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Review Article

Potterland

Pennies From Heaven. By Dennis Potter. Directed by Piers Haggard. BBC-TV, 1978.

The Singing Detective. By Dennis Potter. New York: Vintage, 1988. Pp. 249. $6.95.
Directed by Jon Amiel. BBC-TV, 1986.

Ticket to Ride. By Dennis Potter. London: Faber & Faber, 1986. Pp. 202. $15.95.

Blackeyes. By Dennis Potter. New York: Vintage, 1987. Pp. 184. $6.95.

1.

> I was born into a coalminer's cottage in a stony village in what was then a relatively isolated Forest of Dean that heaves up in half-hidden layers of grey and green between two rivers on the assertively English side of the border with Wales. Brass bands, rugby football, nonconformist chapels with names like Zion and Salem, the sound of silicotic old men from the now closed mines spitting the dust out of their rattling chests. Secret places. Unknown caves. A mother who was a Londoner, bringing occasional uncles with outlandish Fulham or Hammersmith tongue, who did not say 'thee' and 'thou.' And when the teacher at the junior school left the room, which had windows too high for a child to look out of, she would say, 'Come out to the front, Dennis, and tell a story.' That was meant as a reward, or a compliment: it was, of course, a punishment.[1]

The village was Joyford Hill, Gloucestershire; the two rivers enclosing the Forest are the Severn and the Wye; the schoolboy was Dennis Potter. Fifty years earlier, D.H. Lawrence had moved up and out from his mining village, and raged at the cost of uprooting himself. But whereas Lawrence became a compulsive wanderer, Potter has returned to live only a few miles from his birthplace, probing obsessively at questions deeply rooted in his childhood: innocence, betrayal, sexuality, the nature of evil itself. Like one of those little pellets that expands into a flower when put in water, Potter's buried childhood in the Forest of Dean has blossomed into a career of more than thirty television plays, many screenplays, three novels, and perhaps the biggest audience, in Britain, of any serious writer in this century.[2]

When John Berger examined the fate of a country doctor in the Forest, in *A Fortunate Man* (1967), he saw in the foresters' lives a desperate narrowness and deprivation. Potter's transformation of his childhood into art calls that judgment into question; though he was not, of course, a typical forest child. His mother was an outsider; his exceptional intelligence set him apart from his schoolmates; and he suffered an unnamed psychic wound, "something foul and terrible that happened to me when I was ten years old, caught by an adult's appetite and abused out of innocence."[3] All these things worked to expel him from the "tight, warm mesh" of working-class life. When he was fourteen his family moved to Hammersmith, known for its ornate suspension bridge over the Thames (the setting for some crucial scenes in his plays). Unhappy in London, Potter's father returned to the Forest after two years. Dennis stayed in Hammersmith, already launched on a path that would steadily distance him from his father's world: first St. Clement Dane's Grammar School; then National Service as a Russian-language clerk in the War Office; then a scholarship to New College, Oxford where he edited the literary magazine *Isis*, and wrote a book—*The Glittering Coffin*— attacking the system that was hurrying him on to success.

From Oxford Potter went to the BBC where he helped produce a documentary on the Forest of Dean, "Between Two Rivers." (1960) Before long he quarrelled with his superiors and signed on with the *Daily Herald*, the only serious newspaper that supported Labour. On the side he wrote sketches for "That Was The Week That Was," a TV series that made fun of everything typically English and was, typically, rewarded with enormous popularity. In 1964 Potter stood as a Labour candidate for a safe Tory seat, and duly lost; disillusioned with practical politics he wrote two TV plays about the experience, *Vote, Vote, Vote for Nigel Barton* and *Stand Up For Nigel Barton*. The first of these was produced by the BBC and then cancelled on the day it was due to be shown, on the grounds that it treated parliamentary democracy with contempt and "shat on the Queen." This was the beginning of Potter's running battle with the people who decide what is shown on TV. Eventually he re-wrote the last ten minutes of *Vote, Vote, Vote* and persuaded the BBC to show it, along with its companion piece. His plays have been seen on British TV virtually every year since.[4] "Television," he said in 1970, "is the only medium that really counts for me. . . . [It] is the biggest platform and you should kick and fight and bite your way into it. It's true that television is endemically a trivialising medium, but it doesn't follow that it *has* to be. Television is the true national theatre."[5]

Television drama has been an important cultural genre in Britain since TV service began in 1936. At first, directors just made a few minor adjustments to stage plays before sending them out in the new medium. This mode survives in the costumed nostalgia of "Masterpiece Theatre," the main representative of the British genre on North American television. The tremendous popularity of such dramas—15 million people watched *The Forsyte Saga* in Britain—rests on their conventional narrative form and faithful reconstruction of period settings. But there is also another tradition, critical rather than nostalgic, and using a complex narrative vocabulary derived from modernist literature and film. Potter's achievement has been to push that complexity to the limit, yet bring a mass audience along with him.

An early guide for television playwrights gave the following advice:

> Scenes between twos and threes are what television wants: quiet, intimate stuff which the camera can get right into. Five people on the set for any length of time is a producer's headache, meaning constant regrouping and cutting from shot to shot in order to show viewers what the characters look like in close-up.[6]

Potter has favored this "natural" scale for television, which also has the advantage, for him, of foregrounding the writer's words rather than the sound and spectacle of large-screen movies. He has observed, also, that the compact scenes of studio productions find a counterpart on the *receiving* end: the media's massive audience is the sum of millions of miniature audiences, each watching the dramatic action in the family setting where they also live out their own reality. In *The Singing Detective*, Potter brilliantly uses cutting to show the close-range emotional interplay between characters. In a scene at a workingmen's club, for example, Philip's father sings the Inkspots' "Do I Worry" in harmony with his wife's lover, while the wife plays the piano and nine-year-old Philip watches, entranced. A series of closeups show how all are connected yet all have different interests and understandings; in the background, a leering audience sees all.

2.

Masterpiece Theatre series like *Upstairs, Downstairs* presented an integral national past. Although masters and servants lived in different parts of the house, they were really one big family (with, of course, the inevitable squabbles); and the nation was simply a bigger family yet. The classic setting for such fables was the Edwardian era, the most convenient one to appropriate because it was just beyond the reach of the general living memory. Potter has challenged this formula for representing the British past. His own use of history only goes back as far as the thirties: the decade of his birth (in 1935, the year in which *Pennies From Heaven* is set) and thus, for him, the origin of a *continuous* personal and collective popular culture. He has lovingly re-created that culture in his plays, but not as any comfortably nostalgic living museum. Rather, he has cobbled together his private experiences and obsessions into a mythic "Potterland"—which has nonetheless become as definitive a popular image of the period from 1935 to 1950 as Dickens's version of the Victorian age. Potterland is shaped like a dumb-bell, with the Forest of Dean at one end, London at the other, and the railway connecting them. London really means Hammersmith, for boyhood memories, and Paddington, where trains from the West Country arrive to a neighborhood of whores, transients and "Arabs facing away from Mecca."[7] Trains and whores are Potter obsessions; some of the others are dance music before the rock-and-roll era, Russian spies, cowboys (and America, generally, as a mythic opposite of Britain), the bombing of German cities by the RAF, cigarettes, betrayals, art deco interiors, neurotic schoolteachers, the Oedipus complex, and everybody's childhood.

But these elements are only the backdrop to Potter's dramatic world; what really matters is the action that takes place there. Each Potter play contributes a new perspective to a lifetime imaginative project, the constant reworking of unresolvable contradictions between child and adult, past and present, belief and scepticism, fantasy and reality. Underlying them all is Potter's fervent but totally unorthodox Christianity. "There is, in the end, no such thing as a *simple* faith," he has observed, "and we cannot even begin to define 'good' and 'evil' without being aware of the interaction between the two."[8]

Potter's Forest of Dean is still haunted by Wordsworth, who walked there with Dorothy in 1798, composing "Tintern Abbey" as he went. But *the* Wordsworth poem, for Potter, is the "Immortality Ode." If "the child is father to the man," Potter is only too well aware of how the abused child gives birth to the crippled adult. In *Pennies From Heaven*, the loving schoolteacher Eileen asks her headmaster why he beats his pupils; he answers that he is making sure that when they grow up they will be able to hold down a job in the mines. His belief in punishment combines with religious and nationalist fanaticism: society must be ruled by teachers, police, judges and an angry God at the top of it all. Eileen, and even more her lover Arthur, are overgrown children who try to escape the beating reserved for them. "Nobody ever, ever stops yearning" says Eileen, when she is fired by her head for getting pregnant; his reply is that "they jolly well better had."[9] (In a characteristic Potter turn of the screw, the head cherishes an unrequited yearning for Eileen, and gives her a generous gift to help her on her way).

Evicted from her forest idyll, Eileen takes the train to Paddington; when her money runs out she goes on the streets and changes her name to "Lulu," after the whore in Pabst's film of Wedekind's *Pandora's Box*. Soon she is cheating and even killing with such gusto that the viewer has to wonder if "she always had it in her."[10] This is certainly the message of *Blue Remembered Hills* (1979), where the continuity between children and grown-ups is made literal by having the children played by adult actors. Across the English Channel, the Second World War is raging; in the Forest of Dean, a gang of children are acting it out in their play. War needs victims and they have one to torment, a gentle half-witted hanger-on; at the end, they lock him in a barn where he is burned alive. But are they just imitating what is offered them, or is the real war an example of how an earlier generation are now able to enact their childish desires on a bigger scale? Why do children follow the worst of their own kind, and persecute the good; and why can't the adults—who are never seen in the play—impose morality on their children? Having the children played by adults suggests that there *is* no real older generation to control the play, just as there is, perhaps, no God to set limits to the malice of man.

Blue Remembered Hills suggests that we must live inside the iron cage of morality and necessity, for fear of the worse horrors outside it. Potter's heroes and heroines are people who know this, but still dream of escape. The key to those dreams is often the popular music of the thirties and forties—which, Potter has said, "not only invokes in many of us the characteristically bitter-sweet (and totally useless) emotions of nostalgia, but also carries within its bright and easy bounce, or silkily blue ribbons of sobbing 'regret,' the faint and haunting outlines of 'thoughts that lie too deep for tears.' "[11] The hero of *Pennies From*

Heaven is a travelling salesman for this music, an ordinary sensual man who insists that something in his songs *must* be real. In his semidetached suburban house he lives a life of chronic frustration with his frigid, snobbish wife. At home there is a constant battle between lower-middle class gentility and his own feckless hedonism; but outside, he can let his fantasies bloom, driving towards the Forest of Dean to the strains of "Roll Along, Prairie Moon."

Eileen, buried in her little country schoolhouse, is just as eager to escape from her own cage. But by the time she and Arthur decide to cut loose together, both have been fatally compromised: Eileen has become a whore, and Arthur has taken his wife's inheritance to set up a record shop. By sheer mischance, Arthur has become a suspect in the rape and murder of a blind girl near Gloucester. Bitter in her abandonment, his wife tells a detective of how Arthur had talked her into putting lipstick on her nipples and doing the housework without any knickers on. In his stiflingly genteel accent, the detective observes that "a man like that is capable of anything"; and the final nail in Arthur's coffin is that the murdered girl's knickers were also missing. Arthur goes on the run, clinging to his old dream of escaping to America, "a world where songs come true." What he gets instead is the gallows—not because he committed any crime, but because he always preferred a lie to the truth. In the end, Potter seems to be saying that one can live in two worlds at once—one of the songs, one of reality—but to try and combine them is fatal.

3.

In *The Singing Detective*, Potter makes his most ambitious and moving attempt at unity of vision. We begin with a view of one Philip Marlow sitting in a hospital bed like Job on his dunghill, his face looking like meat that has been boiled and left out to rot, his hands gnarled into stumps. Like Potter himself he is a child of the Forest, a writer, and a victim for many years of psoriatic arthropathy. When Potter was first attacked by this awful disease, in his mid-twenties, he felt it as a self-punishment for betraying the working-class community in which he had grown up. Now, he is more inclined to see it as just a stroke of genetic bad luck. But in *The Singing Detective* it is the visible sign of Marlow's unwholesome moral state: his guilty childhood, his present self-enclosure, and the paranoid world of his recurrent fevers.

Marlow's purulent face repeatedly fills the screen, with an expression either of sullen withdrawal or of wide-eyed terror when his hallucinations start to take over. The viewer must get used to being flipped between four distinct worlds and levels of reality. One is Marlow's present crucifixion, among the motley inhabitants of the cardiac and skin ward of a London hospital. Second is his memory of the events that have put him there, in the spring of 1945 when he was nine years old. Third is a favorite diversion, to imagine himself as P. Marlow, detective—the hero of a thriller he has written, *The Singing Detective.*[12] Fourth is the morbid delusion that his wife and his literary agent are sleeping together while conspiring to sell an old screenplay of *The Singing Detective* to Hollywood and pocket the proceeds.

The inner world of *The Singing Detective* is unabashedly Freudian. Freud speaks of fantasy as essentially wish-fulfilment, "which carries about it traces of its origin from the occasion which provoked it and from the memory. Thus past, present and future are strung together, as it were, on the thread of the wish that runs through them."[13] Marlow suffers from an Orestes complex, adoring his father and unable to cope with the horror of seeing his mother "shagged" by her lover in the Forest. The parents separate, with Mr. Marlow remaining at his job in the mine and Mrs. Marlow going with Philip to her parents in Hammersmith. When Philip confronts her with his knowledge of her adultery, she drowns herself in the Thames. Philip goes back to his father, and spends hours up a tree brooding on the "sticky betrayals" of sex; metaphorically he is still there as an adult, cut off from love by his obsession that every woman is a hateful trinity of mother, wife and whore.[14]

But Marlow is more than just a self-righteous male puritan. He is haunted by guilt for "killing" his mother, but also for the gratuitous crime of having previously sneaked back to his schoolroom and deposited a turd on his teacher's desk. The teacher, a grotesque moral terrorist, suspects Philip of the crime; but in a moment of inspiration he accuses the class half-wit, who had earlier made a face at him. The witch hunt is on as the other children rush to corroborate Philip's story; he will go free, while Mark Binney will get "the Big Stick . . . across your behind, and in front of the whole school." Soon afterwards a strange mark appears on Philip's forearm—the mark of Cain, a first sign of his life-long psoriasis. Binney ends up in a mental hospital, turned into a "complete nutter" by the unjust punishment; Philip's adult confinement in the hospital ward is the only way he can find to atone for the events of 1945, until his psychiatrist sets him free.

The Singing Detective uses the popular music of the forties, but much less insistently and winningly than *Pennies From Heaven.* Its backbone is the superb evocation of Philip's childhood, touchingly re-created by Alison Steadman as Mrs. Marlow, Jim Carter as her husband, and Lyndon Davies as Philip. The parallel plots are a more mixed bag; but the series is driven along by Potter's emotional intensity and by his amazing inventiveness in shuffling together his four levels of meaning. There is no natural continuity of narrative, only a rapid flight from one mental association to another. One can imagine the story being told equally well through many different sequences of narrative elements. Nonetheless, *The Singing Detective* never declines into an exercise in post-modern smoke and mirrors, because its central theme is such a painfully direct exorcism of guilt, betrayal and sexual disability. Indeed, if there is a criticism to be made it is that the series ends up as a commercial for psychoanalysis, releasing its hero into a sunwashed landscape of health and marital love that is scarcely credible after the dark journey that has led up to it.

4.

The two novels Potter has written since *The Singing Detective*, *Ticket To Ride* (1986) and *Blackeyes* (1987), also deal with the construction of identity from spare parts of real or imagined experience. In *Ticket To Ride* the hero is a commercial artist who retires to the country with his wife to paint what he really loves, British wildflowers; but a nervous breakdown strips him of his memory and leaves him looking for his identity among the whores of Paddington. As he puzzles out his past, it seems that his wife may have been a call girl before he met her, and that he may even have killed her before finding himself on a train to London with no identifying papers on him. *Blackeyes*, even more of a puzzle, uses *The Singing Detective*'s device of presenting parallel texts that are as confusedly intertwined as snakes in a basket. The anti-hero of the book is Maurice Kingsley, a has-been novelist; like Sir John Betjeman in real life, he is still fixated on his childhood teddy-bear. Just when everyone has written him off he triumphs with a novel, *Sugar Bush*, that he wrote by picking the brains of his niece Jessica, a former model. At the end, the unnamed author of *Blackeyes* stuffs Kingsley and Jessica back into the text and kills them off—while the model "Blackeyes" escapes from the story into a happy life in the "real" world.

Both novels leave an impression of being work for the left hand, despite the skill with which Potter juggles his *trompe l'oeil* plots. His moral target here is contemporary Thatcherite London, where the old genteel classes rub shoulders with the new opportunists. For all Potter's loathing of this milieu, his barbs often glance off its hard and shiny surface. The British class system is a constant preoccupation in his work; but his roots and loyalties are best seen at the first line of conflict, where the working class encounters the repressive respectability of the lower middle class. *Ticket to Ride* and *Blackeyes* also lack the taproot into the past that reveals the deep continuity between child and man. Finally, one must recognize that in the collaborative art of television Potter's scripts have profited from Britain's tremendous wealth of talent in acting and production. A final judgment on *Blackeyes*, at least, should be reserved for Potter's forthcoming adaptation of it for TV.

Meanwhile Potter has also written *Christabel*, a 1988 series for the BBC. Here the problem is not any slightness of theme, but rather the problem of how to represent, on the small screen, an overwhelming historical reality. In 1978 Potter wrote a savage review of the American mini-series *Holocaust*, in which he argued that commercial television is intrinsically disqualified from showing past horrors with decency.[15] *Christabel* tries to strip Nazism of the *kitsch* that has adhered to it over the decades. Here, we see it simply as a political movement that tested the conscience of the average German in many small matters of daily life. There are no apocalyptic scenes of battle or atrocity, except as they are conveyed by the stories of people who were there, or as they are seen in fragments: a bombed street, an encounter with a SS man in a railway carriage, a village lad being taken round the corner to be shot. Potter seems to have throttled down his imagination to follow as closely as possible the memoirs of the actual Christabel Bielenberg, an upper-class Englishwoman who married a German in the thirties. But *Christabel* lacks the cumulative detail and cultural authority achieved by the West German series *Heimat* in covering similar ground. Representing the Black Forest (where Christabel took refuge in 1943-45) as a middle-European Forest of Dean, populated by peasants with rustic English accents, only confuses the question of national guilt. There is a universal concern, it is true, with what Christabel calls "that silver thread [of conscience] which must run through people's lives, ruling how far they should go and no further." But conscience in Nazi Germany was exercised within specific terms imposed by history. German guilt over the extermination of Jews, gypsies and homosexuals cannot be crudely equated with, say, British guilt over the saturation bombing of civilians (though the latter also needs to be brought to account—which Christabel is more ready to do in her book than Potter in his script).

Christabel still has its powerful moments, when it matches Bielenberg's aim in her very impressive book: to look out, with decency and precision, at the myriad small-scale moral decisions that steered Germany through its national crisis. But too much of the series reverses that point of view, looking in *at* Christabel instead of looking out *with* her. Continual lingering views of the highlighted face of Elizabeth Hurley—appealing as she may be in her nubile ingenuousness—are so many diversions from the true centre of the story: the question of how these events came to happen. The problem of evil is treated most directly by Potter in *Joe's Ark* (1974), where a devout Welsh nonconformist must watch his eighteen-year-old daughter die of cancer. Potter can be bitterly contemptuous of "the dishonesty or special pleading which is, alas, so characteristic of demoralised Christians." Yet he has also testified to his journey, in the seventies, from "an in-turned spiritual nihilism and on towards a new and (for me) startling but exhilarating trust in the order of things."[16] Dramatizing the ultimate horrors of our century, *Christabel* simply places moral contradictions face to face, without any presumption by the author that *he* is able to resolve them. In one scene added by Potter to Bielenberg's narrative, a rabbi advances on an SS officer like a figure of judgment, crying at him: "God sees what you do!" The rabbi is promptly shot and dumped into a mass grave with his fellow victims. In another scene, a children's choir singing "Silent Night" is crosscut with the piano-wire hanging of those who conspired against Hitler in 1944, as if the children's seraphic gazes are turned on *that*. Does God see the same things that man sees, or does he turn his face away from them? There is a mystery worth dwelling on in *Christabel*—the same mystery, finally, as the one pondered by that nine-year-old boy in his tree, in the Forest of Dean, in 1945: "When I grow up, everything ool be *all right*. Won't it, God? . . . When I grow up, I be going to be—*a detective*. . . . I'll find out. I'll find out who did it!"

NOTES

1. *Waiting For The Boat: Dennis Potter on Television* (London: Faber, 1984), 33.
2. *The Singing Detective* built up to an audience of nearly ten million—remarkable for such a sophisticated drama, though still about half the ratings for the most popular shows on British TV.

3. *Waiting For The Boat*, 33. *The Singing Detective* revolves around such a childhood trauma, though presumably altered from Potter's actual experience.
4. But in 1977 the BBC again refused to show a Potter play after it had been taped, *Brimstone and Treacle*. Philip Purser gives a valuable survey of Potter's career to 1979 in George Brandt, ed., *British Television Drama* (Cambridge UP, 1981).
5. *Radio Times*, October 1970.
6. Jan Bussell, *The Art of Television*, quoted in *British Televison Drama*, 11. At that time (1952) British television was on a 405-line standard that could not show large sets in detail; from 1964, it offered 625-line service. The U.S. standard of 525 lines necessarily has less audience impact than British TV.
7. *Ticket To Ride*, 39.
8. Introduction to *Brimstone and Treacle* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1978).
9. *Pennies From Heaven*, Episode 3.
10. Wonder, but not really know. Eileen commits murder when she and Arthur are on the run from the police, and are about to have intercourse in a barn. Suddenly they realize that they are being watched by a deranged old farmer with a shotgun (who turns out to be Arthur's former commander in France). Eileen calms him down by making Arthur go through with the act; then she talks the farmer into giving up his gun, and immediately shoots him. "Why did you do that?" Arthur cries; to which Eileen coldly answers: "Because I felt like it." But what did she feel? Was it just contempt for the voyeur; or did she have enough modesty left to feel violated? (The scene was omitted from the American movie version).
11. Notes to "Pennies From Heaven," EMI album SH266 (1977).
12. The difference between "Marlow" and Raymond Chandler's "Marlowe" is part of a recurrent theme: "One letter's all there is between trick and prick," as Marlow's wife puts it. (149)
13. "Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming" [1908].
14. When asked what his wife's name is, the old reprobate George says "I call her Mum. What the bleed'n hell do you think I call her!"
15. "I have already heard some people talking warmly about the production. One of them said, and the others agreed, that it was 'moving.' Dear God in Heaven. Moving! You could say the same thing about a dog being run over in the road. And, yes, of course, it was 'moving'—like 'Gone With the Wind' is moving, or 'The Bells of St Mary's.' If you can't drum up a bit of pathos out of a pile of naked corpses you might as well bury your snout in a pot of crunchy peanut butter and write dialogue for Yogi Bear. . . .

    American prime-time "dramas' . . . are designed, first and foremost, to shift tons of toothpaste and acres of beans. They work fairly well because their conversions seldom bump into real feelings, genuine anxieties, private terrors and social diseases. They glance, not collide. They pass the time. But to carry the same bag of techniques, the same set of conventions across the frontiers into 'Real Life' and absolute horror is not supportable. Unless they really did sell oven-fresh cookies in Auschwitz." *The Sunday Times*, 10 September 1978.
16. Introduction to *Brimstone and Treacle.*