

JEFF NOON

UNDER THIS PATRONYMIC;
A PALINDROME WITH A LOOP-LIKE CIRCULAR ASSONANCE;
A NOVELIST EXISTS WITH A LIQUID, ATMOSPHERIC AND GROOVY TONE



First of all his novels have magnificent titles: *Needle in the Groove*, *Nymphomation*, *Automated Alice*. A crazy, verbal alchemy that since 1993 marks an infernal linguistic gymnastic: sensual unions, jostled sonorities and elastic parentage, Jeff Noon's novels and short stories eat up literary genres and regurgitate them in a mix as if jubilantly discharging an obligation towards restricting labels. Right from its publication in 1993, *Vurt* will spontaneously create its own public. It obtained the Arthur C. Clarke literary prize that rewards science fiction works. Its immediate success in cyber and science fiction circles propelled Jeff Noon into the line of William Gibsons and Philip K. Dick. Original, he addresses other filiations with sympathy for the fantastic of Borges, the dreamlike fantasy of Lewis Carroll and Victorian England filled with murmurings and unreal presences. His hybrid characters are transposed into technological hyper-modernity modelled on the Orwellian organisation of our surveillance society. Ghosts haunt the machines, artificial paradises penetrate sounds, censors abound, and pure battered souls seek the way out.

All the novels are imbued with extraordinary atmospheric depth, the anchored, dreamt-up urban flesh of a city, Manchester. Until he settled in Brighton last year, his literary prose stuck to the bruised, grey asphalt of the Manchurian streets. A town fireproofed by the Smiths and Joy Division's music, the first in Great Britain to deliver themselves up body and soul to the mechanic beats of Detroit house. His haunted tales evoke a decrepit urban space where beings flee

breaking-down reality by entering into the narcotic, labyrinthine meanders of a double cartography, mental and geographical. The fluid, shifting quality of his style hits right from the introductory sentence. Fine sutures run through the bewitching unwinding narrative while the vocabulary, injected with crater-like neologisms, brushes against the carnal thickness of the lexicon. Read aloud, as Jeff Noon likes to do, his texts articulate a coarse language bristling with Saxon sonorities and limpid whispers. His tales conceal the power of an ensnared inheritance nourished with poetry, epics, Celtic myths and legends.

On the opening page of *Needle in a Groove* he cites the discs that accompanied the writing of the novel. One finds scattered Autechre, Phitek, DJ Shadow, Pole. On the fringes of techno, these musicians hybridise and manipulate sound. *Automated Alice* was written at the junction between Country and Western music, drums'n'bass and free jazz. More than a musical parallel it is a question of mæutics. Once a bass player in a group which never forced fame, he finds in reggae, which in 1977 flooded onto the English scene, the bass line that organized a succession of musical waves, from dub to techno. A sonorous backbone arranges his universe; the small publishing house Ringpull Press in Manchester (now vanished) which had the temerity to publish *Vurt*, functioned like a label. Jeff Noon tracks down liquid words, the scansion of the language, the initial intensity as if for a hit, supposed to mark consciences immediately. The sonorous method applied to the narrative line, alters, duplicates and remixes it like in *Needle in the Groove* where the story gets caught up in ►

"WE LIVE IN FLUX"



routes that go round into themselves in an infernal circle. Dubbed writing with resonance which will mark him out as the Lee Scratch Perry of the English language. *Cobralingus* published at the beginning of 2001 literally transposes musical programming techniques to writing. Like a sonorous line passing through the filters of effects that bend the curve, sculpt its colour and chisel its intensity, the chosen texts cross the thresholds of a mechanism of textual engendering. Like a garment turned inside out, *Cobralingus* reveals the seams and joints of the work, it exhibits the creative principles at work in the novel. *Automated Alice* is a futurist remix of Lewis Carroll's book, a fairy tale "from the future"; *Nymphomation*, a perverse rerouting of slogans or the barbarities of the entertainment society. His depart for Brighton surprised those who riveted his writing in Nordic Manchester. Towns change. New Manchester expunges its popular quarters, delivering them up coldly to nineties yuppies. The city has lost its soul and gave Jeff Noon the reason to leave. A geographical metaphor for his progressive disenchantment towards the cyber-fiction universe. The marine and bluish colour of the bathing resort will perhaps colour his next novel...

MUSICAL TECHNIQUES UNDERLINE THE ACTUAL DYNAMICS OF EXPERIMENTAL MUSIC, WHAT ABOUT LITERATURE?

J.N. : I like to transfer contemporary music techniques to prose, and note whether words and narration can be similarly manipulated. Music is still what I prefer over all the other artistic forms. Literature is more timid than music in its use of experimental techniques. The last decade in music underwent a massive contribution of avant-garde techniques: sampling, scratching and remixing that have passed into the public domain. We should allow the introduction of these techniques into writing, to see if literature can rally to them. **YOU REFER TO FLOW, FLUIDITY, WHETHER IT BE IN WRITING OR IN THE FRAME OF THE INFORMATION SOCIETY, WHAT DO YOU MEAN BY "LIQUID CULTURE"?**

J.N. : I think our way of contemplating the world, our way of apprehending it as well as the different answers we bring to it have

changed since a few years. The mass of information no longer oppresses us, we have ended up by appreciating this invasion. The metaphor of surf used for the net is symptomatic of the ease with which we slide, immerse ourselves into this flow. This liquid culture allows the barriers inserted between us and the world to dissolve. We live in flux. The question to ask concerns the acuteness of the narration which creates fictions around and about this liquid culture. It is a question to seize in the continuity of literary research.

"NEEDLE IN THE GROOVE" IS A CRAZY INCURSION INTO THE MANCHESTER MUSICAL SCENE. DID THE PUNK PERIOD INFLUENCE THE POETRY AND THE DESPERATE ENERGY OF YOUR STORIES?

J.N. : Yes, I was totally impregnated with the brutal spirit of punk. Belonging to that scene, being active and creative in it influenced me a lot. Though my maturity as a writer grows, I still have to find new leads to invest this energy in.

DRUGS ARE ALSO AN IMPORTANT PROTAGONIST IN YOUR NOVELS. YOU EVOKE THEM AS AN ALLEGORY.

J.N. : Once again it's the idea of frontiers and their evanescent nature. Drugs do away with mental barriers. So crossings over can operate between a character's conscience and the exterior world. Evidently there is a negative side; that is something I had the opportunity to realise during my alcoholic years. But I cannot resist the idea of leading my characters into that state of liquidity.

YOU REFER TO THE ELECTRONIC MUSIC OF GROUPS LIKE OVAL, POLE, AUTECHÉ, MOUSE ON MARS. WHAT INTERESTS YOU IN THEIR WORK?

J.N. : The intensity with which they manipulate sound takes me back to the remarks on liquid culture. The melancholic nature engendered by the machine and human interface creates electronic music with a romantic gist produced from classical methods. From the beginning, with Kraftwerk one might say, one could seize this fascinating tension at work.

MUSICIANS PROGRAM THEIR TOOLS TO COMPOSE. IF YOU COULD PROGRAM YOURS, WHAT WOULD YOU INVENT?

J.N. : It's enough to compare a program for composing music or images with a word processor to understand the gap between tools

"AS A KID ONE EXPECTS TO HAVE A WONDERFUL LIFE, THEN SUDDENLY AT FIFTY HALF YOUR DREAMS HAVEN'T COME TRUE"

IS THERE A LARGE PART OF IMPROVISATION?

Nothing is improvised. Improvisation is when one leaves the actors to go off freewheeling. In reality everything is extremely precise: I know exactly what I want but I never decide anything in advance. When I arrive on a set I get an idea while the lorries unload. Generally it's a camera movement I will use to recount a situation. We prepare the scene technically then the text comes at the end. It has to mould into the duration of the shot.

YOU TAKE A REAL PLEASURE IN MIXING AMATEUR AND PROFESSIONAL ACTORS. WHAT IMPORTANCE DOES THAT HAVE IN YOUR WORK?

This mixture creates a particular energy on the set. You have hours of tracking shots with people who have never acted in their lives and you don't see that very often or even ever. Suddenly those people realise the situation and it gives them wings, they really take off. Because they don't feel as safe like the professionals do. It's a magical state: the moment when it's too late and one cannot go back anymore.

DOES ACTING IN YOUR OWN FILM REPRESENT AN EXTRA DIFFICULTY?

On the contrary. Behind the camera I'm in such a state of anxiety and excitement that when the time comes to act it's almost liberating. **WAS THE CINEMA ALWAYS A FAMILY AFFAIR RIGHT FROM THE START?** In the film there is my wife, my daughter, my son, my friend Patrick Grandperret, Yves Alonso who played in *Double Messieurs*... I cultivated this troupe spirit with film makers like Truffaut and Cassavetes of course. For me a film is a piece of life.

DO YOU FEEL YOU HAVE GIVEN YOUR CHILDREN THE COMEDY VIRUS?

I don't know. It can't be explained. When they saw me coming back all year long from filming from one end of the planet to the other, I must have nourished their fantasies, their imaginations... It's quite mysterious.

IS MAKING A FILM ALWAYS A BATTLE FOR YOU?

It's very hard. Because after filming there's another moment of truth: editing. It's like a recipe, screening every week, thought, discussion. Crazy work with the secret desire in the end to reconstruct a piece of life! But nothing's won in advance ■

of transformation and manipulation. We will continue to toil to create new, narrative voices as long as programmers have not invented new machines. This said, all these tools are in my head. It's just a waste of time compared to the ease with which musicians and artists potter around and knock things up. I would like a word processor with a key to arbitrarily remix the text. The fact that we have not yet reached this first stage indicates the conservative approach of writers. Try to shake up words a little, without losing the playful side in doing so.

"PIXEL JUICE" AND "NYMPHOMATION" GLORIFY A SURREALIST DIMENSION WHERE ODDNESS AND STRANGENESS ARE MIXED. HOW DOES THIS UNIVERSE DEVELOP?

J.N. : A little like through a glass partition. Oddly, that's how I see the world. That's also the course the British novel can embark on. We've become experts in realistic novels. Let fantasy reinvest our work. That's why I always return to Lewis Carroll as a starting point, to that very English surrealist imagination. I think there's potential there for the creation of really modern literature.

YOUR LAST BOOK "COBRALINGUS", AS WELL AS "NYMPHOMATION", ARE CLOSE TO PEREC'S, QUENEAU'S AND OULIPO NOVELS. DO STYLISTIC CONSTRAINTS INTERVENE IN YOUR WORK?

J.N. : Perec is one of the most important writers in the second half of the XXth century. *La vie mode d'emploi* is one of my favourite novels. He manages to adapt the avant-garde techniques of the oulipians to an enthralling narrative structure. It's an inspiration on the way to inject experimental inserts while telling a story, which is more important than the rest for me. *Cobralingus* is a structure of practical works from techniques regularly used or that I intend to use in more conventional stories. I like the tension that's created when narration encounters experimentation.

YOUR WORKS PROGRESSIVELY COME OUT OF THE FIELD OF SCIENCE FICTION, YOU MIX CHILDREN'S FABLES, MUSICAL METAPHORS, TECHNOLOGICAL SOCIETY, POST-FUTURISM...

J.N. : I take positions on the fringes and frontiers, I'm interested in what people experience when they live in or cross these various zones.

Otherwise how could I describe these zones accurately and capture the sensation of passage? So what if they don't really know in which genre to place my books, or where to put them in a bookstore? Science fiction doesn't really interest me anymore. It seems to me that this is no longer a literature that explores the limits, it has become frozen as a means of expression. I think that nowadays my work is closer to poetic realism where the fantastic pours out into everyday life.

YOU MOVED TO BRIGHTON, A HEDONIST, NONCHALANT TOWN, SO VERY DIFFERENT FROM THE ATMOSPHERE OF NORTHERN ENGLAND. WHAT IMPACT DID THAT HAVE ON YOUR WORK?

J.N. : The change was drastic. I had begun a lot of stories, false starts, believing that I was still writing a Manchester tale! Now I have a wandering story, a road novel in which a group of characters crosses a strange England in a broken up car. It's a story of travelling, transition. My writing is changing at the moment, it's milder, I think. It's no longer preoccupied with seeking effects.

YOUR BOOKS CREATE AN UNREAL, CRAZY GREAT BRITAIN, STEEPED IN MUSIC AND STRANGELY CAUGHT IN RETRO-FUTURIST NETS. HOW DO YOU SEE THIS COUNTRY IN 2002?

J.N. : With the novel I'm working on and the site Mappalajo, I've begun a voyage in that offbeat England. I'm fascinated by this country and what will happen in this strange period. I think it is a subject to start writing from. We have favoured realistic novels for too long, I would like to create a British *Twin Peaks* ■

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VURT (RING PULL PRESS 1993)

POLLEN (FOURTH ESTATE (1995)

AUTOMATED ALICE (TRANSWORLD 1996)

NYMPHOMATION (TRANSWORLD 1997)

PIXEL JUICE (TRANSWORLD 1998)

NEEDLE IN THE GROOVE (TRANSWORLD 2000)

COBRALINGUS (CODEX 2000)