation. Indeed the forbidden love of brother and sister was often sympathetically portrayed by the Romantics, a Romantic legacy which Ballard does not fail to exploit. The responses of Blake, de Quincey and Poe to the problem of urbanity have about them a quality of immersion, a wilful plunging into a destructive milieu. It is worth noting here that Ballard wrote that ‘we should immerse ourselves in the most destructive element’ (*AE* 37). Perhaps the truly ‘immersed’ poet of the nineteenth century was Charles Baudelaire.

Baudelaire is best known for his controversial collection of poems about Parisian street life, *Les Fleurs du Mal* (1847, 1861). Baudelaire’s poems chronicle the effect of the modern metropolis’ violence, indiscriminate crowds, rapid pace of change and fostering of disease and vice upon a sensibility that might be best described as wounded-Romantic. Peter Nicholls in *Modernism: a Literary Guide* (1995) describes Baudelaire’s heroic dandy as

both victim and executioner, as Baudelaire so memorably puts it, a doubling of role which associates a certain desire for self-wounding and mutilation with a mechanising of the self in defiance of bodily needs and social dependencies.⁸⁹

⁸⁹ Peter Nicholls, *Modernism: A Literary Guide, Second Edition* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009 [1995]), p. 16.

Denied or self-refusing the pastoral healing of a healthy Romantic sensibility, the heroic dandy turns to self-laceration in a split consciousness that derives both pain and pleasure from its predicament. As we have seen, this luxuriating in painful pleasure was prefigured in the joyous agony of the sublime, and so Baudelaire's apparently startling modernity can also be traced to that countertradition within Romanticism. Baudelaire's poetics witness the end-point of the limitless desire of Romanticism prolonged until it is an agonizing ache that finds paradoxical relief in its own perpetuation. Nicholls describes this wilful failing as characteristic of the decadent mode:

Decadence ... expresses the inner logic of a modernity which has reached the terminal point in a cultural parabola already traced by the ancient civilisations. Like them, the modern period has exhausted itself in the search for ever greater sophistication and intensity of experience. The new artistic styles which have appeared therefore aim, like their decadent precursors, at impossible horizons and are condemned to endless disappointment.⁹⁰

A supreme ambivalence is achieved by this literature which can describe such bleak scenarios and feelings, or lack of them, with such powerful lyricism. This self-consuming art achieves a life in death that recalls Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner*:

⁹⁰ Nicholls, p. 45

This art denigrates life and the body but at the same time, vampire-like, it seems to appropriate human energies for itself, becoming monumental in just the proportion that its protagonists are drained of energy and life.⁹¹

Mario Praz's *The Romantic Agony* traces the source of decadent literature from its birth in a Romantic aesthetics which found beauty to be inescapably allied to death. Percy Bysshe Shelley's poem in response to seeing the Medusa painting at the Uffizi Gallery, according to Praz, amounts almost to a manifesto for the Romantic concept of beauty – one which finds its symbol in the figure of the deadly, dying and/or dead woman:

In fact, to such an extent were Beauty and Death looked upon as sisters by the Romantics that they became fused into a sort of two-faced herm, filled with corruption and melancholy and fatal in its beauty – a beauty of which, the more bitter the taste, the more abundant the enjoyment.⁹²

Praz outlines the transition from Ann Radcliffe's, Lord Byron's and Mary Shelley's fatal men to the fatal women of the Pre-Raphaelites and Algernon Swinburne. They have their precursors in Coleridge and Keats, though, the latter's 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci' (1820), for instance. Like their male counterparts they are pale and associated with the devil, but they are less worldly creatures and closer to the divine, the idol, or the worshipped eternal. Praz is to some extent guilty of perpetuating the Romantic ideology by affirming that there have been many such women in history.⁹³

⁹¹ Ibid p. 53

⁹² Mario Praz, *The Romantic Agony, Second Edition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970 [1933]), p. 30.

⁹³ Praz, p. 137

Characteristically, this association of beauty and death is taken to an extreme in Baudelaire's works. 'The Metamorphoses of the Vampire', for example, shows the fatal woman of Romanticism and decadence in reduced circumstances: in mental asylums, the object of unwelcome lust and even as dry bones and dust.

David Weir has suggested that decadence be viewed as a paradoxical cleansing of the aesthetic palette in preparation for new movements, so that it surfaces between Romanticism and Modernism, and again between Modernism and whatever comes next in the guise of Postmodernism.⁹⁴ For Weir decadence is a 'dynamic of change' and thus can be invoked by revolutionary forces,⁹⁵ a point to which I will return in discussing Ballard's wish for more decadence, below. Weir proposes that Romanticism and decadence exist in a dialectical relationship, the key terms of which are natural and anti-natural respectively, and which leads to the synthesis of Modernism.⁹⁶ However, as Tilottama Rajan pointed out, this unresolved dialectic may already have been at work in Romanticism itself, making decadence a refined strain of a pre-existent Romantic complexity.

Accompanying the anti-natural of decadence is the relocation of emotion outside of the observing consciousness of narrator, speaker or poet; but this can also be viewed as an extension of the anthropomorphizing of landscape which the Romantics performed. A calm, cold almost passive observance of atrocity is the decadent mode

⁹⁴ David Weir, *Decadence and the Making of Modernism* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995), pp.15-16.

⁹⁵ Weir, p. 16

⁹⁶ Ibid p. 16-17

of enquiry – a dark parody of gentlemanly decorum. The absent emotion is perhaps to be found in the cityscapes and scenery which decadent works describe, and this imposition of feeling from the outer onto the inner is more than the lifeless registering of sense data in a calumny of the empiricist view of mind and world; it is the very obverse of the Romantic metaphor of the lamp lending a supernatural cast to the objects of perception. Giant allegorical forms that are reminiscent of Blake's fourfold pantheon stalk Baudelaire's ennui-crippled speakers through *Les Fleurs du Mal*, making of the city an internal landscape presided over by psychical projections. But decadent literature also transforms and perverts the lamp metaphor through its lavishing of lyricism upon the disgusting and the ugly: 'Decay is decadent, in short, when artifice is used not merely to disguise but to decorate decomposition.'⁹⁷ The poems of *Les Fleurs du Mal* oscillate between sentiment and transcendence, and deepest degradation and decadence, so that Romantic irony is also displaced from a tension existing within a single poem or the rhetoric of a single speaker, and instead operates externally through the juxtaposition of unlike poems and effects. In the introduction to the Oxford World Classics edition of *Les Fleurs du Mal*, Jonathan Culler notes that

If Baudelaire is seen as the prophet of modernity, it is no doubt because his lyrics can be read as asking how one can experience or come to terms with the modern world and as offering poetic consciousness as a solution – albeit a desperate one, requiring a passage through negativity⁹⁸

⁹⁷ Ibid p. 31

⁹⁸ Charles Baudelaire, *The Flowers of Evil*, trans. James McGowan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008 [1857]), p xxxi.

This seems a close match for the kind of wounded Romanticism which I see at work in Ballard, though perhaps not going quite so far as to call poetic consciousness a solution. If Baudelaire prefigures to some extent the persistence of lyricism and the imagination as a Romantic inheritance in Ballard, he also can be seen to have influenced some of Ballard's darker and more decadent moods. In the poem 'To One Who Is Too Cheerful', for instance, the appearance of a sexualized wound orifice anticipates such depravities in *The Atrocity Exhibition* and *Crash*.⁹⁹

George Bataille in *Literature and Evil* (1957) quotes John-Paul Sartre on Baudelaire, and Sartre seems to be saying that in creating evil literature Baudelaire is recognising and accepting the existence of good.¹⁰⁰ In this argument he recalls the Romantic portrayal of the despoliation of the natural world and of human beings in order to suggest that things might, or ought to, be otherwise. For Bataille the limitless possibility released in the atrocious act is a counter-cultural undermining of the limitless power of the consumer self, and he reads Romanticism, in terms that prefigure Campbell's argument in *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism*, as essentially a bourgeois safety valve which allowed the infinite desire of the consumer to appeal to the sacred and the transcendent in what was essentially a perfect capitalist formation of the self: individualism.¹⁰¹ On this assumption, the Gothic and decadence become the paradoxical safeguards of an un-co-opted Romantic impulse which has dressed itself in a corpse shroud in order to offend the spectacle of modern consumerism. In terms of what we have traced thus

⁹⁹ Ibid p. 87

¹⁰⁰ Georges Bataille, *Literature and Evil* (1957), trans. Alastair Hamilton (London: Penguin, 2012 [1973]), pp. 27-8.

¹⁰¹ Bataille, p. 40

far in this introduction, then, we can see the separation of the high Romantic goals of individuation and transcendence from their darker doubles as, consciously or unconsciously, aiding and abetting the emergence of a consumerist and spectacular society in the 1960s. This, though, was a society that the Romantics themselves saw as already emergent in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and for which they proposed the apocalyptic bardic imagination as a means of transcending or transforming. To take this one step further we might suggest, with Rajan, that the undecidability of Romantic literature – achieved in part through the inclusion of Gothic, decadent and deathly counter currents – was a deliberate strategy for the resisting of what Guy Debord would call recuperation. On this reading we can see Ballard's reinsertion of the Gothic and decadent strains of Romanticism into his contraplexual mix as an attempt to create an apocalyptic vision of the media landscape of his day – one that in its very unreadability resists easy commodification and recuperation.

A brief description of the concepts of 'recuperation', 'detournement' and 'the society of the spectacle' will be useful at this stage. Though the 1950s and 60s avant-garde groups the Letterist International (LI) and the Situationist International (SI) seem far from my topic of Romanticism and J. G. Ballard, they in fact represent the opposite yet complementary current in the contraplex of Ballard's Romantic critique. If Abrams et al had refined and sought to preserve a 'healthy' Romanticism which jettisoned all Gothic, decadent and deathly impulses, then the movements of Dada, Surrealism, Letterist and Situationist Internationals might be seen to have honed and refined precisely those rejected strains through the decadent and symbolist

movements and literatures in France. Though both strains envisage a psychological revolution, and appeal to an order of reality beyond that which is perceived, their *modus operandi*, and the extent to which they believe that the veil can be pierced, can seem wildly divergent. Very briefly, the spectacle and spectacular society are ‘a map that covers the territory’, a veil cast over ‘reality’ by the media landscape that girdles the earth and from which there is no escape because we are a part of it and contribute to it.¹⁰² But, as hopeless as that sounds, the LI and the SI had various strategies which they employed to prevent their radical works and gestures from being ‘hoovered-up’ and regurgitated by the spectacle, from being recuperated. These included the *dérive* – a psychogeographic walking which was radical because unplanned and undertaken without discernible economic or practical purpose;¹⁰³ and *détournement*, which sought to subvert the modes of communication of the spectacle – such as advertising slogans, popular songs and entertainments – for radical intent. In the subsequent chapters these notions become relevant when considering Ballard’s own theorising of the media landscape, and in understanding the strategies which both he and his prophet-bards employ in order to rupture the skein of a false reality. It is commonly thought that the generation of thinkers after the LI and the SI despaired of the notion that there was anything beyond the spectacle, or that it could be resisted, but as Sadie Plant has commented in *The Most Radical Gesture* (1992), the idea of transcendence proves difficult to dislodge:

¹⁰² This concept is explained in a series of aphorisms and aperçus in Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Black & Red (London: Notting Hill Editions, 2013 [1967]).

¹⁰³ Merlin Coverley includes Ballard in a British psychogeographic tradition which he traces from Daniel Defoe, through William Blake and Thomas De Quincey and into the twentieth century with authors such as Ballard, Iain Sinclair and Stuart Home. Merlin Coverley, *Psychogeography* (Harpenden: Pocket Essentials, 2010), pp. 111-140.

And while he scorns and inverts the situationist dream, Baudrillard continues, like generations of romantics and revolutionaries before him, to counter-pose the world's self image to some other, more real reality¹⁰⁴

Jean Baudrillard famously and controversially lauded Ballard's *Crash* for its postmodern, pornographic affectlessness, and Ballard would go on to heap praise upon Baudrillard's *America* (1986). The conjunction of these 'healthful' and decadent strands of Romanticism in the first decades Ballard's career, I argue, contribute to his contraplexual works, and to his wounded Romanticism.

Ballard on Romanticism and its (Decadent) Descendants

Ballard often invoked the legacy of Romanticism in his interviews and non-fiction writings, and he certainly considered himself to be what he called an 'imaginative author', which he conceived of in contradistinction to an outmoded but still dominant 'realism'. In the following section I provide some evidence from interviews that Ballard thought of himself as working in a Romantic/decadent tradition, before going on to consider some of his aesthetic statements in the essay 'Which Way to Inner Space'.

In the prose poem 'What I Believe' (1984) Ballard invokes the specifically Romantic tropes of the apocalyptic powers of the imagination, transcendent flight, inner-dwelling and the visionary aspects of extreme mental states:

¹⁰⁴ Sadie Plant, *The Most Radical Gesture* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 166.

I believe in the power of the imagination to remake the world,
 to release the truth within us, to hold back the night,
 to transcend death, to charm motorways, to ingratiate our-
 selves with birds, to enlist the confidences of madmen.¹⁰⁵

Here and in the rest of the poem we can clearly see the invocation of some of the high Romantic tropes which were discussed earlier in this introduction, but also their ambivalent relationship to contraplexual elements such as motorways and madmen. The effect of this is a characteristic Ballardian ambiguity in which the ostensibly ugly or minatory is described with a lyricism that transforms it, though retaining its darker aspects. In interview with C. Bresson for *Métaphores*, Ballard again hymns the apocalyptic imagination:

[I] am a great believer in the need of the imagination to transform everything, otherwise we'll have to take the world as we find it, and I don't think we should [...] But the real job is to re-make the world in a way that is meaningful.¹⁰⁶

Here Ballard seems to describe a moral purpose and responsibility for his creations. It is a note that he would sound in response to the purported amorality of the novel *Crash*, and yet, later in 'What I Believe', the apocalyptic imagination is called upon to construct atrocities, decadent beauties and grotesque images, and even to conceive

¹⁰⁵ J. G. Ballard, 'What I Believe' in *Science Fiction* #1, ed. Daniel Richie (January: 1984), ll. 1-4. Reproduced on [j.g.ballard.ca](http://j.g.ballard.ca/j.g.ballard.ca/uncollected_work/what_i_believe.html) <j.g.ballard.ca/uncollected_work/what_i_believe.html> [accessed 15 September 2015].

¹⁰⁶ C. Bresson, 'J. G. Ballard at Home', *Métaphores* 7 (March 1982): 5-29, p. 5.

of its own negation: 'I believe in nothing'.¹⁰⁷ Ballard certainly enjoyed reading the work of the American dark Romantic author, Edgar Allan Poe, and he frequently refers to decadent and symbolist works in interviews and essays.¹⁰⁸ In interview with V. Vale for *RE/SEARCH* magazine, Ballard says "We need more decadence – I don't mean in a moral sense..." (*R/S JGB* 6). He goes on to contrast decadence with what he calls 'the new Puritanism', a deadening and imagination-stifling force in society as he sees it. If not 'in a moral sense', it seems fair to assume that Ballard is calling for a resurgence of a decadent aesthetic. Ballard actually seems to articulate the decadent consequences of the primacy of the imagination in Romantic writing and aesthetics when he says:

One cannot repress the imagination, and it seems to me that one certainly cannot suppress the *deviant* and *perverse* imagination. Often the more deviant and perverse ideas that we have by a sort of paradox lead towards the grasping of some sort of moral truth. One needs to break the conventional enamel that encases everything.

(*R/S JGB* 46)

And so in portraying evil, deprivation and depravity, its obverse is actually suggested. There is a clear echo in this line of thinking both of Romanticism, particularly William Blake and Percy Bysshe Shelley, and of Romanticism's dark and decadent descendants Edgar Allan Poe and Charles Baudelaire. In the case of

¹⁰⁷ 'What I Believe' l. 36

¹⁰⁸ He also reworked Alfred Jarry's 'The Crucifixion Considered as an Uphill Bicycle Race' (1903) as *The Atrocity Exhibition*'s 'The Assassination of John Fitzgerald Kennedy Considered as a Downhill Motor Race'. Liam Thomas McNamara's PhD thesis, *The Postmodern Jarry: J. G. Ballard and 'the Real'* (Royal Holloway University of London, 2002), explores Jarry's influence upon Ballard's work.

Blake, we can look to the proverbs of hell in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, for instance: ‘the road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom’, or in a prefiguring of some of Ballard’s more disturbing works: ‘Sooner murder an infant in its cradle than nurse unacted desires’.¹⁰⁹

In an interview with Christopher Bigsby, for the *Writers in Conversation* series, Ballard makes one of his most explicit acknowledgements of the legacy of Romanticism in his work:

Yes, I think I am a romantic. I feel my links are not with any writers or school of writing but really with the surrealists. I am an old-fashioned surrealist, probably the last of them. I think there is a strong strain of romanticism running through surrealism. It is romanticism making a strange mixed marriage with psychoanalysis. It is the informed waking dream. But it is still a dream in some ways and I think there are dream-like and romantic elements running through my fiction. I am glad they are there.¹¹⁰

Here Ballard describes what I see as the triumvirate of aesthetic and philosophical concerns – Romanticism, Psychoanalysis and Surrealism – upon which he draws throughout his career. In Ballard’s understanding of the imaginative versus the realist modes in literature and in art more generally, Surrealism is a late-blooming of Romanticism which utilizes the symbols of the unconscious of its time. Ballard’s

¹⁰⁹ William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790) in Michael Mason ed. *William Blake: Selected Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 76, 78.

¹¹⁰ J. G. Ballard interviewed by Christopher Bigsby in *Writers in Conversation: Volume 1* (London: Pen & Inc Press, 2000), p. 79.

‘old-fashioned’ surrealism aligns him with a line of imaginative artists and poets than runs from Surrealism back through Symbolism and decadence to Romanticism. In conversation with his artist and sculptor friend Eduardo Paolozzi, Ballard expands upon this theme:

There's something about Surrealism which touched the whole Puritan conscience. It's a variety of Symbolism I suppose, a 20th century variety using psychoanalysis as its main language. And if you accept as a definition of a symbol that it represents something which the mind tries to shield itself from you can understand why people in puritanical Northern Europe and North America have always been uneasy in the face, not just of Surrealism, but of Symbolism as a whole. What sort of incursion into the imaginative life of all the arts in England and North America have the symbolist poets made - - Rimbaud, Baudelaire, Jarry, and so on -- almost none. And the Surrealists get the same treatment. But I don't see myself working in a surrealist tradition at all because Surrealism was like Hollywood in a sense, was a one-generation movement. You can refer to the Surrealists in connection with my own fiction, but I certainly don't use the basic techniques of Surrealism, automatic writing, for instance. (*EM* 37)

Pushing further back into the nineteenth century for literary and artistic precursors and influences, Ballard appears to be looking for the universal. The ‘one-generation movement’ would seem to agree with seeing surrealism as one of many re-emergences of Romanticism in the twentieth century, and this is largely how I treat it. Ballard might be said to be working in a Romantic/decadent tradition – so much

of his work is concerned with the relationship between subject and object, and the imbuing of objects with mystical, transcendental value, even the ostensibly ugly or disgusting – but in another interview Ballard seems to contradict this avowal:

Decadence? I can't remember if I ever said I enjoyed the notion, except in the sense of drained swimming pools and abandoned hotels, which I don't really see as places of decadence, but rather like the desert in that I see them merely as psychic zero stations, or as "Go," in Monopoly terms. (*EM* 184)

‘Psychic zero’ seems relatable to the type of cleansing of the senses which apocalyptic literature purports to perform, but also recalls David Weir’s role for decadence as a hinge which connects movements and performs an aesthetic reinvigoration. Empty swimming pools and abandoned carparks, rusting space shuttle gantries and other indications of human absence or obsolescence form part of Ballard’s symbolic landscape, and they are accompanied by more overtly Romantic symbols, such as those of birds and flight which speak of transcendence. This intermingling of the decadent and the Romantic, along with the psychoanalytic and surrealistic, works together to create the creative tension of the contraplex.

In 1962 *New Worlds* ran a short editorial called ‘Which Way to Inner Space?’ (*UGM* 195-198). It was Ballard’s first major statement on aesthetics and a rallying cry for the British New Wave of science fiction. In it Ballard called for an end to science fiction’s ‘juvenile’ preoccupations with ‘rocket ships and ray guns’, advocating instead the infinite frontiers of ‘inner space’ (*UGM* 195). Ballard was not the first to

refer to inner space. As Colin Greenland reports, the term also appears in J. B. Priestley's 1953 'They Come from Inner Space'.¹¹¹ Priestley anticipates Ballard's attempts to construct a mythology of the near future, reading science fiction as the retelling of myths in contemporary form, populated by Jungian archetypes. Although Ballard neglects to mention Priestley's essay, he does nod to Ray Bradbury as an exemplar of the direction in which science fiction should be heading: 'A poet such as Ray Bradbury can accept the current magazine conventions and transform even so hackneyed a subject as Mars into an enthralling private world' (*UGM* 195). Ballard's term of approbation here is worth noting. Bradbury's Mars-bound rocket fictions are not scientifically accurate or even plausible, but they are vehicles for the exploration of the minds of their pilots and crew, and Mars invariably turns out to be remarkably like Earth, only with subtle but crucial differences. In some stories the astronauts' experiences are entirely subjective, the towns that they visit corresponding to the memories of their own home towns on Earth. It is the fears and hopes of the would-be space explorers that make up the terrain of the red planet, and as such these stories represent an early voyage into something like what Ballard speaks of in his manifesto.¹¹²

What Ballard's essay spells out are largely his own usage of psychoanalysis and Surrealism, and the new extremes he believes the incorporation of these systems of thought should propel science fiction towards. In the seminal collection of specially commissioned short 'speculative fiction' stories, *Dangerous Visions* (1967), Harlan

¹¹¹ *The Entropy Exhibition*, p. 52

¹¹² Ballard's short story 'The Time Tombs' (1963) has been read as an attempt to 'do' Ray Bradbury with its interstellar travel and dying planet. See Pringle and Goddard, *The First Twenty Years*, p. 26.

Ellison called Ballard the ‘acknowledged leader of “the British school of science fiction.”’¹¹³ Ellison goes on to suggest that Ballard would not recognize himself as a leader, and that his writing does not betray the ‘easily cited examples, jingoism, obviousness and [...] predictability’ inherent in such literature.¹¹⁴ It is probably more accurate to regard Michael Moorcock as the ‘leader’ of the New Wave movement, but Ballard’s non-fiction has never lacked conviction. ‘Which Way to Inner Space’ and other manifestoes of the 60s do display something of the advertiser’s flair for gnomic utterance, delivered in memorable rhetorical style.¹¹⁵ For instance, on Chris Marker’s *La Jetée*: ‘in my experience, the only convincing act of time travel in the whole of science fiction’; or, in a review for a sexual handbook, ‘Sex does not exist, only eroticism’;¹¹⁶ a decadent statement indicative of Ballard’s thinking at the time about the ways in which we use one another physically and emotionally, themes that he would go on to explore at length in *The Atrocity Exhibition* and *Crash*. There is the haunting sense of half-familiarity when reading a Ballard story, having read any of the other works beforehand. Of course, most authors will have this effect once you become familiar with their style, but Ballard elevates the sensation to a poetics of assonance working against the dissonance of the fractured identities in individual texts.

¹¹³ *Dangerous Visions*, ed. Harlan Ellison (London: Gollancz, 2012 [1967]), p. 504.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid*

¹¹⁵ After leaving medical school and a stint for the RAF in Canada, Ballard worked as a copywriter for an advertising firm. He maintained a lifetime obsession with the ephemera of science and technology too; for many years he received regular deliveries of marketing brochures and flyers sent to a doctor friend by medical and pharmaceutical companies. This junk mail was apparently a great font of inspiration.

¹¹⁶ J. G. Ballard, ‘La Jetée’ in *New Worlds*, 1966. Reproduced in *UGM* p. 29. Marker’s film bears a great deal of comparison with Ballard’s fiction. In particular the method used to time travel is a psychological as much as technological one: the strength of the hero’s memory is what carries him back to a time before WWII. In the ‘Pre-Third’ of ‘Terminal Beach’ (1964), the memories of Traven’s dead wife and son are the only certainties that he can cling to in the ‘ontological garden of Eden’: “But your son, and my nephew, are fixed in our minds forever, their identities as certain as the stars.” (CSS2 p. 48); J. G. Ballard, ‘Use Your Vagina’ in *New Worlds*, 1969. Reproduced in *UGM* p. 258.

‘Which Way to Inner Space’ has most often been read in terms of, and support of, psychoanalytical readings of Ballard’s work. The unconscious, though, is not mentioned until the end of the piece, the rest of which focusses primarily on Surrealism, and even that last nod to psychoanalysis is placed in the mouth of Salvador Dali. Ballard’s debt to Surrealism is well documented for an author often reluctant to admit to his influences, preferring to be seen – in literary terms a least – as entirely *sui generis*, and his highly visual style has helped to foster the image of a frustrated painter forced to wrest his pictures out of words.¹¹⁷ But Ballard wanted to do more than paint pictures with words:

Visually, of course, nothing can equal space fiction for its vast perspectives and cold beauty, as any s-f film or comic strip demonstrates, but a literary form requires more complex ideas to sustain it. (*UGM* 196)

Breton, in the Surrealist novel *Nadja* (1928), both applauds psychoanalysis and distances the Surrealist project from it: ‘I am convinced, moreover, that as a discipline psychoanalysis is not qualified to deal with such phenomena’¹¹⁸ – the phenomenon being the intrusion upon the narrative of a thought regarding an ambivalent response to a statue. This is an odd claim to make about psychoanalysis, given that unbidden thoughts rising to the surface in distracted moments, or during dreams, are precisely the material with which the discipline might be said to work.

¹¹⁷ Will Self, ‘Journey to the End of the Night’ in *The Guardian Review*, 04 August 2012, p. 3.

¹¹⁸ Andre Breton, *Nadja* (London: Penguin, 1999 [1928]), p. 24.

There is a large body of literature which has read psychoanalysis as prefigured by Romanticism, Joel Faflak even goes so far as to argue that British Romantic poetry invents psychoanalysis in advance of Freud.¹¹⁹ Ballard does make frequent use of the terms and ideas of Freud and Jung, but his ambivalent portrayal of psychiatrists and psychologists, and the fact that his heroes almost always either ignore their counsel, or end up having to treat themselves, aligns him closely with the anti-psychiatry of R. D. Laing – many of whose statements on topics such as the space race could have come straight from a Ballard manifesto, or vice versa. Ballard said of Freud that he was perhaps the twentieth century's greatest novelist, again reinforcing the imaginative and speculative components of the work of psychoanalysis.¹²⁰

One of the most interesting statements in 'Which Way to Inner Space' is that which outlines an idea for the kind of writing that Ballard wishes to see in science fiction:

The first true s-f story, and one I intend to write myself if no one else will, is about a man with amnesia lying on a beach and looking at a rusty bicycle wheel, trying to work out the absolute essence of the relationship between them. (*UGM* 198)

There is something purely epistemological in this image – a stripping back to the basic relationship between subject and object in order to ask: “how can we claim to have knowledge of the external world?” Ballard is signalling here the

¹¹⁹ Joel Faflak, *Romantic Psychoanalysis: The Burden of the Mystery* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2008).

¹²⁰ J. G. Ballard, *J. G. Ballard Quotes*: ed. V. Vale and Mike Ryan (San Francisco: Re/Search Publications, 2004), p. 101.

epistemological concerns of his ideal science fiction, his interest in extreme mental states, and a Blakean/Wordsworthian imbuing of the quotidian with the light of unfamiliarity. The amnesiac and the rusty bicycle wheel are transformed here into a symbol of the mysteries of subjectivity. At the same time, however, Ballard's investing of the mundane with the mystical is parodic and decadent: the future technology of rocket ships and space travel has been replaced by the decaying obsolescence of a bicycle wheel, with a rusty zero. Ballard invokes in this essay the limitless possibilities of the imagination to turn even such a banal scene into the future of a genre, whilst at the same time seeming to doubt the power of the imagination which may in fact produce nothing. I have been referring to this oscillation in Ballard between Romantic and anti-Romantic as contraplexual. The *OED* defines contraplex as '*Telegr.* Having two currents or messages passing in opposite directions at the same time.' This, I think, captures something of Ballard's studied ambiguity which, as has been discussed in this introduction, was already at work in Romanticism, and which Ballard invokes in response to the threat of the mediatized landscape. Ballard conceives of himself as partaking in the great stream of Romantic writing which runs from Romanticism, through decadence, Symbolism and Surrealism and on into the science fiction of his early career. But far from a 'healthy', high Romantic faith in the transcendent power of the imagination, Ballard's is a wounded Romanticism which has learned to take pleasure in and aestheticize its own perpetual longing.

Chapter Outlines

In chapter 1 I begin with a discussion of some of the earliest of Ballard's short fictions: 'Prima Belladonna' (1956), 'The Concentration City' (1957), 'The Waiting Grounds' (1959), 'Billennium' (1961), 'The Voices of Time' (1960), 'The Venus Hunters' (1963) and 'The Gioconda of the Twilight Noon' (1964). These stories demonstrate the chiefly epistemological concerns of Ballard's writing at this time, and trace a deepening engagement with the internal landscapes of its protagonists and narrators. Concomitant to this turn inwards is a fascination with the ways in which the human mind relates to the external world. Viewed as a series of epistemological experiments, these short stories seem to test out the possibility of that great Romantic drive to undo the separation between subject and object in a world that the senses half perceive and half create.¹²¹ But Ballard does not engage with these Romantic legacies uncritically; his stories of this period, though laden with Romantic imagery and tropes, by turns also expose the terrifying consequences of such a union of subject and object, and the extreme pathos of the realization that such a transcendent union may be impossible.

Lastly, I consider the full working out of the science fiction which Ballard had anticipated in 'Which Way to Inner Space?' in 'The Terminal Beach'. This story depicts a man at the limit-point of psychological wholeness; Traven is at once as fragmented as the disintegrating remains of magazines upon which he sleeps, and yet as disturbingly one with the nightmare environment which he inhabits as Coleridge's esemplastic imagination would seek to make possible. It is in 'The Terminal Beach'

¹²¹ William Wordsworth, 'Lines Written a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey' (1798), ll. 107-8, in *Major Works*, p. 134.

that the necessity, impossibility and danger of the Romantic desire for both transcendence above and reconnection within the natural world is most powerfully expressed. I read this story as a terminus in the body of Ballard's fiction – with lines of Romantic engagement and disavowal proceeding both synchronically and diachronically from the literal and symbolic testing site of Eniwetok.

In addition to the overarching concern with epistemology, in this and subsequent chapters I shall be paying attention to the following Romantic tropes and symbols as they appear in the short stories and manifesto: the perversion of nature by science and technology; anti-Enlightenment sentiment; the setting free of the unconscious; lamias and femmes fatales; flight and dreams; visionary experiences; a fascination with extreme psychological states; the desire for transcendence and/or dissolution; the desire to collapse the division between subject and object; the privileged place of the imagination; and notions of the sublime. Undercutting and working against these invocations of Romantic thought and feeling are: the subjectivist paradoxes of the self; labyrinthine spaces; Gothic horror and terror; solipsism and the fragmentary nature of the self and of experience; the utter inability to transcend the phenomenal world and/or the non-existence of a transcendental signified; refusal of dialectical resolution and the failure of esemplastic imagination to make a whole of the fragments of self and experience; 'the death of affect'; and the terrible consequences of the collapse of the division between subject and object.

As part of my exploration of Ballard's complex engagement with the legacies of Romanticism, undercut by the ostensibly unromantic strains in his fiction and theory, I shall consider the heritage of some of these ostensibly unromantic doubts in the poetry and theory of the major Romantics. For example, in Wordsworth's concept of the 'savage torpor' of the overstimulated city-dweller, we perhaps have the germ of Ballard's 'death of affect'.¹²² The Blakean dialectic of unresolved and yet productive tension between opposites might also be seen as a Romantic precedent for the oscillations which these texts perform. The flights of lyrical description, sometimes lavished upon the mundane, the ugly and even (as we shall see in subsequent chapters) the disgusting, speak to the Romantic capability to find the supernatural in the natural, and the natural in the supernatural. Again, the drive, the hope, seems holistic – imaginative transformation into wholeness, but the doubts about the possibility of this radical project are here given equal weight where they were perhaps less consciously avowed in high Romantic poetry and aesthetic theory. This, then, can be called a wounded Romanticism.

In chapter 2 I consider the broader canvasses of the quartet of disaster novels: *The Wind from Nowhere* (1962), *The Drowned World* (1962), *The Drought* (1964) and *The Crystal World* (1966), paying close attention to *The Drowned World*. These novels are ostensibly disaster stories – often seen as a peculiarly British sub-genre of dystopian fiction – and they both conform to and subvert many of the generic stereotypes. I explore the deep and complex vein of anti-Enlightenment, anti-rationalist thinking that runs through *The Drowned World* in light of Romanticism's

¹²² Wordsworth, William. 'Preface' to *Lyrical Ballads* (1802), in *Major Works*, p. 599.

ambivalent responses to technology and progress. *The Drowned World* also continues and expands upon the epistemological concerns noted in Chapter 1 and, I argue, should be seen as apocalyptic literature – a continuation and critique of the high Romantic aspiration of a marriage between mind and world. The lyrical descriptions of landscape which appear in the latter three of the disaster novels, and particularly in *The Drowned World* and *The Crystal World*, seem to herald just such a transcendent vision, and these are important in terms of the psychological response of the protagonists; their reveries in contemplation of the natural world are not in any way ‘nature writing’, but serve to foreground and interrogate the relationship between mind and world. But the response to the metamorphosed and metamorphosing landscapes of these texts oscillates between abject horror and aesthetic appreciation of the beautiful and the sublime. Again, there is a danger apparent here; as much as the lyrical passages seem to celebrate the esemplastic imagination and its ability to render whole what is disjointed, and beautiful what is degraded or ugly, they also warn of the yawning solipsistic abyss which potentially opens upon such a subjective refashioning of the world. An aspect of this abyssal gaze is apparent in the passages which seem to pass over into mere celebration of the ugly and disgusting, and therefore invoke the Romantic inheritance of the literature of decadence. All of this is explored in terms of Ballard’s complex continuation and critique of the transformative imagination, which is taken to extremes both farcical and sublime. Against this reading of the struggling/empowering imagination, I consider an alternative in the form of a species of Keats’ negative capability, the achievement of which state: ‘capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts,

without any irritable reaching after fact and reason', might be said to be the ultimate destination of Ballard's quietist 'heroes'.¹²³

Finally, a discussion of the disparity between the plotted events of *The Drowned World* and the effect that it has upon the reader, particularly at moments of intense lyrical description, are considered in terms of their contraplexual effect. This is a move already anticipated by the feared and revered bardic figures described in the poetry of Coleridge and Shelley, for instance in 'Kubla Khan'. Ballard's characteristic ambivalence is seen to simultaneously celebrate and warn of the dangers of the apocalyptic imagination, recreating and examining a tension which was already apparent in the literature of Romanticism.

Chapter 3 will explore *The Atrocity Exhibition* and *Crash*, Ballard's most controversial and formally experimental works, tracing first the ostensible move away from Romantic imagery and tropes and into the (de-centred) heart of the modern metropolis, with all of its minatory and alienating steel, concrete, glass and chromium. The bidding of farewell to the fantastic descriptions of nature, and the more overtly science-fictional elements of the disaster quartet and contemporary short stories, which was heralded in the 1966 article for *New Worlds*, 'Notes from Nowhere',¹²⁴ accompanies a concentration upon the twentieth-century present and its ills which are taken to their logical extreme. Ballard detects in modernity a tendency

¹²³ Keats, *Major Works*, pp. 369-70.

¹²⁴ J. G. Ballard, 'Notes from Nowhere: Comments on Work in Progress' in *New Worlds* (October: 1966). Note no. 18 states: 'Au revoir, jewelled alligators and white hotels, hallucinatory forests, farewell.'

for violence to be sexualized and for reality to be displaced by the fictions of the media landscape, and these two novels extrapolate the consequences of these discourses into nightmare depictions of eroticized car crashes and the fragmented consciousness of the multiply mediated self.

Subsequently I consider Ballard's depiction of the modern city as in the tradition of the Romantic invocations of the metropolis in the poetry of William Blake and William Wordsworth, and in the prose of Thomas de Quincey. This is a two part movement that looks first to the Romantic precedents for the depiction of societal and industrial ills – the dystopian vision that is inseparable from its utopian antithesis. Secondly, in light of Ballard's continued lyrical passages in the unedifying cityscapes of modernity, I look to Wordsworth's 'Preface' to the *Lyrical Ballads* of 1800, in which he proclaims the philosophical and spiritual role of the poet, prophesying that if science and its objects (technology) were to form an integral part of our lives, through some kind of revolution, then the poet will 'sleep no more than at present [...] carrying sensation into the midst of the objects of Science itself.'¹²⁵ With this heritage in mind I ask how far Ballard might be considered the poet of the motorway access ramp and the cloverleaf junction, the bard of the airport architecture of modernity.

Further exploring the aestheticization of the mundane, the ugly and the disgusting, I look for a continuation and critique of Romanticism in the poetics of decadence in

¹²⁵ William Wordsworth, 'Preface' to *Lyrical Ballads* (1802), *Major Works*, pp. 606-7.

Ballard's bejewelling of vomit and sexualizing of wounds and prosthetics. Alongside the echoes of Charles Baudelaire and Oscar Wilde, Mark Seltzer's concept of 'wound culture', and the all-devouring Romantic consumer-self of Colin Campbell's social history, I attempt to identify the unexpected rays of hope that Ballard sees in the relentless pursuit of our innermost desires.¹²⁶

Taking my cue from Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, I consider the Romantic and Gothic heritage of the figure of the double in *Crash*, as well as in the fractured multiplications of the self in *The Atrocity Exhibition*. For all of the terrifying consequences of the doubles that are unleashed upon the worlds of *The Atrocity Exhibition* and *Crash*, there is also the concomitant psychological freedom experienced through the recognition and even acceptance and love of the Other. Male and female counterparts of the self are violently and sexually subsumed by the imagination of the protagonists of these novels, making of the fractured components of torturous fragmentation a monstrous whole, yet potentially one that gestures towards a sublime whole. The pain and pleasure of the sublime and its gendered oppositions, are seen here to be recapitulated in the overlit nightmare of modernity, seeming to hold out the promise of both transcendent hope and the threat of abyssal despair and alienation. These novels manifest a forlorn drive to find beauty, sublimity and eternity in the alienating and endlessly mediated realms of the cityscape, at whatever cost, and I read this will to encounter and maintain contact with the numinous, in the hell of the modern city and the mediascape that enmeshes

¹²⁶ Mark Seltzer, 'Wound Culture: Trauma in the Pathological Public Sphere' in *October*, Vol. 80 (Spring, 1997), pp. 3-26.

it, as a powerful – if wounded – Romantic echo. Yet this same impossible desire, and the lengths to which the desiring self will go to achieve it, however fleetingly, are also seen to be an indictment of the commercially recuperated legacies of Romanticism. In the overlit realm of modernity the Romantic lamp of self-expression must burn dangerously bright in order to be seen at all.

In chapter 4 I look at the imaginative aftershocks of the city cycle of novels in the resurgent nature which overruns Shepperton in *The Unlimited Dream Company* (1979). In turn I offer a reading of *The Day of Creation* (1987) in the light of the creative after effects of the autobiographical novel *The Empire of the Sun* (1984). I also make reference to *Hello America* (1981) and *Rushing to Paradise* (1994). *The Unlimited Dream Company* is perhaps Ballard's most overtly Romantic novel, with its exuberant natural imagery and clear Blakean parallels; and yet with its desecration of the supposedly sacred realm of childhood, it is also amongst his most disturbing. Drawing out the Blakean invocations of the novel, I offer a reading of the negative dialectic operative throughout Ballard's oeuvre, and here brought to its limit-point. The Romantic legacy of the transformative imagination is seen at its most potent and yet paradoxically at its most circumscribed and dangerous. Ballard's lingering Romanticism is in some ways, I suggest, wounded by its encounter with modernity in the city cycle of novels, and I explore the exploitation of children in the novel as a perverse parody of the Wordsworthian concept of childhood, and of the sacred place of childhood memory as a source of inspiration and strength for the Romantic imagination. At the same time, I suggest, it is possible to view the victims of Blake's transformative imagination as the fallout of human contact with a sublime

and indiscriminate power: evil as energy in Blake's formulation. This scorched-earth ransacking of childhood innocence, which nonetheless does feed into imaginative recreation of the world, is also seen to darkly recall Blake's dichotomous yet interpenetrating collection, *Songs of Innocence and Songs of Experience* (1794). Looking back over the oeuvre, and forwards to *Empire of the Sun*, I read a similar ambivalence in Ballard's attitude towards the nuclear armaments that saved his own and his family's lives at the end of World War II.

Coming after *Empire of the Sun*, a novel that has been read by many as identifying the well-springs of Ballard's imagination, *The Day of Creation* can seem derivative and unworthy of critical attention.¹²⁷ In an attempt to recover the novel, I trace the deliberate echoing of previous fictions along with the controlling metaphor of water as both the source of imagination, creativity and life, and the unconscious oblivion of the return to dissolution and death. I read the protagonist Mallory's struggle to sustain and yet control the river, which seems to have sprung from his own mind, as a restaging of the Romantic narratives of the formation of a poet's mind, most strikingly of Wordsworth's *Prelude*. I suggest that the adolescent girl Noon is a continuation of the despoiling of the Wordsworthian childhood at work in *The Unlimited Dream Company*, but that she also represents one of the most fully-realized and autonomous of Ballard's female characters. Drawing upon the televisual theory of Raymond Williams, and the theory of the spectacle as outlined by Guy Debord, I trace the evolution of Ballard's Romantic invocation of the imagination in

¹²⁷ Martin Amis was scathing about what he saw as the recycling of themes in the novel. Martin Amis, *The War Against Cliché: Essays and Reviews 1975-2000* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2001), p. 107-9.

a multiply-mediated world, and the malign effects of the layering of Occidental imaginative projections upon the terrain of Africa, from Mungo Park's *Travels in the Interior of Africa* (1799), through Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899) and on to the modern-day BBC wildlife documentary. Such overlaying and overdetermining of a terrain is set alongside the reimagining of Ballard's oeuvre in the light of the biographical insights of *Empire of the Sun*, and Steven Spielberg's filmic reinterpretation of that novel, which was also released in 1987. I consider Ballard's uneasy celebration and denigration of visual and mediated culture in the light of recent studies in the Romantic response to visual culture, such as Gillen D'Arcy Wood's *The Shock of the Real* (2001), concluding that Ballard's deep ambiguity about the explosion of visual media and entertainment was shared by his Romantic forbears – both their fears about its impact upon the place and value of writing, and their excitement about the imaginative possibilities which it presented.

Chapter 5 investigates the rise of the postmodern detective in Ballard's final quartet of novels, *Cocaine Nights* (1996), *Super-Cannes* (2000), *Millennium People* (2003) and *Kingdom Come* (2006). Paying particular attention to *Millennium People* and *Kingdom Come*, I begin by bringing out the Romantic resonances in this return to generic clothing. Most obviously this appears in the form of Edgar Allan Poe's C. August Dupin stories, 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue' (1841), 'The Mystery of Marie Rogêt' (1842) and 'The Purloined Letter' (1844), but I also go on to describe the Romantic inheritances present in the figure of the postmodern detective – from de Quincey's night time wanderings to Poe's 'The Man of the Crowd' (1840) and Baudelaire's Parisian dérivés. That Ballard's final set of novels takes him to the then

keening edge of the present – to holiday homes in the Costa del Sol, exclusive business parks, luxury gated communities, and out of town shopping centres – once again speaks to Wordsworth’s insistence that poetry and the poet will be there to render most meaningful what is most ubiquitous to man, but also to the decadent impulse to decorate and celebrate the base the disfigured face of modernity.

I then go on to discuss the two layers of criminality that these reluctant detective/narrators unwittingly uncover. The first of these are highly symbolic but seemingly motiveless crime waves. It is perhaps the complete lack of traditionally understood motivation for these crimes that fools the local law enforcement and narrators for so long, and the lesson that they learn appears to be that meaningless acts are the most effective in the affectless realm of modernity; the symbolic here points to no transcendental signified but rather exists in order to generate affect for its own sake. As in Chapter 3, I read this as a continuation of the interrogation of the endpoint of expressive art, asking the question ‘what does it mean to say that art is whatever the artist and/or audience decides it is?’. The popular element of these miniature crime waves is very quickly contained and curtailed, and this bleakly nihilistic vision is further entrenched by the ease with which even these outrageous crimes are absorbed and recuperated by the media landscape.

The second layer of criminality has a much longer half-life, however, and it is the sense of emergent possibility which the major crimes of these novels – the murders – instils, that might be said to engage with those high Romantic concerns of sublimity

and transcendence. Reading these acts as the formative atrocities which bind communities together, as foundation myths, I propose the continuation of the unresolved Ballardian dialectic of the transformative power and yet terrible danger of the imagination to be at work in these acts of incipient terrorism. I see the moral ambiguity of these creative yet destructive acts as problematically reinforced by the lyrical passages of description which accompany their perpetrators; by the recurrent images of flight, the leitmotif in Ballard for the escape from spiritual torpor and blindness; and by the ambivalent complicity of both would-be detectives and the authorities in these crimes – both of which seem more concerned to weave them into acceptable personal and societal narratives than to solve or punish them in any traditional sense. As ever, this seems to be both a celebration and indictment of the malleability of the spectacular world of modernity, both gleeful invocation and dire warning, with Romantic symbols and aesthetics called upon to weave a problematic reading pleasure between both poles, travelling in contraplex.

Chapter 1. Mind-forged Landscapes in Ballard's Early Short Stories

In this chapter I want to put William Blake's 'mind-forg'd manacles' in conversation with the epistemological concerns of Ballard's early short fictions.¹ The Romantic conception of the mind's power to create that which we perceive, but also the danger of the occluded mind creating a prison or a nightmare, is manifested in Ballard's visionary bardic figures seeking to cleanse the doors of perception, and this ability is as much celebrated as it is feared, recognising the potential for such bards to project their own damaged psyches and obsessions onto the world and their followers. This tension between the compensatory and the catastrophic powers of the imagination pertains throughout Ballard's short fictions and beyond, from the early tales of psychological horror, which are clearly indebted to Edgar Allan Poe,² through to the Blakean masterpieces such as 'The Voices of Time' (1960), *The Unlimited Dream Company* (1979) and 'Memories of the Space Age' (1982). In Ballard's call for the 'the need of the imagination to transform everything, otherwise we'll have to take it as we find it',³ we can appreciate an echo of William Blake's 'I must Create a System. or be enslav'd by another Mans',⁴ and many of these stories are about the awakening of the imaginative faculty – for good or ill – in their protagonists.

¹ William Blake, 'London', in *Songs of Innocence and of Experience: Shewing the Two Contrary States of the Human Soul* (London: Tate, 2006), plate 46, l. 4.

² See for instance 'Track 12' (1958), 'Now: Zero' (1959) and 'Minus One' (1963). The latter is a modern retelling of Poe's 'The System of Doctor Tarr and Professor Fether' (1845).

³ Luke Bresson, 'J. G. Ballard at Home', *Metaphores* 7 (1982), p. 7.

⁴ William Blake, *Jerusalem: The Emanation of the Giant Albion*, ed. Morton D. Paley (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), p. 141, plate 10, line 20.

I will be looking at a number of Ballard's short stories from 1956 up to 1964, which takes us up to the point at which Ballard's focus seems to shift from fantastic imagery and invocations of the imagination to bleak depictions of the affectless realms of modernity. To begin with I will outline some of the key Romantic tropes and images which Ballard employs in some of his short stories, including 'Prima Belladonna' (1956), 'The Concentration City' (1957), 'The Waiting Grounds' (1959), 'Billennium' (1961), 'The Voices of Time' (1960), 'The Garden of Time' (1962), 'The Venus Hunters' (1963) and 'The Gioconda of the Twilight Noon' (1964). As we shall see, these stories are full of images of birds and of flight, which represent the soaring imagination and transcendent perception of high Romanticism. They are interested in the dimly perceived recesses of the deep self; contain frequent invocations of Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner*, and of lamia-like *femme fatales*; and evince a tendency for the protagonists to turn to the resources and consolations of the faculty of their imaginations in response to a brutal and uncaring world. Moreover, there is an abiding concern throughout with the ways in which the mind relates to the external world and the attempt, frequently depicted, to overcome the separation between mind and body, subject and object, through the projection of an inner landscape onto the external world. Partnered to this is the reciprocal bio-psychological terrain, referred to as a 'spinal landscape', or measured in terms of neural intervals, through which devices Ballard externalizes the negotiation of the divided and sundered mind and world.⁵

⁵ See, for example, 'The Terminal Beach' (CSS2 40).

All of these tropes, images and echoes work on one level to herald the transcendent and the numinous in the high or healthy Romantic sense that was outlined in the introduction, and the protagonists who turn inwards in order to reveal an inner world, which they project in turn onto the outer, partake of that visionary apocalyptic bardism that the high Romantic poets and their creations are so often associated with. However, such invocations are almost always undermined or perverted in some way so that they are experienced as a wounded form of Romanticism that may cross over into the decadent. Partnered to the images of flight in ‘The Concentration City’, for example, is the unknowability of such a concept and the abject failure of the protagonist’s attempts to fly; the natural world has been corrupted and mutated by the interventions of science in ‘Prima Belladonna’ and ‘The Voices of Time’; and the inner paradises of the ‘The Giaconda of the Twilight Noon’ are purchased only at horrendous physical cost. That these stories oscillate between Romantic and unromantic is read as both a critique of and a perpetuation of already-existing Romantic tendencies, producing a tension and which might be compared with William Blake’s unresolved dialectics. Indeed, as the notion of mind-forged manacles tells us, this dichotomous contraplex was already at work in early Romantic thought.

After looking at a range of the short stories, I end this chapter with a discussion of ‘The Terminal Beach’ (1964) in relation to the manifesto discussed in the Introduction, ‘Which Way to Inner Space?’, which seems to mark a turn away from the more fantastic landscapes and imagery outlined above. This departure can be seen to look forward to the city cycle of novels, which includes *The Atrocity*

Exhibition and *Crash*, and which is heralded by the short essay ‘Notes from Nowhere’. I read the turn away from near-futures and fantastic other worlds towards modernity as rather a development of an existing strand, both in Ballard and in Romanticism. Furthermore, it will become apparent that Ballard’s move into the nightmare realms of modernity – the media landscape and the alienating constructs of concrete and glass – should be understood as a further complication and interrogation of the legacies of Romanticism, rather than an outright rejection of the earlier works’ invocations of nature and lyricism. Indeed, as I emphasize in Chapter 3, the lyrical flights so prominent in the early short stories and the first four novels do continue into the city cycle, albeit in altered and especially wounded form. In its brutal depiction of an affectless present as response to the nightmare of a nuclear past and future, ‘The Terminal Beach’ paradoxically calls forth an emotional connection and feeling in the reader perhaps more powerfully than anywhere else in the oeuvre.⁶

Incipient Bards and Personal Apocalypses

Ballard’s first published short story was ‘Prima Belladonna’, which appeared in the December 1956 issue of *Science Fantasy*.⁷ In it we are introduced to the abiding Ballardian themes of perverted nature and infinite leisure leading to decadence, as well as to the half familiar, half other-worldly resort of Vermillion Sands, to which Ballard would return in short stories and novels throughout his career.⁸ ‘Prima

⁶ With the possible exception of *The Atrocity Exhibition*, as discussed in chapter 3.

⁷ Ballard did have a short story, ‘Violent Noon’, published in a student newspaper whilst he was studying medicine at Cambridge, but ‘Prima Belladonna’ was his first commercial piece.

⁸ The short stories which take place in and around Vermillion Sands were collected as *Vermillion Sands* in 1973, but there are striking similarities in the resort of the ‘Summer Cannibals’ chapter of

Belladonna' evokes the classic Romantic tropes of the liberation of the unconscious and the revolt against reason, of a love of the exotic and a mistrust of science, and of infinite longing. However, the consequences of these disruptive forces, clustered around the siren/lamia figure of Jane Ciracylides, are seen to be potentially catastrophic.

'Prima Belladonna' begins with the narrator Steve and his friends drinking beer and playing 'i-Go' ('a kind of decelerated chess') on the sun terrace above his shop, which sells genetically modified, semi-sentient singing plants (*CSSI* 1). The spectre of genetic modification and mutation hangs over these delicate specimens, and over the story's heroine too: 'gossips at Vermillion Sands soon decided there was a good deal of mutant in her, because she had a rich patina-golden skin and what looked like insects for eyes' (*CSSI* 1). Nature has been interfered with to produce these acoustic wonders and there will be a reckoning, though not quite of the order of catastrophe visited upon Dr Frankenstein. These plants seem to have largely replaced human singers; the orders that Steve fulfils come from famous orchestras and opera houses. Steve is the only one of his friends that works, the rest enjoying the leisure time that a decade-long lull in production affords them. Into this relaxed milieu comes Jane Ciracylides – a golden-skinned, insect-eyed singer who is able to out-opera even the plants that Steve sells. During the course of their time together, Jane is drawn to the shop below, and in particular to Steve's prize singing plant – a monstrous specimen called a Khan Arachnid which he uses to tune the other plants – keeping it satiated

The Atrocity Exhibition, and in the late novels *Cocaine Nights* and *Super-Cannes*. See chapters 3 and 5.

with a carefully controlled cocktail of chemicals. Although Steve tries to discourage Jane's obsession, he is unable to prevent a climactic sing-off which destroys the Arachnid, after which Jane leaves Vermillion Sands.

The antinomy between Jane and the plants in the shop has been read as the staging of a failed Jungian attempt to reconcile the anima (Jane) to the unconscious self (Khan-Arachnid orchid), leaving the unconscious mind damaged and the anima estranged.⁹ Jane certainly has the mesmerising qualities of an archetypal figure: 'Don't you realize, this one is poetic, emergent, something straight out of the primal apocalyptic sea. She's probably divine' (*CSSI*). But these aspects equally recall the lamia figures of myth and Romanticism, as well as their modern *femme fatale* descendants. As a figure out of a dream, Jane creates the lingering sensation of wistfully longing after something, though just what that something is remains mysterious: a recognizable mood of Romanticism. Jane, the desired object, is briefly 'possessed' by Steve. But this proves to be so much less satisfying than the perpetually maintained desire for a mysterious love object that Steve's reaction is to spoil what he has in favour of the hope of something better; even if, paradoxically, that 'something better' is the unfulfilled desire for that which he already has. There are Hegelian resonances in the operation of desire here, but there is no dialectic resolution, merely a perpetuation of the original impulse. The Romantic operation of desire here recalls Campbell's spirit of modern consumerism, described in the introduction, in which the perpetual Romantic quest is hijacked by the forces of consumerism and attached to the

⁹ See, for instance, William M. Schuyler, 'Portrait of the Artist as a Jung Man: Love, Death and Art in J. G. Ballard's *Vermillion Sands*', <http://j.g.ballard.ca/criticism/schuyler_analyses_vermilion_sands.html> [accessed 12 March 2013].

multifarious products of manufacture. This reading is given weight by the ten year lull in production, the ‘Recess’, which may call to mind the Keynesian ideal of production, and which seems here to have been realized, but in a slightly skewed manner. As Sebastian Groes has noted, far from using their expanded leisure time for the betterment of themselves, as the famous economist had hoped, the inhabitants of *Vermillion Sands* find increasingly bizarre ways to stave off their blooming ennui.¹⁰ Keynes’ world of technological emancipation has a Romantic forbear in Shelley’s Spirit of the Hour from *Prometheus Unbound* (1820), who envisages a world ‘exempt from toil’,¹¹ but Ballard’s vision does not allow for an unequivocal, workless utopia. Ballard discussed this vision of the future in interview with David Pringle:

Everyone will be permanently on vacation, or doing about one day’s work a year. People will give in to any whim that occurs to them [...] I think everybody will be very relaxed, almost too relaxed [...] That’s my guess at what the future will be like!¹²

This vision of the future is one which offends the Puritan/Romantic ethic of enjoyment in delayed pleasure, and seems to lead to what Ballard calls the great casualty of the twentieth century: ‘the death of affect’, or in the stories of the *Vermillion Sands* collection, ‘beach fatigue’.¹³ Jane Ciracylides is an apocalypse

¹⁰ Sebastian Groes, ‘The Texture of Modernity in J. G. Ballard’s *Crash*, *Concrete Island* and *High Rise*’ in *J. G. Ballard: Visions and Revisions*, eds. Jeannette Baxter, Rowland Wymer (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 125.

¹¹ Percy Bysshe Shelley, ‘Prometheus Unbound’ (1820) in *Percy Bysshe Shelley: The Major Works*, eds. Zachary Leader and Michael O’Neill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 291, Act 3 l. 109.

¹² Goddard and Pringle, p. 23.

¹³ Five of the nine *Vermillion Sands* stories refer to beach fatigue directly, but the sense of malaise permeates all of them. See J. G. Ballard, *Vermillion Sands* (London: Vintage, 2001 [1973]), pp. 19,

come to wake the unconscious from its drugged captivity in the shop beneath, but the narrator experiences this as a disaster that he is doomed to relive, retelling his tale like a modern incarnation of Coleridge's mariner. This is a pattern that will be repeated in subsequent stories, as well as many of Ballard's novels which begin at the end, a circularity in storytelling that speaks to the infinite repetition of desire, but also of trauma and entrapment.

Jane blows through the sleepy resort of Vermillion Sands like the wind of change – she is the lamia, muse, *femme fatale*, a timeless creature of an ideal realm – and thus stimulates the kind of Romantic longing that can have no end. Steve inadvertently brings his affair with Jane to an end when he reveals that he cannot fully believe in her as reality outside of the dream. In response to Jane's intention to remain in Vermillion Sands, he responds 'Don't tease me, Jane. You're a child of another world than this' (*CSSI* 13). Rather unromantically, though, in Jane's wake the government schemes start up again and the populace are put back to work (*CSSI* 15).¹⁴ Jane Ciracylides rekindles dormant desire and brings a little poetry to the flat-lining imaginations and libidos of the beach-fatigued inhabitants of Vermillion Sands, suggesting that a dose of infinite longing may be required in order for poetry to exist, but that it is also too easily co-opted or recuperated by the prevailing socio-economic order. At the same time, it should be recalled that Ballard was writing in the 1950s when the consumer revolution was just taking off in Britain, a post-war

51, 147, 157, 175. Beach fatigue, like 'the death of affect', might be compared with Wordsworth's 'savage torpor'.

¹⁴ The restarting of the industrial and economic machine is echoed in the short story 'The Ultimate City' (1976), reiterating Ballard's ambivalent response to the utopian dream of a world without labour.

rationing Britain that Ballard had found cold and dispiriting after the opulence and modernity of pre-war Shanghai, and so there is always an element in Ballard of willing progress on in spite of potentially dire consequences because energy and creativity is ultimately preferable to stagnation and ennui. In this again we can see Blakean echoes: the devil's assertion in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* that 'Energy is eternal delight'.¹⁵

Over the next few years Ballard moves steadily deeper into the inner worlds of his narrators and protagonists, settling into a close third-person narration for the majority of his stories. In many ways protagonist may be the wrong word for Ballard's heroes – they do not so much drive the plot as recount their changing subjectivity in response to the altering environment. Pringle has called them 'areas of awareness', a fitting description because they increasingly come to challenge the possibility of the unified whole that is the Romantic subject, though they often aspire to such a union.¹⁶

Franz M., in 'The Concentration City' (1957), seems to exhaust the possibilities of external reality in the search of 'free space', necessitating a turn inwards – the title evoking concentration camps but also potentially a visionary concentration of the mind. The story is set in a nightmarish far-future in which there is nothing outside of the 'City', a man-made environment that now covers the entire planet and has

¹⁵ *Selected Works* p. 75

¹⁶ *Earth is the Alien Planet*, p. 39

existed for so long that it is the work of philosophy to conceive of anything outside of it. Within the confines of this megastructure, its denizens dream of a concept beyond their ken: flight. Initially this megacity might be read as a Romantic indictment of the powers of science and industry run amok and of the ever-widening distance between man and nature having reached a point of no return. 'The Concentration City' looks forward to the city cycle of novels, with its planet-covering city and the claustrophobic notion of there being nothing outside of the concrete and glass: 'Obviously there can't have been a first brick. If there was, how can you explain who laid it and, even more difficult, where they came from?' (*CSSI* 49). When images and dreams of flight are invoked in such a way as to recall their transcendent symbolism, the indictment of modernity seems to have found a Romantic solution, but the failure of Franz's dreams, and even of language to describe such an impossible idea (in the world of this story) as flight, seems to work against any simple reading of this story as a celebration of the imagination and its power to go beyond the phenomenal world. In this Kafka-like labyrinthine bureaucracy, mirrored by the seemingly endless maze of streets and tunnels – the protagonist's name, Franz M., making the allusion clear – the very notions of 'free space' and 'flight' are mythical. Talking about Franz's plans for an airborne contraption:

Gregson shrugged. 'If you could control the thing, you'd, you'd...' He frowned at Franz. 'What's the word, you're always using it.'

'Fly.' (*CSSI* 33)

In popular and high Romantic criticism, flight represents freedom, creativity, imagination and transcendence – the soul or self's transcendent escape from the material realm into the ideal and eternal, but what are we to make of Franz's abject failure in the story? He neither manages to fly nor find anything outside of the city, which turns out to be an endless circularity, seemingly coextensive with the walls of his own mind. Failure and inexplicable punishment chime with the influence of Kafka, but the spirit of hope against hope that Franz manifests is within that Romantic strain that I have been tracing. Furthermore, the failure of Franz's dream recalls Wellek's reading of Shelley's faltering imagination. Franz is trapped here in a subjectivist paradox: to escape the city, which is all, he will have to escape the prison of his own mind, and the only way to achieve that appears to be in death. In this way the story can also be seen as an early example of the incipient New Wave literature calling for an end to the space race; a political opposition to the huge expenditure of the real space programme, which might be diverted to more pressing needs here on Earth, and also an aesthetic distaste for the void of outer space as opposed to the unmapped continents of the mind. In 'Which Way to Inner Space?', Ballard suggested that the imaginative investment of science fiction would be better placed in exploring the new world that the communications landscape and cultural revolutions were opening up, as well as the still-unmapped territories of the mind which psychoanalysis had gestured towards.

Franz. M struggles to define the free space for which he is searching: 'The concept was a little abstract. There weren't any words for it' (*CSSI* 31). There is the sense here of pushing against the boundaries (self-imposed) of human knowledge, and of

language, but also that this involves reaching down into some kind of ancestral memory which is waiting for the opportunity to burrow up from the unconscious. During his odyssey around the City, Franz shows a fellow passenger a sketch of one of his flying machine designs. They seem to recall having seen something similar before, but when Franz excitedly asks if it was in a book or a newspaper they reply: 'No, no. In a dream' (*CSSI* 45). The transport system that Franz utilizes in his attempt to find the limits of the City, though made up of lifts and trains, is reminiscent of commercial flights or even space travel: passengers need to be strapped in before arrival and departure at stations due to the powerful acceleration and breaking, and the drivers are referred to as pilots. But this is a closed system – Franz heads up on a trajectory of 'two hundred and seventy degrees true', but after weeks of travel ends up back where he started from: 'How this curvature was built into the system they can't explain, it seems to be some inherent feature of the City itself' (*CSSI* 44, 48). All roads lead inwards, it seems, and Franz's failed attempt to find 'free space' has led him back inside himself to inner space. The real entrapment is that of the self inside the prison of his own head. We are now in the realms of the Gothic, a Romantic turn inwards having led to a maze of paradoxical self-repetition.

The police surgeon who conducts Franz's interview (he is arrested for vagrancy after his inverted journey) attempts to reconcile the young man to the world as it appears to be:

'Look', he began to explain, 'you can't get out of time, can you? Subjectively it's a plastic dimension, but whatever you do to yourself you'll never be able

to stop that clock' – he pointed to the one on the desk – 'or make it run backwards. In exactly the same way you can't get out of the City.' (*CSSI* 48)

In one sense the surgeon represents the scientist whose empiricist worldview is dominant in his day (and ours) and in another he adumbrates the 'philosophy of acceptance' which was to achieve its fuller description and personification in the dead Japanese doctor Yasuda in 'The Terminal Beach'. The megacity may be the immediate cause of Franz's impossible quest, but it seems likely that such impossible desire would well up within him regardless of the world that he found himself in. The claustrophobia of the City seems to laud Franz's longing, and yet his yearning after the numinous seems to blind him to the responsibilities of the world around him. There is surely something sublimely terrifying about the concept of a city without end, but this story also seems an indictment of the Romantic longing for a transcendence.

The juxtaposition of binary oppositions abounds in Ballard – the surgeon informs Franz that he is 'caught between what the psychiatrists call paradoxical faces' (*CSSI* 49) – but the texts are engaged in a continuous dialectic. The story closes with just such an incompatibility: a desk calendar shows the date at which Franz had originally departed three weeks ago. It seems that his journey has in fact rendered time malleable – travelling at reverse ninety degrees he has shuttled back through space and time to where he began. Whether or not the journey has actually taken place, in a physical sense, or has been a purely neuronic odyssey, is unclear. The limits of the known universe have expanded and/or contracted to the exact

dimensions of Franz's skull, so that his consciousness is one with his prison. His dreams of flight and outmoded concepts of 'free space' are of no use to him in the City without limits; he seems to be a throwback, an anachronism, unfitted for the entirely man-made world of the future. Yet our sympathies lie with him – the extreme claustrophobia of the text makes us yearn for freedom, open space and flight. Franz is the Romantic subject in a homogenised, interconnected and man-made city environment, yearning for individuation; he reaches out for a natural world in which he can be free, the ghostly trace memory of which is almost grasped in the idea of free space. But this desire to escape the phenomenal world seems to blind him to the reality around him: the 'black areas', slums and 'Pyros' of the City may well be just what Franz is looking for – zones of freedom and/or resistance – but in his quest for the high Romantic ideals of flight and the philosophical goal of discovering something beyond the physical realm, Franz ignores the evidence of the struggles of his fellow human beings.

'The Waiting Grounds' (1959) places its protagonist in the inverted position of Franz in 'The Concentration City', one in which the vastness of space and time are open to him. In descriptions of lyrical intensity, the interconnectedness of all things is hymned in this story in such a way as recalls Coleridge and Wordsworth at their most pantheistic. Relatively unusually for Ballard, this story has overt science fictional elements and takes place on an alien planet. The protagonist, Quaine, is posted to the remote observation outpost of Murak, a desert planet of searing temperatures and extinct volcanoes. In the complete isolation of the practically deserted world, in the Romantic wilderness, Quaine has a vision or dream during

which a form of atomic memory is imparted, the sense that his very matter was once part of something greater, anticipating the ‘deep time’ of *The Drowned World* in which the characters ‘remember’ the Triassic period:

Meanwhile we wait here, at the threshold of time and space, celebrating the identity and kinship of the particles within our bodies with those of the sun and the stars of our brief private times with the vast periods of the galaxies, with the total unifying time of the cosmos... (CSSI 125, emphasis original)

The great psychic interconnectedness of the lifeforms of the universe is in a sense an inversion of the extreme isolationism of the City in ‘Concentration City’. In a Neo-Platonic realm of pure ideation the conjoined mind of all matter creates the universe of which it is composed: ‘They are beginning to dictate the form and dimensions of the universe’ (CSS 125). The language used is lyrical, epiphanic, and in the visionary figure of Quaine, invokes a Romantic bardism – a sense reinforced by the crates of Bibles, Qurans and other religious texts which Quaine finds on his outpost, as though he is to witness the next revelation and will write a new apocalyptic gospel. In Quaine’s vision the walls of subjectivity and objectivity are been broken down, the bounds of the cosmos outgrown and enveloped, and time is paradoxically freely manipulated towards the inevitable destruction and rebirth of the cosmos. The experience completely alters Quaine’s concept of time. At the end of the story he relates that he is intending to extend his posting on desolate Murak to fifteen years, during which he half expects to see the cosmic event of his revelation, which is not due for around two million years (CSS 127). Again this seems a Romantic longing after that which can never be reached, and a subjective belief in its achievability

which almost seems to compensate for its impossibility – indeed it may be fuelled by its very impossibility. The hinge of Quaine’s quasi-religious experience of dissolution in the whole of the cosmos is an ancient megalith discovered out in the searing desert wastes, and his response to it is a prototype for the fugues and aesthetic reveries into which the already-ancient megaliths of modernity will propel Ballard’s future protagonists, such as Traven in ‘The Terminal Beach’, or Richard Wilder in *High Rise* (1975). The megalith’s resonant power also anticipates the megalith of Stanley Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), though it is possible that Ballard had come across the idea in Arthur C. Clarke’s earlier story, ‘Sentinel of Eternity’ (1951). Much like the stone circles which inspired the Romantic poets, such as Wordsworth’s wanderer in ‘Salisbury Plain’ (1793-4), these megaliths are the occasion for subjective events that are prompted by the notion of sublime swathes of time, transporting the visionary poet/bard into a realm of apocalyptic awareness.

And yet for all of the passages of high Romantic transcendence in the ‘The Waiting Grounds’, there is an undercurrent of darkness and decay in the empty hills and dead lakes of the planet Murak, with its ghost town of a space port built in anticipation of a mining rush that never happened. Added to this is the lingering possibility that the loneliness and isolation of the posting, combined with overexposure in the heat of the desert, has caused some kind of psychotic episode in the narrator. The visions begin for Quiane once he has accepted his total isolation on Murak, so that when a visiting engineer stumbles across the precious megalith and, realizing its material worth, threatens to interrupt his beatific solitude with a second mining rush, the

interloper's death seems suspicious – notwithstanding the narrator's story of self-defence. Here we see the visionary figure projecting a unique world and also a unique moral code, but one that may not be compatible with the mere mortals that he encounters. Ballard's visionary in this story may turn out to be closer to Coleridge's feared bard of 'Kubla Khan' than to Wordsworth's benevolent, if egotistical, prophet.¹⁷

In 'Billennium' (1961), a story of crushing claustrophobia and bureaucratic menace, the booming population is squeezed into ever-diminishing and subdivided apartments, the occupancy and size of which are state ordained and periodically shrunk by decree. This creates a frantic amount of trading up and down amongst the overcrowded populace – hoping to gain an illegal foot or two before the next mandatory reduction in living space. The protagonist, Ward, accidentally discovers some forgotten partitioned space in a rundown apartment which he and a friend, Rossiter, have taken together. The pair are unable to conceive of the luxury of the space that they have stumbled upon, and before long they have chosen to invite others to share it with them. Ultimately they partition their space down to less than the government maximums with which they started. As the walls literally close in around Ward, he appears to retreat into his own mind, clinging on to the idea that a bigger room means more space, regardless of how many times you subdivide it. Even though he ends up with less space than he started with, the fact that it is a space that he has chosen and constructed himself seems to make it bearable. Here the

¹⁷ John Keats famously referred to the 'Wordsworthian or egotistical sublime' in an 1818 letter to Woodhouse. This is the same letter in which he considers the duplicitous imagination which rejoices equally in its light and dark creations – another intimation that the major Romantics were capable of a deeper ambivalence than Abrams et al would countenance. *Major Works*, pp. 418-19.

power of the imagination is seen to make the unbearable bearable, but at the cost of any meaningful connection between inner and outer worlds. Again, this early story begins with a Romantic invocation of creative and imaginative resistance in the face of seemingly insurmountable forces, but the quietist retreat into a private world is too close to madness and Gothic entrapment within the self to be read as an unequivocal celebration of this faculty.

Pride of place in the comparatively cavernous room is an antique Victorian wardrobe that reminds Ward of ‘micro-films of gothic cathedrals, with their massive organ lofts crossing vast naves’ (*CSSI* 373). As the space of the apartment is steadily eaten into by the new tenants that they invite to share it, the items of furniture are returned to the store, and even Ward’s wardrobe is finally dismantled:

It had been a beautiful piece of furniture, in a way symbolizing this whole private world, and the salesman at the store told him there were few like it left. For a moment Ward felt a sudden pang of regret, as he had done as a child when his father, in a moment of exasperation, had taken something away from him and he had known he would never see it again. (*CSSI* 378)

But Ward’s pathos at the loss of the wardrobe – the almost namesake with which he so clearly identifies – is offset by the seeming indictment of the radical individualism of the Romantic conception of self, which is here seen as an anachronism to be discarded along with other childish things. The comparatively spacious apartment,

the accumulation of luxury items and sense of isolation from the teeming millions beyond their four walls, creates a solipsistic and immoral outlook in the pair:

Rossiter and himself began to seem the only real inhabitants of the world, everyone else a meaningless by-product of their own existence, a random replication of identity which had run out of control. (*CSSI* 373)

Ballard may have in mind the partitioning of houses which took place during and after WWII in a bomb-devastated London, and the story is oddly reminiscent of Elizabeth Bowen's 'Mysterious Kor' (1942) with its recourse to a mysterious, subjective realm.¹⁸ In *Bilennium*, the Romantic self and imagination is invoked, and Ward's small victory against the strictures of living space is welcome, but it is also revealed as a bourgeois privilege which can only ever be available to the few. Ward's solipsistic acceptance of his ever diminishing space is contingent upon the time he has available to explore his inner space: 'Since he had left his job at the library (the small rental he charged the others paid for the little food he needed) he spent most of his time in the room' (*CSSI* 378).

'The Voices of Time' (1960) is impossible to pass over in the landscape of Ballard's short fictions; an early example of Ballard's formal inventiveness, its short numbered sections are elevated by moments of lyrical intensity, and yet shot through with entropic despair and existential anxiety. The story follows the descent of a

¹⁸ Bowen's short stories, such as 'The Happy Autumn Fields' (1944), with characters dreaming their way out of their minatory surroundings, would repay a more detailed comparison to Ballard's.

neurosurgeon, Powers, into fatal narcoma, a sleeping sickness that gradually increases the required amount of sleep until no waking time remains. Whilst attempting to adjust to his dwindling conscious hours, and the knowledge that he only has three months left, Powers continues the work of his colleague, Whitby (who committed suicide), using radiation to activate 'sleeping genes' in lab animals and plants in the hope of reawakening humanity's degraded genetic code (*CSSI* 238-9). But these creations prove unstable and ultimately tear themselves apart; a super-intelligent monkey, for instance, is forced to wear a crash helmet in order to prevent it from dashing out its own brains in an attempt to end its torturous headaches (*CSSI* 238). We waver in these passages between a classic Romantic position which would see science as having run amok, and a wonder at the marvels which science can produce. This perversion of nature by science recalls the laboratory horror of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and partakes of that Romantic tradition warning against the encroachments of science and technology against nature. And yet the lyricism with which these bizarre creations are described recalls the sunflowers of William Blake and Allen Ginsberg, with their supra-dimensional abilities and tragic ends. The second position might be regarded as anti-Romantic, or at least pro-Enlightenment, but there is also something of the Romantic overreaching genius in these bizarre experiments. The hope is that these genes can provide an evolutionary escape from the narcoma that is already necessitating the provision of thousands of hospital beds. With only a few weeks remaining before his terminal sleep, Powers decides to irradiate himself, despite having witnessed the terrifying deaths of his test subjects. Rather than a desperate attempt to evolve a cure for his terminal narcoma, Powers seems rather to wish to partake of the visionary synaesthesia of his lab creations. He is granted his wish and, experiencing time as visual waves pulsing from the

mountains, the dry lake beds and the stars and galaxies above him, Powers slips into the warm amniotic embrace of the time stream ‘beyond hope but at last at rest’, lying down to die in the Jungian mandala he has spent his last days constructing (*CSSI* 262). Struggling for words to comfort Powers, and in an apparent empathetic failure, his doctor thinks to himself: ‘*What can I say – Even the sun is getting cooler?*’ (*CSSI* 229). But Powers’ erstwhile human patient, Kaldren, the victim of an experimental procedure which removed his need for sleep, says precisely that with his enigmatic notes and messages communicating an ever-decreasing sequences of numbers, counting down to the extinction of the cosmos. It is this force of universal entropy, mirroring Powers’ diminishing days, that provides the backdrop to the story.

The central drama of the story can be viewed through the lens of a Romantic negotiation of self and world – always perilously close to dissolution at the one extreme, and solipsistic egotism at the other. These two poles are manifest in the figures of Powers and Kaldren; the scientist partakes of the dream to the extent that it becomes him, whereas the patient, whose capacity to dream has been surgically removed, can but curate the dead and unrelated exhibits of his museum of atrocity. There seems to be the need for some sort of marriage between the two poles, between reason and passion as in Blake’s *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, but here it seems impossible – unless we consider the strangely poetic and wistful ending. The final paragraph of 'The Voices of Time ' is exemplary of Ballard's perplexing style, of the resonant prose which is simultaneously ironic and satirical, yet lyrical and infused with pathos. Powers, dead in his mandala/clock, an edifice

that echoes K's walls in Franz Kafka's *The Castle* (1926), is watched by the existential detective, Kaldren. The scene is tangentially reminiscent of the summing up of a case: Kaldren (the putative PI) leaves instructions for the police to be contacted, removes evidence from the site for his own collection, and pulls up his collar. Haunting this affectless moment, however, is Powers' ecstatic reverie as he communes with the great stream of time, his moment of *jouissance* before death:

Like an endless river, so broad that its banks were below the horizons, it flowed steadily towards him, a vast course of time that spread outwards to fill the sky and the universe, enveloping everything within them. Moving slowly, the forward direction of its majestic current almost imperceptible, Powers knew that its source was the centre of the cosmos itself. As it passed him he felt its massive magnetic pull, let himself be drawn into it, borne gently on its powerful back. (*CSSI* 261-2)

This recalls 'The Waiting Grounds', and the ecstatic death and rebirth of the universe that the protagonist patiently waits an impossible lifetime in order to glimpse. Here, though, there is no indication that the universe will exist beyond its final countdown. Powers is granted, before death, the ability to 'see into the mysteries of the universe',¹⁹ like an ancient bard able to read mysterious symbols and visions, but this same time stream is winding down to zero, and Powers' transcendence is tempered by Kaldren's cold, sleepless rationality. Kaldren's post-episode brooding, surrounded by his eccentric collection of cultural artefacts, is sublime in its inferences and gestures towards unknown poetry, vanished suns and long-dead planets. It is a

¹⁹ Shelley, *Prometheus Unbound*, Act 3. l. 105, *Major Works*, p. 291.

pathos-infused reaching towards the unknown and lament over the short span of human life, and of the universe itself, but it also works to undermine any Romantic content by suggesting that the human mind is nugatory and insignificant.

Half-asleep, periodically he leaned up and adjusted the flow of light through the shutter, thinking to himself, as he would do through the coming months, of Powers and his strange mandala, and of the seven and their journey to the white gardens of the moon, and of the blue people who had come from Orion and spoken in poetry to them of ancient and beautiful worlds beneath golden suns in the island galaxies, vanished for ever now in the myriad deaths of the cosmos. (*CSSI* 263)

Reinforcing the poetic quality of this passage are the lulling sentences, punctuated by commas, without the usual conjunctives. Those missing conjunctives seem to be peeling away like atomic decay, but like the Romantic fragment this 'loss' is experienced as an aesthetic gain gesturing – like the fragmented numbered passages of the story – towards a sublime whole that may no longer be there or may never have been. Even Kaldren, whose sleep has supposedly been removed, has slipped half into the world of dream. The generic implications of this invocation of classic science-fictional tropes, which Ballard himself would lambast in editorials and essays for *New Worlds*, works to undermine and satirise the Romantic resonances described above, leaving the passage skirting dangerously close to bathos. But 'leaving' may not be a very useful term when discussing Ballard's fiction. As outlined in the introduction, the literature of the Romantic period can be seen as inaugurating a painfully layered self-awareness for which the tropes of transcendence, the natural

and egotistical sublime, and of dissolution were all attempts to overcome and yet also to recognize. The oscillating tone and poise of Ballard's prose keeps Romantic and anti-Romantic readings in permanent flux; a contraplex of meaning that appeals simultaneously to the nihilistic and entropic sense of material decay, as well as to more traditionally Romantic tropes such as hope, beauty and faith in a truth that lies both within and beyond the phenomenal realm. It is this furious stasis that makes Ballard's work at once soothing and anxiety inducing.

Dr Ward of the Mount Vernon Observatory is the narrator of 'The Venus Hunters' (1963), but the story is really about the 'amateur star-gazer and spare-time prophet' Charles Kandinski (*CSSI* 652). As a scientist, Ward and his colleagues are suspicious of Kandinski's claim to have met with a 'Venusian Prime' – an alien visitor from Venus – but something about the awkward charisma with which he makes his case appeals to Ward and eventually sees him risking his career and reputation to be out in the desert with Kandinsky, witnessing flying saucers. Ward's avuncular colleague, Cameron thinks of Kandinski in the light of C. J. Jung's theories on flying saucers, and warns him that 'The mana-personalities of history have no time for personal loyalties – the founder of the Christian church made that pretty plain' (*CSSI* 677). Cameron's overall bearing towards Ward and Kandinski seems to be that of a tolerant parent looking on at the necessary stumbling of developing children, though he does lose his temper when Ward allows his growing attachment to Kandinski to jeopardise his academic standing. His take on the symbols of the prophet Kandinski is that they do not contain literal or empirically verifiable truths, but that they are the symptoms of a coming apocalypse, the

rumblings of which can be felt in the growing anti-Apollo movement. On this view the facticity of Kandinsky's claims is an irrelevance and their importance lies in the desire that people have to believe him. Such a desire demonstrates a need to believe in something beyond the dead world of empirical fact – a need for the magical or the numinous. The apocalypse of the bard-like figure Kandinski is imbued then with a Romantic, anti-Enlightenment hue.

Ballard, though, is an author who engages with the full complexity of Romantic thought, which included an appreciation for the discoveries and wonder of science, as well as apprehension at the demystifying tendency of empiricist endeavour. As has been shown by Luckhurst, this story is in part a discussion about genre which parodies and partakes of science fiction in equal measure.²⁰ But Ballard is not content merely to undermine the stock tropes of science fiction, nor to lean upon the theories of Jung. As he indicated in 'Which Way to Inner Space', science fiction was for him uniquely able to carry the concerns of the twentieth century, but it needed to reinvent its vocabulary. This concern is about the creation of a system, and Ballard seems to be resisting any sense in which his chosen symbols might be said to be merely symptomatic rather than selected for their unique resonance. It is not entirely clear whether or not Ward sees the Venusian spacecraft that Kandinski calls him into the desert to witness, though he ends the story with a seeming admission that he did. What is more important is that Kandinski's world view or vision has imposed upon Ward's and changed him in some fundamental manner. Put another way, the irreconcilable opposites of empirical science and magical thinking have met in

²⁰ See Luckhurst, pp. 32-3

productive tension and generated something beyond that which is recognised by the established order, embodied by Cameron. Just as Blake's vision imposed upon that of his visiting angel in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, so Kandinski's vision is powerful enough to unsettle Ward's training as a scientist.²¹ Whether or not Ward actually saw the spacecraft, he is now a firm believer in what the coming of a prophet/bard such as Kandinski heralds; in the deep need that it signifies for something beyond the universe bequeathed by the Enlightenment. That Ward nonetheless abandons Kandinski to teach Freshman physics, 'getting right back to fundamentals', suggests that despite the 'truth' content of Kandinski's vision, it is not one that he wishes to see fulfilled (*CSSI* 683). Here again contraplex pertains: the science fiction genre is both denigrated and celebrated, the visionary/bard figure is simultaneously hymned and yet presented as a warning, and the problematic marriage of technology and magical thinking is seen to be both productive and destructive.

One of the most interesting effects that Kandinski has upon the rational mind of Ward is that he seems to turn the scientist himself into something of a bard. Ward found Kandinski's account of his meeting with the Venusians a disappointment, 'totally lacking in imagination' (*CSSI* 659). But Kandinski himself seems to fire Ward's own imagination to excess. Here he is describing Kandinski cleaning the tables outside the sci-fi café at which he works:

²¹ *Selected Works*, p. 83

He was scrubbing away energetically at the abstract tables with his long hairy arms, head down so that his beard was almost touching the metal tops, like an aboriginal halfman, prowling in dim bewilderment over the ruins of a futuristic city lost in an inversion of time. (CSSI 660)

This lurid account could have come from between the covers of the science fiction paperbacks and magazines that the denizens of the café read, one of whom – Ward had joked to himself – was sporting a lobotomy scar (CSSI 655). Kandinski struggles with the role of prophet in a sceptical age: ‘short of committing some spectacular crime to draw attention to myself I don’t see now how I can convince anyone’ (CSSI 662). In later works this is precisely what Ballard’s prophet/bard figures will do, the narrator’s perceiving them with an equally Romantic cast. Out in the desert it is Ward’s imagination that transforms what he is seeing: ‘High above a stratojet was doing cuban eights into the sun, the spiral vapour trails drifting across the sky like gigantic fragments of an apocalyptic message’ (CSSI 672); and of Kandinski looming over him: ‘his red beard like the burning, unconsumed bush’ (CSSI 674). What Kandinski’s apocalypse has done, for good or ill, is to cleanse the doors of Ward’s perception and awaken his latent imaginative faculties.

‘The Gioconda of the Twilight Noon’ (1964) is one of the most extreme depictions of the drive to achieve inner vision amongst Ballard’s short fictions. Maitland, a name that appeared previously in *The Wind from Nowhere* (1962) and which would crop up again in *Concrete Island*, is convalescing at his mother’s house near the coast after an eye operation that went awry. With his eyes bandaged for a month, his

other senses are heightened. At first he is affronted by the noise of the gulls that flock to the garden at high tide. Ordinarily symbols of transcendence and imagination in both Romantic literature and Ballard's oeuvre, these creatures take on a threatening aspect that recalls Daphne du Maurier's 'The Birds' (1952) and the Alfred Hitchcock film interpretation of 1963:

[T]o Maitland their ravenous pecking filled the warm air like the cries of some savage Dionysian chorus. He had a vivid image of the wet banks streaming with the blood of thousands of dismembered fish. (CSS2 111)

Maitland's internal world is populated by nightmares, and the fishy pogrom he imagines perpetrated by the gulls might be said to recall the disasters of the recent past: for Ballard the mid-twentieth-century imagination is never far from the apocalyptic landscapes of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Dresden and Auschwitz. When Maitland thinks to himself 'The only real cripples [...] were the perfect in limb' (CSS2 112), he seems to be suggesting that the physically impaired can boast a closer connection between mind and body, one that reflects the psychological scars of the era. Maitland fears that the birds will swoop down and claim him next: 'their fierce beaks tearing at the bandages over his eyes' (CSS2 111). The protagonist's temporary blindness, his obscure guilt, and the fact that the place he has come to recover is his mother's house are all suggestive of an oedipal plot, and the story certainly seems to deliver on this promise.

Maitland wanders the corridors and staircases of his rambling childhood home by memory alone, so that he might be said to be traversing an internal landscape in a literal as well as metaphorical sense. Ballard invokes the Gothic in his depiction of the blind Maitland haunting his own past; his wife Judith is frightened by his soundless appearances 'as he wandered among the old attics and dusty lofts' with a 'rapt expression, as he hunted some memory of childhood' (CSS2 112-3). But it is Maitland's stationary journeys through at first unfamiliar inner landscapes that lead him to wish to remain in his sightless condition. He says of the blind to his doctor: 'They see with an inner eye, you know. In a sense everything there is more real' (CSS2 118). Travelling along a coastline towards looming cliffs, along an estuary and into the caves and grottoes that riddle the cliffs, guided by soft, prismatic light through mirror-lined caverns to a high-gabled house, Maitland is compelled to pursue the green-robed woman that he finds there (CSS2 114-5). When he is at last able to hold the vision before his mind long enough to see the mysterious woman's face, Maitland is appalled to discover a 'terrifying lamia' (CSS2 117). Undeterred, though, Maitland seeks every opportunity to return to this 'potent private world', in order to witness 'Her beckoning eyes, the pale lantern of her smile' (CSS2 113, 119). After the intoxication of this spectral realm, Maitland finds the imposition of reality with the removal of his bandages unbearable, revealing to him a dead world. Finding the source of his enchanted domain in the house and grounds in which he has been recovering fails to imbue the quotidian with the marvellous and instead threatens his inner vision. In the horrific finale Maitland chooses to tear out his own eyes rather than have his dream world retreat behind the wall of consciousness.

The literary and artistic allusions are many in this story, including Sophocles' (and Freud's reading of) *Oedipus the King*, Leonardo da Vinci's paintings of the Madonna (and Freud's reading of them, too), Shakespeare's *King Lear*, Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner*, T. S. Eliot's 'Sweeney among the Nightingales' (1918) and du Maurier's 'The Birds'. The site of Maitland's visions also recalls the biblical significance of the cave as the place of revelation from God. Maitland's struggle to maintain his grip on his visions when interrupted by his wife, his doctor and by the sea birds that plague him at the beginning of the story, recalls the mythology of the composition of Coleridge's 'Kubla Khan', whilst his later incorporation of the birds as aural cues that guide him towards the visionary cliffs carries a Blakean echo of seeing the phenomenal world as symbolic of a higher realm; Maitland is only interested in sense experience to the extent that it can help to summon his dream visions.²² What seemed at first to be a Romantic celebration of visionary insight turns in this story into an horrific re-enactment of the oedipal drama which ends not with the punishment of symbolic castration, but with a blinding that ensures the continuation of the taboo, at least in Maitland's own mind. The shock ending recalls Poe's stories of psychological and bodily horror, and Maitland's lack of repentance – his cry at this terrible self-wounding – 'half in pain and half in triumph' – makes of this a problematic story of psychic fulfilment; and the lyrical descriptions of Maitland's visions would seem to confirm such a reading (CSS2 120). At the same time, that Maitland's reconnection with childhood memories has resulted in the horror of incest and gratuitous self-harm makes of it a dark parody of the Wordsworthian drive to reconnect with one's inner child, and suggests that some

²² Coleridge was supposedly interrupted by an unexpected caller just as he was recording the dream which inspired 'Kubla Khan'. By the time his visitor had gone, his dream-memory had dissipated – hence the fragmentary nature of the poem.

memories may be better left undisturbed. Moreover, it undermines the figure of the prophet/bard by portraying a man who is simply following his own repressed fantasies to their logical and horrific conclusions. That the horror of the final scene cannot entirely erase the seduction of the visionary passages that precede it, creates a familiar tension in this story between the terrible consequences of, and yet the persistent desire and need for, the visionary and its role in the attainment of self-knowledge.

In the early short stories discussed so far in this chapter – ‘Prima Belladonna’, ‘Concentration City’, ‘The Waiting Grounds’, ‘Billennium’, ‘The Voices of Time’ and ‘Gioconda of the Twilight Noon’ – I have demonstrated the contraplexual currents in Ballard’s fiction, of which Romanticism forms a significant stream. The latter two stories in particular begin to evidence that wounded Romanticism which is one of the signs of Ballard’s critique and yet perpetuation of Romantic legacies in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. There is a recognition of the desire and even the need for the transformative imagination, and for contact with the numinous and belief in the transcendent, but a concomitant contamination of that power and desire, and a rendering of it irrelevant or even obscene in the face of the atrocities of modernity. To conclude this chapter’s exploration of early short stories, I turn now to ‘The Terminal Beach’ which confronts the nuclear atrocities of past, present and future.

Atomic Revelations

'The Terminal Beach', of all Ballard's short stories, might seem to be the least likely place to look for the legacies of Romanticism. The story revolves around the traumatized and very probably insane Traven, who is lingering in a half-existence of disease and starvation on the former American nuclear-test site, Eniwetok. The atoll of Eniwetok is covered with the crumbling infrastructure of a nuclear test site, 'a functional megalithic architecture, as grey and minatory (and apparently as ancient, in its projection from, and into, time future) as any of Assyria and Babylon' (CSS2 32). But the buildings of 'The Terminal Beach' are of a military design, of the cold war period in particular, which is called in this story 'The Pre-Third', as in pre-Third World War. The collapsing of time indicates that a disaster, a thermonuclear holocaust, has psychologically already taken place, blasting any coherent sense of self into a collection of magazine cut-outs and obscurely labelled cellular diagrams pinned to the wall of a concrete bunker (CSS2 39). Traven has been traumatized by the deaths of his wife and child, but seems to experience some kind of oblique respite in the conflation of his personal atrocities with those of the twentieth century, and those still to come. Traven befriends the skeleton of a Japanese doctor that he finds/hallucinates near the test site, and they converse together on philosophical subjects. Doctor Yasuda is the avatar of the hundreds of thousands of Japanese people who died as a result of the atomic strikes on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and for Traven the tests on Eniwetok prefigure the atrocities of the Third World War. The story is presented in short headed sections which do not appear to follow a chronological order; their fragmentation and dislocation reflect the precarious hold that Traven has upon his own identity, and upon the dimensions of time and space.

The quest of self-realization is often depicted in Ballard through a unique and disturbing foregrounding of fraught subject/object relations, and in the wearing away of memory and identity in an attempt to achieve ‘psychic zero’, which is figured as both a beginning and an end – both generative and terminal. ‘The Terminal Beach’ is in some ways the realization of Ballard’s promise in ‘Which Way to Inner Space’ to write the story of an amnesiac lying on a beach staring at a rusting bicycle wheel, trying to determine their exact relation to the object. The story is twinned with ‘The Voices of Time’ in that it treats of the repercussions, physical and psychological, of atomic warfare past, present and future. The radio-gene therapy that Whitby pioneered in ‘The Voices of Time’ came out of his research on Eniwetok into the effects of the nuclear testing on the local fauna. Both stories also explore an extended leave-taking by the protagonist of all they know in a conscious effort to reach psychic zero. Powers says to his doctor in ‘The Voices of Time’: “In fact, Paul, I’d like to forget everything. I don’t know whether I’ve got enough time, though. How much can you forget in three months?” (CSS1 230); and Traven in ‘The Terminal Beach’ begins to say goodbye to all that he knows before abandoning the endeavour because ‘Such a leave taking required him to fix his signature upon every one of the particles of the universe’ (CSS2 46). This sublimely vast task seems to indicate a surprisingly powerful connection to the universe for one who is in many ways suffering from utter alienation and estrangement from the world. This is not the only instance of such equivocality in this story. The amnesiac is in some ways the polar opposite of Wordsworth’s mature self who is able to reconnect with sundered childhood memories in order to effect a marriage between man and the natural world; and yet, paradoxically, this deep pathology allows Ballard’s characters to see and appreciate the world anew, as though through a child’s eyes. ‘The Terminal

Beach', along with *The Atrocity Exhibition*, is Ballard's most comprehensive investigation of what he calls 'the death of affect', by which he means the loss of the ability to feel empathy through a combination of media-bombardment and exposure to atrocity. Such bleak and despairing depictions of the emotional bankruptcy of his characters tends to paradoxically call forth those absent emotions in the reader, though, so that the apparent nihilism of this story might be said to have moralistic intent.

The opening paragraph of 'The Terminal Beach' partakes of the legacy of the Romantic lone wanderer, the Byronic hero at the limits of the world plagued by memory and longing for forgetfulness. There is a reconnection, through repetitions of trauma, with the memories of childhood, and a radical externalisation of an internal world: 'This memory of the great night raids against the Japanese mainland had filled his first months on the island with burning bombers falling through the air around him' (CSS2 29). There is a crossover here between the worlds of sleep and dream and a waking 'reality'; the story begins with Traven 'hearing' the waves breaking on the beach 'as he lay asleep'. Perhaps this is something like what Ballard describes as 'the informed waking dream'. There is, too, a sense of pathos as Traven is 'overcome by this long forgotten memory', and the 'ruined bunker' which is Traven's abode by the sea makes of him a hermit in his (concrete) hut (CSS2 29).

All of this is worked against by the simultaneous unease of the intrusion of modernity, history and war. Traven transforms the breaking of the waves along the

shore, somewhat implausibly, into the 'sounds of giant aircraft warming up at the ends of their runways' (*CSS2* 29). Here the nightmare overpowers the sounds of soothing nature, mechanising the sea and imbuing it with violent intent. The nightmare does pass, however, to be replaced by potentially sweeter childhood memories of the beach at Dakar, but this is another memory of being alone by the sea 'watching from the window in the evenings for his parents to drive home along the corniche road from the airport' (*CSS2* 29). The passing of the nightmare is also attributed to 'attacks of beri-beri', indicating that the horror of history may be transcended, but only through the fevered dreams of severe illness and malnutrition. This is simultaneously an undermining of and a recapitulation of the association of Romantic desire with a kind of diseased, decadent longing. The name Dakar recalls bloodshed and conflict, with its long history of colonial violence, and its strategic importance during World War II. Perhaps most destabilizing to the seeming Romantic aesthetic of the opening paragraph, though, might be the final sentence: 'Overcome by this long-forgotten memory, he woke uncertainly from the bed of old magazines on which he slept and went out to the dunes that screened the lagoon' (*CSS2* 29). This casts the whole into doubt, raising the possibility that the dunes screen from the bunker the sound as well as the sight of the lagoon, and that the memories altering his world are mere fragments, perhaps gleaned from the pages of the magazines on which he sleeps. But even as we doubt Traven's ability to distinguish between dream and reality, we are carried along by the power of his vision and the sweet/sad poetry of his disturbing personal mythology.

The simultaneity of these conflicting currents in the passage work at the level of emotional affect on the reader, but also stimulate the intellectual faculty of doubt. The stage is set for an interrogation of the relationship between the mind and world, and this passage suggests both a Romantic mutuality in which mind and world are equally productive, brought together through the power of the imagination, and a Romantic solipsism in which the natural and phenomenal world is escaped or sundered and an 'ideal' world of pure ideation is manifested. Traven's solipsism, though, is nightmarish and warns of the potential disaster awaiting those who would follow him on this Blakean path. If the fevered dream of childhood memory is an escape from the nightmare of history in the shape of the burning bombers, then technology – no matter how terrifying – perhaps offers a practical means of affecting the world, whereas the comforting illusion of dreams are associated with sickness and irresponsibility. Traven forgets where the shore is, even though the island is only a little over half a mile wide, continuing to undermine the opening passage's evocation of crashing waves and the images that they summoned. Further cementing his alienation are the palm trees that 'leaned into the dim air like the symbols of a cryptic alphabet' and the 'strange ciphers' covering the island; this is a terrain that Traven struggles to decode, and its mysteries propel him to its central maze of blocks (*CSS2* 29). The rupture of the relation between mind and landscape is enhanced by the discovery of fossilized tracked-vehicle trails in the sand. Fused by the weapons tests the 'double line of fossil prints [...] wound its serpentine way among the hollows like the footfalls of an ancient saurian' (*CSS2* 29). The nuclear tests have ruptured time and space in some way so that Traven struggles to anchor himself in either dimension, all of which is formally echoed by the titled sections of the story – fragments which may or may not be re-orderable into a linear narrative. If Traven is

exploring the landscape of his own mind, he has become lost amongst its Gothic passageways and his rusty key will not open any of the doors. But this 'profoundly depressing' place is a perfect projection of the detritus of the traumatized twentieth-century mind. 'The island is a state of mind' according to Osborne, a scientist working in an old submarine pen, and Traven agrees: 'by this Cartesian yardstick the island at least existed in a sense true of few other places' (*CSS2* 31). The island is not a popular visitor's attraction, perhaps because it so closely reflects the latent content of the twentieth-century media landscape, but Traven has been drawn to its synthetic landscape, a place utterly devoid of the 'natural', because it is the perfect externalization of his own alienation and trauma. On this reading, Traven is in the vanguard of twentieth-century psychopathology – he is a kind of bard figure who has travelled to an apocalyptic landscape in order to negotiate the guilt and trauma of atrocity that he assumes we all carry. Traven's 'quest' echoes that of the dark wanderers of Romanticism, haunting mountain passes and lonely towers perched on the edge of impossible precipices in search of transcendence and or/death; he is a twentieth-century Manfred, summoning up spirits to help him make sense of his grief and guilt, and to ease him towards death. That he, among so few, has chosen to travel to the island, marks him as in some way more attuned to its perversely numinous qualities; like the Romantic poet and/or wanderer he is to read its enigmatic ciphers like a modern day hierophant or seer:

There were also stronger unconscious motives, Traven recognized: if primitive man felt the need to assimilate events in the external world to his own psyche, 20th century man had reversed this process (*CSS2* 31)

Twentieth-century man must attempt to assimilate his own psyche to events in the external world. In fact, as the island shows, twentieth-century man must attempt to assimilate his psyche to the world which he has created; if the external world is a product of his psyche, there is no objective external reality to assimilate, and world and mind become one in a terrifying synthesis of subject and object terminating in psychic zero. Rather than a Blakean dynamic marriage of tensions, contrarities are fused into stasis by the apocalyptic heat of the atomic tests and their endless repetition in the human imagination.

The bending of time to one's will is often, in Ballard, the key to some kind of transcendental realization, a potentially liberating ability – but here we see the other side to tampering with the flow of time, the awful consequences of such a temporal disruption caused by the half-lives of catastrophes past and future. In 'The Terminal Beach', Traven's sense of time is steadily eroded by the isolation of the island and its alienating architecture. His relations with the external world are repeatedly refined until they seem to lose all sense of a narrative of the self:

He evolved no routine for himself. All sense of time soon vanished, and his life became completely existential, an absolute break separating one moment from the next like two quantal events. (CSS 35)

And yet, once Traven penetrates the heart of the island, losing himself amongst the corridors of identically sized concrete blocks radiating out from ground zero, he

discovers an odd sort of equilibrium – a state understood in both transcendental and biological terms. This ‘herd of megaliths’ seems to correspond to elements of Traven’s body and mind, a ‘cerebro-spinal’ column reaching towards the future, concrete examples of survival at the blast centre of a thermonuclear explosion, holding out the hope that he might survive the nuclear Armageddons of past, present and future (*CSS2* 39). It is their insistent size and shape that Traven seems to find so comforting, their seeming solidity: ‘the blocks seemed to occupy more than their own volumes of space, imposing on him a mood of absolute calm and order’ (*CSS2* 38). This, in contrast to his own physical and mental disintegration: ‘The [magazine] page was falling to pieces, like a fragmenting mirror of himself’ (*CSS2* 39). But like the preserved blocks at the centre of the test site, beyond the crumbling camera towers and observation bunkers, Traven’s disintegrating exterior hides a core of ‘inner sinewy toughness, an economy and directness of movement’ (*CSS2* 33). The ‘strange luminescent fish and plants’ that have survived on the island are examples to Traven of the kind of metamorphosis required to survive in this man-made world, new echelons of being that must be scaled and for which he will have little need of the Romantic notion of the self. But by the end of the story, with a little help from the dead Japanese doctor Yasuda, who advises Traven to ‘pursue a philosophy of acceptance’ and view Eniwetok as ‘an ontological Garden of Eden’, Traven might seem to have arranged the components of his synthetic landscape in such a way that he can begin to make sense of his separation from and connection to the world (*CSS2* 49). As the ghosts of his wife and child come closer to him, and the ‘dead archangel’ Yasuda guards him from the blocks, Traven is able to look after his own physical needs again, to forage for food, to take some responsibility for himself. Traven, though, does not succeed in repressing the memories of atrocity. He may be able to

conceive of the destruction of humanity through visions of nuclear catastrophe, but he cannot entirely erase his awareness from this experience. We leave him on Eniwetok, enveloped by the ghosts of his dead wife and child and the future ‘memory’ of nuclear apocalypse represented by the blocks. It is in this space between disasters that he is able to purchase fleeting moments of serenity, even identity, and, as Michel Delville has expressed it, achieve:

a superior state of awareness beyond the terms set by conventional ways of apprehending and transcending reality, including traditional means of understanding, measuring or simply coping with the passing of time.²³

This description seems to hark back to the figure of the Romantic bard again, but Traven’s inability to read the strange ciphers of the island make of him a metaphorically blind prophet. The fugue states into which Ballard’s characters slide, with differing levels of willingness and a general ambiguity of motives, allows for the alteration of their perception of time. Whether this is a subjective experience of time or a genuine overhaul of the temporality of existence is in some sense irrelevant, for it is this mastery of time that allows fragmented subjects to superimpose the fractured elements of themselves, from different time periods and alternate conceptions of personality, to make something like a whole. Being outside of time they manage the impossible: individuation *and* blissful dissolution. Sometimes this is a paradox that can only be maintained briefly in the moment before death, although the characters themselves may experience this moment as a subjective eternity. Either way, this psychic fulfilment seems to be worth paying any

²³ Michel Delville, *Writers and their work: J. G. Ballard* (Plymouth: Northcote, 1998), p. 12.

price for. That Ballard sees disasters (both natural and man-made), atrocities, violence and sexual perversions as opportunities for psychic fulfilment in extremis has undoubtedly contributed to his reception by some as at best an amoral author, at worst an immoral one. But we do not have to assume that Ballard wishes these external circumstances upon his characters (or us!). Such criticism fails to appreciate Ballard's engagement with Romanticism, which rejects the Enlightenment project of a 'global movement towards human liberation' in favour of an individual odyssey of self-discovery, a journey that takes place in the interface between the inner and outer landscapes, across the territory of the imagination, and is stimulated by aesthetic experience. Ballard, on this reading, is paradoxically one of the most hopeful of contemporary authors, able to reduce the modern self to 'little more than the meagre residue of the infinite unrealized possibilities of our lives', whilst simultaneously seeing eternity in that grain of human sand (*CSS2* 48). In the face of atrocity, catastrophe and apocalypse, his heroes endure, create, remember and imagine, in ways that both resist and perpetuate Romantic notions of selfhood. Were his only mode ironic, his works mere echo chambers referencing yet more ciphers, Ballard could be called postmodern in the most derogatory sense. Like the best work of that confused label, though, the ghostly presence of Romanticism accompanies us through the hall of mirrors.

The title of 'The Terminal Beach' suggests both an end point and a point of departure. Here, at the limit of being, Traven awaits both an end and a beginning – a circularity also suggested by the repetition of ciphers, which word can also mean the figure zero, and by the use of the word terminal to mean the completing point of an

electrical circuit. How then does Romanticism fit into the contraplex of 'The Terminal Beach'? Answering this will open up many journeys back and forth from this story which sits at the beginning and the end of Ballard's oeuvre. In detailing the malignity of modernity so evocatively in this story, Ballard might be said to adumbrate the desire or the possibility of something better, even as the achievement of a better state of being is perhaps denied to Traven. Traven's extreme isolation and alienation matter because we instinctively feel that a connection to the world, to people and to our own bodies is essential for a life well lived, although this may be nothing more than a Romantic hangover. What is more unsettling is the sense that the catastrophe is welcomed by Traven, that he is authentically existing somehow in this state, and that perhaps he is in the avant-garde of humanity. Here we have the contraplex movement of the text: the reader desires on some level the rapprochement of Traven and world, and yet at the same time shares in his perverse sense of peace in the terrifying landscape that he has to some extent called into being, but from which he remains sundered.

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Landscapes are central to any Ballard story – the inner and outer and the amalgamation of both by the imagination – and the deep ambivalence with which they are depicted. In 'The Terminal Beach' we experience the unsettling oscillation between beauty and disgust, horror and sublime terror. The ciphers which Luckhurst has 'read' as translations and retranslations are themselves imbued with the enduring mystery of the symbolic, their very inscrutability calling up an echo of that great Romantic obsession with the fragment, the incomplete gesture, the tantalising

glimpse of that which can never be fully disclosed.²⁴ In as much as the Romantics were obsessed with beginnings and endings, agonising over them and avoiding them, the terminus of 'The Terminal Beach' can be seen as both staging point and destination for the repeated Romantic quests of the self in Ballard's oeuvre. Traven's past echoes around him making a disaster area of any possible present or future. At the individual level, there is an attempt being made to understand the effects of personal trauma by overlaying the sublimely vast traumas of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the myriad nuclear deaths still to come, which the weapons testing at Eniwetok promises. In this chapter I have been tracing the evolution of the ambivalent bard/prophet figures in Ballard's short fictions, reading in them an increasingly complicated and wounded response to the legacy of Romanticism. The transformative imagination has been seen to be capable of both apocalyptic renewal and horrific nightmares – often at the same time.

The short stories discussed in this chapter, with all of their generic and narrative variety, seem to hinge upon the undecidability between a qualified celebration of the desiring, imaginative Romantic self, and an indifferent or hostile world which would suit a far less individualistic self. An attempt at rapprochement is made through the transformative power of the imagination, but it is seen to be a power to be wary of as well as celebrated. In 'Prima Belladonna', Jane Cyracylides blew through the affectless resort of Vermillion Sands provoking a minor and destructive apocalypse, but the lyricism with which both she and her effects are described undercuts the seeming critique of Romantic infinite longing co-opted by a consumer society. 'The

²⁴ Luckhurst, p. 69

Concentration City' hymns dreams of flight and freedom, but at the seeming expense of the urgent needs of reality – Franz M.'s circular journey transforming his Romantic quest for 'free space' into the nightmare realization of his entrapment in a Gothic labyrinth of the self. 'Bilennium' continues this sense of the necessity for imaginative transformation of a constraining world, whilst underlining the solipsistic dangers of such inner terrains. The protagonists of 'The Waiting Grounds', 'The Voices of Time' and 'The Gioconda of the Twilight Noon' travel further and at greater personal cost into the private worlds of inner space, and they achieve a lyrical and visionary intensity which is at odds with a generalized sense of entropic despair, or with the psychopathological origin of their visions. Lastly, in 'The Terminal Beach' I explored the meeting of the wounded Romantic imagination with the historical reality of atrocity. A marriage of opposites in the Blakean sense is achieved in these short stories, preserving the creative tension of the unresolved dialectic and contributing to the overriding sense of ambiguity and ambivalence which characterises the Ballardian tale. In the fantastic landscapes of *The Drowned World*, discussed in chapter 2, the state of contraplex continues in a critical renewal of the high Romantic goal of a marriage between man and nature, but remains quivering unresolved between a solipsistic eliding of real catastrophe and horror, and a Romantically transformed relation of mind to world. The spectre of history haunts the 'paradises of the reborn sun' (*DW* 175), but cannot entirely disenchant the lyricism which sustains the contraplex.

Chapter 2. Apocalypse Now: The Romantic Prophet and Union with Nature in *The Drowned World*

In this chapter I will be discussing the meeting of the two sorts of apocalypse discussed in chapter 1 – both disaster and revelation – in Ballard’s *The Drowned World*, though I make passing reference to the other ‘disaster cycle’ novels: *The Wind from Nowhere* (1962), *The Drought* (1964) and *The Crystal World* (1966). These are the first four of Ballard’s novels, and they bring the apocalypse to the prophet in the form of radically altered landscapes and drastically diminished prospects for the survival of the human race. I have elected to concentrate upon *The Drowned World* because although any one of these novels provides an abundance of Romantic echoes, imagery, symbols and critiques, this novel foregrounds most consistently the depiction of the drive to reconcile sundered man with the natural world. This union, as outlined in the introduction, is figured in Romantic theory as a marriage between the masculine mind and a feminine nature, and in opposition to the modes of thought and being associated with the Enlightenment and its legacies. In this way *The Drowned World* can be seen to echo the Romanticism conceived of by the high Romantic criticism of the 1950s and 60s. However, the generic subversions, deathly conclusion, and oscillations between disgust and aesthetic reverie that are prompted by the contemplation of nature amount to a critique of this Romantic drive, even as its depiction and sometime celebration seem to perpetuate it. With an appreciation for the complexity of the Romantic poets’ own ambivalence about the possibility of such a marriage between man and nature, I explore the continuation of these paradoxes in Ballard’s second novel. Whilst Romantic metaphor, symbolism and desire are often pushed to an extreme, nonetheless the heritage remains clear; the

bardic imagination that I traced through a selection of short stories in chapter 1 is now called upon in *The Drowned World* to reconcile the mind with the transformed terrain in which it finds itself, and this is as much an aesthetic revolution as it is an exercise in stoicism and fortitude, thereby continuing Ballard's tendency to transform, undercut and parody generic elements in his fiction. The affectless and flâneur-like protagonists of these novels, who seem almost to will the disaster upon themselves, are a far cry from the derring-do heroes of the catastrophe genre, as Colin Greenland has noted:

This is a development against the trend of the catastrophe story, which has usually been concerned with the continuation of the human identity despite inhuman conditions: wit and will pitted against time and evolution¹

Ballard's 'heroes' in the disaster quartet are arguably more recognizable as echoes of the brooding and lonely wanderers of Romantic poetry and fiction, seeming 'half in love with easeful Death',² and there is something of Keats' negative capability in this acquiescence, though it is carried to a radical extreme.³ The disaster genre itself might be said to have had significant Romantic contributions in works such as Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1926) and Lord Byron's 'Darkness' (1816), and the sublime spectacle of a world transformed by cataclysmic environmental change magnifies the already sublime sense of undecidability that reverberates through Ballard's oeuvre. Will Self has called this psychological phenomenon, in his

¹ Greenland, p. 94

² John Keats, 'Ode to a Nightingale' (1819), l. 52, *The Major Works*, p. 287.

³ Will Self has suggested that a species of negative capability is at work in *The Drowned World*. See Will Self, 'Introduction' in J. G. Ballard, *The Drowned World* (London: The Folio Society, 2013), p. xiv.

introduction to *The Drowned World*, ‘at once disconcerting and oddly heartening’.⁴

In interview with David Pringle and James Goddard, Ballard offered an explanation for the strange sense of fulfilment that pertains in these ostensibly deathly narratives:

The geophysical changes which take place in *The Drought*, *The Drowned World* and *The Crystal World* are all positive and good changes – they are what the books are about. The changes lead us to our real psychological goals, so they are not disaster stories at all. (EM 89)

These are apocalyptic texts in the Romantic, even biblical sense, in that they involve a revelation to the suitably attuned, and a concomitant revolution in perception, but this is complicated by the fact revelation appears to lead to the ‘real psychological goal’ of deathly dissolution. Whereas the staples of the disaster genre have tended to see human practical ingenuity and technology as the means by which disaster is to be avoided, these novels set out to discover what might be gained by embracing catastrophe. Ballard’s ‘heroes’ travel willingly towards death, losing their identities in a melting away of the boundaries between the internal landscapes of their minds and the external, phenomenal world. As the dimensions of time and space are disrupted, the characters are able to perceive the infinite in the finite, even as their available stock of linear time appears to diminish. The apocalypse enables Ballard’s protagonists to ‘Hold infinity in the palm of [their] hand[s], And eternity in an hour’.⁵ That this is achieved through a kind of aesthetic reverie, however, opens up the potential for a decadent ecstasy in the presence and decoration of what actually

⁴ Ibid

⁵ William Blake, ‘Auguries of Innocence’ (1804), *Selected Works*, p. 173, ll. 3-4.

turns out to be the ugly and disgusting, and the fact that their visions appear to lead these bardic figures to their deaths seems to warn of the dangers of the transformative imagination, and of following in their footsteps. We do not witness the actual death of the protagonists, however, leaving the moment of individuation and/or dissolution perpetually suspended by the ending of the text – ever more about to be. Perhaps our ‘real psychological goals’ lead us towards the extinguishing of all anxiety – sexual, cultural, existential – in death, as Sigmund Freud suggested in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), but Ballard opens up a trapdoor in the sun in the form of an escape from the tyranny of time, allowing his heroes to spend a subjective eternity poised between Eros and Thanatos.

Compared with the “keep calm, carry on” ethos of Nevil Shute’s *On The Beach* (1957), and the blitz mentality of John Wyndham’s *The Day of the Triffids* (1951), there is a visionary, lyric quality about the responses to disaster in these novels that echoes the Romantic tradition. The resonances of British Imperial decline, the exploration of the deep self, anti-Enlightenment sentiment and a deep sense of ambivalence and ambiguity are amongst the leitmotifs of Ballard’s apocalyptic novels, and they seem to echo the melancholy appreciation of the classical and Gothic ruins that populated the works of Romanticism. The welcome with which the environmental catastrophes are greeted by their protagonists unsettles the generic conventions of the struggle for human survival at all costs, and sets off a chain of allegorical, symbolic and psychological possibilities. The ambivalence with which the changing environment is viewed in these novels causes the apocalyptic imagination to waver uncertainly and disturbingly between the Wordsworthian

power to invest the quotidian with the numinous, and the decadent imagination's dark delight in celebrating the ugly and disgusting. The natural world is by turns bewitchingly beautiful and monstrously inhospitable, and in their attempts to come to terms with apocalypse I read a wounded Romanticism that persists in the pursuit of a marriage between the sundered human mind and world, in spite of its extreme hostility.

Following a brief discussion of *The Wind From Nowhere*, as an indication of the direction that the subsequent novels would take, I look firstly at the anti-Enlightenment sentiment in *The Drowned World*, whilst also exploring how this is undercut by an appreciation for the mythic resonance of obsolete technology. I then explore the oscillation between lyricism and horror in the depictions of the natural world and landscape, and the extent to which this dialectic might be said to be resolved, either in the Romantic marriage of mind and world, or in the fulfilment of deathly desire. Concluding that the perpetuation of contrarities, in a Blakean preservation of productive tensions, is achieved by an oscillating response to the natural world, I look forward to chapter 3's discussion of *The Atrocity Exhibition* and *Crash* with a consideration of the invocations of historical atrocities in the *The Drowned World*.

Anti-Enlightenment

Ballard's first novel, *The Wind from Nowhere* (1962), sees civilization brought to its knees by a ferocious wind of unexplained origins. Reaching speeds of hundreds of

miles per hour, and carrying with it the dust and detritus that litters the surface of the Earth, people are forced to cower in underground shelters and bunkers – if they are lucky enough to have access to them – and wait out the enraged primal forces of nature. Most above-ground structures are felled by the wind, and the dust clouds that it carries are capable of stripping the flesh from the bones of anyone exposed to them. Eventually, the wind does begin to subside, but only after enormous loss of life, and it is clear that humanity was entirely at the mercy of forces beyond its reckoning or control, and that modern technologically-dependent humanity is wholly unsuited to weathering such a disaster:

On the whole, people had shown less resourcefulness and flexibility, less foresight, than a wild bird or animal would. Their basic survival instincts had been so dulled, so overlaid by mechanisms designed to serve secondary appetites, that they were totally unable to protect themselves. [...] they were helpless victims of a deep rooted optimism about their right to survival, their dominance of the natural order which would guarantee them against everything but their own folly, so that they had made gross assumptions about their own superiority. (*WFN* 120)

This is an ambivalent response to the catastrophe which seemingly denigrates the legacies of both Romanticism and the Enlightenment, a deeply pessimistic vision of humanity's hubris and insignificance. But in its implied valorization of instinct and nature – that people would have done better to follow the animals and the birds – there is a Romantic echo, and the mention of 'secondary appetites' recalls the decadence of Rome before the fall, as well as the post-Romantic literature of

decadence. The avatar of such hubristic values in *The Wind from Nowhere* is the millionaire maverick Hardoon, whose egotism leads him to build an enormous concrete pyramid in defiance of the wind, a modern-day tower of babel, when all else are scurrying below ground for shelter. Hardoon seeks to challenge what he perceives as the irrationality of the wind, facing it head on in order to display his 'moral courage' and assert man's 'determination to master nature' (*WFN* 166). Building up as everybody else is burrowing down is indicative of his inverted logic – he stands for all of mankind's arrogance and alienation from the natural world. The text passes judgement on Hardoon, and in a sense all of humanity, when the wind begins to dissipate immediately after tearing apart his supposedly indomitable structure, which turns out to have been built upon poor foundations. Hardoon has much in common with the classic Gothic villain, his pyramid the Gothic castle of a novel that seems to delight in the destruction of a hubristic human society. The forces of irrationality come violently, devastatingly to the fore in *The Wind from Nowhere*, sweeping away Enlightenment values and humanistic views of the world. The template of the disaster genre does reassert itself to some extent in this first novel, however, when relatively traditional heroes, such as the protagonist Maitland, come to the rescue in various small ways, ensuring that there is at least a remnant of humanity to rebuild civilisation once the wind subsides. The invocation of the wind in this novel, that Romantic master metaphor for change and for the interaction of nature with the mind of the poet, sets the theme for the remaining three novels of the cycle, and there is an intimation of the apocalyptic nature of these works in the strange attitude towards the disaster that some characters demonstrate. Maitland's wife, Susan, for instance, refuses to be reduced to digging a hole in the ground to survive, and when he tries to rescue her from her wind-ravaged high-rise apartment,

she tells him ‘I just like to watch the wind. The whole of London’s starting to fall down. Soon it’ll all be blown away’ (*WFN* 85). Soon after this reverie Susan is caught by the wind and carried out of the window to her death. This quixotic response to imminent personal and species-wide destruction at the hands of nature is a familiar mood of the subsequent three apocalyptic novels.

In *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944), Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer claim that ‘Men have always had to choose between their subjection to nature, and the subjection of nature to the self’.⁶ This is already a tension in Enlightenment thinking: between the conquering of nature and superstition by rational and empiricist means, and the undercurrents of Deism, and intimations of depth psychology in the writings of authors such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau. These undercurrents would, of course, come to fruition in the period that we call Romantic, and formed part of the Romantics’ rejection of the recent past in favour of something more remote. In *The Drowned World*, matters have progressed beyond choosing: humanity is dominated by the environment and its resurgent prehistoric flora and fauna of giant gymnosperms, fist-sized mosquitos and man-eating iguanas. In the face of such fantastically altered terrain, the legacy of the Enlightenment seems increasingly irrelevant, and so the protagonist and like-minded others pursue a Romantic means of relating to the world: through the deep resources of the self, and an aesthetic reunion with nature. Ballard devotes just over two pages early in the novel to describing the source of the geophysical changes to the twenty-first century

⁶ Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (London: Verso, 1999 [1994]), p. 32.

landscape: a chain reaction, brought about by increased solar activity, has steadily raised global temperatures, melted the ice caps and engorged the oceans, submerging most of the surface of the world, or burying it under the huge banks of silt which the movement of such vast volumes of water has produced. The sun now appears as an enflamed ellipse and regularly pulses with new flares. What remains of the human race is clustered around the poles – the only surviving temperate zones capable of supporting human civilisation (*DW* 21-3). Most of the novel takes place in and around the sunken city of London, where a research team from Camp Byrd in Greenland are ostensibly recording the radically altered plant and animal life that the environmental changes have wrought. The team has a civilian science component and a military escort led by Colonel Riggs. Most of the expedition's members are billeted on the boats that carry them over the system of vast inland lakes that was Europe, but in a defiantly decadent gesture the protagonist Kerans has holed himself up in an apartment at the Ritz – one of the few remaining high-rise buildings with intact floors above the waterline. The majority of Ballard's novels feature a central mystery which its protagonists begin by investigating, but which they invariably end up embroiled in themselves, if they were not so already. With their immersion in the element which they observe, they have something of the existential detectives of postmodern fiction about them, a strain which is developed more fully in the last four of Ballard's novels, and which I discuss in chapter 5. At the start of *The Drowned World*, the biologist Kerans muses on his increasing tendency towards isolation and introspection, comparing it to the preparatory shutdown of a species about to undergo an evolutionary change or metamorphosis. Most of the members of the team seem to be experiencing a similar malaise, and some are also reporting strange dreams of a booming, black sun which leaves the sleepers distracted and

unsettled during the day.⁷ Kerans' scientific colleague, Bodkin, has developed a theory to explain the psychological and physical changes which are manifested by the crew, suggesting that the reborn Triassic landscape is triggering memories that are held at the cellular level, preparing them for the necessary adaptations needed to survive in their altered environment. Bodkin thinks of this as a slide down the spinal column into levels of being that are capable of communing with the concept of 'deep time' (*DW* 42-4). When Colonel Riggs announces that the team are to pack up and leave in three days' time, Kerans, Bodkin and Beatrice Dahl – who the research team discovered living alone in an apartment building above the sunken city – decide to stay behind and continue to pursue their dreams. Beatrice is the first to refuse to leave. She and Kerans are lovers, and the time that he spends at her apartment, staring into the Paul Delvaux and Max Ernst paintings on her walls, seems to prepare him somehow for the journey into inner space. Meanwhile Bodkin, the eldest member of the party, spends his time looking for the submerged libraries and concert halls of London, searching for some forgotten childhood memory. All three are to an extent following in the wake of Riggs' Lieutenant, Hardman, who was amongst the first to dream of the reborn sun, and who escapes to pursue it in the lethal jungles of the south. Hardman is the prophet/bard-like figure of *The Drowned World*, and he is the first to sacrifice himself to the worship of the reborn sun. The tension between their duty to serve the remnants of humanity at Camp Byrd, and the compulsion to continue along the strange path they have already started upon, is symbolised in the novel by the directions of north and south. North represents life, such as it is, and the

⁷ The symbolism of the black sun has a long apocalyptic heritage, from classical mythology and the bible through the German Romantic poet Novalis and the Russian symbolist poet Osip Mandelstam. The apocalyptic and underworld resonances of the black sun were welcomed by the German Romantic poet Novalis, and also feature in Mary Shelley's *The Last Man*. See Michael Ferber, *A Dictionary of Symbolism, Second Edition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 29.

south death. Kerans' own passage is prefigured by the broken compass that he steals, its arrow pointing resolutely south.

There is a strong current of anti-Enlightenment feeling running through *The Drowned World*. Kerans and his fellow scientist Bodkin come to realize that the rational and empiricist modes of enquiry and being are outmoded and irrelevant in the transformed environment. Despite their apparent scientific mission, Kerans and his cohorts seem to have little faith in the tools and methods of their training, and are convinced that nobody back at Camp Byrd is reading their reports (*DW* 9). The scientific method, rationality and its technological products, are variously portrayed as outmoded, anachronistic and in terminal decline, and depictions of decaying machinery and an atmosphere of entropy accompany and even precipitate their journey into inner space. When Kerans and Bodkin scuttle their research station, as a preliminary to evading a northerly evacuation to Camp Byrd (*DW* 78), it is an act of rebellion against Riggs and the vestiges of the social order that he represents. But the sinking of the vessel is also a symbolic farewell to the philosophical underpinnings and practicality of empirical science. The apparatus, charts, diagrams and reports of the research station have ceased to be relevant in the Triassic swamp; Kerans refers to the charts on the wall as 'gnomic and meaningless graffiti' – scientific notation is breaking down, becoming obsolete (*DW* 40). These recent inscriptions are already ancient – like hieroglyphics – as though language itself were becoming archaic, the need to communicate with one another pared down to the bare minimum of contact in order for them each to ensure their own survival. After Riggs' departure, Kerans reflects that: 'Although they [Kerans, Bodkin and Beatrice] might see one another

occasionally [...] their only true meeting ground would be in their dreams' (*DW* 81). This clearly chimes with the stereotype of an anti-Enlightenment and anti-scientific current in Romanticism, and with the quietist reveries that signal the turn towards an inner world of the imagination in compensation for, and retreat from, the horrors of history. The scientific and strategic goals of their expedition are further undermined by the lack of response from Camp Byrd to the filing of a spurious report of the sighting of a Pelycosaur. Perhaps the idea of the rebirth of the dinosaurs is unremarkable given the return of the Triassic climate, or perhaps their reports, which have so far merely confirmed the predictions made decades ago, are no longer read. Kerans wonders if 'the specialists at Camp Byrd were too tired even to laugh' (*DW* 9). Images of withdrawal, and of the coming obsolescence of technology and rationality abound: Kerans' short wave radio remains uncharged and obscured by a self-consciously arranged pile of books in his hotel suite – symbolic, perhaps, of his diminishing need for communication and increasing introspection; the fast diminishing fuel supplies for the generators that power the air conditioning units, and their failing generators, are frequently referred to; Riggs' fretting over the wear and tear to the team's helicopter suggests a scarcity of spare parts; and the stopped clocks presiding over the sunken towns and cities through which the research team pass signal the end of time measured in hours and minutes. Riggs' compulsion to restart these derelict instruments marks his resistance to 'deep time' and an unwillingness to accept the obsolescence of empirical measurement.

For all the depictions of technological decline, machinery and architecture retain a mythic power and mystery in *The Drowned World*, which is amplified by their

removal from everyday surroundings and situations. There is a mythic resonance to Riggs' clock towers, and the broken pieces of equipment and obscure collections of twentieth century ephemera take on a totemic power for the inhabitants of this world. Speaking to the Romantic interest in the figure of the scientific genius, this current in the novel works against both the anti-Enlightenment and overly simplistic Romantic strains that I have been outlining thus far. The discovery or ingenious appropriation of technology from before the disaster is a genre staple, and is one of the ways in which survivors demonstrate their resilience and strive towards new beginnings, but technology in *The Drowned World*, although often re-purposed in what appears to be the expected 'make do and mend' survivalist mode, can be seen to perpetuate the turn away from civilisation and the abandonment of Enlightenment values. Bodkin, for example, constructs a miniature representation of the sun from an old heating filament and a mirror in order to draw out Hardman's troubled dreams. Along with Kerans letting slip about their imminent evacuation, though, this device actually ends up precipitating the Lieutenant's southerly pilgrimage. Likewise, his extreme alarm clock – set to wake him every ten minutes – proves ineffectual, unable to measure the new (old) vast timescales to which his psyche is aligning, and it is little more than a parody of the segmentation of time that occurs in a regimented and rational society.⁸ *The Drowned World* depicts an escape from the alienating power of technology, but at the same time remains entranced by its mystical resonance through obsolescence. As we have seen, such an ambiguous attitude towards science and technology is part of the complex inheritance of Romanticism and the critique of the Enlightenment.

⁸ Ballard's short story 'Chronopolis' (1960) is a sustained meditation on the psychopathology of clock time.

Outside of the rapidly shrinking temperate zones near to the Earth's poles, there exists 'a nightmare world of competing organic forms returning rapidly to their Paleozoic past' (*DW* 19). This is Kerans mentally surveying the terrain early on in the novel, maintaining an empirical, rational distance, as becomes a scientist whose mission it is to catalogue the emerging new species of plant and animal life, comparing them to predictions made when the changes first began. Over time, though, Kerans' attitude to the natural world is destabilized, and by the end of the novel, as the narration pulls back from the close third-person it has maintained throughout, he might be regarded as just another of those competing life forms, at last one with the landscape. Kerans' attempt to shrug off his own scientific background is neither painless nor complete. Just as his reaction to the natural world (and to Beatrice) swings violently between aesthetic contemplation and reverie, and nauseated fear and disgust, so his analysis of his own motives and actions is deeply ambivalent. The struggle is, on one level, between the rational, scientific, Enlightenment doctor, who prides himself upon his 'complete and objective awareness of the motives behind his actions', and the emerging self, with 'diminishing control over his own motives' (*DW* 39). The novel sets up an opposition between those who respect and listen to the irrational forces of the unconscious – paying heed to their quasi-religious visionary experiences, and showing a willingness to accept the lessons of their aesthetic reveries – and those who rely too heavily on the power of human reason and rationality. Throughout Kerans' slow journey south, he sheds the accoutrements of civilized existence. The final chapter sees him practically naked, with no means of transport or tools to aid

his journey, having lost his final companion, Hardman, after nursing him back to something like life. Notches on his belt count down the days and, in a final human gesture, he inscribes a message that nobody will ever see upon the wall of an apartment building that he will shortly abandon to continue south:

27th day. Have rested and am moving south. All is well.

Kerans. (DW 175, italics original.)

This might be a parody of the sort of message that a hero would leave in a more conventional story of exploration, but its sentiment ‘All is well’ is meant to be taken at least partly seriously, I think. It is at this point that the narration draws back from the closeness to Kerans it has maintained throughout and delivers the final few sentences from a perspective outside of his consciousness, as though along with the accoutrements of civilisation he has finally shrugged off the burden of self-awareness.

Kerans’ symbolic discarding of equipment and company does not simply indicate a return to a prehistoric state – after all, the earliest humans were probably hunter-gatherers, working together in packs or tribes – but a taking of the Romantic outsider figure to the absolute extreme. Technology of any kind, or indeed human organisation that imposes any kind of mediation of reality – that of social strata, duty, abstract concepts – are rejected as causes of the distancing of man from nature, as agents of alienation. Kerans will be the second Adam but, significantly, there will be no Eve, no hope of repopulating the earth, just one man’s ‘successful’

renegotiation of his relationship with the environment. This echoes the Romantic marriage of mind and world, explaining why Kerans could not take Beatrice with him on his journey south. But we cannot avoid the narrative ‘fact’ of Kerans’ death, and the imminent demise of humanity. To understand this dialectic it is necessary to consider Ballard’s ambivalent aesthetics of environment, for which the anti-Enlightenment relinquishing of technology, and the idea of progress in human history, have prepared us. Clearly Ballard does not envisage a technological, Enlightenment resolution to the catastrophe. Nor does the option of an atavistic, primitive society seem possible: the changes which Kerans and the others undergo make them profoundly solitary and unsociable. But these novels are not merely nihilistic celebrations of catastrophe. The stage appears to be set, in fact, for an inner and imaginative reunion with nature in the tradition of the solitary wanderers in the wilderness of Romanticism. Indeed the aesthetic reveries into which Kerans is prone to slide seem to herald just such a quietist revolution. But there is a problem; the reborn sun and spectral lagoons, which are capable of inspiring such lyrical experiences, are interludes in a Triassic swamp that is monstrously, hideously inhospitable to human life, and which very often elicits opposite reactions of equal force. Somewhere in this deeply ambivalent response which Kerans has to the natural world, and in his attempts to align it with the inner landscapes of his dream worlds, lies Ballard’s unique response to the catastrophe.

Marrying Heaven and Hell

Flights of lyrical description, transcendent moments and feelings of dissolution in the natural world occur frequently throughout *The Drowned World*. Seemingly just

as frequently, feelings of horror, panic, isolation and despair recur. Kerans' internal negotiation of the resurgent Triassic landscape is in many ways an aesthetic journey, one which begins within the safe cocoon of his air conditioned rooms at the Ritz. Kerans is on the inside looking out, aestheticizing the natural world as one might view a painting, from the safety of his hotel balcony. Kerans experiences fear and hatred of the iguanas and basilisks that are now his natural predators, and extremes of despair, horror and nausea when faced with the stench of decaying plant matter in the swamps, and the plague of insects that feed upon it. But the submerged buildings that ring the lagoons of London perform the role that the crumbling architecture of mediaeval monasteries and Gothic castles did in the nineteenth century picturesque. The physiological changes which Hardman, Bodkin, Beatrice and Kerans are undergoing are accompanied by an increased capacity for meditative, aesthetic contemplation of the rampant natural world juxtaposed with the remnants of the twentieth century, frozen in time. The ability to aestheticize the threatening landscape seems to alleviate Kerans' anxieties, and his inner dream world increasingly coalesces with the external; achieving something like the Romantic marriage of mind and nature.

On the way to achieving this reintegration with the natural world, however, Kerans' responses to it oscillate violently. In the face of the obscenely alive jungles and swamps, from which he has become alienated by the mediating factors of culture and science, he is by turns filled with nauseated disgust and transported through visionary insight. These antithetical responses are sometimes triggered by the same landscape or view, one reaction bleeding in to another as the aesthetic or apocalyptic

vision competes with the cultured self. Reacting to the primacy and power of nature, standing in defiance of his Enlightenment inheritance, profession and distant society, Kerans has recourse to the deep recesses of the self, to memory and to the aestheticizing redemption of the imagination. Kerans might be said to have experienced an apocalyptic cleansing of his perception, one which allows him to face the reality of his situation, rather than clinging to the forlorn hope of Camp Byrd. This personal apocalypse has been brought about partly by the changing environment, which in turn, according to Bodkin, has triggered the deep cellular memories of a world before humans evolved. This is a delving deeper into memory and the past than even Rousseau and Wordsworth described; it will result in a union of man and nature, but very possibly one that involves the relinquishing of human consciousness. This is an extreme and inverted working out of what Wordsworth, in the 'Preface' to *Lyrical Ballads*, envisaged as the central role of the poet and poetry, in a landscape transformed by science and technology, and Ballard will follow that path in his novels of the 1970s. But in a world where science and technology are rendered irrelevant by resurgent nature, the poet and poetry must return to the natural world from which man has become estranged – even, it seems, if that world is monstrous. On his journey towards his origins and a reunion with nature Kerans passes by the Romantic notion of such concepts and goes further, ultimately headed for a state not unlike the primordial ooze of creation.⁹ However this is not experienced as entirely pessimistic or parodic – the lyricism with which the horror and disgust alternate in *The Drowned World* creates a distance between the plotted events of the novel and the experience of the reader. Whether the competing forces

⁹ A similar fate awaits Mallory in *The Day of Creation* when he reaches his river's source. See chapter 4.

operating upon Kerans contribute to a dialectics of transcendence, or merely mire him forever in the contest of second and first natures, is perhaps the point; all of these conflicting energies seem to aim at maintaining the possibility of creative difference in a Blakean fashion, whilst offering an illusion of a choice between a rebellious death and stultifying compliance. I began by suggesting that in *The Drowned World* man really has no choice but to be subjected by nature. But Kerans' aestheticizing gaze seems capable of a kind of victory over the abject horror of nature, signalled by passages of lyrical description:

In the early morning light a strange mournful beauty hung over the lagoon; the sombre green-black fronds of the gymnosperms, intruders from the Triassic past, and the half-submerged white-faced buildings of the 20th century still reflected together in the dark mirror of the water, the two interlocking worlds apparently suspended at some junction in time, the illusion momentarily broken when a giant water-spider cleft the oily surface a hundred yards away. (*DW* 10)

The strange beauty of this illusion, this dream, seems to allow Kerans a luxury we do not normally enjoy: the time to contemplate the melancholy moment of one era passing into another. But Kerans' response to the environment oscillates between aesthetic reverie and disgust. Heralded by the 'cough of a diesel engine' from a 'large Gothic building half a mile to the south' (*DW* 9), this beautiful illusion is shattered moments later as the rising sun burns off the mists of his dream:

As the sun rose over the lagoon, driving clouds of steam into the great golden pall, Kerans felt the terrible stench of the water-line, the sweet compacted smells of dead vegetation and rotting animal carcasses. Huge flies spun by, bouncing off the wire cage of the cutter, and giant bats raced across the heating water towards their eyries in the ruined buildings. Beautiful and serene from his balcony a few minutes earlier, Kerans realised that the lagoon was nothing more than a garbage-filled swamp. (*DW* 13)

This pattern of the beautiful becoming ugly, reverie followed by horror, is repeated throughout the novel, demonstrating both the power and the danger of the apocalyptic imagination. The use of synaesthesia here registers the force of the stench which is ‘felt’ as though it had mass. Kerans’ dream has met reality and dissolved, but his transformative imagination persists. For Kerans, early in the novel, his surroundings are pure aesthetic spectacle, and he shows little interest in the provenance of the ruins above which they float:

Curiously, though, despite the potent magic of the lagoon worlds and the drowned cities, he had never felt any interest in their contents, and never bothered to identify in which of the cities he was stationed. (*DW* 20)

The buildings have become a part of the landscape in a way that denies an instrumental attitude towards the world. Imbued with mythic and symbolic power, the landmarks of the lagoons are psychological waypoints, rather than resources to be explored and utilized. Kerans seems immune to their human significance, appreciating them as one might a rock formation or a rugged landscape. He is not

entirely able to resist the pull of nostalgia, though, succumbing to the *fin de siècle* grandeur of the Ritz hotel and making himself a home of one of its air-curtained suites, complete with a well-stocked bar and nineteenth century French-Empire furniture (*DW* 15). Kerans is able to accommodate the signs of its disrepair into his dreams of decadence, ‘even the rich blue moulds sprouting from the carpets in the dark corridors adding to its 19th-century dignity’ (*DW* 10). Ensclosed in his hermetically sealed time capsule, Kerans is sheltered from the extremes of the emerging landscape. This withdrawal into himself aligns him with the solitary Romantic, parting from the company of his fellows to plumb the depths of his soul and to stir up the powers of his imagination. But the suite at the Ritz is a cul-de-sac, an escape from the emerging reality without its walls, and one that threatens to trap Kerans in a fetishizing of the recent past. In the throes of another reverie Kerans describes the jungle and iguana-infested skyscrapers in geological terms:

[they] seemed millions of years old, thrown up out of the Earth’s magma by some vast natural cataclysm, embalmed in the gigantic intervals of time that had elapsed during their subsidence. (*DW* 47)

Kerans’ aestheticizing gaze has wrested a poetry from scenes of degradation and despair, a utopian way of being and seeing in the heart of dystopian decline. The quotidian office blocks and high rise apartments, taken out of their everyday surroundings, are rendered mysterious by their non-functioning, numinous in their pristine purposelessness. This is a form of nostalgia, an analogue of which might be the ‘ruin lust’ of the picturesque of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. But the peculiar resonance of these abandoned buildings is not to be found in their

ruin, but in their surreal intactness: ‘Their charm and beauty lay precisely in their emptiness, in the strange junction of two extremes of nature, like a discarded crown overgrown by wild orchids’ (*DW* 21). We approach here, perhaps, Keats’ ‘cold pastoral’ of ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’ (1820), rather than the crumbling majesty of Shelley’s ‘Ozymandias’ (1818). We might also see an echo in Kerans’ aesthetic gaze of the Romantic cast of Wordsworth’s vision, capable of rendering the quotidian supernatural. But Kerans’ reveries are disrupted – by an insect on the water, or the cough of a diesel engine – and are shown in this way to be mere illusions. Moreover, these illusions are dangerous, tempting Kerans to linger too long in the sun, or to sink into the waters in an amniotic dream of return.

Kerans’ violently oscillating responses to the landscape continue on the search for the absconded Hardman; gazing through the hatch of Riggs’ helicopter he describes the jungle-infested city as ‘like an immense putrescent sore’, silt ‘oozing through a submerged arcade like the fetid contents of some latter-day Cloaca Maxima’, and the lakes as ‘yellow disks of fungus-covered sludge from which a profuse tangle of competing plant forms emerged, walled gardens in an insane Eden’ (*DW* 52-3). Kerans is unable to synthesise the horror and the beauty of the natural world. The language is bodily, reminding us that for Kerans this is a spinal landscape, a journey down his own spinal column as much as into the jungle. The historical and biblical allusions demonstrate the mediation through which Kerans still experiences the world – if man has fallen into knowledge then even such ancient knowledge is an exemplar of the fall, preventing him from simply existing in the world. Later, when exploring a crumbling apartment block protruding from one of the silt flats:

A thick cloacal stench exuded from the silt flat, a corona of a million insects pulsing and humming hungrily above it, and a sudden spasm of nausea knotted Kerans' gullet, for a moment dizzying him. (*DW* 61)

The word cloaca also has connotations of moral filth, and the buzzing hordes of insects, in light of 'insane Eden', might suggest biblical depictions of hell. Contact with raw, untamed nature is overwhelmingly terrifying for Kerans, provoking an extreme physical and psychological reaction to the Earth, which has been transformed into an alien planet on which man is unable to survive for long without a cornucopia of antibiotics, sun screen, mosquito nets and anti-malarial drugs – to say nothing of air conditioning to keep at bay the 120 degree heat of the flaring sun, and the weapons and ammunition necessary to fend off the encroaching reptiles. The sheer unnerving fecundity of the filth that he observes is resistant to aestheticization, and the depiction of such complete alienation from nature, the horror at its rampant growth and putrefaction, is a studiously unromantic response to the natural world. But his appreciation for the eerily preserved architectural remnants of civilization is also highly changeable; the very same vistas that had prompted aesthetic reverie appearing minatory – the vacant buildings reminding Kerans of the inevitable fate of both himself and the human race. Here the mythic resonance of a pair of stalled clock towers produces a sublime terror in Kerans:

Four hundred yards away two white-faced clock towers protruded through the vegetation, like the temple spires of some lost jungle religion, and the sounds of his name – “*Kerans... Kerans... Kerans*” – reflected off them

seemed to Kerans to toll with an intense premonition of terror and disaster, the meaningless orientation of the clock hands identifying him, more completely than anything he had previously experienced, with all the confused and minatory spectres that cast their shadows more and more darkly through his mind, the myriad-handed mandala of cosmic time. (*DW* 61)

Having mastered his fear, though, the same scene, moments later, provokes the almost opposite reaction:

Kerans stared at the two clock towers jutting up like white obelisks above the fern fronds. The yellow air of the noon high seemed to press down like a giant translucent counterpane on the leafy spread, a thousand motes of light spitting like diamonds whenever a bough moved and deflected the sun's rays. (*DW* 62-3)

The terror that Kerans experiences, once mastered, is capable of producing aesthetic pleasure. The faculty of the imagination renders the sublime productive of both self-knowledge and a communion with nature that is experienced as contact with a numinous quality inherent within nature and the self. This movement, through horror, anxiety, fear and terror to serene contemplation and acceptance, is a microcosm of Ballard's take of the disaster genre as a whole. Kerans' contact with the sublime in this passage leads directly to his aesthetic mastery of the environment a few pages later, the mind-expanding terror of the sublime allowing Kerans to construct new categories of being and experience. John Gray has referred to this

tendency in Ballard as ‘finding value in what are catastrophic or desolate situations and events.’¹⁰ This both follows and extends the Romantic operation of the sublime.

Kerans’ desire to hide away in his hotel room at the Ritz is a turning away from all life: that thriving around him in the jungles and the possibility of continued human existence at Camp Byrd in the north. Marooned in the near past, this is a singularly fatalistic, nihilistic vision. But such a stark portrayal of the dire state of man’s alienation from nature and society somehow posits or sets up the longing for its alternative or opposite. Enlightenment rationality, technology, religion and mythology have all failed to reconnect Kerans to his world, continuing to act as mediating factors. Kerans gently points out to Lieutenant Hardman that his ‘classifications are all confused’ when he shows him his amateur naturalist diary (*DW* 34). Hardman, though, has preceded Kerans into the ‘time jungles’, and has realised that the old languages of scientific notation, prediction and classification are only so much meaningless graffiti. By naming the flora and fauna anew, Hardman re-enacts Adam’s naming of the plants and animals in prelapsarian Eden by inscribing the landscape with idiosyncratic names that carry personal meaning for himself; he has become the poet legislator, the creator of new worlds of the imagination. The whole of civilisation and its discourses, which came long after the Triassic period now re-emerging around them, cannot help Kerans to understand his changing world. He must cultivate a new language of the unconscious in an attempt to reconcile himself to the mud and filth of his origins, but his means of achieving

¹⁰ John Gray and Will Self ‘J. G. Ballard: Cities, Suburbs and Edgelands.’ A talk held as part of the Bristol Festival of Ideas, 2nd December 2011. <<http://www.watershed.co.uk/dshed/john-gray-and-will-self-jg-ballard>> [Accessed 7 July 2012].

this is the weaving of the features of the environment into a personal mythology. This paradox is irresolvable, perhaps, leading as it does to a tumour-infested, yet paradisiacal death in the south. His utter alienation from the virulent growth and stink of life is the cause for the turn inwards to what Ballard calls inner space: ‘a middle ground [...] between the outer world of reality on the one hand, and the inner world of the psyche on the other’ (*EM* 6). It is in this meeting between inner and outer landscapes that Kerans can begin to re-establish the sundered connection to nature:

A few branches and clumps of weed drifted along the northward current, the bright sunlight masking the molten mirror of the surface. The water drummed against the portico beneath his feet, beating slowly against his mind, and setting up a widening circle of interference patterns as if crossing it at an opposite direction to its own course of flow. He watched a succession of wavelets lapping at the sloping roof, wishing he could leave the Colonel and walk straight down into the water, dissolve himself and the ever present phantoms which attended him like sentinel birds in the cool bower of its magical calm, in the luminous dragon-green, serpent-haunted sea. (*DW* 56-7)

This is the same lagoon that is described as a ‘garbage-filled swamp’ earlier in the novel (quoted above), but the language is now lyrical and mythical. The drumming water beats against his mind in opposition to the normal flow of his thoughts: he is in a state of contraplex. Kerans is hearing the siren call of a blissful dissolution in nature, and particularly the element of water, with all of its connotations of memory, time and the return to a uterine past before the pain of separation and subjectivity. That which was previously the cause of nauseating horror and despair has been

transformed by the imagination into an amniotic paradise in which Kerans would like to drown (perhaps literally) all of his worldly fears and anxieties. In this moment of Romantic reverie, Kerans has reconstituted the world with the power of his imagination. The water ‘beats slowly against his mind’ in an undoing of the separation between subject and object, the ‘cool bower’ a Coleridgean echo. Again, though, the vision of oneness with nature is aligned to death, Kerans here seeming to be at least ‘half in love with easeful Death.’

Stuart Allen’s discussion of Wordsworth’s sonnet, ‘The World is too much with us’, suggests that ‘The poem can only defy second nature in the instant that it produces it.’¹¹ The lyric flight of the description attempts to heal the rift between man and nature, but it is always a second nature critique of and attempt to transform nature using that second nature technology which is language, multiplied by the mirroring effect of literature. Kerans, Ballard and in turn the reader partakes in a similar attempt to resurrect a buried first nature, through second nature modes of aestheticization – through writing and reading. For Allen, ‘Moments of lyricism register alienation and then mobilise the resources of poetry to broker reconciliation between man and nature’,¹² but the poem remains wary of the dangers inherent in disrupting the boundaries between the internal and external. Kerans’ extreme oscillations between antithetical responses to the natural world in *The Drowned World* seem to continue this dialectic, though the disruption of the boundaries between inner and outer are insisted upon – in spite of the dangers. Kerans’

¹¹ Stuart Allen, *Wordsworth and the Passions of Critical Poetics* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. xv.

¹² *Ibid*

daydream of drowning is a recurrent image in the novel of the dissolution of the self in water, which culminates in his near-drowning during the exploration of a submerged planetarium in the aptly-named 'Pool of Thanatos' chapter. But Kerans, courts exactly this area of overlap between external and internal worlds, and the text seems to reward him for doing so. *The Drowned World* mobilizes all of the anti-rational, anti-Enlightenment forces at its disposal – from bardic reveries to religion, mythology and the unconscious, and an interest in extreme psychological and emotional states – embracing the dangers inherent in the meeting of external and internal landscapes in search of an elusive reconciliation between mind and world. The latent positivity or hopefulness invested in the transformative power of the imagination refuses to resolve the catastrophe in any straightforward or satisfying manner, leading to fulfilment only in death – or at least in the moments shortly before death. Finding hope in such circumstances might demonstrate a powerful faith in the ability of the human mind to adapt and thrive in extreme situations, but the mode and means of that survival prefers something either post or pre-human over the traditional, generic reassertion of civilisation through rational, scientific renaissance; the concept of progress in history is firmly rejected in *The Drowned World*. Kerans has moved into a landscape coextensive with his mind, in which he has no need of community, technology, emotion or any of the other hallmarks of the human; he appears to have achieved the longed for return to first nature. But his journey to that environment has been facilitated by the second nature aestheticization of the natural world, through artefacts such as Beatrice's Surrealist paintings, and through the cultivation of a highly idiosyncratic collection of myths, which he has mapped onto the lagoons, swamps and jungles that surround him.

In this aesthetic mode, these plotted incongruences to tone and register perhaps lend their payload of pathos to the proceedings, but the incommensurability of the effect and the outcome leaves the reader with the cognitive knowledge of death and the aesthetic enjoyment of its depiction. This perpetual oscillation is maintained in what is a determinedly ambiguous text. The catastrophe renders all disasters – past, present and future – contemporaneous in a collapsing of time. Psychologically speaking, the disasters have all already happened: ‘the terrestrial and psychic landscapes were now indistinguishable, as they had been at Hiroshima and Auschwitz, Golgotha and Gomorra’ (*DW* 74). Horror and terror render the internal and external one – an apocalyptic cleansing of the doors of perception. Part of what Ballard’s fiction does is to confront the endemic horror of existence, whilst offering the shadow of the glimmer of a hope – suggesting that perhaps through such excoriating circumstances new worlds can be imagined. There is a sense in which Ballard’s fiction is a working through and soothing of the anxieties which these barely graspable concepts of ‘deep time’ produce. As Doctor Yasuda recommends in ‘The Terminal Beach’: ‘Have a proper humility, pursue a philosophy of acceptance’, one that paradoxically acknowledges the insignificant role of the human as part of the infinite (*SS2* 49). The dead doctor Yasuda here is the voice of negative capability, and achieving this state might be said to be Kerans’ ‘quest’ in *The Drowned World*. As ever, though, it is difficult to avoid the suspicion that the therapeutic in Ballard is palliative more than restorative, aimed at furnishing a state of mind capable of enduring the catastrophe of existence, rather than transcending it. Shortly before the novel’s close with Kerans as a new Adam, we witness the fate that is in store for him in the shape of Hardman – the trail blazer who has led the way

throughout the novel. He discovers him sheltering against an altar in the ruins of an old church, a shrivelled figure of a man ‘so inert and blackened that Kerans assumed it must be dead’ (*DW* 170). I quote at length here to give a sense of the sheer horror of the condition of Hardman which recalls the earlier invocations of Hiroshima and Auschwitz:

The man’s long legs, like two charred poles of wood, stuck out uselessly in front of him, sheathed in a collection of tattered black rags and bits of bark. His arms and sunken chest were similarly clothed, strung together with short lengths of creeper. A once luxuriant but now thinning black beard covered most of his face, and rain poured across his hollowed but jutting jaw, which was raised to the fading light. Fitfully the sun shone on the exposed skin of his face and hands. One of the latter, a skeletal green claw, suddenly rose like a hand from a grave and pointed at the sun as if identifying it, then fell limply to the ground [...] Both eyes were almost completely occluded by corneal cancers, and Kerans guessed that they would be able to see little more than the dying sun. (*DW* 170-1)

That this is an apocalypse is reinforced by Kerans description of Hardman as a corpse ‘jerked from his grave and abandoned to await his Day of Judgement’, and by the vision of a lake of fire that Kerans had seen after taking morphine to dull the pain of his injured leg (*DW* 171, 167). But even amongst this horror, there are intimations of a strange kind of fulfilment. Hardman’s moans that accompany the pulsing of the sun, which had attracted Kerans to the ruined church, are ‘half in protest, half in gratitude’, and Kerans is able to nurse the Lieutenant back to something like life,

enabling him to continue his journey into the sun (*DW* 170-4). The site of the ruined church, and the small hut that he builds to shelter Hardman, echo the Romantic ruins of the picturesque and the symbolism of the hermit's retreat, and on the very next page Kerans is 'a second Adam, searching for the forgotten paradises of the reborn sun' (*DW* 175). The spectacle of the city lagoons, with their pools of Thanatos and mirrors reflecting images without originals, are narcissistic traps that play upon the tyrannical organ of the eye. By contrast, the more ancient structures of the ruined church and rustic hut are closer to the spirituality which is missing from the empty twentieth-century buildings, and Hardman has had his treacherous organs destroyed by the power of the reborn sun – literally cleansing the doors of perception and marking him as the type of the blind prophet. What is ostensibly an unhappy ending, with the protagonist marching towards certain death, with no prospect of salvation for the rest of humanity, is also a story of existential achievement in that he is at peace with himself – internal and external landscapes have finally coalesced. Like Hardman before him he has faded into the new environment, Kerans describing earlier in the novel the way that 'he seemed to be walking across dunes of white-hot ash into the very mouth of the sun' (*DW* 69). These moments that blur the boundaries between inner and outer worlds anticipate the final drawing back to view Kerans as though he were a figure in a painting, the final visual image with which the novel closes, and which recalls the canvases of Caspar David Friedrich, with their lone and diminished figures in awesome landscapes. But these final words end the novel on a lyrical note that cannot be reconciled with the pain, degradation and suffering of Hardman, and which presumably awaits Kerans. Such an irresolvable dialectic is what I have been calling a state of contraplex, and each of Ballard's apocalyptic novels seems to finish with just such a tension. If this is the longed-for

Romantic marriage of man and nature then it comes at unconscionable cost and seems a devastating critique of the high Romantic argument.

In order to think about what might be behind such a radical rehearsal of the Blakean claim that ‘without contraries is no progression’,¹³ and to imagine just what such a progression might be, I want to consider the invocations of twentieth-century atrocities in Ballard’s apocalyptic novels in the light of Theodore Adorno’s imprecation that ‘To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric’.¹⁴ As discussed in chapter 1, ‘The Terminal Beach’ is in a sense a working out of the relationship between personal tragedy and trauma and the atrocities of the twentieth century, both those that had already happened and those which the tests at Eniwetok were rehearsals for. I would argue that on the evidence presented from *The Drowned World* in this chapter, in the studied ambiguity of lyricism juxtaposed with bodily and psychological horror, we can see a response to Adorno’s claim. I have been arguing that Ballard’s belief in the transformative power of the imagination, his anti-Enlightenment sentiment, his turn towards the deep recesses of the self, and his seeming desire for a reunion of mind and nature, are continuations of Romanticism. But Ballard – who experienced the atrocity of WWII at first hand in Shanghai as a child – is conscious that the world in which he writes has been altered by atrocities including the Nazi concentration camps. His response is not to write as if the atrocity had never occurred, nor as if atrocity is all there is, but to combine lyricism with atrocity in recognition of them both, in a marriage of heaven and hell.

¹³ Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, in *Selected Poetry*, p. 74.

¹⁴ Theodor Adorno, ‘Cultural Criticism and Society’, in *Prisms*, trans. S. and S. Weber (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1983), p. 18.

*

Luscious and lyrical descriptions of the natural world are to be found in abundance in *The Drowned World*, which sees nature resurgent – encroaching upon the terrain that had been claimed by cities and industrial progress, and a rapprochement between mankind and nature, between mind and world, is fleetingly achieved by the protagonist. However, this most overtly Romantic of Ballard’s novels novel ends with its protagonist’s death. Put another way: the beautiful apocalypse of *The Drowned World* turns out to be deathly. Through a detailed discussion of the oscillating responses to landscape and nature in *The Drowned World* – between abject terror, lyrical descriptions and aesthetic reverie – I have demonstrated a continuation and critique of the high Romantic project of a reconciliation between man and nature, figured as marriage. However, the same landscapes and vistas were also seen to frequently produce reactions of terror and disgust – a realization of the horrific otherness of the natural world. In contrast to, but paradoxically allied to, this internal struggle which the protagonist undergoes, is the quietist strain of acceptance and surrender in the face of forces too vast and glacial to be understood or resisted by nugatory human consciousness. However, set in turn against this aspect is the extent to which Ballard’s protagonists have recourse to the deep resources of the self, finding there both succour and terror. Such contraplexual textual effects, I have argued, had intimations in the poetry and theory of the Romantic poets themselves, so that even where Ballard seems to be most critical of the Romantic inheritance, its legacy persists, and is in fact expressed with the full complexity and ambiguity of which it was capable. Finally, I have argued that Ballard’s invocations of twentieth

century (and biblical) atrocities demonstrate a wounded Romanticism in that any engagement with its still potent legacy must acknowledge the horrors of modernity. What becomes apparent in the oscillations of Ballard's apocalyptic vision is that such a technique can come very close to a decadent celebration of the ugly, the disgusting and the morally reprehensible. In chapter 3 I discuss *The Atrocity Exhibition* and *Crash*, in which Ballard takes the exploration of the decadent imagination to extremes.

Chapter 3. Romantic Wounds in *The Atrocity Exhibition* and *Crash*

It has been widely supposed that Ballard's exuberant, Romantic phase ended with his increasing concern to depict realistic modern environments, technology and the new media landscapes of the 1960s. As we have seen, if we turn to the short stories, this new thematic first appears in 1964 with 'The Terminal Beach', and was intimated even earlier in tales like 'The Concentration City' and 'Billemium'. But the lyrical component to Ballard's aesthetic is not genuinely abandoned, though its predominant symbols and motifs undergo a metamorphosis, and the appearance of *The Unlimited Dream Company* (1979) twelve years later – with its poetic lyricism and gorgeous energy, resurgent nature and reworking of William Blake's *Jerusalem* – witnesses the return of the fantastic imagery of the disaster cycle. An undercurrent of fiction which was more overtly fantastic and science fictional in its imagery and plot was to continue in the form of Ballard's short stories through the 1970s including: 'My Dream of Flying to Wake Island' (1974), 'Low Flying Aircraft' (1975) and 'The Dead Time' (1977). Moreover, Ballard's continued preoccupation with the subject's quest for self-realization and, conversely, the desideratum of dissolution, is consistently constructed around a glowing ember of Romantic hope – even where the very notion of such a thing is mercilessly undermined. The modern subject may be dislocated, fragmented, unstable and wounded, but the door to self-knowledge in Ballard's fiction remains ajar, even in the 'dark period' of 1966-1975.¹ As we head into the 'city cycle' of novels – *The Atrocity Exhibition*, *Crash*, *Concrete Island* and *High Rise* – the archetypes outlined by David Pringle, and what has been called

¹ David Pringle, *Earth is the Alien Planet*, (London: Borgo Press, 1980), p. 8.

Ballard's 'romantic exuberance', seems to wane;² it can find no purchase in the man-made concrete nightmares of the present. The apogee of the renegotiation of the relation of the self to hard rectilinear shapes and megalithic structures leads to a redefinition of the self in geometrical, abstract terms in *The Atrocity Exhibition* and *Crash*. According to Ballard, then, in order to facilitate a return to the time when man 'assimilated the events in the external world to his own psyche', the man-made world must be mythologized, and indeed sexualized (CSS2 31). The generation of new mythologies out of the products of the media landscape is capable of transforming the subject's relationship with the alienating architecture of the modern metropolis, and with the concrete and steel of the motorway flyover and the motor car, such that they too may be capable of producing transcendent experience. Here we discover a poetics of the predominant domain of man – where Wordsworth had written that the poet would be found, were there to be a revolution in science such that it infiltrated the daily life of man.³ However, the media landscape – understood here as analogous to Debord's 'society of the spectacle' – is equally capable of harnessing the power of myth, and so the subject can never be certain which of the competing fictions that makes up their identity are autochthonous and which are born of the entertainment and media matrix which girdles the planet (C i). Under such conditions, Ballard maintains that the author's role is no longer to invent fictions but to 'invent the reality' (C i). Such a proposition is immediately suggestive of a continuation of a Romantic notion of the imagination, and of its apocalyptic potential to transform the phenomenal world.

² See, for example, Dominika Oramus, *Grave New World* (Warsaw: University of Warsaw Press, 2007), pp. 8-9.

³ William Wordsworth, 'Preface' to *Lyrical Ballads* (1802), *Major Works* p. 599.

In this chapter I will be focussing on the first two of the city cycle of novels, *The Atrocity Exhibition* and *Crash*, with emphasis upon the former. I will firstly discuss the tropes of atrocity and apocalypse which continue into the realms of steel, concrete and glass, reading in the depictions of extreme violence, sexual depravity and psychopathology both a diagnosis and a suggestion of a cure for the ills of modernity. The ability of Ballard's protagonists in these two novels to see through the proliferating fictions of the media landscape to its latent content marks their membership of the visionary and bardic cadre I have been outlining in Ballard's earlier fictions. At the same time, their extreme responses also continue and magnify the element of warning that has accompanied these figures – the malleability of an already fictional world leading to some truly atrocious transformations that nonetheless may be preferable to those that are imposed from without. After outlining the plots and extreme imagery of these two novels, I consider in the central part of this chapter the decadent inheritance in Ballard's aestheticizing of the ostensibly disgusting and horrific, which leads to a tension between the celebration and decoration of the ugly, and the Romantic capacity to discover the beautiful and the numinous in the quotidian, resulting in a state of contraplex. Mary Shelley, Edgar Allan Poe and Oscar Wilde provide a way into a discussion of the figure of the double in these novels – the multiple doppelgangers of *The Atrocity Exhibition* and the dialectics of desire that exist between James Ballard (the narrator and protagonist) and Vaughan in *Crash*. Finally, I consider the iconoclastic power of

these two novels and their desecration of all that modernity holds dear in the light of the Romantic, Gothic and decadent inheritances of ‘ruin lust’.⁴

The Atrocity Exhibition and Crash

The Atrocity Exhibition is Ballard’s most formally inventive novel. The stories of which it is composed were originally published as a series of ‘condensed novels’ in the pages of *New Worlds* and *Ambit* in the mid to late 1960s, and were subsequently collected and expanded for publication in 1970. The short pieces, some as little as two or three lines long, are begun with bold-type headings and are themselves grouped under chapter titles. Highly condensed and not necessarily in chronological order, the segments contain the kernels of elements of plot, dialogue and narrative description. Although they are related to one another and can be read from start to finish, tracing an underlying connective thread or threads, they are also capable of standing alone as entire ‘micro fictions’ or ‘flash fictions’. The form of *The Atrocity Exhibition* is resonant of the psychological disintegration and fragmentation of the central character, who goes by several names and identities. Predominantly a research psychologist at a psychiatric and teaching hospital, he comes more and more to resemble one of his patients, and finds himself the subject of his own students’ studies. *The Atrocity Exhibition* is frequently sexually and violently obscene, featuring graphic descriptions of wounds, diseases, and perverse sexual acts and violence. The stories are structured around the attempts of the various

⁴ ‘Ruin Lust’ was the title of an exhibition at the Tate Britain gallery in 2014. It set out to explore the ‘mournful, thrilling, comic and perverse uses of ruins in art from the seventeenth century to the present day’. Intriguingly, it included pieces by Eduardo Paolozzi and Tacita Dean – both of whom were creatively inspiring for and inspired by Ballard. < <http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-britain/exhibition/ruin-lust> > [accessed 25/09/2015].

incarnations of the protagonist – Travis, Traven, Talbot, Tallis, Trabert, Talbert and Travers – to make sense of the world and their relationship to it, and Dr Nathan’s ambiguous study of those attempts. The Ts are fragments of the same fractured consciousness, each enacting variations upon the same oblique attempts to reconcile personal tragedy to historical catastrophe and atrocity. Catherine Austen, Karen Novotny and the Ts’ wife Margaret are some of the other recurrent characters – semi-willing female bodies upon which the Ts enact their violent techno-celebrity fantasies. The tone and vocabulary of the book is mostly detached and scientific, clinical almost, but the modes of investigation are insane. Insanity, though, is often seen in Ballard’s work as a last refuge from the nightmare of (un)reality that is the modern, media-circumscribed world. The paragraphs of *The Atrocity Exhibition* are filled with the dominant imagery of the 1960s media landscape as Ballard saw it: televised war and assassination; the space race; politics as a branch of advertising; the proliferation of fictions; the fractured nature of consciousness in this over-lit realm; and the horrific consequences for mind and body of modern technologies, such as the threat of thermonuclear war and the violent marriage of body and machine in road traffic accidents, wounded war veterans and the victims of increasingly bizarre pseudo-scientific studies.

Ballard encouraged a desultory approach to reading *The Atrocity Exhibition* in his 2001 ‘Author’s Note’:

[S]imply turn the pages until a paragraph catches your eye. If the ideas or images seem interesting, scan the nearby paragraphs for anything that resonates in an intriguing way. (*AE* vi)

This immediately suggests the ‘cut-up’ method which was favoured by the Beats, an impression reinforced by the striking correspondences between some of the passages of *The Atrocity Exhibition* and the work of the Beat author William S. Burroughs. Ballard was a great admirer of Burroughs and the two met on a number of occasions over the years – Burroughs even wrote a preface for the 1990 Re/Search edition of *The Atrocity Exhibition* in which he ad-libbed a little imagery from Ballard’s text in his own style, clearly finding an aesthetic and symbolic order in Ballard’s fragmentary vision that he felt comfortable communicating in. Ballard also produced four additional stories for the Re/Search edition, as well as margin notes which riffed on the themes of particular paragraphs and included autobiographical insights.⁵ These later authorial expansions, the recommendation for randomly combinative reading and the scientific journals whose style Ballard emulated, might recall the aleatory methods of the Oulipo group, in addition to Burroughs. But Ballard also spoke of the unsuitability of the Burroughs cut-up method, given the amount of re-writing that he does.⁶ Coleridge returned to his *Ancient Mariner* with marginal glosses, purportedly explaining the moral of the ballad. But, as Seamus Perry notes

⁵ See J. G. Ballard, *The Atrocity Exhibition*, ed. Vicky Vale (New York: Re/Search Publications, 1990). Most of the material from this edition is available in the Harper Perennial paperback (which I have been referring to within the text in parenthesis as *AE*, unless indicated otherwise), although sadly not the illustrations and only two of the four extra stories.

⁶ J. G. Ballard, ‘The Art of Fiction 85’ in *The Paris Review*, Winter 1984, No. 94. <<http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/2929/the-art-of-fiction-no-85-j-g-ballard>> [accessed 24/08/2015].

in his ‘An Introduction to the *Ancient Mariner*’ for the British Library website,⁷ this may be a further fictional editor, complicating and deepening the mystery by adding to the narrative frames. If we think of Coleridge’s additions, alterations and explanations for his three great Gothic poems,⁸ Mary Shelley’s narrative frames for *Frankenstein*, and Lord Byron’s playful and obfuscating notes to poems like *The Giaour* (1813), we can see a Romantic precedent for the authorial re-intervention of Ballard’s marginal notes in later editions of *The Atrocity Exhibition*.

The images of alienation, degradation and despair in *The Atrocity Exhibition* produce a powerfully dystopian picture, and would seem to leave little room for Abrams’ ‘high-Romantic words’: life, love, liberty, hope and joy.⁹ Deeply disturbing images abound and the affectless denizens of this realm seem motivated towards little but their own deaths. As the Ts’ erstwhile colleague and psychologist Dr Nathan explains:

The only way in which we can make contact with each other is in terms of conceptualizations. Violence is the conceptualization of pain. By the same token psychopathology is the conceptual system of sex. (*AE* 116-7)

⁷ Seamus Perry, ‘An Introduction to the *Ancient Mariner*’ (2015) on [www.bl.co.uk](http://www.bl.co.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/an-introduction-to-the-rime-of-the-ancient-mariner) <<http://www.bl.co.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/an-introduction-to-the-rime-of-the-ancient-mariner>> [accessed 21/08/2015].

⁸ I am referring to *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798, 1817), ‘Kublah Khan’ (1798) and *Christabel* (1816).

⁹ *Natural Supernaturalism*, p. 430.

This is a fair model for most of the human interactions in the novel, with the addition of machines and the built environment. As discussed in Chapter 2, however, in articulating a world so at odds with the Romantic – so far from nature – a text may be suggesting that things might or ought to be otherwise. Indeed, the Romantics were quite capable of sounding this note themselves – witness William Blake’s ‘London’ (1793), for instance. In a recent interview with Adrian Holm for *Varoom!*, the illustrator of the Re/Search edition of *The Atrocity Exhibition*, Phoebe Gloeckner, makes a related point:

AH: I have been thinking about the idea of ‘death of affect’ in Ballard, which also seems to come up in people like Warhol

PG: Unlike Warhol, Ballard is emotional. When you first read the book it’s frightening – it feels incredibly cold until you let it sink in, *and then you feel the symphony of emotion* that is in it. [...] the book is almost childish in a way. You can talk about it in terms of coldness, but instead it’s an awe... looking for an answer that he doesn’t seem to find.

The coldness he projects was appealing to a lot of people in those days. *I felt it was sad, and emotional in its lack of emotion.*¹⁰

Gloeckner is referring to the paradoxical ability of Ballard’s texts to inspire that which they appear to deny, and to lyrically evoke the alienating and the monstrous. I

¹⁰ Varoom 25: ‘Phoebe Gloeckner and J.G. Ballard’s The Atrocity Exhibition’, *Varoom Magazine*, <<http://www.varoom-mag.com/?p=7287>> [Accessed 9 June 2014]. Italics mine.

ended the last chapter thinking about the intertwined problems of personal trauma and historical atrocity, and the ways in which these are manifest in both the twentieth century and in literature. We might see all of Ballard's narrators and protagonists as in some way Ancient Mariners who endlessly attempt to give narrative meaning to the arbitrary atrocities of their own existence and of history. Coleridge's Mariner was able to reconcile himself to the natural world by incorporating his senseless and gratuitous killing of the albatross in a story of crime and punishment, but also potential or partial deliverance. This puts the onus squarely on man: man commits atrocity, nature responds in kind. But what if nature herself cast the first stone? In the marginal note to 'Cinecity' Ballard explains that:

[My] younger self was hoping to understand his wife's meaningless death. Nature's betrayal of this young woman seemed to be mimicked in the larger ambiguities to which the modern world was so eager to give birth, and its finish line was that death of affect, the lack of feeling, which seemed inseparable from the communications landscape. (AE 125)

On this reading Ballard himself is something of an Ancient Mariner, and this most shocking and disturbing of his texts is an attempt to find a narrative capable of explaining the atrocities of existence, both personal and historical; like *The Ancient Mariner*, they constitute an enormous compensatory fiction for the guilt of an irrational crime and/or the trauma of a disaster. The childlike wonder and awe of Gloeckner's response is important here too; one of the strangest aspects of *The Atrocity Exhibition*, and of much of the oeuvre, is this sense of fresh eyes upon a tired world, which of course has its Romantic antecedents in the recovery of

childlike wonder at the natural world. In an interview with Graeme Revell, Ballard speaks of the need for the imagination to ‘remind us of the marvellous’:

Every stone in my garden is in its way mysterious – even more mysterious than that machine [points to tape recorder]. The mere fact of its existence in time and space is infinitely marvellous. (*R/S JGB* 51)

The wonder at the quotidian and at the mere facticity of the world, and the invocation of a childlike awe in the adult mind are, of course, of Blakean and Wordsworthian extraction, and yet there is an inherent undermining of Wordsworth’s conception of childhood in the very idea of a child-like mind bearing witness to the perverse content of *The Atrocity Exhibition* and *Crash*. We are in the realm of productive tensions, contrarities producing one another in endless Blakean dialectics.

The disasters which hang over *The Atrocity Exhibition* are of their moment, but they are presented achronologically. Their sources are variously attributed to the atrocities of WWII and the bombings at Nagasaki and Hiroshima, the assassination of John Fitzgerald Kennedy, the suicide of Marilyn Monroe, or even looking forwards to a putative WWIII that in some sense has already happened. In *The Atrocity Exhibition* the Ts see themselves as already fighting their own personal WWIII. The bombardment of images of war, nuclear testing and automobile accidents in the 1960s, juxtaposed with the glamour of Hollywood actresses and aspirational, sexualized advertising, offers a ‘hot mix’ of material which is both destabilizing and

desensitizing, but also rich with potential for imaginative rearrangement.¹¹ It is as though Blake's giant forms stalked the Earth in the shape of mushroom clouds and larger-than-life screen actresses. *The Atrocity Exhibition* certainly gives us the dark side of this techno-media landscape, but most extant accounts of these novels have not sufficiently accounted for the complex inheritance of Romanticism in the continued presence of epiphanic highs of lyrical intensity, and invocations of the sublime. The paragraph in *The Atrocity Exhibition* headed 'Googolplex', for instance, is an obscure example of the Kantian mathematical sublime. Referring to an obscure collection of artefacts that one of the Ts has assembled – 'an entry from Oswald's Historic Diary, a much-thumbed reproduction of Magritte's "Annunciation", and the mass numbers of the first twelve radioactive nuclides' – Dr Nathan wonders:

The theoretical number of nucleotide patterns in DNA was a mere 10 to the power of 120,000. What number was vast enough to contain all the possibilities of those three objects? (*AE* 42)

The conjunction of these three cultural artefacts seems to radiate a mythic power beyond their individual worth. An infinity of possibilities in their recombination and dissemination is imagined by Dr Nathan such that once the 'visible content of the world is put in service of the invisible', the imagination is unleashed to recreate the world.¹² This sublime power is potentially liberatory, allowing the mind to reconfigure the media landscape and technological realm in epiphanic moments of

¹¹ 'The Art of Fiction 85'

¹² *Ibid*

lyrical intensity. This transformative power of the human imagination, coupled with the found objects of the physical world, approaches the ‘natural supernaturalism’ of Abrams: the divine being immanent in the natural world and the human psyche, as opposed to transcendent in God.¹³ But in familiar contraplexual style, this imagination is lavished upon the worst of modernity. The passages describing the Ts futile attempts to escape a city girdled by advertising and media are exemplary of this ambivalence: ‘*At dawn, after driving all night, they reached the suburbs of Hell. The pale flares from the petrochemical plants illuminated the wet cobbles. No one would meet them there*’ (AE 4);

In the suburbs of Hell Travis walked in the flaring light of the petrochemical plants. The ruins of abandoned cinemas stood at the street corners, faded billboards facing them across the empty streets. In a waste lot of wrecked cars he found the burnt body of the white Pontiac. He wandered through the deserted suburbs. (AE 10)

These italicized passages throw a Romantic cast over the minatory ruins of modernity, their resonant bleakness nonetheless infused with the apocalyptic visionary of Ballard’s bards. The first of the headings that introduce the paragraphs which make up *The Atrocity Exhibition* is ‘Apocalypse’, signalling a continuation of the themes of the earlier works, but taking place in the media landscape of modernity. The Ts are aspects of the bardic prophet figures we have seen in Ballard’s earlier fictions, and Dr Nathan feels the allure of their apocalyptic charisma, even as he tries and fails to maintain a scientific distance.

¹³ *Natural Supernaturalism*, p. 234

‘Crash!’ is the title of one of the short pieces of *The Atrocity Exhibition*, and the novel *Crash* is in many ways an extended meditation upon the themes of that ‘condensed novel’. The narrator is called James Ballard, but the hero of the novel is really Vaughan, who shares many of the obsessions of the Ts of *The Atrocity Exhibition*. The novel begins, familiarly for Ballard, at the end, with the narrator describing the events that will culminate in Vaughan’s death. This is a technique that suggests the endless repetition of narrative and trauma, as well as the circling inescapability of consciousness and its subjectivist paradoxes. In a London that seems (de)centred around ‘London Airport’ rather than the City – a world of motorway access ramps, cloverleaf junctions and high-rises mimicking control tower architecture, a terrain only navigable by the motorcar – Vaughan acts out his obsessions in the fluid space of a moving car, a black Lincoln Continental (the same make and model as the car in which Kennedy was assassinated). In a series of deliberate car crashes Vaughan recreates and/or anticipates celebrity road deaths, mapping the history of his endeavours onto his own body, and those of the men and women who accompany him, in the form of scars and wounds – injuries that provide Vaughan and his cohorts with a rich source of sexual arousal and possibilities, but also work to forge the bonds of a fledgling community. The cars that this cabal drive become covered in their bodily fluids, marking them as their own; an animalistic scent-marking of their territory – the declaration of the dominance of space and ownership. But it might also be read as an attempt to ‘biologize’ alienating and inorganic machinery. Along with the repetitious similes and metaphors which describe the relationship between body and machine, this works to make of man and machine a hybrid – an extreme integration of the ostensibly alienated. It may be

difficult to imagine a more unromantic prospect than a novel which deals so unflinchingly and relentlessly with human perversions, alienation, psychopathology, and violence and death in the overlit realms of modernity. The world depicted is one of unremitting concrete and steel, onto which is projected a vast media landscape through which it seems impossible to make contact with anything approaching reality. The eventual deaths, which seem to be the ultimate goal of these car crashes, and which are often figured explicitly as orgasmic climaxes, envisage a final fusing of body and car into a kind of erotic death sculpture for the ogling crowds to witness. In this sense they might be said to contribute to, rather than resist, Debord's 'society of the spectacle', and yet they can also be read as cataclysmic contacts with a reality which puncture the illusory. The apocalyptic intent of the prophet Vaughan and his followers, like James, is signalled in James' prophetic visions of an ultimate auto-disaster, killing millions of drivers and passengers instantly. At the same time, a mesmeric calm is sometimes discovered in this world encircled by the motorway, making of it something like a concrete Romantic bower. Here James experiences a moment of deep calm in viewing the landscapes that make up his de-centred London, and which clusters around the airport and the North Circular:

An immense peace seemed to preside over the shabby concrete and untended grass. The glass curtain-walling of the terminal buildings and the multi-storey car-parks behind them belonged to an enchanted domain. (C 35)

Ballard's statements about *Crash* are contradictory. In the introduction to the French translation of 1974, he sounds a broadly cautionary note, suggesting that the sexual

and violent subtext of the motorcar was a glimpse of a nightmare new world of integrated bodies and technology:

This demise of feeling and emotion has paved the way for all our most real and tender pleasures – in the excitements of pain and mutilation; in sex as the perfect arena, like a culture-bed of sterile pus, for all the veronicas of our own perversions; in our moral freedom to pursue our own psychopathology as a game; and in our ever greater powers of abstraction – what our children have to fear are not the cars on the freeways of tomorrow but our own pleasure in calculating the most elegant parameters of their deaths. (*UGM* 91)

The above quotation is taken from a 1969 article on Salvador Dali for *New Worlds*, but Ballard was to repeat it in almost its entirety in *The Atrocity Exhibition's* 'Biomorphic Horror', and again in the 1974 introduction to the French edition of *Crash* (*AE* 116-7). 'Our most real and tender pleasures' evokes a decadence that recognizes the inextricable link between pain and desire, condemning our age as one that requires increasingly perverse and bizarre experiences in order to continue to feel at all. This is Ballard's tocsin for the twentieth century. And yet Ballard is also capable of suggesting that just such extreme measures may be the necessary means to break through the affectless media landscape of an overlit modernity in order to reconnect with some kind of reality, albeit a highly subjective one. In an interview with Will Self in 1995, Ballard suggests that the cautionary note of his introduction was a mistake, a failure to stand by the implications of his own work:

in the final paragraph, which I have always regretted, I claimed that in *Crash* there is a moral indictment of the sinister marriage between sex and technology. Of course it isn't anything of the sort. *Crash* is not a cautionary tale. *Crash* is what it appears to be. It is a psychopathic hymn. But it is a psychopathic hymn which has a point. (EM 309-10)

The combination of the words 'psychopathic' and 'hymn' speak to just that perpetual ambivalence and ambiguity that I have been outlining. In *Crash* Ballard treats deviant sexuality and violence with a reverence which approaches that of religious awe, an effect which is achieved in part through passages of lyrical description, and in James' epiphanic moments of visionary insight:

I realized that the entire zone which defined the landscape of my life was now bounded by a continuous artificial horizon, formed by the raised parapets and embankments of the motorways and their access roads and interchanges. These encircled the vehicles below like the walls of a crater several miles in diameter ... The wounds on my knees and chest were beacons tuned to a series of beckoning transmitters, carrying the signals, unknown to myself, which would unlock this immense stasis and free these drivers for the real destinations set for their vehicles, the paradises of the electric highway. (C 40)

In *The Atrocity Exhibition* the language of rational scientific investigation and advertising was applied to delusional fantasies and Surrealistic combinations of imagery, creating an instability between the sense of an objective case history of the

mental collapse and fragmentation of Traven, and the incitement and collusion by both Dr Nathan and the reader. In *Crash* the return of the lyrical flights witnessed in the disaster cycle of novels and earlier short fictions is combined with the description of wounds, sexual acts and horrific accidents in the language of a medical textbook. Buccal injuries, scarred mucous membranes and punctured perineums jostle with the mythic and bejewelled visions of James, here describing a fellow car-crash victim: ‘fragments of the tinted windshield set in her forehead like jewels’ (C 4).

The lyrical quality to the prose when describing the motorcar, and the motorways from which they seem almost to take flight, exposes the lie in Ballard’s cautionary injunctions every bit as effectively as his later withdrawal of the sentiment quoted above. *The Atrocity Exhibition* and *Crash* both work to make of the bleak concrete and glass of the city, completely covered by the media landscape, a magical realm. In particular, there is an hallucinatory sequence about half way through the novel in which James describes his acid trip whilst being driven around at dangerous speeds by Vaughan. Here London appears as a Blakean New Jerusalem, and its heralds are the gleaming metal chariots that stretch over the horizon into the sun. This and other lyrical, visionary moments seem to directly invoke Blake and his ideas about another reality beneath this one. The violence and sexual perversions of the novel can be read in this way as attempts to pierce the skein of this veil (here created by the media landscape) and to use trauma therapeutically in order to counteract the death of affect which afflicts the denizens of modernity. The inhabitants of this London are in a state of abjection which is enlivened and stimulated by the extreme metaphor of the car crash, just as the wind stirred up and released Coleridge’s state of dejection in his

famous ode, releasing his dormant imagination. James' acid trip whilst driving along the motorway is the exemplar of this visionary and lyrical quality which the prose sometimes adopts: 'I pressed my palms against the rim of the steering wheel, pushing the car unaided through the golden air' (C 162). The marriage of man and machine is completed in this experience, his body perfectly in tune with the revolutions of the engine and its passage over the road, the shifting of the gears and steering mechanism an extension of his own body: 'An airline coach sped towards us, its silver hull irradiating all six lanes of the motorway, bearing down on us like an alighting archangel' (C 163):

An armada of angelic creatures, each surrounded by an immense corona of light, was landing on the motorway on either side of us, sweeping down in opposite directions. They soared past, a few feet above the ground, landing everywhere on these endless runways that covered the landscape. I realized that all these roads and expressways had been built by us unknowingly for their reception. (C 164)

Ballard lavishes luscious description upon overpasses, high-rises, cloverleaf junctions and other megalithic concrete structures, some of which were being built near to his home in Shepperton at the time of his writing *Crash*. In this he is using the Romantic subjective criteria for art to make of the ugly everyday concrete something beautiful. Ballard applauded the demise of crumbling old Victorian terraces, which he saw as anachronistic exemplars of the out-dated English class system (ML 122-3). However, there is also an element of the exploration of the ugly, the inhuman and the psychopathic in the latent content of these structures. What does

an architecture of speed and brutality bring out in those who travel upon and live around it? *Crash* is in part Ballard's answer to that question. Even the transformative power of the human imagination must work with the materials it has at hand, and working with such materials leads to an oscillation between the desire for high Romantic transcendence, and a deeply decadent aesthetics of deathly desire and decorated atrocity. In the next section, therefore, I turn to considering more deeply Ballard's invocation of the decadent tradition in *The Atrocity Exhibition* and *Crash*.

Decadence

Both *The Atrocity Exhibition* and *Crash* contain overt references to, and strong thematic elements of, literary and artistic decadence. As discussed in the introduction to this thesis, decadence tended to privilege art and the artist over and above society, very often in contradistinction to morality, and its roots can be traced back to Romantic ruin-lust, the poetry of Ossian, and the Gothic imaginations of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Thomas De Quincey and Edgar Allan Poe.¹⁴ Arguably Ballard uses the decadent symbols of decay, extreme artificiality, exhaustion and sexual deviance in order to both castigate and celebrate 1960s media culture, and thus there is a contraplexual movement both away from and back towards nature and reality. In

¹⁴ There are too many examples to list, but the most obvious is perhaps Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798), which takes the listener on a journey into the Gothic supernatural and far away from any sense of connection to the natural world. It is through such sundering that reconnection is achieved in the poem, though, so that the Gothic is put in service of the Romantic, if you will. However, the poem remains ambivalent, particularly because of the ambiguity that surrounds the gratuitous act of killing the albatross, as well as the fact that the Mariner's reconciliation to nature can only ever be partial, and he remains both haunted and a haunting presence in the lives of others through the compulsive repetition of his tale and though his listeners' compulsion to hear. Baudelaire was to find in 'The Albatross' a symbol for the wounded-Romantic poet in modernity, and Ballard draws upon the same heritage in *Rushing to Paradise*, discussed in chapter 4.

this section I will focus on some key examples of decadent aesthetics from the two novels, seeing them as engagements with the problematic legacies of both Romanticism and decadence. Finally, I consider decadence, anti-Enlightenment sentiment and pornography as interrelated elements of an investigation of the possibility of imaginative renewal in the overlit realms of modernity.

The Atrocity Exhibition and *Crash* continue to celebrate the capacity for the imagination to change the world. However, as is becoming familiar, this supreme imaginative capacity is coupled to already disturbed minds, and is seen to potentially lead to a dangerous unreality in which deeply decadent games are played with one's own psychopathology. The possibility is explored in these texts that the imagination run riot may be doomed to conjure nothing but violence, perversity and degradation. Travis explains his vision of the degenerate condition of humanity thus: 'the human race – Caliban asleep across a mirror smeared with vomit' (*AE* 12). And, when moments of lyrical reverie are evoked, they may merely represent the desperate attempt to force supernaturalism upon mundane and indifferent matter. Such decadent games are taken to new heights (or lows) in *The Atrocity Exhibition* and *Crash*. An early image in *Crash* demonstrates the depiction of shocking atrocity in a highly aestheticized manner. In Vaughan's final, fatal crash he launches his battered Lincoln Continental off a motorway overpass, crash landing upon a coach full of unfortunate tourists:

The crushed bodies of the package tourists, like a haemorrhage of the sun, still lay across the vinyl seats when I pushed my way through the police engineers an hour later. (C 1)

Considered for their formal arrangement and colour, dead human bodies en-masse may well prove aesthetically pleasing, but only to the highly developed aesthete's taste which is capable of dissociating both objects and bodies from their human significance.¹⁵ This quality might be called psychopathic, but it might also be called decadent in the tradition of Edgar Allan Poe, Charles Baudelaire, Stéphane Mallarmé and Arthur Rimbaud. As explored in the introduction, the search for a new invigoration of the imagination in apparently otiose times sanctioned the symbolic appropriation of the ugly, horrific and immoral. David Weir, in *Decadence and the Making of Modernism*, writes that 'Decay is decadent, in short, when artifice is used not merely to disguise but to decorate decomposition.'¹⁶ In *Crash* the violence of a car accident wrings from James a decorated vision of vomit:

This pool of vomit with its clots of blood like liquid rubies, as viscous and discreet as everything produced by Catherine, still contains for me the essence of the erotic delirium of the car-crash, more exciting than her own rectal and vaginal mucus, as refined as the excrement of a fairy queen, or the miniscule globes of liquid that formed beside the bubbles of her contact lenses. In this magic pool, lifting from her throat like a rare discharge of fluid

¹⁵ A relatively recent example of psychopathic aestheticism is Hannibal Lecter in the HBO TV series *Hannibal*. An aesthete of impeccable taste, the eponymous cannibal doctor arranges the corpses of his victims (those that he doesn't transform into elaborate gourmet dishes) into spectacular displays of light and colour.

¹⁶ Weir, *Decadence and the Making of Modernism*, p. 35.

from the mouth of a remote and mysterious shrine, I saw my own reflection,
 a mirror of blood, semen and vomit, distilled from a mouth whose contours
 only a few minutes before had drawn steadily against my penis.

(C 8-9)

The intermingling of scientific, pornographic, lyrical and mythic registers creates a studied ambiguity and ambivalence here. The scene is sordid, disgusting even, but James somehow seems to transform revulsion in order to find something almost spiritual in his wife's sick. 'Liquid rubies' speaks to the decadent impulse to decorate the squalid with rare jewels, even the repellent and decaying, whilst the 'fairy queen' and 'remote and mysterious shrine' invoke the decadent inheritance of Romantic antiquarianism. The effect is at once darkly comic and obscurely uplifting; James has earned his epiphanic moment, and whilst the reader may shudder and shrink from his means, the perverse logic of the car crash is posited as a powerful stimulant to both the libido and the transformative imagination. Vomiting occurs on a number of occasions in both *The Atrocity Exhibition* and *Crash*, and its symbolic employment registers more than just disgust and illness, though these are part of its resonance. Vomit joins blood, semen, saliva, vaginal and anal mucous as one of the many ways that characters in these novels render the territories of steel, glass, chromium and concrete human – just as the interpenetration of these materials with the human body renders the biological mineral or machine-like. It is not simply that the decaying and disgusting are decorated, but that offensive fluids themselves become the decorations with which modernity is to be decked.

The discovery of beauty in horror is a Romantic trope exemplified by Shelley's 'On the Medusa of Leonardo Da Vinci', or Coleridge's 'Christabel'. That this can very easily set one on the path to discovering horror in beauty, as Keats seemed to in 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' (1820), and even to finding the horrific beautiful, thus becoming a decadent aesthetic, was also acknowledged by the Romantics. Ballard mentions his debt to the symbolists, as well as to the decadent artists and poets of France's *la belle époque* in various interviews, making reference to decadent authors and even themes on numerous occasions, such as when interviewed for Re/Search publications: 'We need more decadence – I don't mean in a moral sense...' (*R/S JGB* 6).¹⁷ Ballard contrasts decadence with what he calls 'the new Puritanism', a deadening and imagination-stifling force in society as he sees it. The margin notes to the Re/Search edition of *The Atrocity Exhibition* make mention of the Marquis De Sade (who Mario Praz devotes a whole chapter to in his *The Romantic Agony* (1934)), as well as the Goncourt Brothers' journal and their comments upon the work of Edgar Allan Poe.¹⁸ The Goncourt's review could almost be a prophetic vision of *The Atrocity Exhibition*:

After reading Edgar Allan Poe. Something the critics have not noticed: a new literary world pointing to the literature of the 20th century. Scientific

¹⁷ The conversation is sparked by the clean-living interviewers, the fact that they do not smoke or take an alcoholic drink when offered. There's something of Lord Henry from *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in Ballard's attitude and posture in this extended (9 hour!) interview. He reclines in a sun lounger indoors by his metal palm trees, imparting his peculiar brand of warning and incitement. Lord Henry's scientific and experimental approach to pleasure also might be seen to anticipate Ballard's calculated exploitation of his own obsessions, of his own psychopathologies. (See Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (London: Penguin, 2003 [1891]), p. 244, note 7.) Ballard also talks of *Crash* in some interviews as a highly corrupting book, terms used to describe decadent literature in the nineteenth century as well as the mysterious book which so affects Dorian Gray.

¹⁸ See Mario Praz, 'The Shadow of the Divine Marquis' in *The Romantic Agony* (London, Oxford University Press, 1988 [1933]); The reference to the Goncourts' journal can be found on *AE* pp. 126-7.

miracles, fables of the pattern A + B; a clear-sighted, sickly literature. No more poetry but analytic fantasy. Something mono-maniacal. Things playing a more important part than people; love giving way to deductions and other sources of ideas, style, subject and interest. The basis of the novel transferred from the heart to the head, from the passion to the idea, from the drama to the denouement.

The Goncourt Brothers' Journal, July 16, 1856 (AE 126-7)

This excerpt is the marginal gloss for 'Conceptual Games' (AE 116), a paragraph which is dominated by another of the strange kits which the Ts have been constructing. Quoting a French decadent journal would seem to demonstrate Ballard's familiarity with the literature, as well as with Poe's work. 'Analytic fantasy' could very easily be Ballard's fiction of the 'informed waking dream', and 'things playing a more important part than people' is an interesting way to think about Ballard's epistemology, which seems to begin, particularly in *The Atrocity Exhibition*, with an equivalence of mind and object. An abiding obsession of the Ts in *The Atrocity Exhibition* is the phenomenology of objects, time and space, and how these elements can be made to relate to themselves and their sexuality.¹⁹ This seems a desperate attempt to escape individuation which follows the subject/object attachment formation quite closely, although something seems to have gone seriously awry. Traven, according to Dr Nathan, wishes to subsume the entire universe: 'What the patient is reacting against is, simply, the phenomenology of the universe' (AE 46). The attempt to force irreconcilable concepts and volumetric

¹⁹ 'Partners' may be too mutual a word. The women are rearranged and conceptualized by the Ts like Hans Bellmer dolls, much as they are by James and Vaughan in *Crash*.

shapes into one another, and the spatial and logical absurdity of Margaret Trabert's womb catching one of the incinerated astronauts of the Apollo disaster, is on one level, crudely symbolic of sexual congress:

The Polite Wassermann. Margaret Trabert lay on the blood-shot candlewick of the bedspread, unsure whether to dress now that Trabert had taken the torn flying jacket from his wardrobe. [...] He looked down at her naked body, with its unique geometry of touch and feeling, as exposed now as the amorphous faces of the test subjects, codes of insoluble nightmares. The sense of her body's failure, like the incinerated musculatures of the three astronauts whose-after deaths were now being transmitted from Cape Kennedy, had dominated their last week together. He pointed to the pallid face of a young man whose photograph he had pinned above the bed like the icon of some algebraic magus. 'Kline, Coma, Xero – there was a fourth pilot on board the capsule. You've caught him in your womb.' (*AE* 65-6)

But the marginal gloss suggests that it can be seen as a plaintive cry of mourning for the death of the space age and an attempt to erect a strange mural for its passing in time, space and flesh. Ballard writes that

All disasters – earthquakes, plane or car crashes – seem to reveal for a brief moment the secret formulae of the world around us, but a disaster in space rewrites the rules of the continuum itself. (*AE* 76)

Melancholy and the absurd are fused here into peculiarly sad and ridiculous, menacing and ominous, yet somehow beautiful, imagery. At this level the sexual connotations seem to fall away, like the rocket launches of a space shuttle thrust from the earth's atmosphere, leaving only an aesthetic appreciation for the body's geometric design. And yet Margaret's body is described as having failed somehow, which only adds to its tragic beauty, its fractured partiality gesturing towards the possibility of a sublime whole – perhaps with the addition of the reborn astronaut. This abstract and disinterested aestheticism is once again redolent of a decadent strain of Romanticism, which renders suffering beautiful. The Romantics of course were interested in extreme psychological states – in a sense, as with so much else, Ballard is taking this Romantic trope to its extremity, way past its breaking point:

Murder. Tallis stood behind the door of the lounge, shielded from the sunlight on the balcony, and considered the white cube of the room. At intervals Karen Novotny moved across it, carrying out a sequence of apparently random acts. Already she was confusing the perspectives of the room, transforming it into a dislocated clock. She noticed Tallis behind the door and walked towards him. Tallis waited for her to leave. Her figure interrupted the junction between the walls in the corner on his right. After a few seconds her presence became an unbearable intrusion on the time geometry of the room. (*AE* 60)

The menace of this passage is palpable, Tallis seeming to be offended by the colour of Karen Novotny's life staining his white cube of eternity and introducing the

unwelcome element of time.²⁰ This seems an indictment of the modernist, minimalist ‘machine for living in’ of Le Corbusier – the total abstraction of the place leading to a fascistic intolerance for perceived disturbances of its Platonic perfection. In this way humanity’s entry into space can be seen to have disturbed the serene motion of the planets, the aesthetic purity of geometric precision ruptured by the stain of life upon eternity. Indeed the Apollo 1 disaster of 1967, to which Ballard refers in chapter five, seems a warning against the hubris of technological ambition.

In contrast to, and a probable cause of, this intolerance for the intrusion of the preposterous physicality of the human form, are the perfected ‘real’ forms of the Hollywood actresses and other famous women which form the landscape of *The Atrocity Exhibition*. Massively blown up images of parts of the female form become inseparable from the landscape in some episodes; in a weapons testing range, for instance, Traven finds an obscure kind of peace lying in blast craters which he associates with the contours of an enlarged Elizabeth Taylor. These moments have about them something of the Romantic idealization and idolization of women taken to an extreme, and they also recall the feminized landscapes of the picturesque, only explored here at the logical limit point. There are hints of this in decadent literature, in which the idealized woman is subjected to a stark misogynist turn, whilst still being the avatar of impossible beauty, even in decay. For instance, in Baudelaire’s ‘The Giantess’ (1857), in which the speaker imagines being a cat

²⁰ The allusion is to Percy Bysshe Shelley’s elegy to Keats, *Adonais* (1821): ‘Life like a dome of many-coloured glass / Stains the white radiance of Eternity’ (ll. 462-3). Ballard quotes these lines in *The Crystal World* (CW 125).

At leisure to explore her mighty forms;
 To climb the slopes of her enormous knees,
 And sometimes, when the summer's tainted suns

Had lain her out across the countryside,
 To drowse in nonchalance below her breast,
 Like a calm village in the mountain's shade.²¹

These are images that would recur, albeit in more threatening form, in science fiction films such as Nathan Juran's *Attack of the 50 Foot Woman* (1958). There is something of a wounded romanticism and a decadence in Traven's dissolution of himself into a vast feminized landscape at the weapons range:

A Terminal Posture Lying on the worn concrete of the gunnery isles, he assumed the postures of the film actress [Elizabeth Taylor], assuaging his past dreams and anxieties in the dune-like fragments of her body. (*AE* 14)

Here we might see an oscillation between the softening and beautifying of the weapons range, its feminization, and the statistical or quantitative sublime inherent in the super blown-up portions of Elizabeth Taylor's body, which are in turn suggestive of the sublimely inexhaustible nature of female sexuality which so perplexed and fascinated decadent authors. The 'dune-like fragments' of an impossibly vast whole here gesture towards a sublime integrity of which Traven

²¹ Charles Baudelaire, 'The Giantess' in *The Flowers of Evil*, trans. James McGowan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008 [1857]), p. 41 ll. 9-14.

hopes to become a part. That this whole is figured as a beautiful woman harks back to a Romantic conception of nature with which it is the goal of the 'quest Romance' to reconnect after the sundering of experience and entry into the adult world. Traven's sundering has been extreme, experienced as a catalogue of atrocity, violence and personal disintegration and fragmentation, and his means of reconnecting with some such whole are equally extreme, seemingly involving the detonation of his wife and lover at the weapons range, perhaps having sacrificed them to the effigy of an enormous female deity. But the fragments which hold this special appeal for Traven are mediated and artificial, no more redolent of a benevolent nature than the weapons of the testing range, and so his attempts to be re-absolved in the embrace of the natural world figured as woman cannot but fail. The weapons range itself is mimetic of this furious energy directed essentially at nothing, spent in futility – a grand representation of masturbatory failure. Even so, the very determination of his attempt is in itself a Romantic impulse which cautions against a reading of *The Atrocity Exhibition* as a mere cataloguing of atrocity. It is possible to view such brief moments of contentment, such assuaging of past dreams and anxiety, as decadently successful in the creation of a new subjectivity. In the example above, Traven has recreated his environment through the surrealistic combination of images and events; he has made use of the materials of the media landscape in order to fashion something acceptable to his fractured mind. It is artificial, and so in this way decadent, but in a world composed of fictions the artificial is all that he has to work with, the artificial in fact becomes the natural.

Another example of the assemblages which the Ts build out of ostensibly disparate documents and objects are the survival kits which they construct, and which also appear throughout Ballard's fiction. These kits are reconfigurations of technology, attempts to harness its revolutionary potential. They represent a desire to reawaken the dreams which first led to the invention of technologies, almost a Futurist stripping back of technology to its raw components, like Filippo Marinetti with his combustion engine mounted upon a skeletal frame. An example of this process might be seen in the short story 'Memories of the Space Age' (1981) in which a rogue pilot flies a succession of increasingly primitive flying machines – from bi-planes and gliders, right back to winged bird suits – around the ruins of Cape Canaveral, as though attempting to understand the original impulse to leave the ground and join the birds. Destabilizing but not neutralizing both of these permutations is the sense in which these collections of enigmatic objects simply betray the sad attempt of a very sick and alienated mind to make sense of the world, like the distorted clocks drawn by the mentally impaired. And yet, in *The Atrocity Exhibition*, undercutting the despairing portrayal of utter alienation is the absurdity of these juxtapositions and the comic solemnity with which Dr Nathan ponders them; and this, in turn, is cut across by the mythic and lyric resonances of the language with which they are described. The subject position from which this mass of contraplexual effects is imagined owes something to Romantic irony in its acceptance and almost celebration of the impossibility of representation. Such oscillations, as is becoming familiar, do not resolve into a final position or thesis, operating as they do at the level of textual effect. *Pace* Luckhurst, it is only in the reading that they are made manifest, but only

ever fleetingly like a stroboscopic optical illusion.²² There is something about this process of perpetually juggling thesis and antithesis, whilst refusing a Hegelian dialectical resolution, which seems to recall Keats' negative capability. Ballard's extreme use of equivocation creates a space of questioning and potentiality that cannot be pinpointed satisfactorily and so remains in the realm of the possible, available to the passively attuned. In *The Atrocity Exhibition* and *Crash* the Romantic and decadent sensibilities are invoked alongside seeming celebrations of alienating modernity and of the transformative power of technology. Yoking together all of these seemingly incompatible forces, aesthetics and moral frameworks, is the imagination stimulated by the human libido. In both *The Atrocity Exhibition* and *Crash*, both the human libido and the imagination are expressed in pornography, to which I turn next.

In her seminal essay, 'The Pornographic Imagination' (1967), Susan Sontag outlines some of the commonplace critical attitudes towards pornography. One such, which she attributes to Theodor Adorno, is that pornography does not have the formal properties of literature; it does not have a beginning, middle and end. Instead, it concocts a flimsy excuse for a beginning, goes on and on and ends nowhere.²³ One wonders whether Ballard was deliberately invoking this formula with the interminable circularity of *Crash*, which brings us back to where we begin at the start of the novel: Vaughan's spectacular auto-disaster death. The extreme repetition of both *The Atrocity Exhibition* and *Crash*, in their obsessive combinations of body

²² Luckhurst in his *The Angle Between Two Walls* speaks of the core unreadability of Ballard's texts. See pp. 168-81.

²³ Susan Sontag, 'The Pornographic Imagination' (1967), in Georges Bataille, *The Story of the Eye* (London: Penguin, 2001), pp. 83-118, p. 87.

parts, wounds, machines, scientific documentation and works of art, also seems to fit this pattern. Sontag goes on to defend the pornographic in literature as one of the extreme mental states which literature is licensed to explore, that it in fact is part of the ways in which we use and abuse each other in the course of our relationships – how we consume one another in person and in image.²⁴ For Sontag this becomes an argument about the place and importance of literature which does not conform to the narrow scope of nineteenth-century realism, which she notes has itself been grossly over-simplified and sanctified by the English and American commentators who use it as a critical standard against which to judge deviant texts. Ballard acknowledges the importance of Sontag's essay in his 1993 margin note to 'The Terminal Zone' paragraph in *The Atrocity Exhibition*:

I commend Susan Sontag's brave 1969 essay ('The Pornographic Imagination'), though I would go much further in my claims. Pornography is a powerful catalyst for social change, and its periods of greatest availability have frequently coincided with times of greatest economic and scientific advance. (*AE* 53-4)

Earlier in the same margin note Ballard predicts that the twentieth century's version of the decadence of the nineteenth-century *fin de siècle* will paradoxically turn out to be an 'aggressive and over-the-top puritanism' (*AE* 53). In *The Atrocity Exhibition*, Ballard conflates science and pornography, image and identity, so that they are seemingly inseparable. In this way the scientist's drive to isolate its objects of study from their contexts becomes comparable with the pornographic gaze which obsesses

²⁴ Ibid pp. 91-5

over the fetishized components of the human body, clothing or other ostensibly non-sexual objects. Science itself becomes aesthetically decadent, a tool for the radically dissociative visionary. At the same time, the blowing up of a part of an actress' body, her left eyebrow for instance, because her image is inseparable from her identity, is at one and the same time an enlargement and an explosion – she has been 'blown up'. As William S. Burroughs says in his introduction to the novel, 'since people are made of image, this is literally an explosive book' (*AE* viii). In addition to being blown up, the media landscape mass-reproduces the image in a mathematically sublime explosion of the Romantic/Gothic trope of the double, to which I turn now.

The Double

The Gothic and Romantic figure of the double appears in the literature of the mid to late eighteenth century in the form of Gothic villains and witches, the troubling counterparts of the ostensibly pure and chaste heroes and heroines of romances like Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) and Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), and much Romantic literature continued to make use of doubles as manifestations of the dark side of visions and desires. The most famous of these Romantic doubles must be the unnamed monster in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, the grotesque and villainous 'other' which reveals the latent horror and criminality of Victor Frankenstein's Enlightenment endeavours. In this section I explore the problematic of self-formation in *The Atrocity Exhibition* and *Crash*, noting the manifestation of doubles as a Romantic legacy with which Ballard engages.

According to Hegel, the self comes to learn that the only way to realize itself fully is to act upon the external world and change it – to claim a piece of it for its own, or even to destroy it.²⁵ This foreshadows Marxism, but it also raises a huge problem in that desire is perpetual. Once the desired object is possessed and therefore ceases to exist as an independent object, the self has lost what it needed to prove to itself the fact of its own existence. In this we can see the perpetual desiring consumer self which Campbell outlines in his *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism*, discussed in the introduction, and the elegance of Traven's psychotic solution to such perpetual desire: to merge himself with the whole universe is to cease to desire and to absorb all knowledge, but also to lose painful self-awareness. Dr Nathan describes Traven's goal as follows:

[T]he patient forms a distinctive type of object relation based on perpetual and irresistible desire to merge with the object in undifferentiated mass. (*AE* 46)

Dr Nathan's notes recall the type of dissolution which the characters in some of Ballard's short fictions, such as 'The Voices of Time' and 'The Terminal Beach', have attempted, and they are an extreme manifestation of the Romantic quest for a return to oneness with nature, whilst also being a troubling indictment of the impossibility of identity formation in the modern world. The scientific language with which Dr Nathan makes this attempt sound insane is filled with irony at the expense of such Romantic notions, but also a fascination bordering on wonder. Nonetheless, the Ts persistence in their attempts to achieve some sort of reintegration and

²⁵ See Peter Singer, *Hegel: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 76.

absolution in a sublime whole indicate the persistence of hope even in this bleakest of modernities.

Traven's quest for a melding of self and world in *The Atrocity Exhibition* has the result of splitting his consciousness into various fragmentary parts – multiple doubles which repeat his attempts to restage twentieth-century disasters in ways that 'make sense'. This Gothic repetition is revisited in *Crash*, where Vaughan is in many ways the double of the narrator, James, who will go on after Vaughan's death to recreate the famous auto-disasters of the future. In *The Atrocity Exhibition* the natural world is composed of the projections of and impositions upon the human psyche – a nightmarish Gothic labyrinth of competing fictions of the self. Often the Ts are depicted driving or wandering on the outskirts of cities, lost in forests of billboard advertisements which reflect back to them their dreams and nightmares. But Ballard sees a potential way out of the maze of mirrors by utilizing a radical subjectivity; in accepting that the world is composed of fictions, the subject is free (or forced) to reconfigure the elements of the phenomenal world by harnessing the power of the imagination. The flipside of this creative realignment of the components of 'reality' is the car crashes of *Crash*: the fantasies of imaginative transformation impacting with the hard 'fact' of physical reality. These moments are treated as fatal dead ends, but also as epiphanies in which the veil of illusions is penetrated, and the 'real' is experienced in the viscerally real wounding of the body. There is in *Crash* a powerful ambivalence between the desire to merge and become one with the machine and concrete landscape, and the desire to transcend it, to escape into the loftier realms of air and light. The encirclement of the zone of airport

architecture, apartment blocks, multi-storey car parks, supermarkets and motorway access ramps, is repeated in the narrative circularity of the novel, and in the rounded and elliptical wounds which transform the bodies of the car-crashing characters. James frequently – before, after and during his LSD trip – has visions of cars taking off, shedding their earthbound stasis and becoming the carriages of dreams and desire for which their styling, advertising and mythical place in the culture have marked them. The car crashes, then, are in part an attempt to break out of this stasis for both man and machine, to realize their mutual potential and escape the circularity of the ensnaring ring road. It becomes clear in these two novels that the trap that Ballard's characters are trying to escape from is that of subjectivity – the circularity of the narratives, the repetition of zeroes, the desire to return to the 'lost symmetry of the blastosphere', is described by Dr Nathan as 'an acceptance of "the Mythology of the Amniotic Return"' (AE 9). Struggling to accept the 'fact of his own consciousness', the various Ts of the novel conjure enigmatic followers and disciples, doubles that are ambivalently disposed to their creators. These emanations of the troubled psyches of the Ts perform that classic role of living out the extremes of behaviour of which their originals find themselves incapable. A mixture of repulsion and attraction drives the relationship between these figures, who are mediated so multiply that the distinction between double and original breaks down.

In *Crash* the desire to possess and destroy the double is manifested in the homoerotic affair of Vaughan and James, consummated in a love act that seems to encompass the entire landscape in its visionary enactment. In one sense it is the physical manifestation of the violent and sexually aggressive power struggle that has been

waged between the two since they met. In marked contrast to much of the exploitation of female bodies in cars which runs through the novel, though, this is an oddly tender and mutual act. Although Vaughan is bent over and penetrated, and so nominally in the passive position, James is said to kneel behind him in what is also a submissive gesture. James' penis is placed at the entrance to Vaughan's anus and only enters once his glans has been gripped by Vaughan's hard detrusor muscles. This gentle love-making is described from James' seemingly vastly expanded perspective. The car in which they are situated, the motorway overhead and the cars which course over it are part of his awareness and seem to take part in the sexual act, drawing the semen from his loins and into Vaughan's anus. In this act James, Vaughan, the cars and the motorway become one, albeit briefly. In this way it echoes the fleeting achievement of a Romantic of oneness with the world, Wordsworth atop Snowdon, Shelley on Mount Blanc's summit. At the same time, it is with the mechanical and the man-made environment which the two men have found brief integration, a world devoid of both nature and women, and thus it is also a union which subverts the hetero-normative, quasi-religious Romantic union of the masculine poet with a feminized nature. (C 164-7) In light of this almost mythical union, what are we to make of the brutal come down which James subsequently experiences sat in a dented and abandoned car, arguably the Tintern Abbey of the North Circular? And what then of Vaughan's subsequent attempt to kill James? Vaughan is distressed by James' breaking of the seal of the machine bower which had contained them and their love-making, but James had already begun to see the car and Vaughan covered by insects and foul excretions, an intimation of his death and decay. These descriptions are not lavish and lyrical like others of similarly foul material, and they seem to represent genuine horror and disgust. The union of human

and human can only ever be fleeting, decadent even, and mocks the higher goal of the marriage of man and machine – which Vaughan attempts to forcibly enact by running James down. James is also experiencing the horror of self love – the homosexual act symbolizing to some extent his self love and union with his Gothic double.

If Vaughan is headed towards his ultimate auto-disaster, having fixed the parameters of his ideal death, it seems odd that a man on the brink of such psychic fulfilment would betray outward signs of depression and withdrawal. These symptoms have appeared before in Ballard's work, in *The Drowned World* as the body's preparation for some kind of transformation, and in 'The Voices of Time' as a winding down of the human genome in symphony with the heat death of the universe. Vaughan is about to enter the realm of the mythic, like Kennedy and James Dean before him; his car crash death will inspire the speed, collisions and sex acts of the future. This seems a model for the Futurist heroic death, but also and paradoxically, the Romantic hero's death in pursuit of his own artistic becoming. The fact that these cataclysmic impacts feature both celebrities and the motor car, icons of their age, makes *Crash's* crashes amenable to a reading of their iconoclastic intent.

Iconoclasm

The crashing of cars and their descriptions of bent fenders and shattered windcreens, their interiors plastered with bodily excretions, can be seen as an act of

transgressive iconoclasm.²⁶ If we think of cars, as Barthes did, as the cathedrals of the twentieth century, embodying the West's dreams of personal freedom, speed, eroticism and beauty, then the depiction of them smashed-up and soiled is a kind of desecration:

I think cars today are almost the exact equivalent of the great Gothic cathedrals: I mean the supreme creation of an era, conceived with passion by unknown artists, and consumed in image if not usage by a whole population which appropriates them as a purely magical object.²⁷

A decade on from Barthes' famous reading of the importance of the motorcar to twentieth century culture, when Ballard was writing *Crash*, this trend had accelerated and come to include not just the pristine example but also the mutilated and melancholic ruin of the crashed vehicle too:

Above all, Vaughan waited for head-on collisions with the concrete pillars of the motorway overpasses, the melancholy conjunction formed by a crushed vehicle abandoned on the grass verge and the serene motion sculpture of the concrete. (C 4)

This image could almost be a photograph by Arnold Odematt, whose 'peaceful crash scenes' Ricarda Vidal explores as part of her 'century of Romantic futurisms' in

²⁶ Car manufacturers are extremely chary of images of their products being depicted in states of disrepair or with collision damage. Computer games which feature real car brands and models are often not authorized to show crash damage, and when they are it is very often of a very superficial kind. In Ballardian terms, realistic collision damage would perhaps be a step too far, exposing the latent violence of a product which is extensively designed and tested *to* crash.

²⁷ Roland Barthes, 'The New Citroën' in *Mythologies* (London: Vintage, 2009), p. 101.

Death and Desire in Car Crash Culture (2013).²⁸ Vaughan desires the end to his accelerating visions of automotive desire and imagines it in a beatific scene of arrested speed. This supports a reading of the Freudian death drive at work in the longed-for orgasmic release of tension which his final, fatal collision will bring. But the fact of its aesthetic and emotional consideration and appreciation, elevate it beyond the mere animalistic instinct which Vidal takes it for.²⁹ It is overly simplistic to insist, as Vidal does, that ‘Lacking all human characteristics, the *Crash* characters are an extreme realization of [Filippo] Marinetti’s mechanical man.’³⁰ There is certainly this aspect to them, but there are also moments of human care and affect which work against such a thesis. In response to what James feels is his wife’s perfunctory expression of regret for the death of the engineer, James muses on the significance of the accident and the man that he unwittingly killed:

I stared pointedly at the clock over the door, hoping that she would soon leave. This bogus commiseration over the dead man irritated me, merely an excuse for an exercise in moral gymnastics. The brusqueness of the young nurses was part of the same pantomime of regret. I had thought for hours about the dead man, visualizing the effects of his death on his wife and family. I had thought of his last moments alive, frantic milliseconds of pain and violence in which he had been catapulted from a pleasant domestic interlude into a concertina of metallized death. These feelings existed within my relationship with the dead man, within the reality of the wounds on my

²⁸ Ricarda Vidal, *Death and Desire in Car Crash Culture: A Century of Romantic Futurisms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 101-117.

²⁹ *Ibid*, p. 149-50

³⁰ *Ibid*, p. 149

chest and legs, and within the unforgettable collision between my own body and the interior of my car. (C 27)

This is a man who has been deeply affected by his accident and the terrible consequences for the other party, but he seems rather to have the respect for him accorded to a defeated but valorous opponent in battle. Just as James' gaze lingers over the wound profiles and sexual possibilities opened up by human crash victims, attention and lavish description is allotted equally to the cars in which so much of the novel takes place. Body panels warped out of shape by violent impact, shattered windscreens, torn upholstery and instrument panels covered with bodily fluids and leakages – repetitively anointed, as though as part of some religious ceremony, with the endlessly produced semen of James and Vaughan. This overproduction of semen anticipates the lavishing of sperm upon the suburb of Shepperton in *The Unlimited Dream Company* (1979), though here it does not appear to be directly generative of anything. James' and Vaughan's sperm has life after expulsion – oozing into the chrome and leatherette orifices of the car's they inhabit, leaking out of the vaginas and anuses of their sexual partners. Karen Beckman, in her *Crash: Cinema and the Politics of Speed and Stasis* (2010), distinguishes semen by its generative properties, noting that it is usually understood in terms of its purpose and end result rather than its sticky, physical properties.³¹ James ends the novel by wiping a handful of semen which has been drained from his wife's vagina over the binnacles, dashboards and upholstery of a collection of crashed vehicles in a breaker's yard. The cars include his own rental vehicle in which Vaughan died. This anointing of the cars with the

³¹ See Karen Beckman, 'Film Falls Apart: *Crash*, Semen and Pop' in *Crash: Cinema and the Politics of Speed and Stasis* (London: Duke University Press, 2010), pp. 161-178.

generative seed seems to be symbolic of the imaginative awakening which these crashed cars have instigated, and seems to recall religious ceremonies in which the faithful are touched with holy water. Here, in the final scene, James impregnates these death sculptures with the auto-erotic schemes for his own and his wife's future deaths at the wheel. Semen is to be understood as some kind of medium then, perhaps transforming the wrecked hulks into the auto-disasters of the future, but also paying homage to their ruined, Cathedral-like beauty. The semen is no longer for biological reproduction (the sex act is described as brief and perfunctory) but for the emergent sexuality which violence and the motorcar have birthed. The decadence and deviance of the forgoing pages can be understood in these final moments as the transitional period, the painful births of new ways of being. Whether those ways of being are at all appealing is almost beside the point; the fact of the possibility of this change, maintained by the oscillating ambiguities of Ballard's text, and reproduced in their reading, continues to ask questions of society's banal acceptance of the manifest content of its self-produced world. In this sense the car crashes are the formative traumas of new societies, atrocities out of which new mythologies can grow. William Blake constructed his own mythic pantheon; in *Crash* we might say that the assassination of John Fitzgerald Kennedy, and the blowing up of celebrity culture, are being used by Vaughan and his fellow car crashers as the raw material for a new mythology of speed and deviant desire. The world they are attempting to give birth to is a frightening and in many ways dystopian one, but the fact that it is chosen – the result of exploring their own psychopathologies rather than being directed by the ideologies of others – seems to juxtapose a potentially revolutionary message with that of the sheer horror of their activities. Undercutting all of this is the sense in which the protagonists of *Crash* and *The Atrocity Exhibition* may be

responding to the latent content of the media landscape in precisely the way that is intended; all of their revolutionary fervour, their imaginative recreating of the world as they find it, may fall victim to recuperation as mere spectacle. The crowds that gather to watch the car crashes in *Crash*, and the seeming disinterest of law enforcement agencies in both novels, may be indicative of a malevolent permissiveness. On this reading the society of the spectacle, the media landscape, welcomes iconoclastic acts and grist to its mill – anticipating their recuperation as entertainment. The current of paranoia that runs through both novels also suggests that insanity might be inherent in the system; but if this is the only terrain, the only reality that is available, then the ability to merge even briefly with it can be counted a Romantic victory, albeit a fleeting, illusory and decadent one.

*

The perpetuation of ambivalence and ambiguity, the refusal of dialectic, recalls the Letterist International, and the later Situationist International, with their fear of recuperation – the reabsorption of revolutionary ideas, movements and imagery into the dominant mode. In this way the car crashes of *Crash* and the survival kits of *The Atrocity Exhibition* might be read as deliberately deviant logics that set out to resist easy interpretation or accommodation, as the texts do themselves – actively resisting interpretation that would render them safe or ‘recuperable’. By turning the symbols of the dominant order to such ends they represent what the Situationists called *détournement* – the repurposing of ideas, images and forms to serve revolutionary intent. In a wider sense, then, the ceaseless oscillations which Ballard’s texts perform can be seen to work in order to maintain possibilities. By resisting closure or

concrete (and therefore attackable or repurpose-able) meaning they create spaces in which to dream. The risk inherent in this strategy is that these spaces are available for transformation by any kind of dream imaginable – as likely to be inherited by the psychopathic prophet Vaughan as by a Romantic bard. The fictions themselves dramatize this danger, providing a space for dreams to take shape which are then analysed. But the analysis must never be completed, the space must remain and the dream must always be possible, no matter how bizarre. And so, a state of contraplex pertains. In chapter 4 I explore the further encroachment of the media landscape into the suburbs of London and central Africa in *The Unlimited Dream Company* and *The Day of Creation*.

Chapter 4. Dreams of Mediation in *The Unlimited Dream Company* and *The Day of Creation*

In 1966 Ballard wrote ‘Au revoir’ to ‘jewelled alligators and white hotels, hallucinatory forests’, bidding them ‘farewell’ as he embarked on a series of short fictional works that would eventually culminate in *The Atrocity Exhibition*.¹ As discussed in chapter 3, however, the jewelled alligators were transformed into a decadent decoration of the mundane and the ugly – into pools of vomit, crowns made of windshield glass on car crash victims’ impacted heads, and bodily excretions ritually daubed onto vinyl seat covers, instrument binnacles and chromium body trim. But Ballard’s short fiction continued to play host to vibrant images of the natural world, to distant planets and dream-like inner worlds – even as the fractured and brief fragments of *The Atrocity Exhibition* came together.² Meanwhile, glimpsed in *Concrete Island*’s verdurous gestures, the lyrically described and abundant fauna of *The Crystal World* and *The Drowned World* was to make an explosive return in *The Unlimited Dream Company* (1979). Significantly, this resurgence took place within the built environment of the suburb of Shepperton, where Ballard and his family lived – literally pushing through the concrete paving stones and minatory façades of suburbia and inaugurating a series of novels all of which hark back to the disaster quartet, whilst looking forward to the micro-communities and enclaves of the final sequence of novels I shall discuss in chapter 5. There is a marked return to

¹ J. G. Ballard, ‘Notes from Nowhere’, Michael Moorcock ed. *New Worlds*, Vol. 50, No. 167 (October, 1966), 147-51, (p. 51).

² See for instance: ‘Storm-Bird, Storm-Dreamer’ (1966), ‘Tomorrow is a Million Years’ (1966), ‘Cry Hope, Cry Fury!’ (1967), ‘Say Goodbye to the Wind’ (1970), ‘My Dream of Flying to Wake Island’ (1974), ‘News from the Sun’ (1981).

the imagery and lyrical flights of the early novels, but mediated through the endlessly replicating technology of the media landscape.

This chapter's focus will be upon *The Unlimited Dream Company* and *The Day of Creation* (1987), but will make reference to *Hello America* (1981) and *Rushing to Paradise* (1994) too. Beginning with a brief outline of the plots of the four novels, I will then go on to explore the importance of William Blake and his dialectics in *The Unlimited Dream Company* – a novel whose protagonist is named for the proto-Romantic poet, and whose prophetic visions and powers deliberately invoke the latter's life and poetry in a continuation of the contraplexual effects that I have been describing. I then move on to a discussion of the imposition of the televisual imagination in *The Day of Creation*, drawing upon Raymond Williams' theorising of the social impact of the technology in *Television* (1974), and the media landscape of the spectacle as outlined by Guy Debord. In the multiply mediated media landscape of the twentieth century, I argue, Romanticism is both a source of weakness and of succour to those who would remake the world.

All four of these novels feature an adolescent or young adult central character or protagonist and narrator, and the 1985 novella *Running Wild* also centres on the crimes of a group of bored teenagers living in a gated community. This is a change for Ballard, whose characters up until this point had most frequently been middle aged professionals and staunchly middle class. That this is the period in which he returns to his own childhood through the autobiographical *Empire of the Sun* (1984)

and *The Kindness of Women* (1991) might suggest a source for this renewed interest in a younger perspective. In these novels there is a contraplexual celebration of the childhood imagination and perspective upon the world, and a brutal undermining of the Romantic idea of the blessed nature of childhood.

Mediation is central to these novels; the televisual world of the media landscape which Ballard set out so terrifyingly in *The Atrocity Exhibition* is shown to reach into the far corners of the globe. This is a cultural colonisation of territory that – given Ballard’s continued interest in inner space, where the landscapes of the mind and external reality intersect – produces a map that exactly covers both its psychological and geographical territory.³ Guy Debord’s spectacular society in *The Society and the Spectacle* (1967) has much in common with Ballard’s concept of a blanket of media which enshrouds the world with competing fictions.⁴ Will Self has suggested that these novels are forays into the society of the spectacle – by which he means Guy Debord’s idea of a map that completely covers the territory, a global, ubiquitous fiction which we cannot see beyond – and indeed something of the endurance and inescapability of the spectacle can be seen in the continued resonance of the ideology of late capitalism and consumerism, still present in Ballard’s future wastelands of the United States in *Hello America*.⁵ If the writer’s job is to ‘invent the reality’, but the materials out of which to invent that reality are the already mediated products of a mediated society, then entrapment in a Gothic labyrinth of endless mediation seems

³ Ballard refers to the media landscape as a ‘map in search of a territory’ (*AE* 145).

⁴ See for instance Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (London: Notting Hill Editions, 2013 [1967]), p. 16, no. 30.

⁵ Will Self, ‘The Ballard Tradition’, J. G. Ballard, *The Drought* (London: Fourth Estate, 2014 [1964]), pp. 235-7, originally published in *Prospect*.

the sorry fate of the self in this ‘overlit’ realm (C v). Ranged against this despairing sense of the infinite ersatz are the powerful personal mythologies and psychopathologies into which the characters of these novels are able to reshape the elements of the media landscape. As is becoming familiar, these internal landscapes are brimming with liberatory potential, but they are also potentially nothing more than the fevered dreams of the dangerously unhinged. The lyrical intensity of *The Drowned World* and *The Crystal World* are discernible in *The Unlimited Dream Company* and *The Day of Creation*, for instance, but it is a more self-aware, ironic, and above all mediated lyricism; we can now properly call Ballard’s Romanticism ‘wounded’. Like the imagination in the texts explored in this chapter, it springs back after the desolation of the city cycle – in fact it is invigorated by it – but it is changed, somehow damaged, by its immersion in the destructive element of modernity. The malleable, mediated world gives unprecedented freedom to ‘invent the reality’ (C v), but this also means that there is a concomitant insubstantiality to these products of the imagination.⁶ As outlined in the introduction, the ephemerality of the Romantic imaginative apocalypse was a problem that some of the major Romantic poets, such as Shelley, were already engaged with.

The Unlimited Dream Company is the gorgeously described but deeply disturbing tale of Blake, a young aeroplane thief: drifter, dreamer, paedophile and prophet. Blake steals a plane from London Airport where he works as an aircraft cleaner, but he only manages to pilot it as far as the suburb of Shepperton, where he crashes the

⁶ Ballard elaborated on this aspect of his aesthetics in various interviews. See, for instance ‘Jannick Storm: An Interview with J. G. Ballard’ in *Speculation* no. 21 (1969), (EM 20).

flaming vehicle into the Thames. Over the next seven days (recapitulating the Biblical period of creation), having escaped both his life and death, Blake transforms the sleepy suburb into ‘some corner of a forgotten Amazon city’ (*UDC* 3). A surrogate family arranges itself around Blake: Dr Miriam, who treats his injuries and will become his lover; Mrs St Cloud, the elderly lady who will mother young Blake – rebirthing him in a bizarre symbolic episode; and Father Wingate, the unorthodox priest who will guide Blake through his fledgling steps as a prophet. *The Unlimited Dream Company*’s Blake is the apotheosis of the imagination, a prophet-Bard of the type that we have been describing in Ballard, only here he seems to be imbued with magical powers. He is, however, a deeply ambivalent figure. His purpose appears to be the salvation of the poor consumer-obsessed denizens of suburbia, but the sacrifices which must be made to ensure their safe passage to the sun are extreme and disturbing. Reading with William Blake we might say that the forces of destruction and creativity are eternally present in both the universe and the individual. There is a sense, too, in which the enormity of the sublime power channelled through the imperfect human form is somehow warped and perverted, and the ecstatic visions and creative wonders of the young prophet are fuelled by his dark and disturbing appetites.⁷

⁷ William Blake was, of course, a man of belief, an unorthodox and dissenting faith but one nonetheless formed of deep biblical knowledge, as well as immersion in and critical engagement with religious epics such as John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* and Dante Alighieri’s *The Divine Comedy*. Part of William Blake’s personal faith was a belief in the holiness of the human body and its desires, its inseparability from the soul and its celebration and prayer in acts of physical union. It was this sexualized faith – an attempt perhaps to marry high Christian spirituality with priapic pagan ritual – that was to prove irresistible to the counter-culture of the 1960s, and to a drug culture keen to hearken to his call to cleanse the doors of perception.

Hello America revisits the landscapes of *The Drought* in the form of a desiccated future America, clutching with febrile fingers at the competing fictions of its own spectacular past. A team of European scientists and explorers have been tasked with investigating the source of radiation clouds coming from the lost continent, abandoned in the last days of the twentieth century. The cause of the great evacuation, which is not revealed until some way through the novel, was primarily due to economic collapse, accelerated by the building of a great dam, which altered the course of the world's oceans and transformed the ecology of the United States. There is a sense, however, that America's downfall ultimately represented a collective failure of the imagination. The wastelands of America are now populated by strange tribes each of which has a culture and identity built upon the relics of the professions or lifestyles that they are named for. The Executives, for instance, are named for corporate brands and carry around broken calculators and pens. This mocking portrayal of America's image of itself is ostensibly anti-American. But Ballard, in interview with Thomas Frick for *The Paris Review*, demurred: '*Hello America* is pro-American, and ends in the triumph of those old nineteenth-century Yankee virtues embodied in my old glass-airplane-building inventor.'⁸ The Romanticized view of America as a land of opportunity in which the self can be made according to the designs of a personal and national vision have origins in the Romantic period's approbation of revolutionary America and France, and to some extent remain with us today, perpetuated by American cultural imperialism and globalization. As Ballard puts it in his 1994 introduction to the novel, 'However hard we resist, our dreams still carry the legend "Made in U. S. A."' (HA 4). Even as the characters of *Hello America* experience queasily ersatz echoes in the shape of

⁸ 'The Art of Fiction 85'

holograms and defunct advertising, they feel its magic working upon them such that they are driven ever onwards in a desperate attempt to make contact with the ‘real’ America. In this we can see again Colin Campbell’s diagnosis of the corruption of Romantic infinite desire into an all-consuming consumerism; it is a quest doomed to failure, not merely because of the inadequate provisions that the team have for a trek across the vast interior of the derelict continent, but because as Baudrillard has argued in his *America* (1986), America is only really an idea, a great open space for projected ideas and dreaming and a revelling in the surface of things.⁹ It is this, though, that makes the terrain especially attractive for the exercise of the regenerative powers of the imagination, and the young protagonist, Wayne, who dreams of becoming the next president of the (re)United States, assumes the mantle of the Romantic bardic prophet – resolving the enigmatic ciphers of late capitalism into a resurgent American dream. Ballard’s glass aeroplane building inventor invokes the spirit of the Wright brothers and their dreams of flight, associating technology with revolution both imaginative and social, and thereby combining an Enlightenment celebration of progress with a Romantic conception of America. At the same time, the novel depicts the betrayal of both Enlightenment and Romantic ideals in the form of the threat of nuclear Armageddon and the robotic revenants of past presidents who threaten to push the button.

The Day of Creation is a novel marked (and some have thought marred) by its coming after ‘the China book’, the semi-autobiographical *Empire of the Sun*. Martin Amis, for instance, was scathing about what he saw as the recycling of themes in his

⁹ Jean Baudrillard, *America* (London: Verso, 1988 [1986]), p. 27.

review of the novel,¹⁰ but as I aim to show, the novel deliberately engages with themes of repetition in the form of mediation, and interrogates the Romantic inheritance of childhood and memory as the source of imaginative renewal in the present and future. If *Empire of the Sun* was supposed by some to have to provide a code for unlocking the enigmatic fictions of Ballard's past – resolving the flooded landscapes, empty swimming pools, obsession with nuclear power and the sense of reality as a stage set to childhood experiences of World War II in Shanghai – *The Day of Creation* seems to set out to understand just what the sources of inspiration are, and how one is to continue to create after laying bare the well-spring of one's inspiration. The river Mallory is the central metaphor for the imagination and creativity in the novel, and it passes through many landmarks of Ballard's previous fictions; for instance, in a nod to *Crash*, the river appears to spring forth from the radiator grill of a wrecked car in the early stages of the novel. If *Empire of the Sun* was the fictionalized account of Ballard's early life, then *The Day of Creation* reads like a Wordsworthian account of the formation of a poet's (or novelist's) mind, with its re-treading of the imaginative past. The river is named the Mallory in honour of its discoverer, the protagonist Dr Mallory. Mallory is a charity worker stationed in Port-la-Nouvelle, a dilapidated dust bowl where once there was a lake, in an unnamed, war-torn central-African state. Mallory is determined to find an underground water source for which he has been drilling for years on behalf of the World Health Organization. When a vast underground body of water of mysterious origin is accidentally unleashed, giving birth to a vast flooded landscape, Mallory's reaction is deeply ambivalent. The rest of the novel follows Mallory's attempt to find

¹⁰ Martin Amis, *The War Against Cliché: Essays and Reviews 1975-2000* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2001), p. 107-9.

the source of the river, which is also heavily and repeatedly figured as the source of imagination and inspiration. Mallory is by turns hindered and supported on his journey by an adolescent girl, Noon. Idyllic ‘back to nature’ scenes of naked bathing in the waters of the river, surrounded by the first bloom of a reborn forest – a new Eden – are troubled by the shadow of abuse and exploitation. Mallory’s sexual desire for the twelve year old Noon is a troubling current that serves to propel him ever onwards to the river’s source, and one which unsettles Romantic notions of the sanctity of childhood. But just who is being exploited in this strange relationship is not always certain. Noon is given an unusually prominent role in the text, a female character who is developed beyond the Ballard staple of lamias and femme fatales – symbols which she nonetheless encompasses. Noon calls Dr Mallory ‘Dr Mal’, highlighting his obsession with death but also his wilful disregard for his patients and for the lives of others in his struggle with the river. General Harare and the police chief Kagwa vie with one another and with Mallory for ownership of the river, exposing the ambiguous role of Westerners on the continent, whose aid programmes are misappropriated by corrupt governments, or else used to fund deranged vanity projects, and whose liberal rhetoric seems laughably maladroit in the harsh realities of wartime existence. Once again, integral to the representation of Africa in this novel are the competing dreams and fictions which Africans, Europeans and Americans have about themselves and the continent, mediated by the lens of a video camera.

Finally, *Rushing to Paradise* revisits the themes of eco-catastrophe from the disaster cycle through the mad dreams of an eco-terrorist and her attempts to establish a

utopian community on the Pacific atoll, Saint-Esprit. Dr Barbara Rafferty is another of Ballard's few female central characters. Although narrated by the impressionable adolescent Neil, it is the lamia-like Dr Barbara – nicknamed 'Dr Death' in an echo of *The Day of Creation's* 'Dr Mal' – who steals the show. Dr Barbara takes the place of the predominantly male 'mana-personalities of history' that have populated Ballard's fiction from the beginning, but her genesis might be seen in the powerful and mysterious *femme fatales* of the *Vermillion Sands* collection.¹¹ Perhaps Ballard's most satirical work, *Rushing to Paradise* relentlessly lambasts the green movement and its almost instantaneous commercialisation and mediation – its recuperation. In their quest to save the albatross, that heavily-freighted Romantic and decadent symbol, which is threatened by French plans to resume nuclear testing on Saint-Esprit, the crew of eco-activists cause a major environmental disaster of their own. Initially this is the result of the ageing ship that takes them to the island capsizing and leaking oil into the surrounding waters, but as the group become entrenched in the island and food becomes scarce, they begin to feed upon the fauna of the island – even on the donated rare species that have been flown in for protection by various charities. The more desperately Dr Barbara tries to cling to the ideals of the expedition the more terribly harmful to the environment and the volunteers the project becomes. This ruthlessly undermines the Romantic desire for a return to oneness with nature, exposing it for the dream of the privileged that is soon discarded in the tooth and nail struggle for survival. It also demonstrates the ease with which revolutionary movements are recuperated in the media landscape: the corporate sponsors and tourism which the enclave attracts very quickly turning it into the very obverse of its intent. The perspective of Neil, though, is relentlessly and

¹¹ See also *Millennium People's* Kay Churchill, discussed in chapter 5.

naively Romantic, and his desire for Dr Barbara is as much to do with the power of her vision to transform the world around her, as it is her sexual allure.

Imposing Visions

William Blake, so central to *The Unlimited Dream Company*, wrote in his prose poem *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* of the necessity of opposites and the creative power of their perpetual tension. As in previous chapters, the refusal of a dialectic can be seen at work in this novel, and in *Hello America*, *The Day of Creation* and *Rushing to Paradise*. This maintenance of contrarities produces a creative tension through studied ambivalence and ambiguity. It might be said that Romantic idealism leads inexorably to dystopian practice and nightmarish unintended consequences, laying bare the disturbing latent content of utopian dreaming. Coupled with the increased self-awareness that sees these works as already multiply mediated through televisual and personal mythology, past literatures and culture, the awareness of the inadequacy of the form – already present in Romantic irony – makes itself felt. There is certainly a darkly pessimistic side to this acute self-consciousness, a side to Romanticism which is symbolised by the deathly obsession with lamia figures, and the urge to slip away into blissful oblivion. But many Romantic writers were capable of conceiving of the portrayal of the bleak and the catastrophic as a creative and positive act. The dystopian, utopian or catastrophic novel is always as much about the present as it is the past or future, and so its imagined world stands in opposition to contemporary reality, suggesting that things should be better. For Ballard, the act of reimagining the world, of refusing to take reality as it is found, is an inherently positive and creative act:

I believe that the catastrophe story, whoever may tell it, represents a constructive and positive act by the imagination rather than a negative one, an attempt to confront a patently meaningless universe by challenging it at its own game [...] It is the inflexibility of this huge reductive machine we call reality that provokes infant and madman alike, and in the cataclysm story the science fiction writer joins company with them, using his imagination to describe the infinite alternatives to reality which nature itself has proved incapable of inventing. This celebration of the possibilities of life is at the heart of science fiction.¹²

Ballard must have been writing this piece at the same time as he was working on *The Unlimited Dream Company*, and it is remarkable how Blakean his conception of the imagination has become. Compare William Blake's: 'I must Create a System. or be enslav'd by another Mans'.¹³ In the above statement from *The Visual Encyclopaedia of Science Fiction* (1977), we see the conflicted currents of disappointment in the world as it is discovered by the senses, but an almost naive faith in the power of the imagination to remake that world, and a determination to do so in spite of an indifferent universe. That very meaningless universe pulls the sentiment of the piece in other directions too, towards Byronic irony and even on to Nietzsche and existentialism, or Albert Camus' concept of the absurd and his paradoxically 'free' Sisyphus.¹⁴ The sense of betrayal by the phenomenal world, though, and the

¹² J. G. Ballard, 'Cataclysms and Dooms' in *The Visual Encyclopaedia of Science Fiction* (1977), reprinted in *The Drought*, p. 240.

¹³ William Blake, *Jerusalem: The Emanation of the Giant Albion*, ed. Morton D. Paley (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), p. 141, plate 10, line 20.

¹⁴ Sisyphus is freed in the act of choosing his fate. Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (London: Penguin, 2000 [1942]), pp. 107-11.

invocation to alter it with the power of the human imagination is undeniably Blakean, and Ballard's characters are free to the extent that they are able to imagine. A major brake on this faculty, however, is the imposition of other people's fictions and fantasies, and the struggle to shrug off the imaginings of others is part of what this third quartet of novels dramatize.¹⁵

Ballard's reincarnation of the crashed pilot Blake in *The Unlimited Dream Company* is filled with sexual energy and the creations born through its release. As an incarnation of a fertility god – horns sprouting from his head – Blake copulates with the women of Shepperton in animal form, leaving them cropping peaceably on their front lawns. But in his attempts to outdo the spectacle of television, 'the travelogues that presided over their lives', Blake elects to 'mount the town itself', spreading his semen over every surface and raising blooms and foliage in his wake (*UDC* 107):

At the slightest touch, semen spilled into my hand. I let the pearly string fall across the water. Jewelled medallions glimmered on the surface, an electric chemistry rippled to and fro like an invisible swimmer. Within seconds each of the patterns had coalesced into a series of green saucers each with a white flower at its centre. When I stepped down from the ladder the entire surface of the pool was covered with immense lilies, the playground of a water-cherub. (*UDC* 107)

¹⁵ Again this echoes William Blake's imposition of his vision upon the angel, and vice versa, in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, Selected Works*, p. 83.

There's something of Krishna in this seed-spilling demi-god, Blake, but it is as a modern (and so perhaps perverted or wounded in some way) incarnation of one of William Blake's giant forms that he is best understood. Blake transforms himself and his suburbanite followers into myriad different forms, a protean power that he shares with William Blake's Orc:

Sometimes an eagle screaming in the sky, sometimes a lion
 Stalking upon the mountains, and sometimes a whale I lash
 The raging fathomless abyss; anon a serpent folding
 Around the pillars of Urthona, and round thy dark limbs
 On the Canadian wilds I fold¹⁶

Orc's transformations unsettle the laws of nature and of identity and form a part of the rebellious, revolutionary energy of the giant form. In the chapter 'I swim as a Right Whale', Blake transforms himself and much of the population of Shepperton into an array of aquatic creatures that frolic in the sun-spangled water of the Thames, joying in the company of one another and the freeing sensation of movement in water. But in an echo of 'The Pool of Thanatos' chapter of *The Drowned World*, Blake's ecstatic swim plumbs depths that threaten to pull him under permanently, his whale form plunging down to a nightmare encounter with his human corpse in the sunken Cessna that he crashed into the Thames. Emerging in human form once more into a meadow populated by vivid flowers and birds, Blake seems to comprehend that the transformations and swim were a kind of dream or vision, but everywhere around him that visionary insight colours reality – the rainbows of his sodden suit

¹⁶ William Blake, 'America, A Prophecy' (1793), *Selected Poetry*, p. 95 ll. 13-17.

and the damp clothes of the tennis players and their children, whose faces are glowing with an inner light (*UDC* 70-3). The lyrical intensity in this passage is offset by his brush with death, just as in the novel as a whole the exuberant power of Blake's imagination is curbed and curtailed both by his own self-destructive tendencies (conscious or otherwise) and by the physical boundary of the borders of the suburb of Shepperton. The text does not resolve neatly the reality of Blake's experiences. Are they the dreams or visions of a disturbed and drowning pilot? Are they powerful enough to sustain him after death? Through equivocality, the possibility inherent in these tensions is maintained in perpetuity.

Blake's sexual energy does not seem to distinguish between sex or age, indiscriminately lavishing his physical and spiritual love upon Shepperton. This operates on the level of a parody of William Blake's prophetic writings, but also as an attempt to envisage what a sexual religiosity might be like. Just how would a purportedly omnipotent power, such as that of the Christian God, interact physically with a human body? Ballard has an interest in child sexuality which appears in many of his works, from mothers teaching their sons to masturbate 'in a totally non-abusive way' to the crushes of middle-aged men on adolescent girls and the infatuation of young men with older women.¹⁷ In William Blake's mythology, gods are not perfect but fallible and even capricious. Through *The Unlimited Dream Company's* Blake, Ballard seems to explore the attempt of boundless energy or power to make contact with the human, and the unpredictable fallout of the

¹⁷ See, for example, the ministrations of the paediatrician Richard Gould to his patients in *Millennium People*.

dissemination of that power. If understood as a conduit for God's all powerful love expressed in the form of ribald sexuality, then *The Unlimited Dream Company* can be read as an uneasy depiction of the blindness and indiscriminate quality of such an all-encompassing power that would consume adult and infant alike:

The boy hesitated, his round face reflecting the sun like a mirror. He threw himself into my chest as if diving into a warm pool. His head pressed against my sternum, his hands searched my hips and stomach, hunting for a doorway into my body. Calming him I took him into me, swallowing his mouth, his cool lips and sweet tongue, inhaling his hot breath, letting him enter my flesh and pass through me. (*UDC* 137)

The absorption of the children of Shepperton strengthens Blake and propels him on to ever greater feats and miracles, but this is a man who in his past life had gotten into trouble with the police for playing the pied piper to a group of local children, and when he first arrives in Shepperton he is warned away by wary parents:

For five minutes one rainy afternoon I was gripped by a Pied Piper complex, and genuinely believed that I could lead twenty children and their startled mothers, the few passing dogs and even the dripping flowers away to a paradise which was literally, if I could only find it, no more than a few hundred yards from us. (*UDC* 6)

This echo of William Blake's 'Introduction' to *Songs of Innocence* (1789) comes straight after a passage on the character Blake's pornographic experiments, leaving

long and detailed explicit answerphone messages for secretaries whom he hoped would type them out for their bewildered executives (*UDC* 5-6). In another reminiscence, Blake recalls his aggressive need for others to take part in his fantasies: in a parody of Victor Frankenstein's hubris, having thought that he had detected life in a cadaver that he was dissecting at medical school, Blake 'terrorized a weak fellow student into helping [him] frogmarch the corpse up and down the laboratory in an attempt to revive it' (*UDC* 5). He is thrown out of medical school for this stunt, but his conviction of being special – a Romantic hangover built on the myth of a unique and special self, perpetuated by advertising and televisual dreaming – remains undimmed:

[Y]et for all these failures I had a tenacious faith in myself, a messiah as yet without a message who would one day assemble a unique identity out of this defective jigsaw. (*UDC* 6)

The jumbled fragments of experience and symbols from which Blake attempts to construct a better reality recall the attempts of the ragged Ts in *The Atrocity Exhibition*, with their collections of obliquely related objects and media-saturated minds, but also their tenacity in attempting to shore up those fragments into a unified self.¹⁸ Blake's visionary powers are continually undermined or offset by his past crimes and failures, and his deviant urges in the present, and so the young protagonist might be said to embody William Blake's states of innocence and experience. Blake's omnidirectional urges extend to all inhabitants of Shepperton:

¹⁸ There are strong elements of the biographical in this novel, and not only in the Shepperton setting of the story; Ballard attended medical school at Cambridge but left before qualifying, reading English Literature at King's for a year before leaving that course too. He also trained to fly planes for the RAF in Canada, but left the air force before becoming a qualified pilot.

I enjoyed my sense of power over this small town, my knowledge that sooner or later I would mate with all these women in their bright summer dresses strolling and talking around me. I sensed the same impulse, perversely, towards the young men and the children, even to the dogs running along the crowded pavements, but this no longer shocked me. (*UDC* 88-9)

This generalized experience of lust hones in on a disturbing target and comes frighteningly close to being realized. *The Unlimited Dream Company* is not a sustained hymn on paedophilic tendencies the way that *Crash* was on the pornographic potential of the car crash, but it seems surprising that a passage such as this, in which Blake attempts to abduct a young child, did not receive more alarmed commentary:

Muttering thickly to her, I decided to take her to the park. I thought of the secret bower and the soft beds of flowers within the grave. Even if the crippled children saw us together – and in a depraved way I wanted them to for their own sake – no one would believe them. (*UDC* 91)

‘Bower’ invokes a Romantic setting for this projected perversion of the sanctity of the Romantic childhood, undermining the creative well-springs upon which Blake (and Ballard) might seem to be drawing for his visions. William Blake, in his *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience*, and the traffic between them, understood childhood not to be an entirely blessed realm, and Wordsworth’s ‘Nutting’ (1798) also contains intimations of childhood sexuality. Here Ballard, characteristically,

renders extreme what is implicit in order to expose the anxiety about adult sexuality which may lie behind the Romantic obsession with childhood innocence, and by extension our modern sensitivity to the welfare of children; it is, of course, still a prevalent obsession and one that is perpetuated by the media and advertising of consumerist culture. Blake's absorption of children in order to heal himself and perpetuate his powers is at once an horrific parody of Wordsworth's inspiration drawn from childhood, and an indictment of the infantilizing fantasies sold to adults in a consumer society. Mallory's troublingly sexualised relationship with the young adolescent girl Noon in *The Day of Creation*, continues this thread, and the young male narrators of *Hello America* and *Rushing to Paradise* are sexually manipulated by older women too. The episode above is staged in a busy shopping area, with the women in pretty summer dresses expressing their newfound reproductive urges (they have been seeking maternal advice on an unprecedented scale since Blake's arrival, even pensioners enquiring about the possibility of artificial insemination) in an almost frenzied bout of shopping for wedding dresses. In the intense crush and heat of the crowds, Blake experiences hallucinatory combinations of colours, smells and tactile contact – his tropical birds swooping and adding their cries and plumage to the sensory overload. The availability of everything in the consumer paradise is extended for Blake to the women, men, children and animals around him; in a process of inverse sublimation his desires fixate upon real sexual objects which he feels impelled to grasp:

Holding tightly to the crushed hand of the little girl, I remembered the white plumage of the birds clamouring around me, driven mad by lust. The women swayed against me, their voices shriller, creatures of a demented zoo

quivering in a rut. I shielded my eyes from the overbright sun. A huge macaw with electric blue plumage screeched past my head. Its talons tore methodically at the blood-stripped awning. A small boy with the eyes of an insane dwarf whirled a rattle in my face.

Forced against the plate-glass window, I lifted the girl into my arms, tasting her damp, frightened breath in my mouth. I stumbled against a trestle table, and a tray of costume jewellery and wedding tinsel fell to the ground. The women pushed towards me, joined by the crowd packed into the shopping mall, excited visitors on a saint's day surging about for a glimpse of a holy man. (*UDC 92*)

In this crush and press of overexcited consumerism, Blake feels 'an uneasy sexual euphoria [...] the intoxication of some strange hunger' (*UDC 92*). This pan-sexual feeling is not consummated, unless it is in the kiss of the rogue priest, Father Wingate, who saves Blake from being trampled to death by his 'new brides', but its excitement seems to come from a visionary awareness of the latent sexual motivations beneath the act of consuming. Blake is viewing the world from an oblique angle capable of exposing its latent content, but far from being a detached and rational observer he experiences the full force of the passions he uncovers, physically acting them out.

That Blake crash lands his plane in Shepperton next to a film studio, the woods surrounding which are littered with the props of the filmed fantasies of the past, again highlights the prominence of visual media in the twentieth century

imagination, and makes the suburb a stage set on which Blake will act out his various roles and fantasies. The environs of Shepperton are warped to the designs of Blake's deviant mind, the bored housewives and accountants of the sleepy suburb only too glad to follow this latest and greatest spectacle, even to a presumably fiery death in the sun, and it is easy to imagine that the transcendent episode that precipitates the disappearance of the entire population of the riverside town is in fact a mass suicide. This would be to read the epiphanic moments of the novel as merely delusional, and there is every possibility that *The Unlimited Dream Company* is nothing more than the momentary visions of a troubled mind before death. The text is poised between psychological and fantastic explanations so that there is no definitive reading available, perhaps only a strange bleeding of fantasy into the phenomenal world suggesting that an imagination powerful enough might actually be able to compete with the 'real', and that the consequences of such a remodelling would be both sublime and horrific. The people of Shepperton give to their new deity that which had most meaning in their lives, a spectacle of consumer decadence and a parody of refuse tips and the throwaway nature of their culture:

At the entrance to the park are the memorials which they built to me before they embarked on their last flight. With good-humoured irony, they constructed these shrines from miniature pyramids of dishwashers and television sets, kiosks of record players ornamented with sunflowers, gourds and nectarines, the most fitting materials these suburbanites could find to celebrate their affection for me. (*UDC* 3)

Blake's dark and disturbing imagination is also an exploration of the instant gratification of the modern consumer that draws all it could possibly desire to itself and yet remains perpetually famished and, as Campbell notes in *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism*, this self is an evolution (or recuperation) of the all-desiring Romantic self.

The Unlimited Dream Company and *The Day of Creation*, along with *The Drowned World* and *The Crystal World*, contain the most sustained reveries prompted by the natural world in the whole of Ballard's oeuvre. The powerful imagery of verdure bursting forth – through the paving slabs of Shepperton in *The Unlimited Dream Company*, and blooming in the African desert of *The Day of Creation* – seems significant after the Anthropocene of the city cycle. In both novels the scale of the change wreaked by the power of the protagonists' imaginations also marks a new departure. In previous works there is the sense of a world half perceived and half created, but here the message is repeatedly hammered home that the splendour described so lavishly is the product of the waxing imaginations of Blake or Dr Mallory. Mallory's riverside experience of a new Eden in *The Day of Creation* is described in lushly lyrical prose:

A grove of wild myrtle ran down to the narrow strip of sandy clay. I rubbed the oil from my arms, breathing the thick scent of desert lavender. Fan-palms and slender saplings of bamboo formed a cool waterside garden, an arbour filled with succulents and passion flowers. I walked through this charming

glade, placing my bare feet between the aloes and armoured rosettes of century plants that sprang from the damp floor. (*DOC* 121)

Such detailed botanical description very quickly segues into the language of transcendence and epiphany: ‘A new race would spring from Noon and myself as we lived peaceably in these forest bowers. It was time for a naming of new things, of new hours and new days’ (*DOC* 122). Such reveries, glimpses of reborn Edenic paradises, pepper the narratives of these novels. As much as they recall earlier works, the interpenetration by the televisual experience of the modern world seems to call for an upping of the ante in order to compete with the proliferation of fictions in the media landscape. It is a struggle referred to explicitly on a number of occasions. In *The Day of Creation*, Sanger muses on the reasons for Dr Mallory’s duel with the river: ‘I even suspect that your wish to destroy it is really an attempt to destroy television’s image of the world’ (*DOC* 176). Again in *The Unlimited Dream Company*, Blake speaks of his plan to mount Shepperton in terms of a spectacular contest: ‘I would mount the town itself, transform Shepperton into an instant Paradise more exotic than all the television travelogues that presided over their lives’ (*UDC* 107). Throughout the novel Blake feels himself in competition with spectacular and consumer society, just as the canonical Romantic poets found themselves in competition with what Wood calls the shock of the ‘real’ in their era: the panoptical entertainments of late eighteenth and early nineteenth century London.¹⁹

¹⁹ Wood, *The Shock of the Real*, pp. 1-17

In *Hello America*, the artefacts of late capitalism, the brands and advertisements, the movie stars and theme parks, all are explored with an initial mixture of reverence and wonder, and the research team appear like archaeologists discovering the ancient wonders of a long lost civilisation. There seems the potential for the launching of an American renaissance akin to that precipitated by the rediscovery of Ancient Greece and Rome in the fifteenth century in Europe. The objects of consumer-driven America, the Coca Cola cans and fast food outlets are subjected to a process of defamiliarization – removed from their everyday context and ubiquity, these objects take on the light of prized artefacts, of mysterious import to the lost society that made them and for those that would seek to resurrect it. Later in the novel, when Wayne reaches Las Vegas, the President welcomes them with a spectacular light show:

For an hour the whole iconic past of pop Americana moved by in parade, Superman and Donald Duck, Clark Gable and the Incredible Hulk, a Coca Cola bottle twenty stories high, the Starship *Enterprise* like an airborne petroleum refinery, all silver pipes and cylinders, a dollar bill the size of a football field and the colour of purest Astroturf. (HA 136)

Dr Barbara in *Rushing to Paradise* is of the same ilk in many ways as Blake in *The Unlimited Dream Company* – a charismatic and inspiring leader with deep personal flaws and a terrifying psychopathology. The force of unbounded idealism and the warping effect of the media hi-jacking of her project, and the threat of the recuperation of her revolutionary intent, are portrayed here as far worse and more damaging to the environment and humanity than the military pragmatism of the

French army and their proposed resumption of nuclear testing. Right from the beginning, in a scathingly satirical depiction, the environmentalists' every attempt to protect the albatross of Saint-Esprit ends in ecological disaster – from the capsized tanker that plasters the surrounding sea and beaches with oil, to the wholesale feasting upon rare donated fauna when the food runs out at the wildlife sanctuary – the creatures of Saint-Esprit would have been far better off taking their chances with the French Army. Like all utopian enclaves, the Saint-Esprit revolutionaries very quickly require an 'Other' against which to define themselves. As 'Dr Death' sinks further into the fantasy of her sanctuary, the 'Other' morphs from the French military to the visiting tourists and well-wishers, and when they are disposed of, to the Germans on the beach and finally to the entire male sex. These dark fascist undercurrents to the utopian enclave are studiously ignored by the other members of the group who are content to be led and fed by their charismatic leader.

For all the power of the protagonists' visions in these novels, the intervention of technological mediation disrupts and arguably recuperates their apocalypses such that it becomes impossible to tell whose vision is imposing upon whom. And yet Ballard, maintaining the state of contraplex, seems also to celebrate the potential for détournement which these technologies, such as television, represent. It is to this quintessential twentieth-century technology and its role in these novels that I turn now.

Televisual Nightmare

Ballard's fascination with technology and its 'nightmare consequences', particularly the ways in which it alters our interactions with the world and with one another, has included the atomic bomb and subsequent nuclear testing; the space age; the motor car; and what he called the media landscape. The role that television has in the shaping our perception of reality, and in our own identity formation, is a prominent theme of *The Atrocity Exhibition* and *Crash*, and continues to resonate in *The Day of Creation*. The television, or rather visual media more generally, including cinema and print advertising, has intersected with the other technologies listed above right from their inception. The hold that nuclear armaments and the moon landings had over the twentieth-century imagination arguably owed a great deal to their repeated representation on television and film; the vivid blue of the Earth seen from space, and the mushroom cloud of nuclear testing are the twin symbols of everything that we hold dear, and the means by which it might be destroyed. Raymond Williams' seminal work, *Television*, navigated between the competing modes of technological determinism then dominant in his field and attempted to chart a third way in which technology was wilfully produced to solve specific problems, and then equally wilfully used in ways that come out of a 'matrix of shifting cultural and social factors.'²⁰ Williams delineates a body of work and thought which would see technology as productive of social change: scientific and technical research produces technological innovation which is in turn applied to society in order to alter or 'advance' it. An alternative model is one which sees social change as driving the need for new technology so that the desire comes first, the product being designed to meet that desire. In Williams' synthesis of these models, both the societal and technological change are willed – thus introducing the radical component of agency

²⁰ Raymond Williams, *Television* (London: Routledge, 2003 [1974]), pp. 24-5.

mediating between competing determinisms. Discussing the genesis of broadcast media, Williams suggests that the technology that serves it was not 'predestined' to be used in this way: 'It is not only that the supply of broadcasting facilities preceded the demand; it is that the means of communication preceded their content.'²¹

Considering the role of the ubiquity of broadcast media in Debord's concept of the spectacle, Williams' introjection of agency seems hopeful of the possibility of détournement – the co-opting of dominant modes of expression for revolutionary purposes, and Ballard certainly entertains this prospect, whilst undercutting it with the seemingly inherent venality of mediated dreams. Ballard's use of technology in his fictions seems to be interested in the possibilities of individual agency, specifically in the potential for the intended use of technologies to be disrupted and altered by its users, even as he remains cautious of the equal risk of misappropriation by deviant impulses. This is played off against the insidious use of technology by corporations, governments and demagogues. Always Ballard's characters seem fascinated by the potential of technology, by the original impulse which inspired its creation – the dreams behind the surface reality. This accounts for the fact that technology in Ballard's fiction, unusually for an erstwhile science fiction author, is most often contemporary or even antiquated, as though if the technology can only be pared down to its simplest form and reimagined from there, its revolutionary potential might be renewed. This is in part the impulse behind the deviances of *Crash* – the drive to understand a ubiquitous twentieth-century technology and the human relationship with it. Ballard's modern inverted Crusoes partake of this peculiar pleasure with their salvaged and improvised tools and survival kits, and in

²¹ Ibid. pp. 18-19

Hello America this drive perhaps reaches its apogee with Wayne's dream of resurrecting the once great nation:

‘Well, you're going back to the beginning, all right. Perhaps you'll start everything up again, Wayne. You could even be President [...] Think, Wayne – the forty-fifth President of the United States’ (*HA* 12)²²

The captain of the Apollo (named for the space programme) is teasing Wayne, but he has read the ambiguous motives driving much of his crew with unerring accuracy. The crew of the Apollo have pursued their dream of America across the ocean from Europe, braving the heat and radiation of the deserted continent to discover the truth about their fantasies of movie stars, limitless wealth and unmatched industrial might: a highly mediated and televisual notion of America. But both the dreams that the crew have carried with them and America's idea of itself are relentlessly satirized by the novel. The wastelands of North America are more like a bad TV commercial for late capitalism than the Promised Land that Wayne and his companions were hoping for. Not long after landing, the individualism that powered America in its heyday begins to work upon the members of the expedition, leading to conflict and the splitting of the group. They hail from a socialist or Communist-sounding regime in Europe, the ethos of which is entirely incompatible with the strident individualism of America. Like a distant future echo of the founding fathers these adventurers discover native tribes on what was assumed to be an empty land, and are every bit as willing to exploit these ‘primitives’ for their own ends. This repetition of history, and

²² Ballard explores this fantasy of a technological utopia waiting to be reborn in the novella ‘The Ultimate City’ (1976), though in this version of the dream the violence inherent in the environment and pent up in the desire for speed and power appears to suggest that technology can be both corrupting and liberating in and of itself.

the fact that the dreams which the crew carry with them to this great imaginative continent are all already mediated, seems to disavow the Romantic promise of the myth of America. But the promise of the reimagining of the continent persists; in a sense, the America of *Hello America* has its technological infrastructure and communications network in place: the new pioneers must now invent its content.

The Day of Creation perhaps foregrounds the insidious work of television upon the fabric of reality more than any of Ballard's novels.²³ Many of the events of the story are filmed by the documentary maker Sanger and his faithful companion Dr Pal. Sanger, though, is almost blind and relies upon the voice of Dr Pal, who narrates the world to him in the style of a wildlife documentary. Dr Pal is the imagination of the blind seer Sanger, narrating the landscape in quasi-Ballardian style. In *The Day of Creation*, the technology of television has been imported from the West before there is any content, and what Western content has made it over with the equipment is seen to be meaningless. Instead, in a strange recapitulation of the process Williams describes in *Television*, the Africans create their own content. In scenes that are eerily prescient of the broadcasting of the self that characterizes social media, characters watch themselves on CCTV feeds; broadcast live propaganda to an audience of practically zero; observe the world from behind broken camera lenses; and experience self-revelation in the viewing of highly symbolic videos of themselves. In his 1977 *Vogue* article 'The Future of the Future', Ballard describes the home of the future as a 'TV studio, in which we can simultaneously play out the roles of audience, producer and star' and in which '[t]he spherical mirror forms the

²³ The 2006 Harper Perennial reprint has an antiquated television on its front cover.

wall of our universe, enclosing us forever at its heart'.²⁴ Ballard has the police chief Kagwa and Noon both utilize the technology of television to bask in the projection of their own image. Noon comes to know herself in this way, or at least a mediated version of herself presented to her by the camera lens – an incarnation of the savage African queen straight out of the Orientalist imagination:

[P]ictures of herself emerging bare-breasted from the river with a fish impaled on her spear. I remembered her primitive autistic drawings on the beach at Port-la-Nouvelle. As a child Noon had possessed almost no image of herself, and these cassettes had allowed her to describe herself for the first time. I imagined her becoming a princess of the river and the forest, ruling the leopards and the giant oaks with an authority and allure modelled entirely on the poses in Sanger's tawdry films. (*DOC* 160)

Noon stops fishing, hunting and cooking for Mallory, Sanger and Dr Pal after discovering the filmed footage of herself. In an odd inversion she becomes more real to herself as she does less – as though reality is in the watching, not the doing. Noon has been transported through time from 'primitive' huntress, through the language of educational tapes played on a car stereo, and on into the 'alphabet and syntax of the film' which become 'all [that] she needed' (*DOC* 159). But this is a journey backward in terms of the West's image of Africa – from the newsreels of war and famine of the late twentieth century to the earlier and more Romanticized documentary films of a naïve and unspoiled Africa. Noon's newly discovered narcissism displeases Mallory in that she has stopped fulfilling her domestic role

²⁴ J. G. Ballard, 'The Future of the Future' (1977), (*UGM* 224-7).

aboard the ship, but he applauds her growing awareness of her own sexuality. Despite the heavy satirical components to the education of Noon in *The Day of Creation*, this appropriation of Western technology does allow her to reimagine herself as something other than a child soldier. She ‘comes of age’ so to speak through the narcissistic experience of watching herself being watched. The invasion of western technology has corrupted and caused strife in Africa, but it has also provided opportunities like these. Noon has learned to internalize the male gaze, and to use the knowledge of her sexuality to lure Mallory into completing his quest.

Mallory’s desire to destroy the river, which is so closely associated in his mind with Noon – in many ways its avatar and guardian – seems a desire to dispense with these second, third and fourth-hand clichés of Africa and make contact with some kind of ‘authentic’ experience. Rather than have his visionary river co-opted by others, he would travel to the source and choke it off. Sanger is the voice of the impossibility of this desire:

[A]n authentic first-hand experience of anything had long ceased to be of any meaning in the late twentieth century. ‘The truth is merely the lie you most wish to believe’. (*DOC* 176)

This is familiar territory; the incitement for the author to invent the truth but applied to the African continent, and the slippery solipsism that guides Western intervention in this part of the world is revealed as a matrix of hopelessly confused and damaging fantasies. The nightmare here is that perhaps that last bastion of Romantic hope – the

internal game reserve of ‘reality’ stored in our own heads – has already been colonized by the spectacle.

For Captain Kagwa, his television channel, along with the Mercedes limousine which he purchases using the money Dr Mallory paid for the navigation rights to the Mallory, are essential components of his rising importance and strengthening grip upon the land. This despite the fact that there are probably no more than a handful of working television sets in the broadcast area and no navigable roads upon which to drive his handsome German automobile: ‘...Captain Kagwa beamed out like the electronic statue of a new Ozymandias’ (*DOC* 41). There is the sense throughout *The Day of Creation* that unless the world is being recorded and documented it is not really taking place and has no claim upon reality. Mallory views the world through the cracked screen of the boat or the bullet-holed windscreen of the Mercedes, and Sanger’s camera lens is cracked. The physical damage to these portals onto other worlds underlines the warping effect that they have upon observer and observed: ‘But the torn muscles of my scalp set it askew on my skull, and in turn seemed to tilt my mind, so that it perceived the world at an odd angle, like a misaligned camera’ (*DOC* 137). Here Williams’ birth of the media landscape is rehearsed: the televisual infrastructure has arrived ahead of the content, and the struggle to kill the Mallory can be read as an attempt to resist its content developing along the deterministic lines of the recuperated Western Romantic dreams of Africa.

As was the case in *The Unlimited Dream Company* and *Hello America*, however, the very concept of Africa is so mediated through Orientalism, TV documentaries, fictions of every kind as well as personal projections of desire onto the ‘dark continent’, that any hope of contact with an authentic Africa has long since been abandoned. The vast and unforgiving landscape is instead the playground for the corrupt wielders of power and influence, trying to establish personal and idiosyncratic fiefdoms – fantasies that are fed by the all-sustaining narcissism of the camera lens. The novel itself might be seen in some sense to be Ballard’s own capitulation to the hopelessness of making contact with an unmediated Africa, spun as it is out of a nest of fictional representations – from Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* to BBC documentaries – as well as projections from Ballard’s own authorial back catalogue of images and obsessions. The huge river that Mallory calls forth from his mind, and which seems set to re-fertilize the desert and create a second Eden, wanes and disappears as quickly as it came into being. The novel ends with Mallory in the desiccated landscape in which it began, as though the creative forces that conjured the narrative are now in abeyance and awaiting their next cataclysm. Mallory serenely contemplates the next great onrush of his imagination which will call forth the Mallory’s waters once more. It is as though, in the hyper-fictionalized modern world even the traditional havens of an imagined first nature, such as the central African wilderness, are now over-signified and multiply invested with competing mythologies. As such it requires a constant effort of the imagination to stave off the intrusive visions of others, or the forces of recuperation. In this sense Mallory saves his river from the vision of commercial colonisation which he has early on in the novel, its poisoning and exploitation:

Fed by the main channel, pools of waters had formed in the waste ground, and now carried a regatta of used condoms, jettisoned by the French oil-company workers who had built their camp beside the airstrip. Looking down at this floating parade, I felt as if I had conjured up, not just this miniature river that would irrigate the southern edge of the Sahara, but the entire consumer goods economy that would one day smother the landscape in high rises, supermarkets and massage parlours. (*DOC 51*)

His quest to choke the river off at its source is a paradoxical attempt to maintain the possibility of the river's return. The 'miniature river' – the Mallory in its infancy – springs to life when an ancient oak is dug up at Dr Mallory's command. This 'long dead god of the earth' is a symbol of creative block and of the weight of the past, and its removal frees the imaginative forces symbolized by the river (*DOC 40*); and yet, paradoxically, the removal of such a venerable symbol of the natural world represents an Enlightenment remoulding of nature to fit human design. Mallory traces the water further into the forest and discovers it coursing through the grill of an abandoned car's radiator grille. On the path of Ballard's own inspirations we can now trace a course back through *Crash* and the *Atrocity Exhibition*, *The Crystal World* and *The Drowned World*, and encroaching at the edges of this journey is the desert of the future from *The Drought*. This recycling of themes and imagery, as well as enacting a form of creative *bildungsroman*, is another form of mediation – just one of the many layers of fiction which, by the end of the novel, the Mallory's brief and exuberant existence will have washed away. The death of the river Mallory, on this reading, demonstrates the infertility of a land that has been so imaginatively exploited that it can no longer sustain a novel's fantasies. There is something

vampiric or parasitic in this sense of the imagination feeding upon itself and speaks to an anxiety as to the extent to which this is sustainable or desirable. Again, an echo of the Wordsworthian recourse to memory and particularly childhood is invoked but unsettled and, in the grooming of Noon, despoiled. As Dr Mallory's imagination waxes and wanes so too does the river expand and contract, flow and stagnate. Passing through emblematic elements from Ballard's previous fictions, the river carries the reader on a guided tour of the imaginative highlights of the oeuvre so far. Again, mediation is compounded by mediation; as in *Hello America*, there is an insistent doubt as to the possibility of making or imagining anything new, but an intermittent and decadent drive to continue regardless.

Perhaps the bleakest and most problematic portrayal of Africa in *The Day of Creation* comes towards the end of the novel when Mallory has travelled almost to the source of his river. Harare's rebel forces have dammed the Mallory and diverted the water in order to irrigate the land along its banks, attracting an impromptu community of farmers, and even enticing some of Harare's rebel fighters to hang up their rifles. But the lack of knowledge that the settlers show, soiling the waters that they use for cleaning, cooking, drinking and irrigation, leads to the outbreak of disease and the withering of their crops. As the supply of water begins to wane, the sickly farmers devote their time to defending their small portions of rank water, which lie festering in the hot sun. This provides the ideal breeding ground for mosquitos, further spreading disease amongst the population. At this stage in the novel, close to the source of the Mallory and of Mallory's imaginings, the dream is rapidly becoming a nightmare. Fighting has resumed between Harare's rebels and

Kagwa's soldiers, the river is poisoned and the utopian vision of a bountiful paradise in the desert has become a diseased and squalid failure. Mallory's mediated imaginings of Africa, filtered through centuries of fictions and televisual fantasies, has run aground; he is duty-bound to put an end to his exploitative and racist vision. In the mountains Mallory discovers the source of the river and of his visions in a primordial mud soup, into the warm dissolution of which he has a powerful urge to return.

Mallory's oscillating response to the river and to the terrain and people of Africa seems to be a result of at least two competing imaginings of Africa: a Romantic vision of it as an unspoilt, if sometimes savage, paradise; and a racist vision of a people too backwards and ignorant to harness the technology which a benevolent West has bestowed upon them. *The Day of Creation*, with its depiction of exploitative Westerners and moribund Africans, unsettles Romantic notions of Africa as an unexplored, exotic continent. The paedophilic grooming and eventual sexual conquest of Noon by Dr Mallory has much to say about the exploitative relationship between Africa and the West. The consummate act of this courtship is signalled as repulsive by the foetid fountains which 'appear to be washing the young girl's body' as they copulate in an act which might at best be said to be half-consensual on the girl's part (*DOC* 250). Mallory cannot be sure if it is Noon or 'some other child of the night' that he forces himself upon on his malarial sickbed, but the signs of her presence linger in the room the next day in the form of her Lee Enfield rifle and the bloody saliva from her infected mouth wound that stains his

pillow (*DOC* 253). In this can be seen the Western dream of the sexually exploitative tourist, explored in Michel Houellebecq's novel *Platform* (2001), for instance.²⁵

Rushing to Paradise is an equally media-led story, its band of activists constantly racing to keep up with where the news agencies have decided that their story is going. The warping influence of the camera is felt most powerfully on the atoll itself where the cameras bring holiday-makers, documentary film makers, hotel and leisure chains and the attention of the outside world. The uniqueness of the package holiday experience is of course a paradox: another mass produced image and product which is consumed in an attempt to both individuate and placate the all-desiring self. The camera here, as in *The Day of Creation*, has magical, restorative powers: 'She [Dr Barbara] rallied when Neil raised the camera and began to film her (*RP* 18)'. This media savvy works in the eco-warriors' favour initially by convincing the French military to step down, but the press proves a fickle friend. Once the furore dies down and other stories replace their quest to save the albatross, the group turns in on itself in search of the enemy within. The environmental movement is portrayed as not only hopeless and too late but fuelled by unconscious motives of a deeply dubious nature, the playground of psychotics and death-obsessed dreamers.

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²⁵ The recent scandal of European aid workers sexually exploiting local women and girls lends contemporary resonance to Ballard's and Houellebecq's novels.

As is no doubt becoming familiar, the apparent pessimism and nihilism of the Ballardian surface is far from the whole picture. From death, destruction, and disaster springs new life: a new America that rekindles the frontier spirit of the founding fathers in *Hello America*; a revolution in suburbia in *The Unlimited Dream Company*; a river in the desert of central Africa in *The Day of Creation*; and a utopian drive born of impending ecological disaster in *Rushing to Paradise*. The depiction of all of these in many ways expressly unromantic worlds has the uncanny effect of proposing, or at least lamenting the lack of, their antithetical Romantic alternatives. By the same logic the resurgence of the natural world which is so prevalent in these novels, and particularly in *The Unlimited Dream Company* and *The Day of Creation*, is accompanied by the epiphanic and lyrical flights that I have been tracing throughout Ballard's oeuvre, though here they are undermined by the perpetual threat of mediation, by symbolic exhaustion and recuperation. In *The Day of Creation*, as in so much of Ballard, Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* looms large as a source of imagery, plot and symbolism, both in the narration and in the imaginations of the characters. Mallory often thinks of himself as a lonely Mariner, and the sequences of starving, heat-exhausted drifting upon the river could have come straight out of the poem. The centrality of the albatross as symbol of man's crimes against nature, and for the wounded Romantic sensibility and crippled visionary of decadence is evoked in both *Rushing to Paradise* and *The Unlimited Dream Company*, in which Blake compares himself to Baudelaire's albatross. Frequently in these novels, the faces of women float eerily in partial light, recalling Coleridge's 'nightmare life in death', as well as the Lady Geraldine from *Christabel*. Ballard invokes Coleridge, as he does throughout the oeuvre, at key moments of realization about a characters true import and their role in the narrative. As we have

seen, Romanticism continues to play a key role in the maintenance of Ballard's state of contraplex, in both its high Romantic forms and its darker more circumspect modes.

Chapter 5: Detecting the Future of Apocalypse in *Millennium People* and *Kingdom Come*

In the final phase of his career, certain of Ballard's debts to Romanticism come to the fore through the figure of the dilettante detective and urban and suburban wanderer; imaginatively recreating the man-made terrain which they traverse, stumbling into crimes in which they will become complicit, these oblique investigators of modernity stand in the line of psychogeographic explorers that includes William Blake, Thomas De Quincey, Edgar Allan Poe and Charles Baudelaire. The detective genre itself, of course, is a Romantic creation, and Edgar Allan Poe's Dupin stories are widely acknowledged to be the genesis of the form.¹ But in removing his flaneurs to the margins – the suburbs, business parks and holiday resort complexes of modernity – Ballard's characteristic ambiguity and ambivalence can also be seen to chime with postmodern detective fiction, such as Paul Auster's *New York Trilogy* (1987) or Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966). This has arguably always been an undercurrent at work in Ballard's fiction; his affectless avatars can be seen as existential investigators, probing the problems of being to a backdrop of hyperreal paranoia.

Ballard's previously prolific output of short fiction largely dried up in the early nineties. The final story of his collected *The Complete Short Stories* (2001), 'Report

¹ See, for example, Stefania Ciocia, 'The Last of the Romantics? The Accidental Investigator in Postmodern Detective Fiction' in Carman Casaliggi and Paul March-Russell eds. *Legacies of Romanticism: Literature, Culture, Aesthetics* (London: Routledge, 2013 [2012]), pp. 198-210.

from an Obscure Planet', is dated 1992. His remaining novels, having a contemporary setting, are not generally considered to be science fiction. Generically, the final quartet *Cocaine Nights* (1996), *Super-Cannes* (2000), *Millennium People* (2003) and *Kingdom Come* (2006) borrow tropes, symbols and motifs from detective, hard-boiled and noir fiction and film. Oblique investigations into seemingly motiveless crimes ostensibly drive the plots of these novels, but the motives behind the crimes remain obscure – to their perpetrators and investigators, and for the reader too. This sets up the field of enquiry as much broader than the specific crime of the piece, foregrounding instead wider societal and cultural concerns, as well as a much more pervasive sense of guilt. Irony is created by the growing awareness of the reader and the wilful ignorance of the would-be-detective protagonists. Ballard, though, upsets the generic expectations he has created, his mysteries refusing to be solved and crimes going unpunished in a manner reminiscent of the fiction of the French author Georges Simenon.² In fact, the 'detectives' of Ballard's late fiction, far from restoring the moral order, frequently find themselves aiding, abetting and perpetuating the crimes of their erstwhile quarry, working to unsettle the moral order. In this way the criminals of these novels are akin to the Bardic figures of Ballard's earlier fictions, leading the protagonists to challenge their perspectives upon the world.

² Georges Simenon's *The Mahé Circle* (1946) is very strikingly a novel of psychic fulfilment which ends in the death of its protagonist. There is much highly symbolic staring into the deep blue sea and being horrified yet compelled by what he sees which could almost have come out of the pages of *The Drowned World*. The detective novels themselves are very ambiguous, the crime solved but not reported or punished in *The Late Monsieur Gallet* (1931), for instance.

The impositions of the natural world in the final quartet are more frequent perhaps than in the Anthropocene of the ‘city cycle’, but they are also more cultivated – a tamed and potted nature which has merely been allowed or tolerated in the urban environment. Certainly there is a palpable return to the domains of the man-made, which is striking after the abundant verdure of the previous cycle. In terms of the oeuvre, this last sequence completes an undulation in the novels from the fantastic environments of the disaster cycle of chapter 2, into the contemporary 1970s cityscapes discussed in chapter 3, back once again to the far-flung and exotic locales of chapter 4, and lastly a return to the suburban environments of the final four novels discussed in this chapter.

There have been readings of the last three novels as a millennial triptych, which has the effect of connecting *Cocaine Nights* more explicitly with the earlier works, such as the short stories set in and around the fictional Mediterranean resort of *Vermillion Sands*.³ I prefer, though, to see the final four as a quartet, and one that pairs off into two opposing doubles: *Cocaine Nights* as the antithesis of *Super-Cannes*, whereas *Millennium People* contrasts with *Kingdom Come*. There is some opposition between the opposing pairs too, the earlier novels taking place abroad, the latter two in and around London (or Heathrow), and the first two really witnessing the births and foundation myths of new communities, where the final two show the convulsions of already existing classes and communities. The changes that occur in the societies of

³ See, for example, Philip Tew, ‘Situating the Violence of J. G. Ballard’s Postmillennial Fiction: The Possibilities of Sacrifice, the Certainties of Trauma’ in *J. G. Ballard: Contemporary Critical Perspectives* ed. Jeannette Baxter (London: Continuum, 2008), pp. 107-119.

all four novels are apocalyptic in nature; they involve the slow revelation to their protagonists of a different way of seeing and being in the world.

This chapter will focus upon *Millennium People* and *Kingdom Come* whilst making reference to *Cocaine Nights* and *Super-Cannes* in order to draw out Ballard's continued engagement with the dangers, paradoxes and consolations of Romanticism in his late fiction. I will firstly consider the continued presence of apocalyptic bardic figures in these late novels, accompanied by the lyrical and mythic passages and effects of the texts which speak to a visionary Romanticism at work in what on the surface appear to be relentlessly bleak modernities. Secondly, I consider the emergence of the detective figure in these fictions and the continuing Romantic and decadent resonances of their oblique investigations. This reifying of latent tropes in the oeuvre is further explored in the striking need which Ballard's protagonists' display in the suburban quartet for human contact; this was always present – though more often rendered conspicuous by its absence, as discussed in chapter 3 – but here Ballard's characters seem to show emotional need with disarming candour. Finally, I turn to the persisting ambiguity and ambivalence in Ballard's final novels, which are seen to be both indictments of suburbia and celebrations of the transformative potential of their terrain. To begin with, I will give a short outline of the plot of each of the novels to be considered.

In *Cocaine Nights*, Charles Prentice travels to the Spanish resort town Estrella de Mar in order to investigate his brother Frank's seemingly inexplicable confession to

the crimes of arson and murder. Finding Frank unwilling to aid him in clearing his own name, Charles elects to stay at his brother's apartment and looks for help from his sibling's friends and employers in the town, including the enigmatic tennis coach and sports club manager, Bobby Crawford. Charles very quickly becomes caught up in the lively nightlife of Estrella de Mar – a heady mix of sexual perversion and drug and alcohol-fuelled reverie that frequently spills over into violent crime. But Charles seems reluctant to follow the clues that are by no means difficult for the reader to deduce, and by the end of the novel, his brother all but forgotten, he begins his real assignment as Bobby Crawford's apprentice, unwittingly following in his brother's footsteps and taking the blame for another of this unhinged bard's foundational atrocities.⁴

After the overabundance of leisure and time in *Cocaine Nights*, *Super-Cannes* gives us another view of the present in the shape of the ultra-modern French business park, Eden-Olympia. Here the residents are time-poor, overworked and stressed out – verging on corporate burnout. The protagonist, Paul Sinclair, in an echo of 'The Cloud Sculptors of Coral D' from *Vermillion Sands*, is an injured pilot. He accompanies his wife, Jane, to Eden-Olympia where she has been appointed the resident doctor of the complex, replacing her predecessor David Greenwood, who was shot by Eden-Olympia's security forces after 'running amok with a rifle' (SC 3). As Jane busies herself with her new job, becoming increasingly integrated into the strange lifestyle and ethos of the business park, Sinclair finds himself drawn to the resident psychiatrist and demiurge, Dr Wilder Penrose, whose unorthodox methods

⁴ 'Deep assignments run through all our lives; there are no coincidences' (AE 16).

include therapeutic hate crimes and the encouragement of statutory rape. Torn between his interest in the mysterious shootings which brought them to Eden-Olympia, and the uneasy appeal of Penrose's visionary treatment programme, Sinclair is as little able to follow the clues laid before him as Prentice was in *Cocaine Nights*. Sinclair eventually resolves to finish the crime that he is ostensibly trying to solve, much as Prentice does in *Cocaine Nights*.

Millennium People moves the setting back to the modern London of the Millennium Dome, the glass and steel of high-rises and exclusive housing developments, by now familiar Ballardian territory. But this is also London the cultural capital – home to the Tate Modern, the British Film Institute (at the time Ballard was writing the National Film Theatre) and the National Portrait Gallery, bastions of middle-class bourgeois society. In this tale of a second bourgeois revolution, the corporate and popular psychologist David Markham becomes embroiled in a middle-class revolt that targets all that they themselves hold dearest – their art, history and culture. Feeling obscurely guilty for crimes he has not committed – such as the detonation of a bomb at Heathrow airport which kills his ex-wife – Markham is drawn to a group of highly-educated professionals who vent their anger upon the symbols of their own class. Initially engaged by the authorities as an unofficial undercover agent, Markham very quickly loses any sense of objectivity and allows himself to become an accomplice to the increasingly bizarre actions of the Chelsea Marina revolutionaries. At the same time, a current of darker and more violent terrorism seems obliquely related to the good-mannered professional rebellion at Chelsea Marina, and Markham finds himself drawn into the world of the latter-day visionary

and prophet, Richard Gould, a disgraced paediatrician with a fascinating and disturbing psychopathology. An inability to piece together the evidence that he encounters hinders Markham's ability as an investigator, and the middle class uprising is soon contained by the recuperative forces of the government and media, but not before he has accidentally foiled an assassination attempt on the Home Secretary.

Finally, *Kingdom Come* takes place largely within the environs of the twenty-first century equivalent of a cathedral, a megalithic out-of-town shopping centre. For the people of Brookfields, a suburb of Heathrow, the Metro-Centre represents the hub of their community and font of all social activity. In a drive to stimulate flagging consumerism, the mall's management recruit a would-be messiah of daytime television, David Cruise, in order to bully shoppers into fascistic gangs and sports clubs that both terrorize and stimulate the community. Richard Pearson, a recently-fired advertising executive almost off-handedly investigating his father's death at the Metro-Centre, finds himself immersed in this heady atmosphere of St George's crosses, racist attacks and aggressive, ritualistic consumption. Pearson spends most of his time putting his marketing background to good use by helping David Cruise to win the hearts and minds of the resident shoppers of Brookfields. The uprising culminates in the occupation of the Metro-Centre, and a month-long siege by the army and police that ends in its partial destruction by fire. If *Millennium People* saw the random acts of violence perpetrated by an aimless middle-class uprising, *Kingdom Come* exposes the fascistic, violent tendencies which are harnessed by consumerism ruthlessly exploited to ferment a working class rebellion with strong

fascistic parallels. *Kingdom Come* delivers on its biblical name, serving up an abundance of prophet-like figures whose apocalyptic visions warn of the coming consumer Armageddon waiting to spring up in the motorway towns around Heathrow and the M25. The deep boredom of these characterless suburbs draws the latent violence of consumerism to the surface, finding its victims in the minorities who do not worship at the temples of commerce, and erupting at fascist rallies masquerading as sporting events. Horrified by the changes that suburban sprawl and rampant consumerism have wrought upon the rural towns that they remember, a group of middle-class dissenters decide to take action, fermenting what they see as the incipient fascist infection in the hope of attracting the antibodies of the state in the form of police and military intervention. Their scheme to inoculate suburbia with a controlled dose of its own violence backfires spectacularly, however, resulting in the deaths of the majority of the conspirators, and in the rise of a true messiah of the Metro-Centre: the wilfully oblivious narrator, Pearson.

The everyday enclaves of these four novels are sites of revolution, incited by the various forms of modern malaise afflicting the communities – from ennui and stagnation in *Cocaine Nights*; overwork and exhaustion in *Super-Cannes*; to middle-class angst in *Millennium People* and declining consumer spending and racial tensions in *Kingdom Come*. Working against these forces of entropy in each case is a variation upon a programme of therapeutic violence and crime, a notion first encountered in the pseudo-scientific studies of *The Atrocity Exhibition*. The fostering of sexual assaults, racial attacks, vandalism and terrorist plots in these novels is opposed to and in reaction against the authority of the wider societies in which these

communities exist, but at the same time seems to be easily absorbed and accommodated into the economic and cultural hegemony. This is Ballard describing the endpoint of the liberal meliorism of Western capitalist society, which is forced to disingenuously cater for the evil in each of us by adopting a tolerance for therapeutic crime, violence and resistance to the established order. But, as is no doubt becoming familiar, Ballard's final novels are ambiguous in their depiction of violent upheaval. The self-willed enclaves confront their inhabitants with moral dilemmas of the sort that Ballard argued have been franchised out in liberal democracies:

[T]here's a danger that we've become excessively passive. And then our moral sensibility tends to dull and atrophy, so that when we're faced with a *real* challenge – for example *George Bush*, or Tony Blair over here – **we're too restrained, too blunted. Our moral sensibilities are too blunted to react critically.**

Also, the great institutions of the past (over here the monarchy, parliament, the church, and even the civil service) have lost their authority. And I think it's up to everyone to create their own *moral micro-climate*. [...]

I think each of us have got to put up a moral umbrella and actually work things out for ourselves. **We can't take our moral systems and our ethical systems wholesale from some central supplier – the church, the education system, whatever.** We have got to do it on a piecemeal basis. **Each of us is a kind of ethical Robinson Crusoe building a replica of**

civilized society from the sort of debris washed up on the beach – on our own beach.⁵

I quote this interview at length because I think it is an excellent example of Ballard's evolving engagement with the contemporary moral landscape. The language used harks back to earlier fictions, the beach of 'The Terminal Beach', the modern Robinson Crusoe of *Concrete Island*, and 'micro-climate' looks forward to Ballard's description of his writing practice in *Miracles of Life* (2008): 'A friendly microclimate unfurled itself from the bottle of Johnny Walker and encouraged my imagination to emerge from its burrow and test the air' (*ML* 204). To a great extent the interview describes the basic premises of a Ballard novel: the removal of patriarchal or societal authority, the power vacuum which ensues and the central character's attempts to grope towards a new moral order. What the above quotation makes clear is the extent to which all of Ballard's fictions speak urgently to the present – ambivalent and ambiguous tocsins imploring us to speed up and/or slow down. The moral free-fall in which Ballard's characters find themselves does at least force them to flex their dormant ethical consciousness, establishing new principles for a changed world. But Ballard's understanding of the present suggests that we are by and large too apathetic to realize that we are in a state of moral decline. Politically, the interview is equally ambiguous. It seems at once to celebrate individuality, personal freedom and responsibility, whilst almost lamenting the loss of the great civic and religious institutions, before recommending that they are torn down. The moral micro-climates that the final quartet of novels describe are brutal

⁵ J. G. Ballard, *J.G. Ballard: Conversations* ed. V. Vale (San Francisco: RE/Search Publications, 2005), pp. 33-4. Emphasis and italics original.

and despotic, suggesting that Ballard is well aware of the dangers inherent in the abandonment of inherited ethical systems. As ever, though, the protagonists stand slightly apart – as much observers as participants in the narratives – and perhaps fix upon a meliorated version of the revolutionary, recognizing their own repressed urges towards destruction and chaos but somehow unwilling or unable to give in to them to quite the extent that the Mephistopheles-like antagonists do (though of course in their role as the dark double of the protagonists they perhaps serve to vicariously satisfy these desires). It is a negotiated revolution that can be traced back to the first generation of British Romantics and their ambivalent reaction to the French Revolution. William Blake, through his invented mythology, and Wordsworth and Coleridge through the sublime powers of the imagination working in unison with the natural world, sought an imaginative and aesthetic revolution in place of a political one which had turned so bloody and so terrible, and which had given license to an oppressive and paranoid regime at home.⁶ Ballard's final novels, by foregrounding the uneasy interactions of micro-communities with the wider nation state, simultaneously call for change whilst depicting the potentially horrific consequences of revolution. *Estrella de Mar*, *Eden-Olympia*, *Chelsea Marina* and the *Metro-Centre* are fictional spaces in which new moralities can be tested and discarded. Fictional spaces are not necessarily 'safe', however. They bleed into the future and the past, and their revolutionary potential is – through publication, marketization and criticism – made available for recuperation.

⁶ Kenneth R. Johnston, in his *Unusual Suspects: Pitt's Reign of Alarm and the Lost Generation of the 1790s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), compares the 1790s in Britain to the McCarthy era in Cold War America. See, for example, p. 15.

The Messiahs of Modernity

Through De Quincey, Edgar Allan Poe, Charles Baudelaire and William S. Burroughs, Ballard inherits the visionary city experience, decoding the concrete and glass (or stone and brick) metropolis and re-mapping it with a projected internal landscape in drug and alcohol-fuelled meanders. Pearson in *Kingdom Come* drifts unconsciously from the M4 onto an access ramp that delivers him to the motorway town of Brookfields, dominated by the Metro-Centre shopping mall: ‘The indicator ticked at the dashboard, a nagging arrow that I was certain I had never selected’ (*KC* 3). If nineteenth- and twentieth-century fiction was preoccupied with the city, then the late twentieth- / twenty-first century novel, Ballard suggests, will be about the de-centred urban and suburban sprawl – the anonymous nowhere spaces in which we live, commute and, most importantly, consume. Ballard’s hardboiled investigators have come primarily to observe, though, and through the eyes of these passive beholders we frequently experience unexpectedly lyrical description. It is these passages that signal the apocalyptic gaze, Ballard’s late fiction continuing to segue deceptively from the prosaic to the mythical and lyrical. In *Super-Cannes*, the injured pilot Penrose longs to soar above the ersatz of the business park that has become his home, and in which inviting tree-lined pathways lead to dead-ends only feet from the main thoroughfares, and the unsustainable, ornamental foliage has to be regularly dug-up and replaced. Catching sight of a plane he slips into a lyrical reverie:

A publicity plane flew along the Croisette, its pennant fluttering like the trace of a fibrillating heart, unnoticed by the sunbathers stretched on their loungers in the hotel concessions. The pilot banked steeply when he was level with the Martinez and soared towards Juan-les-Pins and the Antibes peninsula, his

propeller shredding the air and throwing shards of sunlight across the vivid sea [...] I needed the rush of icy air over the canopy, and the flood of light that irrigated every cell in the retina, every waiting space in the soul.

(SC 107)

To the reader unfamiliar with the furniture of his fiction, such passages may be registered as a slight oddness of tone, an unusual exuberance with metaphor. The opening passage of *Cocaine Nights* is a good example:

Crossing frontiers is my profession. Those strips of no-man's land between the checkpoints always seem such zones of promise, rich with the possibilities of new lives, new scents and affections. At the same time they set off a reflex of unease that I have never been able to repress. As the customs officials rummage through my suitcases I sense them trying to unpack my mind and reveal a contraband of forbidden dreams and memories.

(CN 9)

To those familiar with the Ballardian language, however, such stylistic unease keys us straight into inner space and reminds us that the crossing of a threshold is always deeply symbolic, in the best Gothic tradition. But symbolic of what? Beneath the surface lies a proliferation of surfaces, all seemingly pointing to one another in a matrix of overdetermination. Later in this opening sequence of *Cocaine Nights*, and again in *Super-Cannes*, banks of swimming pools are imagined empty and eulogized as the enigmatic markers of a vanished civilization. The repetition of empty swimming pools throughout Ballard's oeuvre pits the fatigue of over-familiarity

against their function as mythological way points, creating a contraplexual current.

We know this story, and yet it is new:

I began to count the pools, each a flare of turquoise light lost behind the high walls of the villas with their screens of cycads and bougainvillaea. Ten thousand years in the future, long after the Côte d'Azur had been abandoned, the first explorers would puzzle over these empty pits, with their eroded frescoes of tritons and stylized fish, inexplicably hauled up the mountainsides like aquatic sundials or the altars of a bizarre religion devised by a race of visionary geometers. (SC 7)

Here the leitmotif of empty swimming pools has an incantatory power, echoing earlier fictions and placing the new landscapes of the hyper-modern French business parks into a geological time frame that renders them mysterious and imbues them with pathos.

The opening passage of *Cocaine Nights*, quoted above, evokes the Gothic with its emphatic concern with the crossing of thresholds, the breaking of bounds, the revelation of secrets and guilt, and in the case of the Spanish destination with the 'medieval constraints' of its legal system (CN 10). We can be fairly certain that what follows will include a renegotiation of the labyrinthine depths of the self, a wrestle with its subjectivist paradoxes. But Ballard has also elevated the ignominy of passport control and baggage checking – surely some of the dullest time to be spent in what Will Self calls a 'ribbon empire that encircles the globe' – imbuing it with

that grandeur and mystery that he brings to everyday objects and occurrences which have become invisible through over familiarity.⁷ This recalls William Blake's incitement to see the world with fresh eyes, to 'cleanse the doors of perception', but it may also reflect a perverse and decadent desire to celebrate the ugly or mundane – to beautify the repellent. It is with this poetic vision that Ballard has depicted motorway junctions and flyovers, motel architecture and multi-storey car parks, and his four final novels continue this imaginative transformation of our everyday environments, but it is a visionary that forever wavers on the border of the parodic and the satirical; just how numinous can we be expected to find shopping malls, housing estates and business parks?

Frequently these lyrical and mythological passages invoke the symbolism of the sun. Even in the concrete and glass of modernity, the object of the earliest forms of human worship penetrates to remind characters of the contingency of their being, of deep time and space. The central role of the sun in *The Drowned World* (1962) and again in *Empire of the Sun* (1984) makes a muted return in *Millennium People*, very often filtered through the respectably maintained canopies of suburban trees. The troubled bardic figure of the novel, Richard Gould, seems implausibly affronted by the power of the sun to control the human perception of time: 'Gould frowned at the sun, resenting its efficient control over events, and then fingered his badge, reminding himself of his own identity' (*MP* 131). Gould's concept of himself is threatened by anything that challenges his subjective re-imagining of the world, but at other times he seems to indulge in a primitive worship of the heavenly body:

⁷ Will Self and Ralph Steadman, *Psychogeography* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007), p. 16.

On the outskirts of the town there were bosky lanes and high sycamores, and Gould gazed at the distant boughs like a latter day Samuel Palmer, searching the windows of the sky for a glimpse at the light beyond. His pale hand traced the overlay of branches, as if working out a route through a maze.

(MP 177)

These are the visionary moments we might have expected the protagonist or narrator to recount in earlier Ballard, but here Gould is transported by the leafy town, the mention of Palmer – a key Romantic painter and author – seemingly inaugurating a reverie prompted by the natural world and linking Gould to a Romantic visionary tradition. But a darkness underlies his transportation. It is not only mediated through the window of a moving Range Rover, but through the fracture of an historic act of inexplicable violence; Gould is obsessed with the town of Hungerford, in which he would like to spend his final days, because it was the site of the 1996 Hungerford massacre. Markham does not share his experience of the place: ‘But the town itself was nondescript [...] it was unclear why the town should have so many visitors or why they would want to park there’ (*MP 177*). Its anonymous takeaways, coffee bars, dry-cleaners and video shops mark Hungerford as a no-place, a suburb of Heathrow, and in addition to the massacre, it is this zero quality which appeals to the errant paediatrician. Though Markham is taken in by the tenderness which Gould shows to the handicapped children for whom he cares, he cannot share in his aesthetics and is troubled by his propensity for violence, even as he is fascinated and compelled by it. In a later fugue, Gould seems an ethereal, uncanny figure:

[P]acing between the high beeches and sycamores that grew along the river. He paused after a few steps and raised his hands to search the topmost branches. Even across the park I could see his pale hands held against the light. (*MP* 208)

His paleness, an almost ghostly, skeletal quality, aligns him with the lamias of Ballard's earlier fiction, but also with the pale-suited, death-like antagonists, such as Strangman from *The Drowned World* or Basie from *Empire of the Sun*:

His bony face was lit by the sun, a pale lantern swaying among the tree trunks. He stared over my head, his fixed attention on a point far beyond the focus of his eyes. All the bones in his face had come forward, their sharp ridges cutting against the transparent skin, as if his skull was desperate for the light.

(*MP* 208)

But there is a religious, devotional quality to his transports in the sun: 'hands clutching at the air like a devout seminary student gazing at a rose window in a great cathedral' (*MP* 208). Markham wrongly diagnoses this reverie as 'a warning aura before an epileptic fit', but the truth is, again, far more disturbing. Gould is basking in the afterglow of a senseless murder, which Ballard seems to have modelled on the 1999 shooting of Jill Dando. The almost supernatural rendering of Gould in moments like this, and after such atrocious crimes, lend to him the aspect of the ghoul which his name suggests, and connects these uncanny passages with Romantic precursors like Coleridge, and the apparitions that appear in *The Ancient Mariner*

and *Christabel*. Gould is a bardic figure then, but one whose calling card is a highly decadent aesthetic which draws life and creativity from death, violence and decay.

Much as in the relationship between James Ballard and Vaughan in *Crash*, the central relationship which is explored in *Millennium People* is that between Markham and his disturbing double, Gould. Markham even goes so far as to wear Gould's stained lab coat, after the doctor leaves it in the boot of his car. This uncanny doubling plays with the ideas of complicity and guilt in a spectacular society, the vicarious thrill of a violence which is witnessed but from which we nonetheless feel protected. Gould's appeal for Markham is as somebody able and willing to act upon his darker urges, crossing the mental bridge into actual acts of gratuitous violence in search of greater knowledge of the self. Markham stubbornly refuses to admit what the evidence seems to scream, not fully believing that Gould is responsible for his crimes, even after the paediatrician confesses to the shooting of the 'likeable blonde' television presenter, two fatal bombings and an attempt to assassinate the Home Secretary (*MP* 209) – a myopia that suggests the proximity blindness of a too-near double. After his death, Markham remembers Gould in the way that one might a fallen hero, the period of his ascendancy imbued with the mythic quality of the halcyon days of a Romantic childhood:

[A] brief period when Chelsea Marina was a place of real promise, when a young paediatrician persuaded the residents to create a unique republic, a city without street signs, laws without penalties, events without significance, a sun without shadows. (*MP* 293-4)

‘A sun without shadows’ recalls Jim’s descriptions of the atomic explosions over Hiroshima and Nagasaki, which he hallucinates towards the end of *Empire of the Sun*. These impacts, emblazoning upon the mind of the young boy the sublime power of technology – both its deadly and life-saving potential – reverberate throughout the oeuvre as a kind of founding myth of the birth of a creative sensibility. Gould’s crimes and memory function similarly here for Markham in his belated adulthood: ‘We’re all bored, David, desperately bored. We’re like children left too long in a playroom’ (*MP* 115). Gould’s death is figured as the death of the actual sun that he has worshipped, and the police helicopter that strafes the Chelsea Marina garage in which he is shot is ‘an ugly beast that seemed to devour the sun and spit it out as noise’ (*MP* 224).⁸

And yet this mythic memory is undermined by the infinite vacuity of space inside the skulls of Gould’s idiot child patients; the idea of the Romantic idea of childhood is maligned and figured as a void, briefly illuminated by the manual stimulation of their infant sexualities by the hand of their wayward paediatrician: ‘The great taboo [...] a few seconds of pleasure touched those damaged brains before they died’ (*MP* 132). Gould speaks of a crime having been perpetrated against these innocents by nature, a strikingly similar phrase to that which Ballard used to describe the death of his young wife, Mary Ballard in 1964.⁹ Some great trauma has created a similar void

⁸ Ballard seems to have a particular ire for helicopters. Normally rapturous about winged-flight, helicopters are minatory presences in his fictions, reminding us in *The Atrocity Exhibition*, for instance, of the deep chasm that divides the animal and mineral worlds (*AE* 38).

⁹ ‘Why had nature committed this terrible crime against this young woman, who was then only about thirty three or thirty four with three young children.’ “2006: Jonathan Weiss. ‘Not entirely a journey without maps: J. G. Ballard on The Atrocity Exhibition’” (*EM* 450).

inside Gould, his mind 'empty enough to contain the sea' (*MP* 260). The word 'empty' echoes through *Millennium People*, the streets, houses and apartments, cars, drinking vessels, meaningless acts and minds are all described thus. Reconnecting with a sense of infinite space, a staring into the abyss, motivates Gould's acts of terrorism: 'An empty space we could stare into with real awe. Senseless, inexplicable, as mysterious as the Grand Canyon' (*MP* 249). This is the kind of grand arbitrariness that makes and unmakes suns, cosmic indifference of the sort that Ballard's characters have long been grappling with, and which might be said to make a mockery of the idea of a divine or transcendent self. However, this brush with infinitude can also be seen to have the moral significance of the Wordsworthian sublime: Markham takes the blame for the murders at the end of the novel, allowing Stephen Dexter – the archetypal hero of the piece – to escape, and Markham, his wife Sally and Dexter all benefit from their exposure to the sublime in the shape of Gould. Sally finds in the meaninglessness of his violent crimes, and the studied pointlessness of the Chelsea Marina rebellion, a way to overcome her own rage at being arbitrarily severely injured by a faulty tram on holiday. Dexter rediscovers his waning faith in God and escapes to Tasmania where he clears a runway and repairs a classic aeroplane – symbolizing the rebirth of his imagination; flight in Ballard often represents the soaring of the unfettered self, an escape from psychological bondage. For Markham, taking the credit for the double homicide, as well as his involvement in the Chelsea Marina uprisings, allows him a therapeutic brush with mortality and the terror of an unfeeling universe, enabling him to reconcile with his wife, his job and his middle-class life. This seems to suggest the necessity of evil and its energy as an antidote to the flattening of affect produced by the media landscape: a Blakean acceptance of the necessity of opposite but productive energies.

The messiahs of *Kingdom Come* appear to be many at first, but the various mouthpieces for the thesis of the novel all have their proclamations drawn from them by the void that is the narrator and protagonist, Pearson. His ostensible goal in the novel is to discover the identity of his father's killer, who fired into the lunchtime crowd at the Metro-Centre, killing his father and two others and injuring many more. But Pearson is driven by a number of pathological desires which cluster around his sense of rejection by the world, his wife, his advertising agency, and his father who he barely knew. These factors draw him to the embrace of the Metro-Centre's fascist community and incite him to pursue the extreme advertising methods that got him fired from his previous firm. By setting in motion the chain of events that would summon Pearson to the mall, the conspirators summon a golem which they cannot control – one that is capable of bringing about the apocalypse that they would avoid. Pearson's double in this tale is the Christ-like Christie, a sometime mental patient who the conspirators cajole into carrying out the shooting at the mall. Like Pearson, Christie is a visionary who is able to see the underlying emotions and desires that drive consumerism, but whereas Pearson revels in this knowledge, Christie is disturbed by it and does what he can to undermine the mesmeric power of the Metro-Centre. Between these two alternate prophets sits the presiding deity of the mall, David Cruise; a small-time TV actor turned shopping channel presenter and local sports commentator. As the figurehead of the Metro-Centre, Cruise is the target of Christie's botched assassination attempt. In his failed attempt to kill David Cruise, Christie inadvertently brings about his apotheosis. Whether they abhor the processes which they see at work in late-capitalist consumer society or revel in them, the rival

prophets of *Kingdom Come* share a fascination with the decay of society manifested in the shopping malls and motorway towns that have replaced the old civic centres, and it wrings from them a poetry that is decadent in its adornment of the diseased.

At the end of *Kingdom Come*, Pearson looks at the crowds of shoppers watching the smouldering ruin of the Metro-Centre: ‘In time, unless the sane woke and rallied themselves, an even fiercer republic would open the doors and spin the turnstiles of its beckoning paradise’ (*KC* 280). As a thoroughly untrustworthy narrator and semi-conscious instigator of the insurrection that has been violently put down by the military, it would be foolish to count Pearson amongst the sane. In all likelihood he is thinking of the mental patient and assassin, Christie, the Christ to his Satan. Like Blake’s giant forms, Pearson and Christie represent the warring aspects of our ambivalence towards consumer culture – Christie our unchained hatred, and Pearson our pleasure in being enslaved. Standing betwixt them, the figure that combined their paradoxical energies in one form was David Cruise, and they both contributed to his martyrdom. Pearson prepared him for existence in the immortal plane of image through advertising billboards and cable TV broadcasts and Christie, on the second attempt, released him into that overlit realm by killing him.

Much of the would-be-detective protagonists’ time in Ballard’s suburban quartet is spent in flâneur-like fugues, roaming on foot or driving the streets of the emergent communities that they have found themselves in; like modern-day revenants of De Quincey, or Poe’s narrator from ‘The Man of the Crowd’ (1840), their amoral

drifting inaugurates a different kind of investigation. In cars, the protagonists frequently have passengers intervene to steer for them, or else they are driven by their wives or colleagues, and very often too the clutch is depressed disengaging the engine, so that the sense is of the rational mind not being in control and of unconscious forces driving the events of the novels. In addition to the accidental detective narrators, the lamia figures that have haunted Ballard's fictions make an easy transition into the *femmes fatales* of detective and noir fiction and film. The sense one has in a Philip Marlowe novel, for instance, of a detective who solves crimes almost by accident, who is a hostage to fortune, and who is bemused and beguiled by glamorous and mysterious but vulnerable women, chimes very well with Ballard's benighted heroes. The passivity and blindness of the would-be investigators seems to be taken to a parodic height, but it actually makes an oblique kind of intertextual sense when we remember that Ballard's characters have always to some extent been the archetypal projections of the protagonist's psyche, fulfilling a symbolic narrative role in their psychological *bildungsromans*. These might appear to be good examples of postmodern detective stories, which Bran Nicol has described thus: "In particular, postmodern detective fiction draws the reader into the activity of 'paranoid reading' only to frustrate his or her efforts at interpretation".¹⁰ But Ballard upsets even the expectations of postmodern detective fiction – the mystery of the crime and who was responsible in the most prosaic sense will be patently obvious to most readers well before the protagonist is able to piece the clues together, and not because we are privy to information that they are not, but because of the oblique angle from which they view the world. This does have the 'intention,

¹⁰ Bran Nicol, *The Cambridge Introduction to Postmodern Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 226.

or at least the effect, of asking questions about mysteries of being and knowing which transcend the mere machinations of the mystery plot', but there is another layer of frustrated expectations at work here, and a perpetuation of the mystery of the crime at the level of motive and latent content, rather than strict 'whodunit'.¹¹

It is here that an appreciation for the decadent inheritance at work in these novels can help us. Ballard's investigators are attempting to understand the latent meanings of the crimes that draw them into the narratives, an approach that is more aesthetic than investigative in the empirical sense. Coming to appreciate the strange logic behind the atrocities, these decadent detectives finally come to accept an oblique responsibility for the crimes that their criminal doubles have committed. They are like Poe's Dupin, ratiocinating his way into the minds of his quarry, only they carry the process too far and relinquish any hope of finding a way back. In the shared appreciation for an aesthetics of crime, societal decline or decay, criminal and detective partake of an apocalyptic insight that reveals the underlying forces at work in human behaviour. The use of colourful metaphor and symbolism gives to the reveries and fugues that reveal these visions a Romantic hue, but the subject matter upon which this lyricism is bestowed renders it decadent. As noted above, the bardic imagination in these novels is accompanied by a more overt sense of emotion or its lack, and this is particularly so in *Kingdom Come*.

¹¹ Patricia Merivale and Susan Elizabeth Sweeney, 'The Game's Afoot: On the Trail of the Metaphysical Detective Story' in Patricia Merivale and Susan Elizabeth Sweeney, eds. *Detecting Texts: The Metaphysical Detective Story from Poe to Postmodernism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), quoted in *ibid*.

The Life of Affect

Ballard's protagonists very often observe their own transit into the affectless realms of modernity with a disquieting, almost clinical detachment. But in these final four novels there seems to be a widening of the emotional spectrum to include a need and desire for human contact. This is a relocating into the characters of a tendency observed in chapter 3, in which the absence of affect in the novel produces it in the reader. Again, such a paradoxical incitement to feel complicates the notion of Ballard as merely celebrating bleak modernity in these novels, and suggests that things might or ought to be different. This is most evident in *Kingdom Come*, in which Pearson repeatedly reaches out to those around him to give or receive physical and emotional recognition or comfort, but is serially rebuffed. Pearson, and his father before him, seem to like almost everybody that they come into contact with, even violent racists and crypto-fascists. Early in the novel, having arrived in the endless sprawl of the motorway towns, Pearson attempts to befriend the natives:

A pleasant middle-aged couple paused by the window, leaning against each other in a show of affection. Happy for them, I tapped the broken glass and gave a vigorous thumbs up. Startled by the apparition smiling a few inches from him, the husband stepped forward to protect his wife and touched the metal flag in the lapel of his jacket. (*KC* 8)

The rejection of his friendly overture, and the husband's proffering of the St George's cross on his lapel – indicating his membership of a violent gang – sets the parameters for the rest of the novel. Pearson will continue to look for recognition from those around him, and from the memory of his dead father, but his rejection

will eventually drive him into the consumer-fascist bosom of the Metro-Centre. In another such moment, Pearson places a hand on the young manager of the mall, 'trying to calm him' even as he takes him through the last moments of his father's life (*KC* 41). But again Pearson's attempt to connect emotionally with another human being is seen to be misplaced, the manager responding with a barrage of robotically recited facts: 'He spoke rapidly, as if reading from a press handout' (*KC* 41). As the tour continues, the proper place for emotion in this consumer society is revealed. During the shooting, the three bears – giant mechanical mascots of the mall – were injured, 'people were very affected', and '[t]hey sent in hundreds of letters, get-well cards', flowers, pots of honey and small teddy bears (*KC* 42-3). Pearson learns from the shrugging off of his physical intimacies, beginning to place his faith in objects; as the tour ends he places his finger in the dented rail near to where his father was shot, 'taking the last pulse of [his] father's life, a final contact with the man [he] never knew' (*KC* 44). But he never loses the desire to be physically acknowledged by another. Late in the novel, even as he seems to have 'accepted the discipline that these [Metro-Centre] appliances and bathroom fittings imposed' (*KC* 235), he still dreams of an intimacy between himself and the doctor that he has fallen for: 'I wanted to sit next to her and take her worn hands, but I knew she would see the gesture as mawkish and irrelevant' (*KC* 255). His isolation eventually drives him towards the fascist mob that he helped to create; no matter how violent and abhorrent, he begins to find their sense of community and purpose alluring. Watching a group of prisoners volunteering to join the ranks of their captors and oppressors during the long occupation of the Metro-Centre in a disquieting re-enactment concentration camp life, Pearson eulogises the moment: 'They were immigrants to a new country, already naturalized, citizens of the shopping mall, the

free electorate of the cash till and the loyalty card' (*KC* 243). But as he limps towards them he is steered away by the deviant psychologist, Maxted, who says to him: 'Dear chap you were going to join them, the Metro-Centre finally got to you...' (*KC* 243). This is another of the ways in which Pearson's desire for contact with those around him is refused – he finds himself escorted away from the objects of his affection like an errant child by a parent. Indeed, the police officer, Falconer, describes him as 'a little boy lost in a toy factory' (*KC* 248).

Pearson's continually rebuffed outreaching has the effect of creating sympathy for him in the reader – this despite his wilful blindness to the crucial part that he plays in the fascist insurrection in Brooklands, and the pain and suffering of the minority communities for which he is at least partially responsible. His moments of attempted tenderness have the effect to highlighting the lack of emotion in the consumerist realm of the novel, and make him, rather worryingly, one of Ballard's most 'likeable' characters. His childlike wonder at the world, even one as dispiriting as sublime suburbia of Brooklands and the Metro-Centre, discovers the numinous in the mundane and quotidian: 'As the afternoon ended, a reddish glow lit the deep mirror of the Metro-Centre dome, an inner sun' (*KC* 24). Pearson's powerful, child-like imagination and need for love have been perverted by the affectless realm of modernity, and to some extent the channelling of emotion into racist violence and fascist solidarity carries a humanistic warning about the dire consequences of such neglect. The overall effect is something like that produced by Wordsworth's mentally and physically forlorn subjects; Pearson's crimes – and Prentice's,

Sinclair's and Markham's too – hold at bay our pity, whilst allowing us to deplore the conditions that are the sufficient condition of their behaviour.

Revolution and Reaction

Ballard's final quartet offers a bleak depiction of the motives behind the dominant economic order of the twentieth century, and yet they seem to hold out the hope of a revolutionary break with the oppressive recent past. A key moment in *Millennium People* sees Markham fleeing the scene of his first consciously revolutionary act – the lighting of a fire at the National Film Theatre. Abandoned by his co-conspirators, he finds his way onto a gondola on the Millennium Wheel, or London Eye. It is a scene straight out of Carol Reed's *The Third Man* (1949): Harry Lime (Orson Welles) talking to Holly Martins (Joseph Cotten) on top of a ferris wheel overlooking Vienna, expounding upon his deeply ambiguous racketeer's morality. So even as Markham watches 'The fires [...] engulfing the smiles of James Stewart and Orson Welles, Chaplin and Joan Crawford' he feels that his 'memories of them seemed to rise with the turning Wheel, escaping from a depot of dreams that was giving up its ghosts to the night' (*MP* 125). Is this the destruction of and escape from Hollywood representation, or its release and even apotheosis? Earlier in the raid Markham describes the security guards as being surprised to find themselves in the plot of one of their venerated gangster movies, and now, even as he watches the film archives burn, he is rehearsing a scene from a classic of cinema and feeling his filmic memories wax. The attempt to burn away all of that shared cultural capital is a failure: Markham remains trapped in and determined by his relationship to the images that have bombarded his consciousness, by his celluloid memories. This is

the past as Gothic and inescapable – the dark other of that from which Wordsworth draws succour. But David Gould does not expound upon his schemes or his revolutionary morality in the gondola, Ballard unsettling the expectations set up by movie knowledge, thwarting the reader. Instead Markham seems to experience something of the confusion of meeting a double: ‘A dark fire drew closer’ (*MP* 125). Gould’s disguise as a waiter and the hard aloofness beneath the professional veneer also seems to recall *Fight Club*, the novel (1996) and the film (1999), further mirroring the revolutionary act in mediated repetition. And so Markham’s bold attempt to escape the media-determined nature of the self remains wedded to representation; literature and film can represent the destruction of one another and themselves, but only it seems in terms of their own inescapable, self-perpetuating language.

The smoke from the fire at the National Film Theatre blackens the London Eye, transforming it into ‘A machine from a painting by Bosch, grinding out time and death’ and perhaps denoting the blind destructiveness of violence, troubling the visionary pretensions of its perpetrators and underscoring the fascistic tendencies of revolutionary impulses and movements (*MP* 141). Worse still, any potentially revolutionary impulse or movement is immediately hoovered up by consumerist culture and retailed back to the revolutionaries. In *Millennium People*, even as the insurrection rages in Chelsea Marina, the nearby shops are selling combat fatigues and outfits inspired by the struggle. At the end of the novel Kay Churchill, the spokesperson of the Chelsea Mariners, enjoys a modest celebrity from her involvement in the struggle, winning herself a book deal and a regular newspaper

column, and Markham himself ponders writing a book about the events – thereby consigning the fledgling revolution to history and rendering it harmless.

But Ballard seems to propose a recipe for resisting the recuperation which appears to be the fate of the Chelsea Mariners, and it is a method which might be seen to be at work in his own perpetual ambiguities and ambivalence. Gould is the mouthpiece for this paradoxical logic of the ceaseless rebellion which owes much to the thought of the Situationist International: ‘A pointless act has a special meaning of its own. Calmly carried out, untouched by any emotions, a meaningless act is an empty space larger than the universe around it’ (*MP* 176). Only meaningless acts can ‘succeed’ because there is no criteria against which to judge their failure or success, and by virtue of their destabilizing obscurity they resist commodification and representation. This is a nihilistic and bitter vision of the only recourse against the global monoculture of capitalism and the suburbanization of the planet. But at the same time that image of a space larger than the universe that surrounds it begs to be filled by the imagination – a sublime space for that Romantic faculty to transform. Gould has chosen an extreme metaphor, but meaningless acts do not have to be violent. The Chelsea Mariners capitulated just as they were winning, and Markham postulates that they did this in order to enshrine the pointlessness of their rebellion against their own culture and values. By being neither defeated nor victorious, the threat of its resumption and the mystery of its origins is preserved. If there is detectable here the shadow of a glimmer of a hope, then that is the candour of Ballard’s continued engagement with the paradoxes of Romanticism at the end of his career.

Each of these stories, like crime-genre novels, are presided over by a great atrocity which ostensibly motivates the investigative plot. Because they are also tales of the attempted formation of new communities, these crimes also function as foundation myths. In *Kingdom Come*, for instance, the meaningless massacre of three shoppers in the Metro-Centre (and the injuring of the sacred teddy bears!) becomes the shared guilt and atrocity that binds together a fledgling movement: the Romulus and Remus myth of a suburb of Heathrow. And these crimes are bound by the law of repetition; the health and well-being of the citizens of these micro states is guaranteed by the threat of further atrocity, and social cohesion is ensured by their continued complicity with violence. Early in the novel, Pearson finds himself in a landscape which is primed for such random outbreaks of violence around which people will briefly bond:

Nothing now made sense except in terms of transient airport culture. Warning displays alerted each other, and the entire landscape was coded for danger. CCTV cameras crouched over warehouse gates, and filter-left signs pulsed tirelessly, pointing to the sanctuaries of high-security science parks. (KC 6)

In this ‘inter-urban sprawl’ there are ‘few signs of permanent human settlement’, it is like a new wild west, frontier territory, in need of a shared trauma and enemy to invigorate the would-be settlers (KC 6). It is also a post-human landscape, de-centred dwellings lacking any sense of cohesion, ‘no cinemas, churches or civic centre, and the endless billboards advertising a glossy consumerism sustained the only cultural life’ (KC 6). There is something apocalyptic in this representation of twenty-first-

century consumer society, as though Pearson were a visitor to Hell, searching for his Virgil. The congregations in the Metro-Centre later in the novel reinforce this biblical / Blakean vision: 'Freezer cabinets as hot as ovens would suddenly burst from their hinges, each one a vent of hell...', the shopping mall figured as a terrestrial pandemonium, with David Cruise as its very own TV-tanned Satan (*KC* 257).

Ballard's fictions often feature attempts to found new mythologies: the beach massacres of *The Drought* (1965); Vaughan's attempt to kick-start a celebrity autogeddon in *Crash*; and the many crimes and deaths of Blake in *The Unlimited Dream Company*. Ballard's engagement with these themes in his late fiction is, as always, deeply ambiguous. Abhorring the means and lambasting the need, nevertheless these pioneers of new ways of being are celebrated with a lyrical intensity, whilst the conditions which provoke their wayward geniuses are simultaneously lauded and lamented. Ballard's bleak depiction of modernity strikes cynical notes and works as reprehensibly funny satire. In fact, these are probably Ballard's most humorous novels; it is laughter in the dark, but the recurrence of absurd humour requires further exploration. In *Kingdom Come*, for example, an attack on a Bangladeshi restaurant by a team of England-shirt-wearing football supporters is described as 'good humoured' and a 'prank' (*KC* 291). The phrasing of this passage is deeply unsettling because it renders the racist violence almost negligible, described in anthropological and dry tone that almost disguises the real event. This is both funny and terrifying as an example of the manipulability of language, the potential for the distortion of the messages that reach us, toying with the advertising and consumption themes of the novel. But as with all dystopian

fiction, *Kingdom Come* suggests the possibility or the desire that things might be otherwise – inaugurating utopian dreaming. Indeed, these no-places between towns, these psychic zeros, are closer to that potential than the nineteenth-century city centres like London; having escaped the dead hand of history they are zones of limitless possibility, with a dangerous but invigorating lack of moral certainty.

In the opening lines of *Kingdom Come*, the narrator, Richard Pearson, idly surmises the suburban sprawl through which he is driving in his Jensen:

THE SUBURBS DREAM of violence. Asleep in their drowsy villas,
sheltered by benevolent shopping malls, they wait patiently for the
nightmares that will wake them into a more passionate world... (KC 3)

For David Markham in *Millennium People*, that nightmare was Richard Gould, for Richard Pearson the nightmare is the threat of violence underlying consumer culture in the Metro-Centre, a suburban nowhere which he feels that he and his fellow advertising executives have invented. Pearson finds himself in that vertigo-inducing gap between the sign and the signified which Roland Barthes described. The residents of Brooklands, egged on by the managers of the modern cathedral of consumerism, the Metro-Centre, have poured into that gap all of their latent psychopathologies, their fears and desires. Underlying this overt warning about fascism is a more troubling engagement with the legacy of Romanticism. Fascism has of course been laid at the door of Romanticism, as has the totalitarian dream turned nightmare of Soviet-era communism. There seems to be in these last four

novels a Modernist elitism which disdains and fears the mass of desiring humanity and finds abhorrent the thought of their each having a need for individuation which their education and/or aesthetics will render risible and ugly. Romanticism Idealism, particularly that of Wordsworth's egotistical sublime, is to some extent a dream of the few on behalf of the many.

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In his final quartet Ballard maintains the studied ambiguity and ambivalence, of which Romanticism forms a part, and which I have been referring to as a state of contraplex. The portrayals of modernity in *Cocaine Nights*, *Super-Cannes*, *Millennium People* and *Kingdom Come* are terrifyingly bleak and seem to hold out little hope for the future, depicting societies caught between stupefying ennui and affectlessness and the various apocalyptic solutions of psychopathic demagogues and would-be bards. What is worse, the shadowy authority of the state and military offer no security and seem complicit in both conditions: 'violence is the true poetry of government' (KC 251). Undermining this unremitting bleakness of outlook, however, is a decadent aesthetics which lyrically celebrates just such societal decline and decay, such that the experience of reading these texts very often runs counter to the expected emotional response to the plotted events. This seems to gesture towards the possibility for a Romantic inner revolution built upon visionary insight and aesthetics, such as that to which the English Romantics turned after the despairing of political change. And yet these novels also dramatize the dire danger of such a solipsistic flexing of the imaginative capacity, insisting upon the moral nature of any aesthetic system, and of its far-reaching ability to affect the world. Ballard's

revolutions prove to be violent, built upon atrocity and maintained through fear and manipulation, but he nonetheless seems to celebrate the very possibility of change, no matter how dire the consequences. The Romantic poets were fascinated by extreme mental states, by visionary highs and abyssal depths, and Ballard's deranged bards stand in that tradition. The deep pathology of late capitalist consumerism renders the need for the imagination to transform the world ever more urgent, but exponentially increases the inherent dangers of such a revolution.

Afterword: Notes towards a Ballardian Romantic Legacy

My study had dual aims in relation to Ballard studies. Firstly, I wished to return to the somewhat discredited readings of Romantic transcendence in Ballard in order to complicate and bring specificity to their invocations of highly contentious and contested terms. Part of my argument has been that Ballard knowingly engages with and has contributed to the rich intellectual history and contestation of Romanticism and its major tropes of the imagination, transcendence, dissolution, and the deep self. Furthermore, through a more nuanced approach to Ballard's drawing upon and questioning of Romantic legacies, further Romantic dialogues can be seen to emerge, such as the ambivalent Romantic reaction to what some writers of the period understood in terms comparable to Guy Debord's 'society of the spectacle', and which Gillen D'Arcy Wood has called a crisis of the 'real'. Secondly – though necessarily for this study, subordinately – I wished to contribute to the reintroduction of historical engagement and specificity in Ballard's oeuvre which studies such as Andrzej Gasiorek's, Jeannette Baxter's and David Ian Paddy's have placed at the centre of their criticism.¹ Having established what I believe to be a more secure basis for the consideration of Romanticism as one of the central components of what I have been calling Ballard's studied ambiguity and ambivalence, taking its place alongside Surrealism and Psychoanalysis, I have made some gestures towards the importance of particular Romantic authors and texts, but much of this work remains to be done, with my thesis hopefully having opened up a space for such future

¹ See David Ian Paddy, *The Empires of J. G. Ballard: Imagined Geographies* (London: Gylphi Limited, 2015).

research. To some extent we all in Ballard studies await the publication by Ballard's estate of the details of his personal library, and such correspondence and other material that did not make it into the British Library's archive. We know, for instance, that he numbered Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner* amongst his favourite works, and that he was an avid reader of the late-Romantic Edgar Allan Poe, but did a volume of William Blake, William Wordsworth or John Keats grace his shelves, and did his first knowledge of Romanticism come from his school or university days? For the moment these questions remain unanswered, but I have certainly identified Blakean, Wordsworthian and Shellyean moments in the texts themselves, and attempted to understand the complex role that these Romantic invocations play in Ballard's contraplexual writings. One way in which my study has contributed to the historicising of Ballard is in drawing attention to the way in which he can be seen to restage and interrogate aesthetic and intellectual history since at least the Romantic era, taking us through its nineteenth-century descendants in the forms of decadence and symbolism, and on into the twentieth century and Surrealism. Again, further research could usefully complicate this with Ballard's equally ambivalent attitude towards Modernism – perhaps the fourth current in the contraplexual circuit. There are, of course, other minor tributaries to explore: what of Ballard's 'armchair psychogeography' which to a great extent created the worlds which his literary protégés Iain Sinclair and Will Self now explore, and what of his lasting impact upon the writers of modern fiction and science fiction such as James Blythe, Sam Smith, China Miéville and Will Wiles?

With regard to the field of Romantic legacies my thesis contributes to a wider understanding of the long shadow that the period casts over our own, and a further area that I would like to explore as an offshoot of my thesis, and which combines the fields of Romantic legacies and genre studies, is a sustained investigation of the influence and engagement with Romanticism in the science fiction and fantasy genres. Dan Simmons' novels *Hyperion* and *Endymion* certainly spring to mind, as do the works of his literary forbears Michael Moorcock and Brian Aldiss, and the more recent works of China Mieville and Jeff Vandermeer. There is a little crossover here with the previous point that I made regarding Ballard's lasting legacy, and what is perhaps of most interest to me is a potential line of enquiry that would seek to understand the difference between Romantic science fiction as a generalised generic inheritance, and a specific inheritance of what I have been referring to as a wounded Romanticism from J. G. Ballard.

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