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## Always Crashing in the Same Car: Shakespeare, Ballard and Appropriation

### Introduction

The work of the Shanghai-born, British-based writer J.G. Ballard (1930-2009) repeatedly referred to, echoed, or adapted Shakespeare, and in particular *The Tempest*. This paper explores how and why Ballard did this, focussing on his novel *Concrete Island*, and the challenges of reading its Shakespearean appropriations in historical contexts – that is, both Ballard’s and our own. Set in 1973, but published in 1974, what has been called the ‘apocalyptic year of the British seventies’ (Beckett 2009, 246), *Concrete Island* concerns the story of Robert Maitland, an architect, who crashes his car through a road barrier into a patch of what seems to be uninhabited waste land in London. The ‘island’, like *The Tempest*’s, is in fact already ‘peopled’ (1.2.409), by Jane Fairfax, a pot-smoking sometime-sex-worker, and Proctor, a tramp and one-time acrobat. While injured by his crash, Maitland seeks to dominate Jane and exploit Proctor, the apparent Prospero to their Miranda and Caliban. Though Proctor is ‘resident of the island’ (2011, 88), Maitland perceives him as subhuman and deformed: he moves ‘crab-wise’ (159), and has a nose like ‘a blob of amorphous cartilage’ (87). Maitland beats Proctor into submission, rides him as he nurses his wounds, cajoles him to reveal where food can be sourced, plies him with drink, and, eventually, expropriates the environment they shared. To Maitland, Jane is a ‘deranged young woman’ who needs taming (101), even as she polices Maitland’s scraps with Proctor ‘like a bored housewife settling a street fracas’, while fixing Maitland ‘with her severe child’s eyes’ (109); later her face will ‘lay like a child’s’ on his post-coital body (116). If Jane is somewhere between a wife and a daughter, she is also something between a mother and a lover. If Proctor appears a bestial victim, he is also bestowed with humanity and grace. And if Maitland seems dominant, his

strategies mirror those of Trinculo and Stephano, as much as a master mage. *Concrete Island* thus presents beguiling psychological, social, and intertextual terrain, in which *The Tempest* repeatedly re-emerges as both itself and something new, a text Ballard simultaneously thinks *through* and *beyond*.

In this regard, my title recollects a track from David Bowie's 1977 album *Low*, a song often characterized as 'Ballardian' (Wilcken 90). I evoke this not only to acknowledge Ballard's (and Bowie's) impact on others, but also to signal how Bowie's song gestures to Ballard's characters' obsessive, compulsive and repetitive behaviours. These multiple forms of repetition are reflexively acknowledged in what Jane says to Maitland in the novel: 'Do you know that we both thought you might have been here before?' (117). Maitland often thinks so, highlighting both the novel's dependence on a pre-fabricated plot, and his own uncanny sense that he has inhabited the concrete island already.

But why tell this story using *The Tempest* then? In other words, how can we read Shakespeare's place in Ballard's novel historically? Answering such questions should involve attempting to move beyond tracing the contiguities and discontinuities between the novel and the play. This paper *does* do that, but also seeks to address methodological issues about reading Shakespearean appropriations historically; that is, focussing as much on our moment of re-reading as on Ballard's moment of revision. So even as we think about the possible aims or effects of such an appropriation in the mid-1970s, we might also consider how we read it in the 2010s, to ask: can we historicize our own readings of Shakespearean appropriation?

Answering such questions might also be a matter of finding connections between what we could see as the world of 'Shakespeare' (that is, what people are doing both *within* and *with* his works at a particular historical moment, including this one), the world of the appropriator (that is, what their use of Shakespeare says about their identity, working

methods and the development of their corpus), and the world itself (that is, what mattered in the particular historical moment when the appropriation occurs, and what matters in the moment that appropriation is being analysed). Clearly, these are not discrete worlds. Ballard's disturbing fictions inform and are informed by the disturbances of his era, but this era often understood those disturbances in Shakespearean terms. In late 1973, the year of the novel's story, 'an anonymous columnist in the *Essex County Standard* summed up the atmosphere in Colchester and its hinterland by quoting Shakespeare, and in particular part of a line from *Richard III* that would be much more widely cited later in the decade...: 'This being the winter of our discontent...'" (Beckett 2009, 140).

We might acknowledge, though, that some critics have suggested that Ballard and Shakespeare appear unlikely collaborators, 'since [Ballard's] attitude to literature and literary institutions was mostly iconoclastic' (Rossi 363). To Ballard, speaking in a 2006 interview, the science fiction he wrote 'was about the present day' and 'owed nothing to aping past models' (McCrum). But this disavowal of influence – in Ballard's sci-fi, or in his other works – should not be taken at face value. Ballard 'included Shakespeare among the top ten writers of the millennium' and commented publicly on Shakespeare's 'universal' resonance (Rossi 365). Three years before Ballard's death, Robert McCrum had asked Ballard 'what was the young JG Ballard reading?', to which Ballard responded, 'I was reading everything' (McCrum). This voracious and inclusive approach included reading Shakespeare, in the broadest sense of what Shakespeare and reading might mean. For example, as an adolescent internee at Shanghai's Lunghua camp during World War Two, Ballard watched 'full-scale performances in the dining hall of Noël Coward and Shakespeare plays' (Ballard 2008, 71), and befriended an actor who would 'describe the Shakespeare roles he would soon be playing' (Ballard 2008, 104). During the early 1950s, Ballard briefly studied English literature at what was Queen

Mary College in London, coming into contact with the kind of tutor who would give him lifts in her car, 'take both hands off the wheel', and 'hold forth about *Gammer Gurton's Needle*', the raucous pre-Shakespearean comedy (Ballard 2008, 152). The points of contact between Ballard and Shakespeare are plural.

Nonetheless, scholars of Shakespearean adaptations have rarely commented on Ballard's use of Shakespeare.<sup>1</sup> Ruth Morse is one notable exception, observing how 'Prospero and Miranda wind their ways through several of his novels', although there is 'a degree of tenuousness in the connection' since 'his references are like something remembered at a distance, and not recently re-read', and although he 'simplifies' *The Tempest* 'by returning it to its traditional emphasis: boy meets girl' (Morse 173-4).

In contrast, several Ballard scholars *have* noticed and elaborated upon the connection with more appreciation, suggesting 'many of Ballard's stories...explicitly or implicitly build upon the interaction between a Prospero, a Miranda and a Caliban figure' (Delville 94-5). Ballard's play with Shakespeare does indeed permeate and inform his corpus, in all its generic, thematic and topical variety. This might make Ballard a perfect candidate for identifying and reading Shakespeare adaptations, historically or otherwise. However, critical readings of Ballard's Shakespearean appropriations often tend to veer towards the ahistorical, rather than contextualizing. There are perhaps two reasons for this: one, to do with the ways Shakespearean echoes and tropes in Ballard have been read in psychological rather than social terms; and another to do with the way Ballard's status as a writer of science fiction conditions how we contextualize his appropriations of Shakespeare.<sup>2</sup>

Ballard's own estimation of science-fiction does allow, indeed demands, a contextualizing approach, but also can be seen to invite, if not encourage, ahistoricism. He perceived that the sci-fi he began to read when in his formative and tedious days stationed

as an RAF pilot at Moose Jaw airbase in Canada functioned as ‘a form of fiction actually about...a world of cars, offices, highways, airlines and supermarkets that we actually lived in, but which was completely missing from almost all serious fiction’; such fiction, in contrast, was about the “self”, not the ‘everyday world’ (Ballard 2008, 166). At the same time, Ballard would, in his own account of his fiction-making, move to explore “inner space” (Ballard 2008, 181), as opposed to conventional sci-fi tropes of alien worlds. His concern with the tensions between profound interior states and external everyday realities generates much of his writing’s brilliance, even as such tensions complicate how we historicize responses to Shakespearean appropriations in his work.

### **‘Dark obsessions’**

David Pringle argued that the interactions of Ballard’s characters, especially those modelled, however perversely, on Shakespearean characters, should be seen as part of a ‘symbolic whole’, and thus as ‘figures in an inner landscape’ (Pringle 51):

[T]o borrow from Freudian terminology, the Caliban figures stand for the Id, while the Prospero figures stand for the Ego. (Pringle 49)

To some critics, the psychology being explored is the one producing Ballard’s own ‘dark obsessions’: ‘Ballard’s references to *The Tempest* belong to his private preoccupations’ (Morse 169, 174). There is some credibility to this view; that is, that we can understand Ballard’s appropriations of Shakespeare, in *Concrete Island* and elsewhere, with reference to subjective psychological (and sexual) states.

In 1987, Ballard reflected on his earlier enjoyment of Fred M. Wilcox’s 1956 film *Forbidden Planet*, ‘an update of Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*’ (Ballard 1997, 18) in a survey of sci-fi cinema that constituted part of his *User’s Guide to the Millennium*. Ballard suggested

that ‘the film’s real originality’ came with the way it turned ‘the brutish Caliban figure’ inhabiting an ‘isolated planet’ into ‘an externalization’ of the ‘libido’ of ‘the Prospero figure, Dr Morbius’. Ballard was fascinated by the connections between sexuality, destruction, and the apparently rational ‘brilliant but flawed scientist’, and would go on to see ‘Robby the Robot’, the film’s ‘ever obliging Ariel’ (Ballard 2008, 18), exhibited in 1956’s Pop Art extravaganza at the Whitechapel Art Gallery, *This is Tomorrow*.

The subjective psychology underpinning Ballard’s Shakespearean appropriations is apparently laid bare yet again in the semi-autobiographical, semi-fictionalized *The Kindness of Women* (1991), his sequel to the equally genre-blurring account of life in Lunghua, *Empire of the Sun* (1984). *Kindness* presents a rendering of Ballard who describes the growing independence and drive of ‘Miriam’ (Ballard’s wife was called Mary), his ‘mature and strong-willed’ wife, in their suburban home: she ‘had taken a part in the Shepperton Players’ open-air performance of *As You Like It*, playing a spirited Rosalind like a feminist agitator’ (Ballard 1992, 144). This recollection itself comes in a chapter with the *Tempest*-referencing title of ‘The Island’. This recounts a family holiday, with ‘Miriam’ and their three children (variously described in the chapter by people they encounter as “pixies” and “monsters”, that is, we might suggest, Ariels and Calibans) (Ballard 1992, 147, 157) in the 1960s on Spain’s Costa Brava. When the family discover and occupy a sand-bar just off the coast, their adventures are freighted with yet more echoes of *The Tempest*:

‘Hold on – let’s explore a little. This is some sort of island.’

‘A real desert island, Daddy? With cannibals?’

‘Definitely cannibals...’ (Ballard 1992, 138, 140)

Experiencing a different kind of isolation and insularity following the death of ‘Miriam’, ‘Jim’ begins a relationship in England with ‘Sally Mumford’, someone the family met back on the

Costa Brava. He saves her from drowning, and she becomes part of his life: 'A depraved and innocent Miranda had been washed ashore on the island of Shepperton' (Ballard 1992, 188). She is, says Jim, echoing Miranda, 'my guide to a new world' (Ballard 1992, 189) as he becomes a single parent, both mother and father; yet to 'Mumford' he is a kind of Prospero, with all restraint removed, as she instructs him to "Bugger me daddy! Beat me! Pixie wants to be buggered!" while surrounded by the children's soft toys (Ballard 1992, 189). Dark obsessions indeed, which feature, refracted, in *Concrete Island*: the child-like Jane comforts Maitland in his pains and travails by offering sexual pleasure and maternal compassion, 'half-working her plump breast against his forehead as if feeding her own baby' (114). If Maitland has, as Jane suggests, "been here before" (117), he is also reliving incestuous urges. For Ballard then, *The Tempest* carries and triggers associations of both transgressive sexuality and normative domesticity, where roles shift in both, and islands real or imagined can be found close to and far from home.

Evidently, Ballard's own depiction of *The Tempest's* 'family romance' licenses autobiographical and psychological readings of his work, but perhaps at the expense of contextualizing accounts. Hence, several commentators have deliberately swerved away from historicizing interpretations in their understanding of *Concrete Island*: 'the island represents an embodiment of the unconscious' (Stephenson 78), and the text operates as a 'psychodrama enacted inside Maitland's exploding head' (Beckett 2015, 3). When the discussion of Ballard's Shakespeare-infused psychological types *has* touched upon historical concerns, the results have been mixed, and rarely concern *Concrete Island*. Pringle suggested Ballard's development of archetypes had a more problematic function through creating stereotypes, with 'lower-class' and 'Negro' characters drawn from the 'lumpen proletariat'



cast as 'endless avatars of Caliban' (45). Whether we think we are dealing with stereotypes or archetypes, faced with Shakespeare, history seems to disappear.

### **Timeless Worlds?**

This swerve to the ahistorical in criticism is also understandable, because Ballard is known as a science-fiction writer. However much sci-fi keys into, is informed by, speaks about, or extrapolates from the moment of its creation, it is often about some future, alternative domain, *after our history* in all senses of the phrase.<sup>3</sup> This affects and characterizes what Ballard does with *The Tempest*. We can see this in *The Drought* (1965), another fractured, shifting, hallucinatory and at times horrifying reconfiguring of the play. It begins in an all-too-recognisable and not-too-distant future of environmental degradation, then jumps ten years ahead of that point for the latter half of the book. The earth is drying out due to a durable film generated by a cocktail of man-made effluents covering the oceans and preventing evaporation. The novel is notable for setting up 'correspondences of character' (18), and not just between the protagonist Dr Charles Ransom, and Catherine Austen, a naturalist and zoo-keeper's daughter. The correspondences are also between this dessicated world and *The Tempest*. So, Philip Jordan is 'foster-child of the river and its last presiding Ariel...part waif and part water-elf' (21). The rich Lomax is a debauched Prospero, a 'petulant Nero overwhelmed by the absurdity and ingratitude of the world', living an 'insulated existence' as a quasi-exile from society, being 'persona non-grata with the local authorities' (49-50). Lomax's sister is called Miranda ('but was she really his sister, Ransom sometimes speculated' (54)). In the earlier scenes Miranda is 'a wild, evil child...a witch' with 'the mouth of a corrupt Cupid' (54-55), comparable to a 'yellow-locked leprous-skinned lamia' with a 'perverted cherub's face' (60). Though cast as an 'imbecile Ophelia' (93), and despite these other

associations, she will eventually live up to her name, and reprise a version of her role in *The Tempest*. Quilter is a 'grimacing parody of a human being' (68), repellent to Ransom, as 'the grotesque Caliban of his nightmares' (79). Yet he is also compelling, for as Quilter says, anticipating the levelling, inversion, and changes that a new environmental and thus social order will foment: "'We'll have much more in common later, doctor! Much more!'" (68). Ransom cannot miss him – he is part of his thinking and ordering of a world where order is eroding. As if to acknowledge yet also master and thus transcend this commonality, Ransom helps Quilter's mother, a Sycorax-figure who complains that "'Lomax and his filthy Miranda'" have "'stolen my boy!'" (107). In the later stages of the novel, and the drought, Quilter dresses himself in freakish robes (with stilts) so that his face appears, Caliban-esque, 'like a partly curtained exhibit in a fairground freak show' (201). He has now 'peopl'd' their domain (2.1.351) with three children, each deformed with 'the same brachycephalic' skull (208-9), sired with Miranda who is now 'as fat as a pig' and encased in a 'black nightdress...designed to show off her vast corpulence' (205). She has become so fat despite the shortages of food by eating 'dead fishermen' caught up in the chaos of the drought (226). Her 'brother', Lomax, has become 'a demented Prospero...stunned by the horror of this island infested by nightmares'; he waves 'a silver-toped cane like a wand', and bellows to Quilter "'Come here, my Caliban, show yourself to your master!'" (222-23). As his Jordan-as-Ariel disappears into the desert, Ballard rearranges the terms of *The Tempest's* sexual and domestic relations: Miranda and Caliban have mated, 'a last Eve and Adam' (221), and Miranda has become a cannibal. These are horrific scenes, extrapolated from 'the "repressed" palimpsestic layers' of the play (Zabus 2).

Yet, beyond obvious concerns about the environmental degradation, this is not an easy text to historicize, and it knows it. The narrative describes a 'timeless world' (231), while

also being obsessed with time, its relative value and its progress, regress or dilation: 'each of them would soon literally be an island in an archipelago drained of time' (9). Ransom thinks time's backward flow brings about atavism:

He pointed to the dusty villas along the river. 'They look like mud huts already. We're moving straight back into the past.' (52)

Lomax sees things differently: "'You've got your sense of direction wrong, my boy. It's the future each of us has to come to terms with now.'" (52)

Crucially, even as it draws on pre-existing relations inscribed in fiction, this novel relates a history that has not yet happened, though it is possible to see how it might, in the past tense of a novel published in 1965: 'the bizarre temporality of the catastrophe genre projects the disaster as having already happened, but returns it to the present, retroactively' (Luckhurst 71). *Concrete Island* does things differently.

### ***Concrete Island***

*The Drought*, then, depicts a future; *Concrete Island*, however, was described in 1974 by Martin Amis as 'by far [Ballard's] most realistic novel to date' (Amis 101). To understand the persistent credibility of Amis' claim, it is worth noting how some have attempted to historicize other Ballardian fiction that appropriates Shakespeare (if not *Concrete Island*), such as the story 'The Ultimate City'. As Rossi intelligently contends '*The Tempest*...was born in the same years of modernity itself', that is, when the formative texts and moments of the seventeenth-century's revolutions in science, geography, mathematics and philosophy occurred or were published (372). These 'fueled both the industrial revolutions and the European imperialism to come', with the play commenting cogently on the latter in particular (372). This perspective allows Rossi to historicize 'The Ultimate City' as being 'strongly influenced by the

rise of environmentalist concerns in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and its fictional world has surely been shaped by the 1973 oil crisis' (373). Certainly, at least since the founding of the 'tirelessly apocalyptic' journal *The Ecologist* in 1970, and then during the years of *Concrete Island's* inception and publication, '[e]nvironmentalism was sustained by a sense of impending doom' (Beckett 2009, 237, 234). Thus 'the environment' (or concerns about it) might conceivably be a key context for historicizing what Ballard does with *The Tempest* in the period.

Yet even Rossi suggests it is 'simply not enough' to focus on how 'The Ultimate City' 'talks about the environment' (373). Hence Rossi maintains his primary interest in *The Tempest's* role in 'The Ultimate City', resides in the novella's 'metatextual component...as an anamorphic representation of Ballard's literary practice...as a postmodern visionary and a mass media bricoleur' (366). In its own way, this is, of course, a kind of historicizing, because it locates Ballard's 'textual strategies' as a self-conscious engagement with the discourses and practices of spectacle and performance in his period; that is, the world of the appropriator (Rossi 365).

How, then, might we historicize *Concrete Island*, and Shakespeare's place in it? Andrzej Gasoriek affirms it belongs to 'a particular socio-cultural period', that is, 'the fag-end of post-war welfare statism', and 'the interregnum between the end of the 'old Labour' project begun in 1945 and the beginning of the Thatcher era in 1979' (107). Gasoriek describes the narrative in terms that accord with Rossi's perspectives on 'The Ultimate City':

The concrete island on which Maitland crashes is not just a metaphor for his mind but also a symbol of the waste and destruction modernity leaves in its wake. It is a non-place in precise ways: it exists solely as the space left over and in between a series of interlocking highways which define and isolate it; it is a forgotten patch of waste

ground shaped by the discarded remnants of urban life; it is a habitus for the city's rejects, who are forced to live on its margins. (108)

These are vital insights, but are not perhaps context-specific enough, and, evidently, do not explicate why *The Tempest* would be worth appropriating to depict these issues and conditions. In other words, such readings emphasize the wider world, but not the world of 'Shakespeare'. To begin to think this through differently we might acknowledge Rossi's ideas about 'metatextual' relations in 'The Ultimate City' to recognize that no man, or text, is an island, and also perceive how *this* textual and actual island 'is a historical site'. (Gasoriek 113). Certainly, in *Concrete Island* Ballard is at pains to emphasize the subterranean histories and material palimpsests making up his island. It contains 'a World War II air-raid shelter' (38), 'ruins...of a stucco Victorian house', 'the line of a...neighbourhood high street', 'an abandoned churchyard' (40-41), a building which once housed a 'small printing shop' (65), 'the ground-plan of a post-war cinema' (69), and 'the remains of a Civil Defence post little more than fifteen years old' (69). There was, in essence, a whole world here, with domestic, commercial, religious, military, and creative spaces, spaces of cultural and mechanical reproduction. These structures poke out like bones through skin, with just as much pain. We can explore more of the palimpsest though: just as scholars have located the island in London's geography, so part of its history derives from Ballard's understandings of *The Tempest*.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, we might suggest that Ballard is here drawing on how the 'subterranean topography' of one of his routes into the play, *Forbidden Planet*, 'signals' that 'outer space can contain "inner space"' in ways that would have tantalized him (Zabus 187, citing Kumar 404).

So why *The Tempest*, and why then? Maybe readers haven't asked such questions because Ballard worked hard to throw people off the scent, exploiting the instability inherent to the ways intertextuality generates 'radically plural' texts (Allen 90). If anything, *Concrete*

*Island* makes its sources explicit, but they are not explicitly Shakespearean: Ballard's 'Introduction' to the novel itself points to how the 'fantasy' of *Robinson Crusoe* 'endures' (2011, n.p.). Later, the protagonist Maitland will refer to himself as being "marooned here like Crusoe" (32), and, like Crusoe, he sees a 'footprint' in the earth of the 'inverted beach...up from the island' (48). Contemporaries accepted this intertextuality: when Martin Amis reviewed *Concrete Island* in 1974, he noted the novel's 'inevitable resonances', but pointed only to *Crusoe* (99). Likewise, Martin Levin's 1974 review for the *New York Times* observed the novel's 'Robinson Crusoe gambit', but, again, no Shakespeare.

And yet, from the outset, the novel self-consciously admits and defers a link with Shakespeare: the narrative begins on 'April 22nd 1973' (7), thereby acknowledging but then shifting away from a date with Shakespearean significance. This insistence on dating the novel's events points to two key contexts informing how the novel appropriates Shakespeare, and vice versa: the end of the 1960s, and postcolonial movements. Thinking about these can help us better understand the alignment of and distinctions between the world of 'Shakespeare', the world of the appropriator, and the concerns of the wider world.

### **The end of the 1960s**

*The Tempest* was an *ur*-text for the blissed-out mid-to-late 1960s, appreciated for its perceived transformative and redemptive qualities. The sleeve notes for The Zombies' classic British psychedelic album *Odessey and Oracle* approvingly (mis)quoted the play (from 3.2.138-41):

Shakespeare said

"Be not afraid;

The isle is full of noises

Sound, and sweet airs that give delight and hurt not.

Sometimes a thousand twanging instruments

Will hum about mine ears; and sometimes voices" ....

Thanks to Will Shakespeare...for his contribution to the sleeve notes. (Zombies)

'Will' shared The Zombies' informal (and undying) state, in a fantastic isle full of perfumed airs, noises and sounds, where even the enslaved characters and monstrous appreciate art and music.

Ballard was alive to just these kinds of transformations as heralded and fantasized about in the 1960s. Describing arriving in a drab, shabby, worn-out country after the Second World War, he asserts 'Change, I felt, was what England desperately needed, and I still feel it' (Ballard 2008, 127). The 1960s momentarily presented these metamorphic possibilities. Yet, in retrospect, Ballard recognized his detachment from and ambivalence about the period, even as he cherished its fervour:

The 1960s were a far more revolutionary time than younger people now realise...a social revolution took place, as significant in many ways as that of the post-war Labour government. ... In many ways the 1960s were a fulfilment of all that I hoped would happen in England. Waves of change were overtaking each other, and at times it seemed that change would become a new kind of boredom, disguising the truth that everything beneath the gaudy surface remained the same. ... The 1960s were an exciting decade that I watched on television (Ballard 2008, 208-9, 226)

Raising a young family as widower, Ballard took pleasure in the 1960s, but also felt disconnected and anxious, as 'darker currents were flowing a little too close to the surface' during the decade:

The viciousness of the Vietnam War, lingering public guilt over the Kennedy assassination, the casualties of the hard drug scene, the determined effort by the entertainment industry to infantilise us – all these had begun to get between us and the new dawn. Youth began to seem rather old hat and, anyway, what could we do with all that hope and freedom? (Ballard 2008, 235-6)

The cultural and social historian Andy Beckett has recently queried the ‘one of the conventional wisdoms about the seventies’, that it was ‘a time when the rebellious energies of the sixties cooled and dissipated’ (Beckett 2009, 209). Nonetheless, at the time, in Ballard’s reckoning, by 1970, dreams of a brave new world ‘lay dead’ (Ballard 1992, 282). In these terms, *The Tempest* offered resonances to intensify and represent this situation. Gonzalo’s description of his ideal ‘commonwealth’ in 2.1 is also a description of a recovered Eden, where everyone is ‘innocent and pure’, no-one is raised above anyone else, and no-one works because ‘nature’ brings forth ‘all abundance’. However, just as Thomas More’s 1516 *Utopia* was a translated version of ‘no place’ as well as ‘a happy place’, so Alonso reduces Gonzalo’s words to signifying ‘nothing’ (2.1.164). Worse, maybe the island is a dystopia: Ferdinand would ‘live here ever’ since Prospero’s magic ‘Makes this place Paradise’ (4.1.122-4), yet this same magic also makes his guests imagine, as Ariel reports, “Hell is empty, / And all the devils are here” (2.1.214-5). *The Tempest*’s utopian/dystopian imperatives inform and contextualize *Concrete Island*: ‘The return of Prospero, as it is compounded by the return of the repressed, inevitably ghosts politics’ (Zabus 176).

According to Ballard, ‘the 60s started in 1963 with the assassination of President Kennedy – his death and the Vietnam War...overshadowed the whole decade – a sort of institutionalized disaster area’ (cited in Elborough, 7). The key term there is ‘institutionalized’: where is it possible to imagine an alternative world not defined by these disasters? Maybe



only in the acts of those on the edge of society, refugees exiled from the world in a 'non-place', like those in the novel (Gasoriek 108). The subterranean dwelling Jane Fairfax shares with Proctor is decorated with the accoutrements of 1960s' alternative life, visions of other ways to be: 'up-to-date prints taken from underground magazines – a psychedelic poster in the Beardsley manner, a grainy close-up of the dead Che Guevara, a Black Power manifesto, and Charles Manson at his trial, psychotic eyes staring out beneath a bald skull' (80). Yet Guevara and Manson are later described as 'custodians of a nightmare' (91) in the room, and in the world. This is the (late) 1960s condensed: murdered icons, murderous icons, iconoclastic drives. These drives, images and icons have gone to earth, and begun to mulch and decay, being now doubly underground. Jane herself, dressed in 'faded jeans and combat jacket' is a 'prototypal drop-out' (82), and was identified as such in contemporary reviews.<sup>5</sup> This description is later enhanced to portray her as a 'exiting from a well-to-do family with her head full of half-baked ideals, on the run from the police' (95) with her 'pot-smoker's kit' (107). Yet as his car crashes through barriers on the motorway, Maitland, though an established architect, also drops-out, quite literally, 'onto a forgotten island of rubble and weeds, out of sight of the surveillance cameras' (Ballard, 'Introduction', 2011, n.p.). As he does so, and despite his pains, Maitland quickly appreciates the worth of his isolation:

Most of the happier moments of his life had been spent alone – student vacations touring Italy and Greece, a three-month drive around the United States... For years now he had mythologized his own childhood. The image in his mind of a small boy playing endlessly by himself in a long suburban garden surrounded by a high fence seems strangely comforting. It was not entirely vanity that the framed photograph of a seven-year-old boy in a drawer of his desk at the office was not of his son, but of himself. (27)

He manifests a self-contained, psychologically-coherent if narcissistic identity, yet it is an identity scarred by such lost paradises. His most successful relationships with women 'succeeded' precisely because they 'recreated for him this imaginary empty garden' (27).<sup>6</sup> The 'damp bower' (31) of the island promises to lead him to some 'paradisial arbour' (74), indulging and satisfying his narcissism, while returning Maitland to a pre-pubescent state, before 'his parents' divorce' (65). Even the pains he endures to reach and dominate that island are integrated into this return and reclamation: his skin 'blossomed into a garden of bruises' (47). He begins identifying the island 'with himself', and seeing it so intensely as 'an exact model of his own head', that he can proclaim, in an ecstasy of integration, "I am the island" (69-71).

This could be read simply as signalling characteristically Ballardian psychological terrain. However, mirroring the 1960s shifts from utopian aspiration to destructive nightmare, in the novel integration is marked with alienation and separation. It ends with Maitland unable or unwilling to leave the island where he attains this fulfilment. He remains remote from the world, with its responsibilities and possibilities. As David Punter put it, *Concrete Island* 'symbolizes a renunciation of the impulse towards the ideal society, and replaces it with a wish for abdication' (Punter 17). On the island, the high nettles' leaves are like 'the porous rocks of a mineral forest on an alien planet' (70), and Maitland later feels he is 'alone on an alien planet' (149): there are again echoes of *Forbidden Planet*'s echoes of *The Tempest*. As Ballard elsewhere affirmed, 'the only truly alien planet is Earth' (cited in Elborough 5), and perhaps it is on earth that true alienation is experienced. What we assume *is* will not necessarily always be. Maitland's 'whole system of comfortable expectations' proves to be fragile and false when he is not 'noticed by a passing driver or policeman' after his accident, or rescued (43).

In turn, though, Maitland's experiences are not uniquely his. Ballard's 'Introduction' to a later edition of the novel diagnoses and describes an alienated, sequestered, demarcated, fearful and policed environment, a forbidding world (if not a planet), comprised of many forms of *insulae* :

The Pacific atoll may not be available, but there are some other islands far nearer to home, some of them only a few steps from the pavements we tread every day. They are surrounded, not by the sea, but by concrete, ringed by chain-mail fences and walled off by bomb-proof glass. (2011 n.p.)

Maitland's story both consolidates and queries these demarcations and divisions. He might as well be in another galaxy when he looks on 'the dark façades' of London's 'high-rise apartment blocks', which hang in the 'night air' like 'rectangular planets' (23). Crusoe-like, he leaves the mainstream world of this concreted-over, brutalized and brutalizing island – willingly, it seems – but also encapsulates and reproduces it, in his commensurate will to 'dominate' and brutalize the space, as Ballard's 'Introduction' in the 2011 edition has it (n.p.). Jane observes to Maitland, "you were on an island long before you crashed here" (141), and he more than embodies the isolated, dog-eat-dog mentality of what Jane terms "other people's selfishness" (83).

### **Concrete (Postcolonial) Islands?**

Jane's critique of Maitland, and Ballard's vision of the 'Pacific atoll', connect with another key contextual discourse and development – postcolonialism – a discourse and development relevant to *The Tempest*. Again, this allows us to acknowledge connections between the worlds of 'Shakespeare', the appropriator, and the wider context.

The 1960s saw the continuation of waves of independence in the formerly colonized world, including Sierra Leone (1961), Burundi, Rwanda, Jamaica, Uganda (1962), Kenya (1963), Gambia (1965), Guyana and Barbados (1966), Mauritius and Swaziland (1968), and Tonga (1970). These were not just matters for far-off places, and liberation and the affirmation of post-imperial human and civil rights enacted through 'globalized political radicalism' was not without struggle or cost (Ali 7). In addition to the deaths of Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King, and the ongoing conflict in Vietnam, 1968 marked the beginnings of clashes between police and crowds in Derry, Northern Ireland; by April the next year British Army units were guarding strategic sites in the province, and by late summer the Army had taken over security and erected a 'peace line'. The early 1970s, just before Ballard began *Concrete Island*, saw further escalations. The Army used rubber bullets in 1970; in 1971 the British government began internment without trial in Northern Ireland; and January 30 1972 marked the 'Bloody Sunday' disaster. One historian has described the period between summer 1971 and autumn 1972 as 'the most violent phase of the conflict so far': there were 'four bomb explosions and approaching thirty shootings on an average day in Northern Ireland' (Beckett 2009, 109). By 1972-3, as Ballard was finishing the novel, the violent struggle came to the mainland: IRA bombs killed seven at Aldershot, one person was killed and 238 injured in explosions in central London, and there were bombs in London stations. Ballard's *Concrete Island* was therefore conceived and completed as the conflict's divisions were becoming ever more solid and profound.

Accordingly, violence, past and contemporary, lives on and registers in the novel and its world. In addition to finding the ruins of the air-raid shelter and a fifteen-year-old Civil Defence post, Maitland imagines his son waiting for him after school 'near the military hospital' next to 'the line of crippled war veterans' with injuries comparable to those 'his

father might have suffered' (11). A 'uniformed American serviceman' looks down on Maitland as he drives past, signifier of global conflicts (35). So paranoid is Maitland, so embedded in a conflicted globe despite occupying his island, that he reacts to suddenly silent roads and absent cars by wondering, 'Had a world war broken out overnight?' (59) He is too disoriented to realize it is Sunday. But war has become part of the fashion of the times: even Jane wears 'a camouflage-patterned combat jacket' (77).

It is vital to see *Concrete Island's* use of Shakespeare in relation to these events and issues, because *others* were at the time relating Shakespeare to these events and issues: 'The *Tempest*...helped shape...postcoloniality' (Zabus 1). *Psychologie de la Colonisation* (1948) by Octave Mannoni, a French colonial administrator in Madagascar, was translated into English in 1956 (the same year as the release of Ballard's beloved *Forbidden Planet*) as *Prospero and Caliban: The Psychology of Colonization*, which was itself re-issued in 1964. Peter Brook's production of the play four years later at London's Roundhouse was not an explicit interrogation of colonial ideology, but in its sexually-charged and violent scenes did open the text up to other, radical interpretations: 'The plot is shattered, condensed, deverbilized; time is dis-continuous, shifting' (Croyden 126). Aimé Césaire's revolutionary postcolonial retelling, *Une Tempête*, premiered in 1969, and Jonathan Miller's 1970 production of *The Tempest* at London's Mermaid Theatre conjured what contemporary reviewers perceived (not always favourably) as 'a colonial atmosphere', and 'imperialist allegory', with a black Ariel and Caliban, 'European Prospero', and 'Martiniquian goddesses'.<sup>7</sup>

Reviewers' complaints about Miller imposing a colonial reading onto the play clearly missed the point. Despite his knowledge and magical abilities, Prospero confesses he needs Caliban for more than the merely material, in ways marked by colonial encounters:

We cannot miss him: he does make our fire,

Fetch in our wood, and serves in offices

That profit us. (1.2.311-13)

Prospero's need for Caliban runs deep, and registers in language that signifies a paradoxical possession of and possession by, over an equally significant split line: 'this thing of darkness I / Acknowledge mine' (5.1.275-6). Caliban himself echoes Prospero's shift from practical to less tangible functions, and recognizes that the dependency is not just material, but also ideological, political and psychological: 'I am all the subjects that you have' (1.2.341). And so despite or precisely because of this dependency between master and subaltern, Prospero dominates Caliban, keeping him as his 'slave' (1.2.308).

In the novel, Maitland tries to do the same to Proctor and Jane: 'Somehow he must devise a means of dominating them' (125). He tries to gain a 'small advantage' (114) by playing them 'against each other' (114); he also uses 'a bribe' (125), wine, what Caliban worships as 'celestial liquor' (2.2.109). The same bribe works for Trinculo and Stephano, and Proctor shares Caliban's reverence for what he is offered by building a shrine to Maitland. For this bribe, Proctor agrees to show Maitland "the food place" (126), just as Caliban promises to show Trinculo and Stephano the island's various sustaining delights, 'the best springs...berries...where crabs grow...clustering filberts...young scammels' (2.2.149-162). It might appear then that Maitland is less (ostensibly) exalted Prospero, more some combination of Shakespeare's base jester and butler. This is particularly evident when Maitland displays his dominance of Proctor – and Jane – by urinating on Proctor as he sleeps off some wine (135). Through such acts, and by riding 'on Proctor's back' (143) as his injuries heal, Maitland can say he had 'tamed the old tramp' (144).

As with Prospero, through dominating others, Maitland fulfils his self-domination. Early in the book, delirious from pain and from self-medicating with alcohol, Maitland reveals

in a 'drunken tantrum', but 'with an effort mastered himself' (21). His self-disciplining finds him 'Taking himself in hand like a weary drill-sergeant', and speaking to himself 'as if bullying along an incompetent recruit' (37). The war is within as well as without.

Admittedly, at times Maitland sees himself in conflict with his alien environment: 'Sooner or later he would meet the island on equal terms' (56). Yet he uses this dialectic to define himself: 'it was this will to survive, to dominate the island and harness its limited resources, that now seemed a more important goal than escaping' (65). When, at the end of the novel, 'he felt no need to leave the island', this only confirms 'he had established his dominion' over it (176).

*Concrete Island's* engagement with Shakespeare-sensitive analyses of colonial ideology becomes even more intense as Maitland takes this domination further. The narrative speculates that Jane and Proctor *want* him to dominate: 'both of them, by some paradoxical logic, were satisfied by being abused' as 'Maitland's aggressiveness fulfilled their expectations, their half-conscious estimates of themselves' (139). Because the narrative is never focalized from Proctor or Jane's perspectives, we can only take Maitland's word for this, but he sticks to his story. The narrative states Proctor 'seemed to invite Maitland to beat him with the crutch' (147) and 'deliberately exposed the...inflamed scar on his neck, offering it to Maitland in the hope that abusing it would revive him' (155); Maitland himself proclaims "you're all too eager to be exploited" (149). This amply exhibits what Mannoni perceived as 'the dependent personality of the native' (359).

Yet as we know, and as the 1960s showed, *The Tempest* complicates dependencies. Caliban speaks back to colonial power when he says to Prospero that 'You taught me language, and my profit on't / Is, I know how to curse' (1.2.362-3). Comparably Maitland promises Proctor "I'm going to teach you to read and write" (150), and does so, using the concrete of

the 'caisson of the feeder road' (150) as a page, overcoming Proctor's fear of letters which sees him (in suitably Shakespearean terms) 'cringing away as if they threatened some terrifying curse' (151). Maitland is frustrated that Proctor scrubbed out his own earlier appeals for help written on concrete, yet Proctor is right to be concerned, because, as Caliban intimates, the lesson benefits the teacher as much if not more than the pupil. Maitland tells Proctor he will teach him how to write his own name, but instead tricks him into scrawling 'MAITLAND HELP' (152). When Maitland teases Proctor with the prospect that he will indeed teach him how to curse (writing words 'like "fuck" and "shit"', (153)), again Maitland abuses Proctor's trust for exploitative ends. Those curses become yet more self-serving S.O.S messages: 'HELP CRASH POLICE' (153).

So there are several ways in which the novel interacts with the play's depiction of colonial exploitation and dominance. But the novel also realizes how the play explicates the dialectical interdependence of master and slave, colonizer and colonized, in ways that compromise the distinctions on which such identities are founded. Caliban is 'not honour'd with / A human shape' (1.2.283-4); the novel's narrator repeatedly dehumanizes Proctor in similar ways. His head is 'lowered like a bull's' (76), he kicks 'loose stones like a large animal searching for the kindest terrain' (94), moves about his 'den like a hard-working and insecure animal' (121), and vanishes 'like a startled animal into the deep grass' (94). Dressed in Maitland's 'dinner jacket', appropriating the trappings of civility to compensate for his savagery, he is nothing less than a grotesque and comic gorilla in a suit: 'The silk lapels gleamed as they were bunched outwards by the tight fit' (87). As with Prospero (and colonizers), this dehumanizing discourse licenses Maitland's exploitation and dominance: 'The odour of Proctor's sweet sweat rose through the still air, like that of a well-groomed domestic animal' (143).



Yet if both Caliban and Proctor are dehumanized, such processes are incomplete. To Trinculo, in the play, Caliban is 'A strange fish!' (2.2.28-9). Trinculo's adjective shows how he queries his designation even as he makes it: 'a man or a fish?' (2.2.26). Rightly so, because *The Tempest* also affirms that Caliban is 'the third man' (1.2.445) that Miranda has seen; moreover, as Trinculo later suggests, he is a particular kind of man: an Englishman, because in England 'any strange beast...makes a man' (2.2.27-28). Trinculo resolves Caliban is 'no fish' (2.2.33). Similarly, Proctor is cast in humane – and humanizing – terms at times: 'All the stresses of a hard life had combined to produce this aged defective, knocked about by a race of unkind and indifferent adults but still clinging to his innocent faith in a simple world' (86). Proctor thus resembles some kind of hybrid, in temperament and appearance, but retains his humanity:

Despite his sudden bursts of violence, the tramp was a placid and warm-hearted man, with the dignity of a large, simple animal. (123)

Though Proctor is 'clumsy', he has a 'marred grace' (87), and skills as an acrobat acquired as 'an old circus hand' (95). Crucially too, he may be 'crouching like a nervous animal', but with his strength, local knowledge, and agility (all superior to the injured Maitland's), it is for him to decide (or Maitland to influence) 'whether' he will 'assert his dominion over the island' (111). Just as Caliban is as in tune with the 'noises' of the 'isle' (3.2.130) as he is with its other resources, so Proctor embodies the same kind of environmental harmonies:

...they would hear Proctor's trumpeting voice carried away across the whispering grass, his deep mole-music answered by the soft plaints of this green harp (147).

Where the play intimates Prospero is a source of music, with Caliban his appreciative audience, here Proctor himself both makes and enjoys the enveloping soundscape. And as the play unsettles Caliban's difference, so it also queries Prospero's distinction. Since

Prospero has 'made a meal' of Ferdinand, he is himself a kind of 'strange fish' (2.1.106) comparable to Caliban. Prospero is the 'the devil' who taught Caliban the 'language' of the Italian nobles (2.1.64). Caliban, for one, acutely perceives their equivalence: 'He's but a sot, as I am' (3.2.89). And Caliban also reverses the terms of their binary, to animalize Prospero too, as 'the blind mole' (4.1.194).

Reversals and exchanges likewise resonate in the novel, as Proctor makes his 'deep mole-music' (147), and as characters double or 'split', like the ship and crew at the start of the play (1.1.58). Immediately after his accident, Maitland catches the reflection of his own 'staring...blank and unresponsive' eyes in a car-mirror, and it seems 'as if he were looking at a psychotic twin brother' (9); soon after he sees more of a 'distorted reflection' of himself, bearing 'A madman's grimace' (13). These mirrorings emphasize how, as Stephenson suggested, 'each character plays a double role':

Maitland enacts the roles of both Prospero and his usurping brother Antonio. ... Jane Sheppard plays the roles of the witch Sycorax...and of Miranda...Proctor parallels the figures of Caliban and Ariel, combining in one body and mind both the rude, gross savage and the ethereal spirit. (Stephenson 79)

We might add that such distorting doublings self-reflexively indicate the novel's perception of *The Tempest* as something to both mirror and fracture.

## **Conclusion**

Gonzalo therefore says more than he means when he cries 'We split, we split!' (1.1.58); the subsequent 'sea-change' (1.2.400) *The Tempest* enacts affects all. It is only with this change that the play can effect resolution: 'Let your indulgence set me free' (Epilogue, 20). Gonzalo suggests that through the chaos and reconfiguring of relationships he and all others have

found 'ourselves / When no man was his own' (5.1.212-13). This, and the play's other liberating resolutions, however conditional or compromised, are not offered in *Concrete Island*, which defers or denies affirmative conclusion. In this, Ballard effects a disjunction with his Shakespearean source, and perhaps the optimism of postcolonial movements of the period, that aligned him with others' responses to this optimism. Césaire's 1968 Prospero stayed on the island, rather than returning to 'the mother country'; this 'dismantles the resolution' of Shakespeare's play (Zabus 51), and queries what the future holds for colonizers and colonized. Comparably, Maitland is still on the island, and still only contemplating leaving.

If Proctor is part-Ariel as well as part-Caliban, it matters that there is no other or wholly Ariel figure in the novel, just as it matters that Proctor dies. This absence again compromises the idea of liberation, and registers at a symbolic level. In the play, we first encounter Ariel associated with fire: he 'flam'd amazement' in the ship's crew, and can 'flame distinctly', generating 'fire and cracks', making 'all afire with me' (1.2.198-212). In the novel, any attempts at starting fires fizzle out: when Maitland sets fire to his car (53-4) and a blanket (107-8), they won't burn properly, are ineffective at raising alarm or getting help, and are put out by Proctor.

Neither iconoclasm nor parody, Ballard's work with *The Tempest* spoke to and of his understandings of science fiction and psychology, and thus acted as one of several resources he used to analyse the dreams and nightmares of the brave new world he occupied. Prospero famously observed, 'We are such stuff / As dreams are made on' (4.1.156-7), and Ballard's introduction to the novel notes the 'enormous appeal' of the 'day-dream of being marooned on a desert island' (2011, n.p.). By promising Proctor money enough from the "wages satchel" he claimed he was transporting to "buy this island", Maitland makes Proctor's eyes 'wild with the promise of undreamt hopes' (158). In *Concrete Island*, if not *The*

*Tempest*, those subaltern hopes and dreams remain unrealized. As we reflect on Ballard's appropriations of Shakespeare in our own moment of political, economic and environmental crisis, we might observe that they still do.

So the question remains: what of this *now*? In other words, if we *do* attempt to focus on our moment of re-reading as we do on Ballard's moment of revision, what do we see? Perhaps nothing more nor less than how later moments in which an historical appropriation is understood offer their own connections to that earlier moment of appropriation. Significantly, Andy Beckett observes that when he began his research on the seventies in 2003, the period 'often felt much more than three decades away'; but as his research progressed through the mid-2000s, 'this began to change'. By 2008, the year before Ballard's death, Beckett affirmed that the West was enduring problems (and offering solutions) uncannily reminiscent of those prevalent in the seventies: 'economic crisis', stagflation, rises in unemployment and inflation, 'floods, food shortages, terrorism, the destruction of the environment'. In short, there was 'a very seventies dread' (Beckett 2009, 520-22). Events since 2008 have done little to mitigate that dread, or those problems.

And yet, of course, we are not in the 1970s – it is not our world – and so the context in which we now read a cultural product of the era, like someone's appropriation of Shakespeare, is not the same as the context in which that product was initially made and consumed. The decade, and its cultural forms, are thus 'both more fascinatingly alien' to and 'more like...what has happened since' (Beckett 2009, 6). If we want to see how an 'alien perspective' from the past can both 'stimulate and provoke' the present (Sinfield 182), and when the Shakespearean appropriator is someone like J.G. Ballard, recognizing historical and cultural continuities and discontinuities, that is, the separation or congruence of these worlds and contexts, is vital.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Ballard does not feature in, for example, Novy, Zabus, Hulme and Sherman, or Sanders.

<sup>2</sup> Rossi, for one, offers a useful critique of such approaches; see 371-2.

<sup>3</sup> On the complexity of sci-fi's engagement with the 'future', including useful discussions of Ballard's uneasy relations with this aspect of the genre, see Jameson.

<sup>4</sup> On the 'actual' island's location, see Bonsall.

<sup>5</sup> Levin describes her as a 'social drop-out'; see 'Concrete Island: Review'.

<sup>6</sup> As Beckett suggests: 'The steep banks of the island wasteland are the high fence of Maitland's childhood garden' (2015, 12).

<sup>7</sup> See reviews at the *British Black and Asian Shakespeare Performance Database* (2016).

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