Jerusalem and albion: an ecological perspective on contemporary british theatre

“ As the ninth, tenth, and eleventh strokes struck, a huge blackness sprawled over the whole of London. With the twelfth stroke of midnight, the darkness was complete. A turbulent welter of cloud covered the city. All was darkness; all was doubt; all was confusion. The Eighteenth century was over; the Nineteenth century had begun” (Virgina Woolf, Orlando)

In Orlando Virginia Woolf describes the shift between centuries as the shifting of “ turbulent” clouds; meteorological movement is linked with the movement of society from one state into another. If the twelfth stroke of midnight represents the moment of this epochal transition, then Mike Bartlett’s Albion and Jez Butterworth’s Jerusalem and The Ferryman tell stories of the eleventh hour, set on the brink of the final stroke. Each play concerns itself with the perceived threat towards a particular way of life; in Jerusalem the modern “ Green Man” protagonist faces eviction from his mobile home; the IRA intrudes upon the domestic life of a Northern Irish family during the Troubles in The Ferryman; Albion depicts a woman’s futile attempts to salvage a decaying aristocratic garden in the wake of her son’s death. The attempt to find purpose in the face loss – more broadly an apparent cultural loss – affects the lives of each character. The struggle manifests itself in the return of myth, and both writers – but Butterworth in particular – toy with collective identity and cultural heritage through use of the mystical. Ghosts, giants, banshees seep their way into a landscape that is both surreal and familiar: a contemporary battle between logos and mythos, logic and dreams and imagination and reality. Perhaps it is already cliché to state that the characters are haunted by their pasts1, but rather the dramatic tension seems to come from the attempt to hold on to, or reclaim

this past, in the face of the “ twelfth stroke”. Crucially, these efforts to revive old values or retreat into the mythical must reconcile itself, or otherwise fail to reconcile, with oncoming change – a change that is closely interwoven with the landscape, natural world and climate.

The struggle to find purpose is explored throughout Albion, and the word itself repeatedly crops up throughout the play: Zara claims that “ I’m after a dream. A sense of purpose, I suppose”, while her mother insists that her son (James Walters) died “ for a purpose”. In the case of the latter “ purpose” is tied with a perceived set cultural values, the defense of England – Albion – for a just cause. Yet if the exact nature of these values is difficult to pinpoint within the text it is because they are intentionally obscured – for Audrey the ideal England is a paradoxical mix of romanticism for the aristocracy and a business orientated, “ Thatcherite” 2 ethos of “ hard work”. Regardless of whether these values can be precisely defined, they are nevertheless perceived by Audrey to be in decline. The death of her own child progresses into an attempt to return things to the way she was as a child, the catalyst of what forms the premise of the play:

“ As a child there were a number of big houses in this area (…) I thought when I grew up that would be the world I’d inherit … it was all… destroyed. It’s easy to mock but there was culture there. Most other countries preserve their past. The embarrassed and insecure English discard it.”

This childhood desire – now the remnant of a discarded culture – remerges in Audrey’s purchase of Albion and the Red Garden (once belonging to her uncle), previously a memorial to those who had lost their lives in the First

World War and founded by a famous aristocrat. In revivifying and tending to it, Audrey claims that she is “ sticking to a set of values. I’m holding the line. Or we’d have chaos.” Her garden becomes a symbol of a class structure on the precipice of extinction, a system deeply rooted within her conception of English cultural identity. In her recent examination of gardens in literature Annette Giesecke argues that “ A garden is always a utopian construct, for its creation is predicated on hope – hope that what one has planted will grow, that one’s plantings will provide nourishment for the body and for the soul.” 3 In Albion, Audrey’s project is in a sense a utopian one: as the first garden in history to explore the “ chaos of nature in a formal setting”, Albion is a vestige of an idealized social order. And yet by nature of their very existence, gardens must constantly be maintained and ordered to avoid decay; likewise, the cultural order Albion represents exists continually on the precipice of collapse – “ the eleventh strike”.

Multiple reviewers have pointed to the similarities between The Cherry Orchard and Albion4. Both texts describe the loss of an old social order: in Chekov’s work the Russian aristocracy is challenged by the emergence of the middle class, while in Bartlett’s the residue of this former system and its principles are in the process of evaporation. In the Russian play we also have the regression to the child-mind: “ Oh, my childhood, my innocent childhood! This is the nursery where I slept, and I used to look out at the orchard from here! Look, Mother’s walking in the orchard.” And yet, in Albion when the garden does return to its former flourishing in late September, it is one that is “ full bloom, green grown, but perhaps slightly too much. Perhaps a little overgrown”. As Freud argues in his essay on the uncanny, the “ source of

uncanny feelings would not, therefore be an infantile fear … but rather an infantile wish or even infantile belief” 5. Here the attempt to recover the “ infantile desire”, the flourishing garden and all its cultural associations, produces results that are simultaneously familiar and unfamiliar. The garden is both homely (once again in “ full bloom”) and unhomely (“ slightly too much”) – a literal instance of the “ unheimlich”. In fact, much like the collapse of heimlich into the unheimlich, the utopian vision of the garden can only be understood with reference to the threat of dystopia: “ Crisis, not contentment, breeds utopias. It follows that utopia and dystopia are versions of the same mental operation. The utopian dream of a better world can be assessed and appreciated only against the backdrop of the less-perfect world we inhabit”. In Albion this backdrop is literalized – the final scene is one of a collapse, the garden and along with the cultural order it represents are returned to oblivion: “ the last pieces of the garden rot even more. The ground is returned to soil. The house is destroyed. Darkness. Soil.” (talk about ending here)

In an interview concerning Jerusalem, Jez Butterworth states that the play seeks to illustrate how “ there is no Logos without Mythos” 6: the anxiety towards a perceived rise in a logical, scientific way of understanding of the world and a resultant mourning of the loss of a religious order. Indeed, the battle between the mythical and the real permeates the play, extending to the set pieces themselves. Like Albion, Butterworth’s Flintock is distinctly English and Anglo-iconography is littered around the set. Johnny Byron’s mobile home consists of a surreal mix of the natural and the manmade: “ A clearing in a moonlit wood (…) the old Wessex flag (…) lots of junk (…) Stuck

to the porch post is a submarine klaxon". Crucially Johnny himself embodies this dichotomy – or rather a fusion between – man and nature, as he moves " with the balance of a dancer or animal"; one is a trained, a practitioner, and the other is instinctual – a thing of nature. Raymond Williams once referred to ' nature' as " perhaps the most complex word in the English language" 7, and in Jerusalem we are presented with these complications. Here is a protagonist who is an elemental force in his own right: a part of nature just as much as an inhabitant of it. Byron is inseparable from the " green world" he inhabits, and much of the criticism that does exist on Jerusalem fixates on his status as a contemporary Lord of Misrule; a Shakespearean archetype trapped in a modern setting. Johnny's gypsy identity – addressed mainly through use of the pejorative " gyppo" – aligns with the stereotypes of a community that has been described as " remarkably successful at preserving their way of life, adapting to their changed conditions to remain the same" 8. It is this stasis that is threatened by the Kennet and Avon Council. Much of the mythologizing in the play revolves around the idea of ancestry, that the mystical is inherent within the blood of Johnny himself (" magic blood", " See that. That's blood. And not just any blood. That's Byron blood."). As a character inseparable from the natural world around him, this magic embedded into – or at least projected onto – the landscape.

In contrast to Audrey, Johnny's world is devoid of order, but similarly it embodies a set of values – or rather anti-values – that are also at risk of being lost. When contrasted with Albion we are reminded that cultural identity is not homogenous; while for Audrey social order is at risk of collapse, Johnny laments the loss of disorder, advocating for the subversion

of principles entirely: “ Lie. Cheat. Steal. Fight to the death. Don’t give up.” Crucially, both plays principally concern themselves not necessarily with the “ spirit of nationalism or isolationism” 9 but with the movement from what Butterworth terms “ one state of being into another”. In Jerusalem this liminality manifests itself in the mystical, and the play is punctuated by a series of magical realist stories told by Johnny:

“ Johnny: There’s some men’ll tell you anything to get you to believe it. I never jumped Stongehenge. But I once met a giant that built Stonehenge.

Ginger: Oh, really. And where was it?

Johnny: Just off the A14 outside Upavon.”

The use of English mythology and its assimilation into the modern world (“ just off the A14”) is an effort to excavate the mythos into a world of logos: the latter quality finds its home in the scepticism of Ginger. Crucially the fight between these two forces reaches its pinnacle in the ending whereby Johnny beats his drum “ relentlessly” as he summons the spectral, ancestral giants as the bulldozers arrive. The “ purpose” that the characters of Albion search for so desperately, takes on the form of myth in Butterworth’s Jerusalem. As Katherine alludes to in the former play, purpose and belief are inseparable: “ what do you believe in? You can’t have purpose without belief”.

Unlike the previous two plays discussed, The Ferryman is not set in England but instead takes the backdrop of 1980s Northern Ireland in the midst of the Troubles. Furthermore, in contrast with the outdoor stage design of the other

works – while still using a pastoral setting – Butterworth opts for the interior of a house: the audience is made (after the prologue) to invade upon the domestic space of the Carney family. Only gradually does the natural world filters its way through the initially – literally – enclosed room (“ The shutters are closed. The curtains drawn. The room is full of smoke”). Yet while over the course of the play the public world begins to encroach upon the private, the interiority of the stage design renders the arrival of each outside element as almost alien. For example, the presence of a live goose on stage is striking on both the level that having live animals onstage is a risky business (incorporating them into the plot itself is another feat entirely), but also because it is a real creature from the natural world into the home – a world that has only described and not seen (“ harvest time”). On a larger scale, the presence of Muldoon – despite being a recognized figure from the past – is also one that is distinctly alien and threatens the domestic harmony of the household. The inevitable rupture in harmony is graphically visualized in the death of Magennis: “ his blood spurts all over the wall of family pictures” – the family tainted with the blood of the outsider. Like Johnny Byron, the Carneys have existed on the brink of change, remaining static. This is epitomized in the description of the peat bog by Magennis – echoing Heaney’s ‘ The Tollund Man’ – at the beginning of the play:

“ The bog water turns a body black, but it preserves it. You see, Father, there’s no oxygen down there. The peat is acidic. It pickles you. The years roll by and nothing changes. Did you know, Father, that when they found the Tollund Man, that his hands and feet were bound too”

Akin to the preserved body, the Carney's have operated in a kind of generational stasis; Caitlin cannot move on from her husband's disappearance; Quinn and Caitlin do not act on their attraction to one another; in response Mary suffers from emotional and physical immobility; even Aunt Maggie has not loved another man since the age of 15. As a result of an unearthing of the past this frozen state finally thaws – and the characters must deal with their present relationships. This reaches its climax in the face off between Quinn and Mary, as she laments " nothing was healing. Nothing was moving on (…) now it's over. Now there's a body. Now she can grieve." The natural world has thrown up an artifact that necessitates change, and yet the characters struggle against this force. Like Albion and Jerusalem, The Ferryman ends in defiance towards the oncoming storm, and much like the latter it is suffused with mythos: " Aunt Maggie: They're here…! Outside the Banshees scream. It rises". The outside world surrounds the interior setting and its past and history rail against the present order: but much like the endings of Jerusalem and Albion we are left in an inconclusive state.

Each play depicts a shift from one state of being into another, closely tied with a perceived loss of cultural or individual values and the desire to reclaim the past. This shift – particularly in Butterworth's works – manifests itself in the conflict between mythos and logos. Most importantly, the natural world is intrinsically tied to this liminality, perhaps a reflection of anxieties towards an environment undergoing rapid changes. As discussed In The Ferryman, nature's power to preserve and dispel the human body – itself a product of nature – is what provokes the action of the play. Likewise, in Albion the

deceased James is said to become a part of the garden: “ I suppose he’s in everything here now. The trees, the grass, the plants, whatever they are”. Furthermore, changes in climate dominates the play – the structure hinges around the movement of weather: Act 1 ends as “ A cloud passes over”, Act 2 culminates in a rain-fertility dance of sorts (she slowly moves to the music … it starts to rain) and Act 3 and 4 the decay of the garden. It is the change in the earth itself that precludes other forces; overshadowing the pressure of neighbors; the Kennet and Avon council; the IRA. The climate is something inevitable and unstoppable. Audrey notices this, stating “ there’s some things you can’t restore. The earth itself.” Indeed, global warming and climate change silently pervades the play and reveals itself through subtle cues, such as Katherine’s advice in Act 1: “ You may have to adjust your plans for the climate … The climate will be quite different now. Sun like this in early February”. The major hurdle in Audrey’s attempts to reclaim the past is not simply that society or culture has changed, but that the physical makeup of the earth itself has changed. The last scene leaves the audience on this potent image – “ Darkness. Soil”. Alexandra Harris argues in her recent book Weatherland that “ we have arrived in the twenty-century, at a critical juncture in the story of weather” 10. The character of Johnny Byron is the embodiment of the natural world at this critical juncture, a modern Green Man inevitably left on his own in the face of destruction.

Ultimately then, like the beating of Johnny’s drum, we are, meteorologically speaking, at the “ eleventh stroke” of Woolf’s clock. In Albion the collapse of the garden represents the fall of a romanticized social order – the past. In Jerusalem and The Ferryman we left at the crossroads between myth and

reality – a fusion that underpins a supposed struggle between mythos and logos. Anxiety towards a decaying environment, reflecting contemporary anxieties towards climate change, inhabit all three plays – the force of nature becomes the force that pushes the works into momentum. Both playwrights end on the “ twelfth stroke” – we are shut off at the very moment of the resolution and left in a state of darkness and confusion, and yet the principles of the characters – their acts of (often self-destructive) defiance – remain with the audience in the midst of this apparent oblivion. Endnotes and Bibliography1 “ Entangled in Ireland’s bloodstained past” S. Hemming ‘ Jez Butterworth’s Magnificent New Play The Ferryman Opens at the Royal Court.’ Ft. com Available at: https://www. ft. com/content/91ad5998-30b5-11e7-9555-23ef563ecf9a [Accessed 3 Mar. 2018]. 2 Cavendish, Dominic “ The Play that Britain needs right now – Albion, Almeida review” The Telegraph. Available at: https://www. telegraph. co. uk/theatre/what-to-see/play-britain-needs-right-now-albion-almeida-review/ [Accessed 3 Mar. 2018]. 3 Giesecke, Annette L. Earth perfect?: Nature, Utopia and the Garden. Edited by Naomi Jacobs. Artifice Books on Architecture, 2012. 4 Billington, Michael “ Albion review – Mike Bartlett captures nation’s neurotic divisions” The Guardian. Available at: https://www. theguardian. com/stage/2017/oct/18/albion-review-mike-bartlett-almeida-london [Accessed 3rd March 2018] 5 Freud, Sigmund. The Uncanny. Penguin, 20036 “ Theater Talk: “ Jerusalem” Playwright Jez Butterworth and Tony-winning Best Actor, Mark Rylance”. Available at: https://www. youtube. com/watch? v= ENEoRHLuZ1I [10: 23] [Accessed 3rd March 2018] 7 Williams, Raymond. Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society. Oxford University Press, 2014. 8 Acton, Thomas Alan, and Gary Mundy, eds. Romani

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