The Accidental Theme: Jonathan Coe, *The Accidental Woman*[1]

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Jonathan Coe (born 1961) is a novelist who wants to have fun while narrating. His fun comes from confusing the reader as to when things happen, and also from concealing his heroes from him. It is partly the fun of Victorian fiction, partly the fun of someone who has emerged out of Postmodernist sophistication and wit and invents a kind of fictional relaxation whose name as a trend has not yet been invented.

His *Accidental Woman*, Maria, is a perplexing, deliberately unexplained (yet not at all enigmatic) heroine. The lack of mystery comes from Coe's wilful disregard for suspense. Who cares what happens next, the novelist seems to sneer. What does 'fairy-tale' mean? He does not even take the trouble of demolishing a dead myth, the convention of 'they lived happily ever after'.

Maria is not the core of a story we are eager to know. She ignores herself and everybody else, we might say. Her favourite posture is to lie awake in an utterly dark, dispiritingly poor and unfriendly room, listening to classical music in the dead of night. What she does best is to sleep. She sleepwalks through life, forming no attachment whatsoever. Whether we think of parents or lovers, the idea of a family seems – in the context of this novel – preposterous.

Coe goes on to demolish even more. Desperadoes took care of the need for a family and its credibility as a fictional goal. But they did leave a few straws for the heroes to catch at. Most Desperado heroes are career oriented. I could mention to that effect feminine fiction (which is all but feminine, and we could identify it precisely by this refusal to bear a gender-label), such as A.S. Byatt's, Lessing's, Tremain's – all of them past their sixties (much older in fact). I would be at a loss to find younger women-novelists – such as Jeanette Winterson, Laura Hird – focussing on the need to do something with your life, to turn making money for survival into an enjoyable activity. It seems to me that the death of career-worship is a loss for the hero and the reader, but, while reading Coe's *The Accidental Woman* it becomes a challenge to state what the author replaces it by, what he gets his kicks from, so to say.

It had been obvious for almost ten years now that what I once called Desperado literature (in an attempt to escape the trap of Postmodernist talk) is not so *desperado* any more. Authors like Coe are very relaxed. They do not feel the need to prove themselves, to conjure up all kinds of tricks in order to be different. The Desperadoes were like a curtain of forgetfulness after the Modernists carved the first rift in the huge collapse of convention. Their lesson was, in plain and very simplistic terms, Do not take anything for granted. Authors as different as Huxley, Orwell, Durrell, Gray, Barnes, Ishiguro, Lodge, Lessing, had in common a need to confirm

[1] Jonathan Coe, *The Accidental Woman*, London, Sceptre, 1987.

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that convention was truly, inevitably and irretrievably dead. They were still carrying on a battle flag. The modernists still carried a torch for convention, to use a very recent phrase. The Desperadoes – on the rebound – fell in love with the whole world (all times ever) at once and set out to reshape, rewrite, recycle it.

Coe belongs to a new, unnamed – as yet – generation of after-Desperadoes who are care-free. He likes to make fun of whatever bits of the past he happens to come across, but his literary memory is bound to be very selective. I cannot help thinking here of Ackroyd's *The Plato Papers* as the best effigy for after-Desperadoes: a world which exists simultaneously with its past and future, and is totally unaware of its not being the only one around, distorts the past in the most hilarious misunderstandings ever. Its past is so dead that it can be reinvented at last. Ackroyd reinvents it from syllables, half-titles, fragments of names. His invention is both ironic and nostalgic. He feels the loss and his witty rewriting, deep down, grieves for it. Like all Desperadoes, he is heartbroken (T.S. Eliot's Modernist inheritance, I should say...).

Coe's sensibility is free like a bird. He has no battle to fight. No aftermath of stream-of-consciousness focus on emotion is felt any longer. No lyrical burden on the text (after the style of fiction had been its tyrant in Joyce and Woolf). Since 1922 till no more than ten years ago the focus of literature was rather on the 'telling' than on the 'told'. It started with confusion – of both thoughts/emotions and their expression – and slipped into a fake clarity, a clarity which was only meant to be a life insurance for a dying novel, a clarity which managed to obliterate the meaning in Ishiguro just as much as authors such as Henry James or James Joyce did in their mind-and soul-bound way of writing. The Modernist confusion and partly the subsequent Desperado clarity were emotionally very intense. Coe treads the new ground of 'I could not care less – for convention or conventionlessness, for old wars and victories, for all the texts I have never read and maybe never will. My ignorance is my universe. I am history-less.' The novel is a brave new world again.

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The story begins with two statements in which – within very few sentences, actually – two narrative conventions clash and seem to destroy each other. They are the Victorian (mostly Dickensian) convention and the after-Desperado feeling that stories tell themselves. What is at stake here is the status of the author. The Dickensian omniscient, domineering narrator is snubbed. No defiance any more, no substitute artifice is supplied. After the Modernist revolt, after the Desperado appropriation of the whole history of literature ever (modernist defiance included), the after-Desperado puts on a pair of casual jeans and talks to us with his feet up on the story, watching the show while rubbing shoulders with the reader. From the deliberate creator of puzzles (Modernism) and then the suspense-addict (Desperado), the after-Desperado Coe begins his novel as a joke. Chapter one is 'Beforewards' and his first words,

> Take a birth. Any birth (p. 7).

He goes on in the present, with several summarizing sentences which unmistakably recall Dickens:

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> Arriving on the threshold of womanhood (for it is she, as chance would have it) Maria **finds** herself in Mrs Leadbetter's study. Mrs Leadbetter the headmistress. She **beamed** at Maria and **waved** her to an armchair (p. 7).

As can be seen, the present is at once followed, within the very same paragraph, by a past. We are given the details we need to know with Dickensian care for our information, and with a nonchalance simultaneous with our information, a carefree manner which it would never have occurred to Dickens to adopt. We could call it familiarity with the reader if we did not think at once of Dickens's own eagerness to please his readers, to make himself understood. We are haunted by the feeling that someone is being outsmarted, and it is not Coe, obviously. In *The Accidental Woman*, Coe achieves a feat: he baffles/blindfolds the narrator while narrating.

He chooses Dickens as the obvious focus of his 'bantering' (to use an echo from Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*), but he also mocks at himself. 'Am I telling a story?' he seems to wonder. 'After all these centuries of narrative tricks, do you still want a story from me?' In case we might say no, he draws us, the readers, into it:

> Here you are to imagine a short silence (p. 9).

Or he talks about himself as

> we in the trade (p. 9).

Maria used to write poems as a teenager and she was writing one on the evening the story relates:

> [...] she composed a poem, or fragments of a poem, on her walk home that evening. It was a peculiar poem, well worth preserving, **I wish I could give you the whole of it** (p. 11).

He seems to lean heavily on his reader to help him make things up. He overtly associates himself with this reader:

> [...] the vestiges of a sense of duty, the origins of which she had always chosen, sensibly, not to analyse.
>
> But perhaps **we** could undertake this analysis for her (p. 13).

The topics which he considers non-themes – such as the idea of a family – are rejected by the author off-hand, in his own, unambiguous name:

> Here you are to imagine a short scene of family jubilation, I'm buggered if I can describe one (p. 18).

Which proves that the Jamesian tradition of the understatement, so well prolonged and refined by authors such as Kazuo Ishiguro or Graham Swift, is safely dead. Jonathan Coe does not really want to be in command, he hardly knows his own story, he wants the reader to step in and rather live than write: in simple words, he wants his text to be more lifelike – which instinct is as old as the hills. The attempt to portray life as truthfully as if the reader/viewer were sharing it has kept art going ever since it has been known to exist. At least in substance, Coe's creation joins the old convention.

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Another topic which is a non-theme, or rather a non-device, is stealing into the hero's mind and revealing to the reader what the hero himself may not yet know (stream-of-consciousness). Desperado authors were very shy in front of psychological analysis after the torrents of preverbal thought in Joyce or after the vivisection of sensibility in Woolf and Eliot. Yet, while Desperadoes were born into psychological analysis (just as Modernists were born into the fairy-tale tradition) and could not help carrying it in the back of their minds, after-Desperadoes like Coe feel free to dispose of the need to account for what is going inside the character's mind or soul. This is the best explanation for a sentence such as

> End of analysis (p. 37).

The author seems to be trying to know as little about his story as his reader – which, obviously, would be impossible, considering that he wants his readership, he wants to write a bestseller, he wants his story to win prizes. The dream of the author has moved from achieving technical novelty to acceding to widespread success, mainly with financial repercussions. He is relaxed as far as the 'telling' is concerned, but very alert to the 'selling'. He is first and foremost interested in his reader's approval and could not care less if he has to sacrifice his art in the process. He feels positive he will find a new one – and this new art is what this essay is trying to identify in Coe's *The Accidental Woman*.

Coe often poses as the 'forgetful' narrator. At one point he writes:

> Maria laughed or cried, I forget which (p. 42).

This is a strategy meant to confuse the reader as to the literary status of the text. Is it a text? Is it closer than literature to real life? The ambiguity of the author's status is to blame. He both invents and narrates without personal interference, he both uses and ignores convention. At one point he writes:

> There was one time which kept coming back to her, as she sat waiting outside his college that hot afternoon, it came back to her in fragments, glimpses insistent in form and character, always the same, but **this is not how I shall narrate it** (p. 69).

The dialogue with the narrator we are constantly pushed into discourages our expectations, since we are half supposed to know the end, as we are half-creating it as we go along. The writer blames the story on us, so to say.

From the very beginning, then, and all through the narrative, the author sides with the reader, apparently. He warns us about every trick, it would seem, such as he does when he writes,

> Irony coming up (p. 70),

and an ironical situation (which totally debunks emotion) follows. He claims he is as innocent as his reader, as confused – when in fact he is confusing this reader out of his wits, ruining all conventions for him, undermining his status as a reader. What the reader ought to be if not a recipient of the fruit of the writer's imagination is hard to say. Fact is, the author is trying to convey the sad loss of his imagination:

> [...] how can we account for its absurdity? An absurdity apparent to everyone but Maria, apparent even to the passers-by who stared and shook their heads at the

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> spectacle of her yearning vigilance. The best **we** can do is to surmise. Her course of action would probably have been to have hidden behind that tree, until he passed, and then to have called out, in an accent of surprise, Oh, hello, Stephen. And what she would have done after that is **anybody's guess**, for it would have depended entirely upon his response, and what his response would have been is nobody's business. **I have enough difficulty predicting Maria's behaviour without bothering about this** (p. 72).

The heroine, Maria, was on the point of embarking on a fairy-tale (she loved Stephen and, if he returned her love, they might have lived happily ever after), if the author had been up to the task of imagining this kind of story, but he decides he is not at all the right person to do such a thing:

> [...] it might all have been plain sailing, love offered and reciprocated, nothing new really but it seems to mean a lot to the people involved. **It never quite happened** (p. 73).

One could easily remember here Fowles and his games with the convention of the writer (whom he even made a hero in the story the former was reading – see *The French Lieutenant's Woman*) if it were not for a certain disabused air of the present narration.

Fowles (like all Desperadoes) was well aware of his hobby for games and enjoyed every minute of it. Coe does not share the Desperadoes' passion for literature, for the text as a game, for means of enhancing the writer's self-awareness. Coe places himself somewhere in the *context*, while Desperadoes were always – like most other writers – in the *subtext*. The ambiguity of literature as we knew it in the literature of all times could be probed, guessed at by the reader's or the critic's interpretation.

We are suddenly confronted not with an ambiguous text any more, but with an explanatory one. Coe explains to us each one of his moves. We know his mind. He shares his intentions. The story is no longer a mere *space of intention*. The after-Desperado narration is rather a place of *explanation*. The writer feels called upon to explain himself, make his approach clear while writing. Since the author's plan – when found – is the explanation of his writing, Coe makes himself (if we find out what he is trying to do) the *explanation of an explanation*. His story is, thus, an interpretation of the second degree.

Once we finish reading *The Accidental Woman*, we do not feel the joy of having followed suspense and having unveiled the reason why the text pleases us. Can it be because the author is not trying to humour his reader, to please his expectations? Neither did the Desperado novelists, or even the Modernists for that matter. But with Joyce or Eliot we were fascinated by the preverbal stream of sensibility, of lyricism and defiance of convention. With the Desperadoes we were enthralled by their passion for gambling all devices at the risk of losing all they had.

Coe seems to be so lost in explanations of all kinds that there is nothing left for us to wonder at. Riveted on the borderline between many spaces/disciplines at once (literary history, literary criticism, sociology, the psychology of creation, literary theory, even semantics, lexicology), we feel as if, overnight, while we were

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not really paying attention, interdisciplinarity had stolen upon us and had played havoc with our reading experience.

In a way it is unfair to contemporary writers that critics read them after they have read so many other works from so many other times in the history of literature (and not only literature). If Desperadoes strove to be different at all costs, after-Desperadoes are too tired to bother any more. They are giving up all claims to comparing quality, originality, superiority ... They no longer emulate the past but *explain* it. This is where *interdisciplinarity starts*, with the first writer/reader who feels *bored with traditional emulation*.

What after-Desperadoes do is to replace the very idea of emulation with its explanation. Dickens tried to tell a story better than Fielding, possibly. Galsworthy tried to beat all narrators ever at their own game. Joyce found out that you could tell a story while actually tearing it to pieces. Desperadoes felt sure they could fix the fairy-tale tradition in such a way that nobody would notice it had died for good, thus having their cake and eating it. There was nothing more left for after-Desperadoes to do than embark upon explaining a space (that of the written text) whose tricks – all of them? we are about to find out ... – had already been invented. This after-Desperado *interdisciplinarity* (the favourite wonder child of so many cultural studies specialists today) is one way of renewing what was menacing to become boring, predictable convention. Coe's interdisciplinary writing, if we may call it that, is one way of surviving, of literature carrying on.

It is in this spirit that Coe makes statements such as:

> It is customary, of course, when it comes to stories like this, to believe whatever the author tells you ... (p. 81)

Or such as:

> Ronny's delight and surprise upon seeing her lie outside the emotional range of this book (p. 79).

When he explains his story in this obvious manner, Coe definitely detaches himself from the attempt at telling the most captivating story ever, the best-selling, the absolute top-text. He knows he cannot beat them all, so he decides to explain (read expose) them all, beginning with himself:

> It was her own self which she most wanted to escape. Sounds rather trite, put like that, doesn't it. We must recognize, though, that included in what Maria, **or was it me**, termed her self, was a whole crowd of people who really had no business to be there at all. I don't have to remind you of their names, for you know them all; I have introduced all the important ones in the course of telling this story (p. 129).

As we go along and begin to be inevitably interested in the story, this dialogue of the author with the reader (since the author still tries his hardest to be witty, smart and funny) gradually becomes more important than the reader's focussing on the hero. The author makes himself so obvious while explaining his plans for his heroine that the heroine is pushed aside. She is replaced by the impression the author creates that the reader is sharing the process of creation (which would be a very old trick after all). What the reader shares is not the creation of the story at all, but the author's explanation of this creation, from various points of view – interdisciplinary

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– of course: psychological, psychoanalytical, philosophical, sociological, with an eye to gender theory, political evolution and as a philosophy of the human mind all in all. The *interdisciplinary novel* is the novel that can explain everything, from the story it delivers (never properly finished, and in this case even willfully ignored) to the reasons why, the way in which it was written and it is read.

As a confirmation of this theory, the end of the novel has a footnote which states:

> I was conscious in this last passage that **I could never achieve exactly my intended effect.** Readers may therefore prefer to miss it out altogether, and to listen instead to the end of the first movement of Prokofiev's F minor violin sonata, where they will find a much more concrete version of what I was here trying to express (p. 148).

Coe's intended effect is that of absence, of emptiness. The novel begins with Maria's noticing the

> school motto, *Per ardua ad astra*, which she could read, upside down, on Mrs Leadbetter's headed notepaper (p. 7).

when her teacher congratulates her on having 'won a place at Oxford' (p. 7). She goes to Oxford, does not find anything to engross her there, gets married by accident after having constantly rejected a man who loves her and after having fallen in love with a man whose feelings for her stay a mystery (to herself, to us, even to the author) to the bitter end, is forced by her husband to divorce and leave her three-year-old son with him and his mistress, has a few totally uninteresting jobs, is 'stood up' by the man who has loved her since high school but does not turn up at the wedding when she at last proposes to him. The end of the story (if a story it is) takes her back home, none the wiser, none the richer, none the happier – just older. Everything has remained unchanged but the passage of time (the narrative covers fifteen years) and the school motto, which promised at first 'ad astra' and is simply remembered as 'per ardua' now:

> The bus took her past her old school, St. Jude's, which she realised she had not seen since the day she left it, fifteen years ago. She had a vague recollection of the day she had sat in Mrs Leadbetter's office, receiving the headmistress's congratulations, but it was not at all vivid, dark winter evenings being hard to visualise on Summer Saturday afternoons. One detail, however, bobbed up in her mind quite distinctly, as she sighed. Per ardua, maybe (p. 143).

Nothing fills her life, and, if Coe had a plan in mind, it can't have been any other than to make us aware how empty a life can be. Which is as much as to say he annihilates all the themes of the fairy tale (they lived happily ever after), all the reader's expectations of a romantic emotional life (or sexual for that matter), all moral conclusions that the family is the ultimate refuge. The difference between Coe and a Desperado author is that Coe does not simply deny these things: he also justifies his denial, and his novel comes out of the need to explain himself. Maria's story is in fact the story of a novelist who decides there is no story to tell, but that even the lack of a story – especially that – can be accounted for, analysed, turned

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into a mood and offered as food for thought. *The Accidental Woman* is Coe's eating the cake and having it: he tells a story and theorizes on it at the same time.

His real aim is to state that nothing is worth making a romance out of, but the very feeling of absence and emptiness can be passionate nevertheless. Which is as much as to say that the idea of theme and heroes has moved into themelessness and herolessness. It is now up to each novelist to fill the void they have chosen as a main topic with their craft, their sensibility and their wit.

Stream of consciousness authors filled the pages with their preverbal emotional storms, Desperado writers used the clearest possible words to hide inner turmoil (not to banish it), while after-Desperadoes wander away from emotion altogether. There is a whole new world of emotionlessness out there, they seem to say, and all we have to do is to blow life into it. What they mean is we can do their work for them: we must lend their heroes the life we know. The novel is thus not just very clear and familiar (what we put in it must, obviously, be accessible to us) but also very dear to us. As an alternative to loving the author's world or heroes, the after-Desperado novel urges us to explain ourselves, find out how, why we love what we see. We must realize, while reading them, how sympathetic, how rich, how creative we are. This effect – making the reader feel in control – has been at the root of all renewal in art. Art trying to come closer and closer to life has only been a long line of devices to make the reader/viewer/etc feel the richest of them all. Once again, the narrator finds a new approach and the reader is fooled, thinking this is the truth. It is merely art going on.

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The Accidental Woman is a novel which changes absence (of family, of love, of sex, of a career, even of a life of the mind) into a sense of universal emptiness, an exacerbated general loneliness which springs out of displacement and defamiliarization. Significantly the novel begins (the first page we read is *Contents*) with a *Beforewards* and ends with an *Afterhand*. 'Beforewards' is one way of saying 'towards before', of announcing that the direction of the novel (for those who have ears to hear the message) is not towards an end but actually to a place and time *before* the novel was born. This will be good to bear in mind when we deal with the particular type of suspense (or rather non-suspense) the author resorts to in this book.

For the time being, we are interested in the *Afterhand*, which is deliberately neither an *afterword*, nor an *afterwards*. Is this whole novel the best equivalent Coe could think of for a 'helping hand' he offers his reader? Or is this 'hand' mischievous, hinting at the fact that, before we desperately pine for an end, we should be aware there always is a *beforehand* and an *afterwards* (the two words can easily be rearranged, after all), on condition we make the effort of identifying them in our own expectations. The main prerequisite for this novel to exist is our willingness to go out of our way to share it, furnish it, fill it. We may have met the author halfway hundreds of times before (it is the essence of reading to do so), but how many times have we actually been prompted to fill in the plot, the mood?

Filling in is a technique that has always existed, but which was used by modernism more than ever before. It can hardly be denied that the modernist founder Henry James was the father of understatement, and that a postmodernist

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Desperado such as Kazuo Ishiguro perfected the approach (to plot and heroes) beyond James' wildest expectations. We could certainly have tried to double guess Richardson (rather questionably, there?), Dickens, Eliot, Galsworthy, but all we would have managed to do would have been to dig up something that already existed in the text, something the author had already sown there.

Double guessing Joyce, on the other hand, is mandatory. Who could understand Joyce, Eliot, Woolf without reading between the lines, without actually putting plainer words in their mouth? The design was unquestionably theirs, though; we could hardly reach a conclusion they would not have envisaged beforehand. Reading literature before these after-Desperadoes is actually more like second than double guessing. The author had a plan and we found it, in pre-modernism. After that, modernists found out it was fun to make the reader's life hell, but the reward was the discovery of the author's meaning, which had never withdrawn.

Desperadoes realized that they could *withdraw meaning*. Your guess is as good as mine. And yet they built their books in such a way that they gave you an idea of how many things they knew, how many devices they could handle at once, how much of the past of all literature they were able to coexist with. Their withdrawal of meaning was their way of saying they cared for a literary community, however individualistic they may have struck the reader to be.

Jonathan Coe is an after-Desperado precisely because he makes us forget all about double guessing. He discourages our intellectual curiosity. He focusses on the experience. Whether he means life-experience or writing experience, it is no longer relevant. We were so insistently aware of the frontiers of literature being pushed far beyond tradition/convention in pre-modernism, modernism and even in the Desperado age. Suddenly there are no more boundaries. The 1968 slogan (the French students' revolution) – 'It is forbidden to forbid' – has at last taken effect. Coe expects us to fill in his incredibly uncomplicated story with our own lives.

English is mainly (and wrongly, I should say) taught today by means of exercises of the 'rephrase' or 'find the error' type. It is the native way of teaching. It does not help the native, since he already knows the language, and it can hardly teach a foreigner the system of words he ought to know, since no one ever mentions the word grammar. Coe is a man of his age. The after-Desperado age, like it or not, is a mimetic, fumbling, intuitive, chaotic thing. We learn English as some people are taught how to swim by simply being pushed in deep water. We read after-Desperado novels, too, making use of all our instincts to keep afloat. Needless to say, once again, literature survives ...

Maria's story is, then, a 151-page description of what Coe cannot find worth telling us about her. She leaves her family to go to College and comes back to it on the last pages, but her emotions have nothing to do with either her parents or her brother. Her schoolmate Ronny claims to be in love with her almost up to the last page, yet, when (out of solitude, we infer) *she* asks him to marry her, he stands her up at the 'register office' ('The bastard had stood her up', p. 126). Sex is omitted as totally unimportant. A few guesses at gay openings make the story alert here and there – which, when they are infirmed, makes us realize how eager we have become for the uncommon, how much we like the out of the ordinary (this certainly being one reason why gay literature is all the rage today).

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We can hardly notice Maria going towards a career. When the story stops (and she is thirty-two) she has none to speak of. She merely makes a living. She works to survive. There is much to say about the contemporary view of life on automatic pilot. Its effects on the heroine's thoughts are devastating. She refuses to subscribe to a life of the mind. She comes here dangerously close to Anthony Burgess's Alex in *A Clockwork Orange*. Both Maria and Alex like to listen to classical music. It is their only joy, the authors emphatically underline, and society takes it away from them eventually. They grow up, shed all joy, and the book ends. Alex is ready to find a 'mate' and have a child – who will probably reiterate his violence. What about Maria? Coe does not even bother to mention a direction for her. From Desperado Burgess to an after-Desperado like Coe, somewhere along the way, the reader's expectations have died – which means that this reader has learned to be as emotionless as Coe's heroine.

Somehow, the author's irony all starts from his confused feeling of chronology. Convention is safely dead and the absence of a need for defiance (so familiar to his modernist and Desperado predecessors) leaves the reader at a loss. Ronny tells Maria 'I love you' (p.10), while Maria 'felt happiest when she was alone' (p. 11). Chronological causality was the backbone of tension, of enjoyed suspense. Maria's story is all enjoying joylessness, and the paradox becomes possible because of Coe's writerly skills.

The story builds a circle of author-heroes-reader-other authors. The time of narration is inessential and can be playfully rolled along:

> In those days Maria wrote poems, too. For instance, she composed a poem, or fragments of a poem, on her walk home that evening. It was a peculiar poem, well worth preserving, I wish I could give you the whole of it. Unfortunately it was destroyed, along with so many other mementoes of Maria's life at this period, in the fire which burnt down half of her parents' home in 1982. (Touching to reflect that of **this event, which is not due for nearly twelve years yet, she has at present little inkling**.) The poem concerned, among other things, the contact of half-formed snowflakes with unresisting cheek, the act of unthinking uphill progression, the texture of street lamp glow where it merges with winter sky, and the comfort to be derived from states of solitude. Maria felt happiest when she was alone by and large, but the thought of being always alone terrified her, because she was only human ... (p. 11).

The first emotion mentioned in this novel is that of fear. At first it seems to be placed in a future-in-the past, or rather a past-in-the future. Whatever the time, this fear is unexplained, possibly unexplainable at the mere level of the story. It can only be grasped if the reader realizes that he has to make his own book, which means build his own theory on and into the text. This theory of the receiver has everything to do with the real point of the book. Fear leads the way, for the time being.

The author's irony leads the way as well:

> Here you are to imagine a short scene of family jubilation, I'm buggered if I can describe one (p. 18).

His approach to lonely or shared sex clearly sounds like Laura Hird's *Born Free*, another first novel, written in 1999 this time. Coe's sense of inimical,

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alienating family is similar to Laura Hird's, too, and I am afraid they just dutifully follow the path Aldous Huxley's pointed in 1932 (*Brave New World* – early Desperado dystopia): the sense of family seems to have become incomprehensible. To authors at least.

Jonathan Coe's irony is fierce. He does not simply defy or play around. He acts as if he were alone on Earth, as if all the texts ever written had only been produced to allow him to pretend they had never existed. His favourite target – aimed at quite a number of times in *The Accidental Woman* – is Victorian fiction:

> 'Love destroys,' said Philip, from between his fingers. 'It is a raging fire which warms you, then burns, then leaves you for a heap of ashes, grey and barely glowing'. He got up suddenly. 'Do you mind if I write that down?' (p. 32)

Whenever Coe feels like telling a decent story, he suddenly looks in his own pocket Victorian mirror and describes his Maria with sentences such as,

> I know what love isn't (p. 40).

or

> 'Explain the train of thought,' said Maria, 'which leads from love to happiness, and then to marriage' (p. 41).

In his frenzy to forget all texts ever written, Coe does not even realize that his constant parody of prim Dickens (updated with Desperado uninhibited physical descriptions) rather revives the Victorian narrative style, which we keep peeping at and end by craving for. When Coe has done telling us his version of the story, a fiend whispers in our minds: 'How about hearing it in Dickensian language all over again?' After a paragraph like the following, we cannot help wondering which we would prefer after all. My theory is that no reader of after-Desperado texts could ever take pre-modernist author seriously:

> It took him a week or two at first to entice Maria into his bed, and to gain admission to hers, but once the precedent had been established this interval decreased, until it could be done within a minute or two or in exceptional circumstances a matter of seconds. There is no need to give the details. Why describe all the gropings, the senseless fumbles and thrusts which this poor misguided couple executed upon each other on warm spring afternoons and clammy evenings? Why enumerate, in the hope of enlightening or perhaps even arousing **the reader**, the various gasps, kisses, groans, caresses, stains and clasps which characterise this ludicrous pantomime? Far better to forget, as Maria tried often and vainly to forget, the hours she had spent with this man in the flagging pursuit of a hazy gratification (p. 49).

The tone is Dickensian, the address is in very good narrative tradition (known ever since the novel was born), but we, the recipients, are no longer the dutiful believers of stories pre-modernists required ever since the Bible. It took almost a century after 1922, the peak of modernism and defiance of convention, to change our reading habits. And after-Desperadoes are the first to make full use of the change.

As we go along, we have a feeling (which is confirmed at the end of the reading experience in this case) that the story does not really matter. The author fills the space with small gestures which attempt familiarization (and fail). Nothing is

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unbearably intense, nothing reminds us of Joyce, Woolf, Eliot, even Galsworthy (to say nothing of a Fielding, Thackeray, Dickens). An excerpt like the following could easily have come close to Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* (a love story on a 'wasted day, an unhappy day, a very beautiful day in some respects'. The author labels it as 'the heat of anxiety and of desire', which he sums up as a 'pretty pass':

> Of all the Oxford days which Maria ever looked back on, she remembered none so clearly or with so much pain as a blazing summer's day at the end of her last term. It was **a wasted day**, an unhappy day, a very beautiful day in some respects. It started, as far as **Maria's memory** and therefore **as far as we are concerned**, in the afternoon. Armed only with a copy of poems by Baudelaire, which she had no intention of reading, she stationed herself on a bench, beneath a tree, opposite the main entrance to one of the men's colleges. It was astonishingly hot, and had been for about a week, the heat was beginning to have that weighty feel which means that a storm is not far off. It weighed her down, supplemented internally by **the heat of anxiety and of desire**. Her heart pounded, as hearts do at such moments, and in such situations, not an unpleasant feeling as long as it doesn't happen too often, more than once every few weeks for example. In this position, which she varied only in a small way as we shall see, she waited for five hours, during which time she reflected haphazardly on the circumstances, the feelings and former incidents, which had brought her to **this pretty pass**. She did not recall them in chronological order, she did not so much recall them at all, in fact, it would be truer to say that they assaulted her, but **we shall record them chronologically, for the reader's benefit** (p. 65).

Maria's memory, chronologically recollected 'for the reader's benefit', involves two heroes: herself and Stephen. The whole chapter is the best approximation of a text about a young girl in love Coe can produce (for the time being). If he had been fond of his own story and had really meant to tell us what had happened, his irony might have subsided a little. In fact it grows frantically, fighting all sense of intimacy or sympathy we might feel for the heroine, whose love – as we shall half-see – does not seem to be returned:

> [...] she was not at all certain, she had no concrete evidence whatsoever, that Stephen returned her love. (And just when I was thinking that we could get away without using the word.) (p. 67).

In telling us the half (unended) story of Maria's 'love' (or whatever) for Stephen, Coe makes ample fun of convention, baffling all the reader's decent expectations, combining feeling and sex, mediaeval (or Victorian, for that matter) femininity and the latest sexual shamelessness of fiction in a mad medley:

> Maria's love for Stephen (in for a penny) bore little relation to her love for Nigel. They never went to bed together. They never kissed. These were not Maria's decisions, she would have done both, simultaneously for preference. But at the same time she felt that it made a nice change not to do these things, it gave her a sense of independence to think that she could love without seeking petty satisfactions. Stephen himself never mentioned the matter. Occasionally Maria wondered whether he found her unattractive, or whether he was a homosexual, or frigid, but more often she was happy to let things continue as they were. She had never had any use for wiles, the little feminine wiles in which it was considered by some indispensable to be adept. Charlotte, for instance, had found her attitude in this respect particularly hard to

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> understand. You will never get anywhere, Maria, she had said once, until you learn to practise the ways, the little feminine wiles and ways by which we of the weaker sex are able to exercise our authority. Little gestures, Maria, and little actions, which render men helpless, which turn them to putty in our hands. These had turned out to be, in ascending order of effectiveness, the fluttering of the eyelashes, the crossing of the legs, and the sucking of the penis. Maria was not impressed by this advice and had never acted upon it. She felt that it would be wrong, apart from anything else, to force upon Stephen attentions and pressures which he had not invited. She was happy already, and did not want to jeopardise her happiness (p. 67-68).

Besides the very rich gay theme, which is clearly suggested in this novel more than once, for both sexes, this fragment amply draws on the death of the fairy-tale tradition. To make things very clear for us, Coe steps in and pushes all texts off the table, pre-modernism and modernism included. He makes a clear statement to the effect that he is the only one in charge, the story is his and (we find that out much later) he is not going to give it to us:

> There had been others, many others. Days when she had waited outside Stephen's college, knowing what time he was most likely to emerge in order to meet an appointment or an engagement, and had then followed him through the street, debating always within herself whether to approach him and to feign surprise, as if they had met by chance. Sometimes Maria could be very foolish. She knew that if Stephen ever found out about this behaviour, he would consider it incomprehensible, and might stop loving her, or might never start loving her, or might even stop liking her. Yes, might even stop liking her. But that didn't stop her doing it. There was one time which kept coming back to her, as she sat waiting outside his college that hot afternoon, it came back to her in fragments, glimpses insistent in form and character, always the same, but **this is not how I shall narrate it** (p. 69).

At least the modernists and the Desperadoes, defiant as they might have been, stuck to the story with all their might. We knew all about Leopold's Bloom love, Clarissa Dalloway's rich inner life, and we finally guessed what the butler Stevens was hiding inside. After 1922 we stole inside the heroes and shared their innermost thoughts. Desperadoes came after that shameless display of the self and their game was to hide it. The after-Desperadoes' game is to *withdraw the story*, to question the very point of narration.

Consequently, Stephen leaves before we know what he feels and the whole book revolves around one (never answered to our satisfaction) question:

> 'Did he leave a message?' (p. 75)

The answer to that was 'No', but Maria reiterates the question in her mind again and again, like a leitmotif, a memento of what could have been if irony had not prevented it from (at least) becoming a story.

Irony is something Coe himself admits to:

> Even now she felt a shudder, perhaps of pleasure, perhaps of pain, at *the thought of the scene* as her mind's and *her remembrance's eye* had between them framed it, the pale glowing tetragon of sunlight on the slabs, the shaft of sunlight connecting this figure to her nearest window, the dustclouds dancing before her, the shade around, and the soft, insistent music, to which Maria hardly listened, at least in

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> her usual way, but which might have spoken to her of regretful acceptance, if she had been interested in that sort of conjecture. Now here's a funny thing. The music, as far as Maria was concerned, was Stephen's. It was he who made it, and filled the chapel with it, it was he alone who was humanly responsible for the sound of those moments, for the sound which her world made, in other words, during that time. This was how she liked to look at it, and this was at the heart of all that day's worth. **Irony coming up.** But to tell the **truth**, never a bad thing to do occasionally **even in a book**, it had not been Stephen playing the organ at all, in this instance, for his teacher, exasperated beyond measure by the hopelessness of his performance, had taken over and played the whole prelude without stopping, as a demonstration of how it should be done. Maria did not know this. But *her inaccurate memory* meant much more to her than our knowledge of the facts can ever mean to us, **so we needn't feel superior** (p. 70).

This excerpt kills quite a number of birds at one stone. It names both modernism and Desperado positions (modernism in italics, Desperado underlined) while defining after-Desperadoes by opposition (in bold type). Maria remembers her lost moment of love (falling in love, actually – the pure emotion, not the anecdote) with her 'remembrance's eye – which unmistakably sounds like Proust's (and Shakespeare's, though) *remembrance of things past*. With Desperado (and yet un-Desperado) disabused avoidance of intense emotion, the 'funny' thing is that what she remembers (the object of her affections playing the organ) is a false image. The beautiful epiphany her mind (actually Coe's, with a real passion for un-writing, rather than re-writing Joyce) builds into the church scene ('the pale glowing tetragon of sunlight on the slabs, the shaft of sunlight connecting this figure to her nearest window, the dustclouds dancing before her, the shade around, and the soft, insistent music...') is a very commonplace case of mistaken identity. The fact that the author debunks it, so to say, makes the text partly Desperado.

But Coe does not stop here. He warns us: 'Irony coming up'. He makes it clear it is a convention we are looking at ('even in a book'). And then he brings the three ages (modernism, Desperado and after-Desperado) face to face in only one sentence ('But *her inaccurate memory* meant much more to her than our knowledge of the facts can ever mean to us**, so we needn't feel superior**'). Modernism, indeed would greatly have appreciated the poetry of Maria's inaccurate memory. Desperadoes, on the other hand would have been reticent to subscribe to feelings, so they would have belittled them (the moment meant much more to Maria than the story, which in this case is 'our knowledge of the facts', could 'ever mean to us', which 'us' includes the author as well).

What does an after-Desperado like Coe do now? After the Desperado fake pact with the reader (sounding something like 'I am telling you the truth and nothing but the truth', when in fact he is lying to his teeth while building his convention/story), Coe climbs down from the pedestal all authors before him have used and crosses the fine line between the reader's and the author's versions of somebody else's (preferably a modernist's or a Desperado's) stories: 'we needn't feel superior', he says. With this statement in mind it is easier to understand why he builds his stories as if they did not matter much.

What seems to matter is the loneliness this acknowledgment implies. Coe creates not only lonely heroes (that was a Desperado much used trick), but also very lonely (and homesick...) readers. Displaced from the tradition of the fairy-tale (the

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happy or unhappy ending), defamiliarized in a world deprived of emotional intensity, this reader is looking for *the* something that matters. While this novel's heroine fails to find this, the reader is luckier providing he can read in the right way.

After we have crossed a number of very traditional themes (such as gossip and friends, crossed love, useless love, unreliability of a hero's memory) and some Desperado hobby horses (death of the sense of family, the tragic mistake of getting married or having a child, gay love, insanity, drugs, even crime), we have the feeling that no story is worth our attention. What is, then?

Before deciding upon that, one case of intertextuality cannot be missed. After Maria has refused Ronny and has been ignored by Stephen (who leaves for China, anyway), she makes a 'mistake' which results in her marrying a man who will, within six years, make her hate sex (because of his vulgarity, selfishness and violent attitude), who will cheat on her with the maid and will eventually divorce her (and blame it all on her), take their little boy away from her, raise him with the maid and then bully the maid, too, forcing her to take refuge at a shelter where Maria recognizes her, and so the incidents come full circle without anything amounting to a 'story' yet. That initial mistake is 'gammon':

> It is customary, of course, when it comes to stories like this to believe whatever the author tells you, and yet I can imagine that for some of you there might be a problem in taking at face value my assertion in the first sentence of this chapter. I repeat, that if Maria had not chosen gammon, she would not have married Martin. For gammon, as you know, is often very salty, and liable to induce thirst, and if Maria had not been thirsty she would have had no reason, no reason whatsoever, to go into a tea shop that afternoon after saying goodbye to Ronny. And if she had not gone into the tea-shop, she would not have chanced upon her old friend Louise, and if she had not chanced upon Louise, Louise would not have invited her to a party that night. And she would not have gone to the party, and she would not have met Martin, for where else could she have met Martin, who lived in Essex and had never been to Oxford in his life before or since? She had never loved him, and he had never loved her, but he was looking for a wife and she was looking for something to do, so they seemed as well suited as most couples ever are. They had a whirlwind courtship, consisting of much sex, and a bit of theatre-going, married in October, honeymooned on the Riviera, and produced their first and only child exactly sixteen months later. Maria was by now twenty-three, pushing twenty-four, and she was already aware that she had made a bad mistake (p. 79-80).

This short paragraph contains more stories than the entire novel bothers to build. It is similar to the short description of Maria waiting for Stephen, while jealous Ronny is spying on her:

> Maria waited for five hours outside Stephen's college. After one and a half hours, he had left for his viva by a back route, known only to members, and after another hour he had returned, the same way. He had then spent three hours packing, and had left for the station, by the front route, but by then Maria herself had left, in despair, and slightly pissed off with the whole business. And Maria chose to get up and leave, as it happened, at a time when Ronny was in the lavatory, so he neither saw her go nor knew where she went. The afternoon had not worked out too well all round (p. 74).

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This agglomeration of stories exhales a very modernist (Joycean, Woolfian, Eliotian) perfume. But the word ‘gammon, can hardly fail to trigger the memory of *The Waste Land*, where Lil – toothless, with five children and a recent abortion – is on the point of being bereft by a husband returned from military service in the navy, a husband who ‘wants a good time’ and who will possibly find that with Lil’s confidante (nameless in this poem), whose sentence about ‘hot gammon’ is left as unfinished as Coe’s novel, as a matter of fact:

> When Lil’s husband got demobbed, I said –
> I didn’t mince my words, I said to her myself,
> HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME
> Now Albert’s coming back, make yourself a bit smart.
> He’ll want to know what you done with that money he gave you
> To get yourself some teeth. He did, I was there.
> You have them all out, Lil, and get a nice set,
> He said, I swear, I can’t bear to look at you.
> And no more can’t I, I said, and think of poor Albert,
> He’s been in the army four years, he wants a good time,
> And if you don’t give it him, there’s others will, I said.
> Oh is there, she said. Something o’ that, I said.
> Then I’ll know who to thank, she said, and give me a straight look.
> HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME
> If you don’t like it you can get on with it, I said.
> Others can pick and choose if you can’t.
> But if Albert makes off, it won’t be for lack of telling.
> You ought to be ashamed, I said, to look so antique.
> (And her only thirty-one.)
> I can’t help it, she said, pulling a long face,
> It’s them pills I took, to bring it off, she said.
> (She’s had five already, and nearly died of young George.)
> The chemist said it would be all right, but I’ve never been the same.
> You are a proper fool, I said.
> Well, if Albert won’t leave you alone, there it is, I said,
> What you get married for if you don’t want children?
> HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME
> Well, that Sunday Albert was home, they had a hot gammon,
> And they asked me in to dinner, to get the beauty of it hot –
> HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME
> HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME
> Goonight Bill. Goonight Lou. Goonight May. Goonight.
> Ta ta. Goonight. Goonight.
> Good night, ladies, good night, sweet ladies, good night, good night.
> (T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*)

This breathless enumeration of possible stories by Coe can only have one aim: to prove that a story is not all it takes to write a good novel. His predecessors, the Desperadoes, always dreamt of the bestseller, which was the most profitable way of telling a story, combined with the financial profit of selling it, the latter deriving from its accessibility to a large audience. The Modernists – who always encoded their stories in oceans of lyricism – did not dream of the success of their stories in

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terms of money. The same question arises again: what makes Coe's world go round if it is not the story (which may imply it is not really money)?

I think *The Accidental Woman*, like other after-Desperado novels, feeds on fear. It conjures up all kinds of threats. Maria's progress from high school to her thirty-second year of solitude is a constant initiation. Desperado literature was first and foremost dystopic in that it confronted the reader with a world this reader would never want to live in. But the Desperado reader had a refuge: he knew this dystopia was not really his world. It was the author's warning (at first – see Huxley, Orwell, Gray), the author's nightmare (Ishiguro, Lessing, Barnes, Bradbury), the author's concoction.

With Coe we do not so much care about the story because fear has ceased to be an imaginary alternative. Coe's fear is the real thing and we have no refuge from it. We cannot just put the book down to make it go away. Coe's text conveys the conviction that it does not need suspense (a cult with Desperadoes) because there really is no other end but the ultimate one, the final DOOM, the death of the human species. Ian McEwan's *Saturday* (2005) conveyed the same message.

Since fear is what the author feels and his hero conveys, it is only natural that we should find it impossible to focus on his hero. The after-Desperado author cannot help making himself very conspicuous, pushing his heroes aside. Coe describes Maria as essentially passive:

> [...] sleep now being one of the very few aspects of existence for which she felt any degree of enthusiasm (p. 133).

Before falling asleep, though, the old fairy-tale convention of the story still haunts her:

> And how often, during those wakeful seconds, did she hear the words: a man rang. I can't remember. Did he give his name, no. Did he leave a message, no (p. 134).

Love having gone out before it had actually sparkled, fear takes its place. There is only aggressivity all around. Not just acquaintances, but friends, husbands and even brothers and parents. The circle of fear closes when Maria is faced with her past, lost future-to-be: the woman who took her husband and her son is no happier than herself:

> And now is there anything more, I wonder, that you can possibly want to know about Maria's years in Chester. Did she ever leave the city, for a holiday, or for a seaside outing? No, never. Did she not communicate with her family, all this time? Very occasionally, by letter, or by telephone. Did she never have any visitors to stay, in the spare bedroom, none of those old friends who thronged her fancy in moods of fond remembrance? Unnecessary sarcasm. No, of course not. Then surely I have told you all that you need to be told. Yet looking back, it seems to be rather a short chapter. Well, there is next to no direct speech, so you are still getting value for money, of sorts. Let's be honest, **I begin to weary of Maria, and her story**, just as Maria begins to weary of Maria and her story. What little **fun** there ever was in her, and in it, seems to have quite gone away, and I wouldn't be at all surprised to learn that she desires nothing more than to have it brought to **an end,** rapid and painless.

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> Let us move on, for I have **only one more episode to relate** of Maria's life, and then we shall be done, and we can say goodbye.
>
> But there, you start **chatting with the reader** and before you know where you are you find that **you have forgotten all about the narrative**. Did I not say, at the beginning of the chapter, that it was a Tuesday, and that there was something particularly interesting about Maria's thoughts, as she walked home from work? Know, then, that Maria was that day feeling even worse than usual. A new woman had come to the refuge, with her child. The boy was nine years old, and they were fleeing from a husband who had attacked and beaten them in a drunken rage. Maria had recognised them at once as Angela, her old nanny, and her son, Edward (p. 135-136).

This would have been a narrative lead worth pursuing in a traditional novel, even in a Desperado one. To Coe it is a mere mention. As the author himself notices, he has 'forgotten all about the narrative' while he was 'chatting with the reader'. This may be the time to answer the question as to what the story and suspense have been replaced by. In Coe's case, they have been replaced by the pleasure offered by the reader's intimacy with the author. After Fielding's or Dickens's omniscience/ubiquity, here we have a novelist who knows so little about his story and heroine that he can hardly wait to be done with it.

We should not be in a hurry to judge Coe and pronounce him a narrative slob. His focus may not be the chronological telling of a story. He complains time and again that tenses bore him to death, confuse him, he does not know which is when or when is which. The idea is he does not really care when things happen. What weighs on his story and makes it apparently blank and flat, unbearably uneventful or very badly managed, is a lyrical sense of human tragedy. Maria, a woman of our days, is born in a 'clockwork' family, grows up to be a clockwork being, gives birth (so the species will not die just yet) and ends loveless, family-less, career-less, friendless, deprived of any joy that we can notice. She is an automaton.

We live in an age when everyone has a passion for explaining the why's of everything. We no longer write literary criticism because we need to explain why criticism is necessary. We no longer study old subjects because we need to see them as a whole, in their 'interdisciplinarity'. Could this be a longing for the Renaissance *homo universalis*? Hardly. We are narrowly specialized. Our world of specialized explanations, of abstract speculation in the margin of essential, basic 'necessities' breeds *accidental* creatures, such as Maria:

> She felt suddenly and savagely sad to have seen her parents looking so old. But even this moment passed, and in its wake Maria felt, now, a curious **lack of emotion**. All at once the park appeared to have nothing to do with her memory, it belonged neither to her youth nor to her middle age, **neither to remembrance nor to hope** and this was good, because from now on Maria would be **leaving all of these things behind**.
>
> She could hear a lark singing nearby. The bird was perched on a branch of the hawthorn bush, and was looking at Maria with intense interest, fascination, you might say. She returned its stare, and for a while these two creatures stood quite still, watching one another. I find the thoughts of both, at this point, equally **impossible to divine**. It is even hard to say with which, of the two, I feel more in sympathy, but let us for the sake of this story cast our lot with the lark, for whom the sight of Maria's quick unmoving eyes eventually became too much. He flew off the branch and

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> launched himself into mid air. On the ascent, he took another look at her, saw her dwindle, spiralled, saw her move, **saw her smaller and smaller still**, climbed, looked again, saw her little figure on the hillside, climbed higher, and higher again, and then saw only the hillside, where **we must leave her, leave her to her last calm, Maria, a speck in the unseen, homeward bound, alone, and indifferent, indifferent even in the face of death which who knows may be the next thing chance has in store for her** (p. 151, closing paragraph).

Coe may not be a Desperado any more in the way he writes a novel, but he was certainly born into the Desperado dystopic apprehension of life and, even though his narrative priorities have very little to do with stories, heroes, chronological causality or the absence of it, the satisfying reading experience is his main concern. If he has anything to say – which is his fear that the species is dying – then he certainly must find his tools. In *The Accidental Woman*, his first novel, it must have seemed to him that the 'chatting' novel is the way. It may not be the only way, not even a new way for a writer (although few have done it to this degree), but it certainly is the way he takes out of the Desperado age into a literature that is just being born.

Le sujet accidentel: Jonathan Coe, *La femme accidentelle*

Peut-être Jonathan Coe échappe à l'étiquette Desperado (pour ne plus utiliser le mot «postmoderniste») par sa technique romanesque, mais il est né et il a grandi ayant la peur distopique de tous les auteurs Desperado – que l'Apocalypse vienne. Même si les priorités narratives de Coe n'ont rien de commun avec le récit conventionnel, avec le modèle chronologique classique (passé-présent-futur), son but principal est de plaire au lecteur. S'il a quelque chose à dire – et il nous communique toujours l'effroi que l'espèce disparaisse – alors sans doute il va trouver ses outils. Dans son premier roman, *The Accidental Woman*, lui a semblé que le roman «bavard» est la voie à suivre. Peut-être ne pas la seule voie, peut-être ni même une nouvelle voie (même si il y a peu de personnes qui l'ont abordée si passionnément), mais certainement Coe suit cette voie à l'intention ferme de quitter la littérature Desperado et de découvrir une littérature non-nommée encore, non-analysée et à peine perçue. Jonathan Coe a un seul Dieu : le changement.

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