

'Border games' and security in the work of Rupert Thomson

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The extent to which Rupert Thomson's fiction engages creatively with space and place seems at times difficult to overstate, from the mysterious southern English town of New Egypt in *Dreams of Leaving* (1987), the inhabitants of which are not permitted to leave, to the unnamed and obliquely glimpsed European urban spaces of *The Insult* (1996). In particular, his works frequently delve into how an individual negotiates the borders of particular spaces, the fiction staging circulation within as well as moves across established boundaries. The Thomson novel that I will explore below, *Divided Kingdom* (2005), can be read as a crystallisation, in a more clearly structured and abstract form, of this key preoccupation with borders and leaving that is prominent at so many points within Thomson's oeuvre. A perhaps ambiguous journey away from security underlies many of Thomson's novels and this chapter will examine how far *Divided Kingdom's* narrative of border crossing and in-between states intersects with concerns around family and belonging, and ultimately plays a fundamental role in his artistic enterprise as a writer. Thomson persistently plays with readers' expectations and expands the possibilities of contemporary fiction, and this chapter will show how he draws on a variety of literary, historical and artistic influences to create an intriguing and moving account of the search for identity and a future in a challenging world.

In *Divided Kingdom* the UK has been divided into four zones according to the medieval theory of humours, with people confined or forcibly transported to one of the four quarters of the country. A person's sanguine, choleric, phlegmatic or melancholic humour defines their

place in one of the four territories, each of which is associated with one of the four elements and named according to the colour associated with the respective humour: Red for sanguine, Yellow for choleric, Blue for phlegmatic, Green for melancholic. Travel between the zones is strictly controlled, with patrolled borders between them, and diplomatic missions and deportations comprise the principal traffic. Each zone is defined by its humour and supposedly inhabited only by those of the matching humour, with the various cultures and lifestyles in each zone reflecting their different 'nature'. The book's front endpaper has a colour-coded map that follows the geographical outline of Britain and Northern Ireland, identifying the divisions between the four zones, whose respective capitals have been carved out of a divided city located on the map roughly where one would expect to find London. The transition from the United Kingdom to this current divided one is known as the Rearrangement, a euphemistic term that conceals the traumatic nature of the experience of relocation that the novel will go on to explore. The narrative promulgated by the four new governments, however, is that the Rearrangement was both necessary and successful, and is the final solution to decades of increasing unhappiness and social turmoil:

For decades, if not for centuries, the country had employed a complicated web of manners and convention to draw a veil over its true nature, but now, finally, it had thrown off all pretence to be anything other than it was – northern, inward-looking, fundamentally barbaric. (Thomson, 2005: 8)

The rhetorical assertion that the Rearrangement effected the revelation of an underlying 'natural' truth about the country and its peoples is a feature of this political discourse and the novel explores how far such a belief is sincerely held, by the public at large and by those who administer their affairs.

The narrator of *Divided Kingdom* is aged eight or nine when he is taken from his biological family and moved to a holding station named Thorpe Hall. After some time being schooled here, he is given the new name of Thomas Parry and subsequently transferred to the Sanguine Quarter and a new adoptive family in the first section of the book. The boy's memory in the opening scene of the novel is of his mother calling his name as he is taken away, but it is not until page 47 that the reader learns that his original name was Matthew Micklewright. The protagonist grows up in the household of Victor Parry and his daughter Marie in the Sanguine Quarter and learns to hide his pain at his lost family and to satisfy officials that he temperamentally conforms to his new community. He later discovers that these attempts are matched by his adoptive relatives' surreptitious and potentially dangerous acts of remembering the mother in the family, who was forcibly transferred to the Yellow Quarter, a choleric place where the chaotic violence of the residents is matched by brutal official curfews. Thomas's ability to connect with his adoptive family's pain however is hampered by his circumstances and personal history:

In truth, I wasn't all that curious. I was just trying to fit in. The events that had upset Victor seemed academic to me, remote, even foreign. Perhaps I lacked the proper context... or perhaps it was the eerie matter-of-factness of a child who, having experienced a trauma of his own, decides simply to get on with the business of living, which in my case meant acquainting myself with my new environment. (24)

The deceptively simple-sounding task of 'the business of living' becomes the novel's central preoccupation, one shaped by traumatic separation. In this, *Divided Kingdom* shares with other Thomson books such as *The Insult* and *The Book of Revelation* (1999) the reverberations and consequences of injury, imprisonment, abuse and forced exile on protagonists seeking and often struggling to understand the foreign-seeming world around them and to find a (secure) place within it.

These household secrets are Thomas's earliest inklings of the discontinuities that permeate the divided kingdom, discontinuities that are both the worrying sign of a chaotic social schema full of pitfalls and, Thomas gradually learns, gaps or inconsistencies in the system with the potential to be exploited. While a student at university he is approached by a member of staff from the innocuous-sounding Ministry of Health and Social Security and informed by her that, 'We've been watching you' (59). What ensues is the offer of a government job, but the ominous remark evokes the ambivalent quality of the surveillance as a nurturing process supporting growth on the one hand and as an oppressive intrusion into privacy and personal liberty on the other. The novel repeatedly investigates this double-edged quality of security and borders, as a protective armature necessary for personal development, and as imprisoning structures that curb freedom and distort relationships. Parry takes a job in the government service and on a foreign trip to Aquaville, the capital city of the phlegmatics in the Blue Quarter, goes to an enigmatic club called the Bathysphere, where he has a strange immersive experience of being in his original bedroom with his mother downstairs calling his name. This experience encourages Parry to wonder about the fate of his mother and he begins a journey around the different zones, each of which has its distinctive atmosphere and way of life, which makes up the main body of the novel.

Parry's childhood in the Red Quarter, the home of sanguine people, is an ostensibly tranquil one in a zone marked by equanimity and harmony, a kind of petit-bourgeois contentment, without much in the way of either danger or excitement. One of Parry's teachers at Thorpe Hall quotes to the class from Thomas Walkington's early seventeenth-century treatise *The Optick Glass of Humours* on the superiority of the 'sanguine complexion' over other humours, and it is clear that the residents of the Red Quarter are

encouraged to regard themselves as the luckiest people in the divided kingdom. Mary Floyd-Wilson in *English Ethnicity and Race in Early Modern Drama* (2003) argues that this privileging of the sanguine is part of Renaissance ‘geohumoralism’ (2003: 39) whereby different humours are ascribed to different parts of the world, and so Walkington is offering a specifically *English* take on the relative merits of the humour commonly attributed in the period to English people. By extension, the provincial peacefulness and apparent social harmony of Parry’s childhood in the Red Quarter has a quintessentially English flavour, and Parry is struck by how the drycleaner Mr Page looks as though he’s always smiling (27) and how the political leader Michael Song looks ‘almost literally *polished*, and how convivial too, like some worldly uncle you wished you saw more often’ (37). There are however hints that other, less appealing, aspects of Englishness lie just beyond the quarter’s borders.

Part of the atmosphere of the Red Quarter is an aversion to risk, and early on in the novel we learn that:

To sanguine people, motorways signified aggression, rage, fatigue, monotony and death. Motorways were choleric, in other words, and had no place in the Red Quarter. (36)

Soon after moving in with his new family, Parry meets a former Thorpe Hall schoolfriend, Bracewell, and together they explore the borders of their town:

We must have absorbed some of the atmosphere of the times, I suppose, since we invented a whole series of what we referred to privately as ‘border games’. One morning we cycled further north than usual and found a section of the motorway that was in the process of being dug up. In our minds, the area instantly became a no-man’s land, with construction workers standing in for guards. (40)

The border games of Parry and Bracewell require them to take turns playing the roles of fugitive and guard, one patrolling while the other tries to cross the road without being seen. The games prefigure Parry's later journeys between the zones, early on in the novel as a government official conducting the forcible transfer of a young woman to the Yellow Quarter, and then later as a clandestine traveller attempting to avoid detection when crossing the border, and blend in with the local people. This no-man's land, the empty area between zones, becomes a site of great significance in the novel and Parry will spend much of the book testing the boundaries of the divided kingdom, both in terms of geographical borders and the more speculative differences between people. The narrator's reflections on having 'absorbed some of the atmosphere of the times' also point along a different (geographical) axis toward absorbing some of the 'spirit of the place', and Thomson's narrative registers the effects of both spatial and temporal influences on his vulnerable but adventurous protagonist. The narrative suggests that through the authorities' systems of segregation, forced adoption and strict social regulation, the 'character' or 'humour' of each zone can become a self-sustaining force shaping the inhabitants' lives. This leads to the question of how far the Rearrangement codifies existing differences between people and how far it constructs and enforces them.

The significance of no-man's land is heralded by *Divided Kingdom's* epigraph from Jean Rhys, a paratextual invocation existing on the margins of Thomson's text. Rhys was deeply concerned with no-man's land, and her work marks a complex engagement with Britain, existing both inside and outside its borders. Her often challenging experiences as a white West Indian living in Europe form a background to her fiction's frequently distressing accounts of migrant life and feelings of non-belonging. Her most famous work, *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1997, first published 1966), takes its title from an in-between place that is not

a place, an empty zone of the Atlantic where ships were often becalmed, stranded between the Caribbean and Britain. This most famous of liminal spaces was anticipated in earlier books by Rhys, from *Good Morning Midnight* (2000, first published 1939) which begins in a dead-end street or *impasse* in Paris, to the opening lines of *Voyage in the Dark* (1969, first published 1934), the first sentence of which is Thomson's epigraph:

It was as if a curtain had fallen, hiding everything I had ever known. It was almost like being born again. The colours were different, the smells different, the feeling things gave you right down inside yourself was different... Sometimes it was as if I were back there and as if England were a dream. At other times England was the real thing and out there was the dream, but I could never fit them together. (Rhys, 1969: 7)

This dramatic transition between places creates a great confusion in Rhys's protagonist Anna Morgan's mind: Where does she belong, which place is real, the quote anticipating 'Rochester' arguing with Antoinette in *Wide Sargasso Sea* over whether England or the West Indies is more real.¹ A cognitive gap seems to open up between the two 'realities' that cannot 'fit... together'. One of the defining experiences of reading *Divided Kingdom*, and other work by Thomson, is precisely this feeling of disorientation, where the experience of geographical dislocation creates an inward turn and is the catalyst for the line between dreams and reality becoming blurred. The altered UK explored by Parry occupies a liminal position between dream and reality, and the reader experiences the places he visits as at once familiar and deeply strange. The difficulty of mentally reconciling two apparently separate and possibly opposed realities, and the loss of stable reference points that Rhys repeatedly presents in her novels, are part of Parry's predicament as he navigates the divided kingdom on his own voyage in the dark.

Parry and his female friend Odell's experience on the streets of a Northern town in the Yellow Quarter on the day of a football match embodies *Divided Kingdom's* distinctive mixture of the foreign with the (to some British readers, at least) alarmingly recognisable aspects of life in the UK:

We ducked into a doorway as a second group of men swayed towards us. They were singing strange savage songs that I'd never heard before. With their cropped hair and their hard, exultant faces, they seemed to have sealed themselves off from the rest of us. It was like the divided kingdom in miniature – the same tribalism, the same deep need to belong. (346)

Thomson creates a vivid impression of football tribalism, the massed ranks of police in body armour, the savage chanting, broken shop windows, the rioting on the terraces, the fighting on the pitch, the helicopter with its searchlight, to show how a nominal leisure activity can resemble and perhaps even foment mass disorder and social breakdown. This recognisable part of everyday life in the Yellow Quarter (and lamentably, occasionally in the real UK) is not some sort of resistance, but on the contrary the distillation of the logic of segregation into a more concentrated form. The energy which fuels such tribal shows of aggression, and which satisfies the 'deep need to belong', also keeps the kingdom and its peoples divided. Parry's series of displacements and successive experiences of expatriation force him to reflect on how far he, too, is motivated by a need to belong, despite witnessing the ugliness of tribalism as part of his defining experiences of non-belonging in places and communities that can so often be cruel to anyone who does not fit in.

Divided Kingdom pays particular attention to the reproduction of these tribal attitudes in children, not only in the account of Parry's upbringing but in the scenes in which children participate in the activities of their elders. On the day after the football match (the result of

which Parry never discovers) a gang of children ‘some as young as five or six’ (352) attempt to rob Parry, and he is ‘aware of the smallness of the hands that pushed and pulled at’ him (353). It is only after his companion Odell uses an aerosol against the children that a shaken Parry manages to escape with his possessions. Before reaching the Yellow Quarter city Parry and Odell had entered a village where some kind of festivity was taking place:

A crowd had gathered there, beneath a large, gnarled oak, and once the racket the van was making had died away I could hear the shrieks and squeals of children. There must be an attraction of some kind, I thought. A juggler, perhaps. A puppet show.
(339)

It is only after he has left the village that he learns the ‘attraction’ was the public display of the mutilated heads of strangers for the entertainment of local people who have ‘eyes like bits of wet glass’ (340). The aggression that pervades the Yellow Quarter, ‘a sour embittered place, a place that had turned its fury against itself’ (340), seems to permeate every aspect of its residents’ lives, whether they are young or old and Parry himself is not immune to the pervasive atmosphere of aggression:

By the time we reached our first village, something unexpected had occurred. My mood had soured. I was in a bad temper after all, a genuine bad temper, which meant I no longer had to worry about standing out. (338)

The reader is left to wonder how far his displays of anger and belligerence are merely a simulation to protect himself and how far they are intrinsic to his personality, only waiting the right environment in which to emerge.

As so often in Thomson’s fiction, including the arrival of Zummo in Renaissance Florence in Thomson’s most recent novel *Secrecy* (2013), foregoing or being deprived of the

security of the familiar necessitates one's immersion in a potentially dangerous 'foreign element'. The emphasis on immersion in *Divided Kingdom* is very noticeable, and there is a high degree of congruence between the main character's experience of his journey across the zones and the reader's literary experience of immersion in strange, but strangely familiar, places and situations. Like entering a bathysphere or diving-bell, the reader becomes immersed in this semi-recognisable country, its customs and ways of life and the journey has both geographical and psychic dimensions. In a sense, the bathysphere's protective skin is something that Parry will have to forsake if he is to encounter directly what lies outside, and his journey to the different zones brings out different aspects of his personality as he is shaped by the different places he visits. This is very different to being a voyeur, safely watching from inside the diving-bell, in that both protagonist and reader are subjected to this sometimes threatening dislocation, taken out of their comfort zone, and compelled to feel their way through foreign territory. When toward the end of the book Parry has visited all four quarters, he becomes one of the White People, itinerants who, due to apparent mental impairment, exist outside the system of humours and so wander across borders. Significantly, Parry does not simply simulate being one of the White People, he actually becomes one, fully immerses himself, loses his power of speech and is alternately ignored and victimised by the choleric people of the Yellow Quarter. An achromatic, as they are officially designated, is a kind of legal non-person 'lost in a pocket of history' (125), with no place in the new divided kingdom. Without the colour and status that guarantees legal identity, they are without a homeland but free to wander where they will.

During an early encounter with a female member of the White People in Aquaville, Parry is told by a hotel worker that, "They have their places" (127). Parry later thinks this initially dismissive phrase may subtly signal the existence of a space between the quarters,

outside the control of those who maintain the divided kingdom. He speculates that the itinerant freedom of the wandering White People is a key factor in the animosity they sometimes face, and as a social group they are either invisible (generally ignored and free to cross borders) or excessively visible as scapegoats and victims of violence. Although the White People, through being 'bureaucratically dead' (269), offer a tantalising glimpse of a life outside the system of segregation, Parry's involvement with them nearly leads to his actual death when the group he is travelling with is ambushed by townsfolk in the Yellow Quarter. While recovering, it becomes clear to Parry that his time with the White People did not offer a solution to the challenges he faces in trying to belong and relate to others, and that their mute and precarious existence on the margins of life is something of a dead-end. Instead, his experiences with them form part of his experiment in 'the business of living' in the divided kingdom.

The reader's experience of immersion in a foreign element, in a new but oddly recognisable world of sensation and experiment, emerges in part from the generic experimentation and blurring that frames the action of the narrative. While providing an essentially realist narrative set in a fairly recognisable contemporary setting (neither spaceships nor supernatural beings appear), *Divided Kingdom*, through its mixture of familiarity and foreign-ness, manages to be a disquieting read, simultaneously partaking of different genres. In an online discussion for *The Guardian* newspaper before *Divided Kingdom* was published, Thomson gave a hint about his new book: 'I tend not to say too much about what I'm working on. I did think of a way of describing it the other day, though: Philip K. Dick meets Voltaire' (Thomson 2000). Exploring what might have been meant by this surprising conjunction of Enlightenment satire and 1960s science fiction may shed light on how Thomson's book brings together quite different artistic modes.

Since Philip K. Dick's oeuvre is distinguished by the hyper-fertility of its creative imagination, there are a host of potential parallels to Thomson's book. One Dick text, however, that seems to share a particularly strong set of correspondences with *Divided Kingdom* is the 1964 novel *Clans of the Alphane Moon*. Dick's narrative is set on a moon that has been colonised by humans who live in communities segregated according to psychiatric conditions. Among the different clans on the moon are the Paranoids or Pares who live in a militarised community in Adolfville, while people who suffer from mania or Mans have their home in Da Vinci Heights, and the Hebes who have disorganised schizophrenia and, like Thomson's White People, are generally regarded as harmless and even revered by some for their unworldly spirituality. The different clans tend to populate different professions and civic functions, and the Paranoids are the most dangerous grouping. As Carl Freedman (1984) has convincingly argued, paranoia is a mindset Dick returns to again and again in his fiction, albeit presented as an ultimately inadequate ideological response to the powerful complex of forces and conditions that foster it, including opaque political machinations and the effects of narcotics.

If we are struck by how *Clans of the Alphane Moon* exhibits similarities to *Divided Kingdom* in terms of the dynamics of populations segregated according to their mental/behavioural disposition, then the latter's avoidance of the generic features of science fiction becomes marked. Instead of the space colonies of the future, Thomson offers a deliberate archaism in his use of a system of humours long bereft of popular credence. In an interview Thomson has spoken of this turn to the past:

I liked the fact that a government involved in a piece of radical social engineering might look to the past for its inspiration. There was something so believable, or even human, about that – we always seem to think that things are worse now than they used

to be – but it was also perverse. The idea that a government could reject progress so utterly seemed to contain within it the seeds of something unpredictable and quite possibly malignant... (Lawless, 2005)

Thomson's reflections here are notable for bringing together both conservative political tendencies and widely expressed feelings about the passing of time. As the quote suggests, Thomson acknowledges the common human experience of feeling that things were better in the past, and of course in the context of the novel he has provided a protagonist whose desire to return to the past is all too understandable, given the depth of his personal loss. In spite of this however, Thomson carefully balances this longing with the turn to the past embodied by the broader political 'geohumoralism' (to adopt Floyd-Wilson's term) of the Rearrangement. Despite the attractions of recreating that which has passed, and the prevalence of nostalgia in human experience, when raised to a political principle an attempted return to the archaic past can become, in Thomson's words, 'perverse' and 'quite possibly malignant', indicating that Parry's quest is really to secure a future, not to reclaim the past.

Thomson's allusion to Voltaire above may be read as a reference to the 1759 novel *Candide*, and Parry's journey across the divided kingdom shares aspects with Voltaire's eponymous hero's voyages in Europe and the Americas, testing the extent to which people live in the best of all possible worlds, as asserted by *Candide*'s mentor Pangloss. The convergence of Philip K. Dick and Voltaire in *Divided Kingdom* signals the joining of a picaresque journey (perhaps putting a philosophical theory to the test) to the scenario of a segregated world, not a psychiatric division as seen in *Clans of the Alphane Moon*, but a deliberately archaic one based on medieval humours. As *Divided Kingdom*'s colour-coded map indicates, these events happen not on a faraway planet, but in a recognisable UK. A detailed approach to the maps perhaps risks placing too much weight on something that

Thomson himself has admitted feeling ambivalent about including in the book, remarking in interview that:

On the one hand, I thought the book could stand on its own without them, and that to include them might suggest some kind of weakness of vision. On the other hand, I know readers love maps. (Lawless, 2005)

These comments suggest that the inclusion of the map is likely to be welcomed by readers but that the map itself is not fundamental to the book's success as a literary novel, and may risk becoming a distraction from the book's central exploration of Parry. The popularity of maps in fantasy fiction, and *Divided Kingdom's* lack of interest in key features of fantasy writing (such as magic), may also be a factor in Thomson's ambivalence. Nevertheless, *Divided Kingdom's* map does indicate to the reader something of the book's focus. The territory of the Republic of Ireland, a potential reminder that the Kingdom has already been divided, is not presented on the map and in fact, although the map follows the contours of the UK, it is noticeable that of its constituent nations only England looks to be profoundly divided. Scotland (with the exception of Dumfries and Galloway, and Thomson's town of Burnham standing in for Glasgow), Wales and Northern Ireland are each roughly speaking only in a single quarter: Phlegmatic for Wales, Choleric for Northern Ireland and Melancholic for Scotland (Burnham is located in the Choleric Yellow Quarter). England, on the other hand, is divided almost equally between the four humours, suggesting that Englishness rather than Britishness is at stake in Parry's journey, in part centred on a London divided into four zones. So while the borders between the zones do tend to follow the UK's historical 'internal' borders, it is the diversity of Englishness that is the novel's central focus.

If Cold War paranoia found one vibrant outlet in the science fiction of Philip K. Dick, one reference point for Thomson when he was writing *Divided Kingdom*, then what is

perhaps the most powerful icon of the Cold War would seem another important influence on the form of Thomson's novel. The building of the Berlin Wall in 1961 following the city's division into four foreign-controlled zones in 1945, mirroring the division of Germany into four occupation zones by the victorious Allies after World War II, forms a key historical precedent for Thomson's *Rearrangement*, and the barricades and checkpoints Parry sees are strongly reminiscent of Berlin's systems of separation. Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas's monumental book *S, M, L, XL* (with Bruce Mau, 1998) is listed in *Divided Kingdom's* acknowledgements and Koolhaas's reflections in the book on a 1971 visit to the Berlin Wall, which he unexpectedly describes as '*heartbreakingly beautiful*' (1998: 222), may provide some insight into the emotional impact political and architectural division has in Thomson's narrative. For Koolhaas the Berlin Wall reveals an uncomfortable duality fundamental to architecture as a practice:

The Berlin Wall was a very graphic demonstration of the power of architecture and some of its unpleasant consequences.

Were not division, enclosure (i.e. imprisonment), and exclusion – which defined the wall's performance and explained its efficiency – the essential stratagems of *any* architecture?... *The wall suggested that architecture's beauty was directly proportional to its horror.* (Koolhaas and Mau, 1998: 226)

The duality Koolhaas apprehends in the power of the Berlin Wall, I would contend, corresponds to the duality Thomson creates in his exploration of borders and security in *Divided Kingdom*, where structures that apparently exist to protect end up imprisoning. The paradoxical 'success' of a border in isolating the subject can produce both beneficial and harmful effects.

One important difference between Thomson's *Divided Kingdom* and post-war Germany and Berlin is that Thomson's kingdom was not carved up by invading forces but deliberately divided by internal powers. The apparent willingness of the people to engage in this division points to another of Koolhaas's projects launched the year after he visited Berlin, entitled 'Exodus, or the Voluntary Prisoners of Architecture'. 'Exodus', composed of a mixture of text and photomontage, was shown at the Architectural Association in London and offered a speculative reorganisation of that city. Its Prologue tells a very Berlin-like story of a city divided in half, with a large wall built to stop people in the Bad Half getting into the Good Half. 'Exodus' proposes to reverse the polarity of this exercise of architectural power: 'Division, isolation, inequality, aggression, destruction, all the negative aspects of the Wall, could be the ingredients of a new phenomenon' (Koolhaas, 1998: 5). A speculative new reorganisation of London through the imposition of a linear Strip over the city will produce 'voluntary prisoners' who will enjoy their seclusion within the confines of the structure and its architectural marvels. The fantasy aspect of some of Koolhaas's creations in 'Exodus' makes for potentially striking anticipations of Thomson's kingdom, including the Park of the Four Elements, whose features evoke some of the iconic institutions visited by Parry in each quarter. The Water sector of the Park of the Four Elements (Koolhaas, 1998: 12) involves a large pool with a wave machine similar to The Underground Ocean that Parry sees in Aquaville (105) and the private booths of 'Exodus's Baths, designed to bring 'hidden motivations, desires and impulses to the surface to be refined for recognition, provocation and development' (Koolhaas, 1998 13) may be a precursor to *Divided Kingdom's* Bathysphere. Indeed Thomson's reproduction of signage in block capitals for THE UNDERGROUND OCEAN (105), and with extra spacing for T H E B A T H Y S P H E R E (114) echoes Koolhaas's presentation of the different spaces of 'Exodus', while also

sustaining Parry's status as both a literal interpreter of signs, and someone who in a more generalised way struggles to decipher the world around him.

In one of many acts of uncertain decoding in the novel, Parry is initially puzzled by the flyer for the Bathysphere he is handed by a stranger at Aquaville's train station on an official visit to the Blue Quarter:

It could be a new restaurant, I thought, or a bar. Or it might be a show. I studied the card more closely – the name and address written in dimly visible steel-grey, the background midnight-blue – then lifted my eyes to the window again. I remembered bathyspheres from adventure stories I had read when I was young. Round metal contraptions, large enough to hold a person, they were designed to be lowered to the bottom of the sea. (104).

This lack of certainty as to the Bathysphere's function persists during his visit to the address on the card, which seems quiet for a club. The word's link to childhood memories might be read as a factor in Parry's decision to visit the place, given his experience of separation from his parents. Parry enters while not fully understanding its purpose, and when faced with three doors to choose from, ends up selecting the one that seems to be the most popular, judging by the marks on the carpet. One might speculate that the doors denote the past, the present and the future, with a voyage into the past as the most popular choice, and Parry's experience in the booth, perhaps under the influence of a drug administered through a needle on the door handle, shows him a vision of his schoolfriend Jones before he sees a young woman resembling his adoptive sister Marie at a young age. The serenity he feels in the woman's company is a powerful testament to Parry's longing for the past:

It didn't matter where we were going. Our destination didn't interest me at all. I just wanted everything to remain exactly as it was.

I wanted it to last for ever. (119)

The attraction but impossibility of stasis is made clear to Parry when he abruptly wakes up feeling nauseous several hours later alone on the street. He returns to the Bathysphere again, having been warned by an colleague that ‘it can be a bit addictive’ (123), this time experiencing his old house and hearing his mother calling him from downstairs. In the aftermath of his vision, Parry believes that ‘something quite miraculous’ has occurred and that he has been changed by his experience:

I had gained access to a part of me that I had assumed was gone for ever. The club’s name conveyed exactly what was being offered: a journey into the depths, a probing of the latent, the forbidden, the impenetrable... (136)

This psychic journey in the Bathysphere has put Parry in touch with repressed feelings and memories, encouraging him to embrace the unexpected and join his colleagues on a surprise trip to the Yellow Quarter to celebrate Rearrangement Day. The trip marks Parry’s decision to start taking opportunities to elude the constraints of officialdom, and to continue his voyage in the dark.

While Parry’s journey across the divided kingdom takes in some special places that embody qualities specific to that quarter, including the Underground Ocean in the Blue Quarter and the Museum of Tears in the Green Quarter, many of his experiences are fairly mundane, or at least they would be if Parry did not have to concentrate on fitting into his new environment. The novel almost invariably positions Parry as the stranger in a strange land, forever in exile from a country that no longer exists, an analogue for the reader’s own sense of disorientation in the rearranged kingdom. The travel aspect of the narrative recalls eighteenth-century fiction and Mikhail Bakhtin’s discussion of the differing chronotopes of

writing in *The Dialogic Imagination* provides a productive framework within which to consider *Divided Kingdom*'s unconventional use of time and space:

The device of 'not understanding' – deliberate on the part of the author, simpleminded and naïve on the part of the protagonist – always takes on great organizing potential when an exposure of vulgar conventionality is involved. Conventions thus exposed – in everyday life, mores, politics, art and so on – are usually portrayed from the point of view of a man who neither participates in nor understands them. The device of 'not understanding' was widely employed in the eighteenth century to expose 'feudal unreasonableness' (there are well-known examples in Voltaire... Swift in his *Gulliver's Travels*, makes use of this device in a great variety of ways). (Bakhtin, 1981:164)

Unlike his literary predecessors Thomson's use of 'not understanding' does not neatly fit the category of feudal unreasonableness, and his method marks a development beyond Bakhtin's typology in at least two respects.

The first is the issue of simpleminded naivety on the part of the protagonist: Parry's development is shaped by his traumatic separation from his birth family and much of his subsequent life has echoes of a child trying to adapt to new circumstances. As Thomson has described in interview:

One of the central dynamics of the book is Thomas's various attempts to work out the difference between what he used to be and what he has become. The trouble is, the previous version of himself only lasted eight or nine years, and never developed into anything concrete or mature. What he is trying to discover is something that is unformed – a potential. At times, he almost loses himself in the gap between the two. (Lawless, 2005)

The consequence of this is that *Divided Kingdom* focuses on Parry's growing self-knowledge and understanding of the world rather than persistent ignorance, a learning process that while dangerous may also be necessary if he is to develop as a person. His sensations in the Bathysphere, while presenting visions of the past, have also changed his attitude to the present, where he experiences 'an abrupt and pronounced sense of opportunity' (140). It is by 'exploiting the situation to my advantage' (140) that Parry will make his way in the world. The second divergence from the pattern seen by Bakhtin in Voltaire and Swift is the question of participation. As I have already explored, Thomson's protagonist immerses himself in the foreign element, and is a participant (however ill-informed) rather than a voyeuristic tourist. Once Parry leaves behind the diplomatic mission to Aquaville, the laws of separation mean that he is not permitted to be the foreigner observer (although he later learns that his government has been tracking him at least some of the time) and must instead simulate the 'natives', to think and behave like them and so avoid detection. His picaresque journey leaves him at the mercy of the strangers he encounters and he is both the victim of exploitation and the recipient of charity. Franco Moretti's account of borders in *Atlas of the European Novel: 1800-1900* (1998) provides a helpful analysis of two kinds of border-crossing:

Borders, then. Of which there are two kinds: external ones, between state and state; and internal ones, within a given state. In the first case, the border is the site of *adventure*: one crosses the line, and is face to face with the unknown, often the enemy; the story enters a space of danger, surprises, suspense...

Internal borders work differently, and focus on a theme that is far less flamboyant than adventure, but more disturbing: *treason*. (Moretti, 1998: 35-7)

It is part of the ambiguity of Thomson's novel that the borders of the divided kingdom are to a degree both external and internal: the system of segregation is upheld by all four quarters and Parry encounters the ritual burning of emblems of the four zones in a rural part of the

Yellow Quarter, a community engaged in ‘a kind of treason’ (166) against the Rearrangement. As one might expect of a novel so attentive to the reversibility of value in the case of borders and security, this spectacle of treason he enjoys witnessing soon returns to bite Parry as he himself is betrayed by people he meets at the event who offer him a lift and then violently rob him. His assailants cannot resist pointing out the inadequacy of his ability to read situations and the extent of his ignorance, telling him ‘if you knew it all you wouldn’t have got yourself into this situation in the first place’ (173).

Divided Kingdom’s combination of picaresque adventure and speculative geography is often tied up with the law, and the projection of sovereignty over territory. The work of Gilles Deleuze on nomads and the space of the state, and the distinction between smooth and striated space in Deleuze and Guattari’s *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987) are potentially apposite here, however Michel de Certeau’s influential book *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984) may offer a more direct means of theorising Parry’s journey through the quarters. In a chapter entitled ‘Spatial Stories’ de Certeau contrasts his notion of place (*lieu*) with that of space (*espace*) (117). For de Certeau, place is an indication of stability, where ‘the law of the proper’ operates and things are in their correct place. Space on the other hand is practiced place, based on the intersection of mobile elements, and is defined by how people make use of a location. This distinction is elaborated in his discussion of maps and tours as divergent methods of speaking or writing about place/space, with maps offering an abstract tableau that erases the itineraries that generated the raw information. Against the law of the proper, where everything is in its place (and not elsewhere), de Certeau proposes an exploration of ‘delinquent’ narratives:

If the delinquent exists only by displacing itself, if its specific mark is to live not on the margins but in the interstices of the codes that it undoes and displaces, if it is

characterized by the privilege of the *tour* over the *state*, then the story is delinquent. Social delinquency consists in taking the story literally, in making it the principle of physical existence where a society no longer offers to subjects or groups symbolic outlets and expectations of spaces, where there is no longer any alternative to disciplinary falling-into-line or illegal drifting away, that is, one form or another of prison and wandering outside the pale. (De Certeau, 1984: 130)

In *Divided Kingdom*, Parry's 'tour' is precisely what is placed in opposition to the state's system of separation and division, and his 'delinquent' journey, shaped by unpredictable help and hindrance from the people he meets is the means by which Parry may try to evade the falling-into-line that characterises social conformity in the quarters. Developing de Certeau's account further in relation to the text, we can say that Parry's journey is a manifestation and expression of his social delinquency, and a product of his desire to avoid both the 'prison' of life in the Red Quarter and the illegal drifting away of the White People, who are left to wander on the edges of society. Parry attempts to live, in de Certeau's phrase, 'in the interstices of the codes' that structure the divided kingdom through mastering the differences each separate zone is designed to express.

Thomson's allusion to Philip K. Dick and his handling of the Rearranged UK in this novel might be read as signalling the book's place within the fantastic or science fiction in terms of generic categories. In interview however, Thomson has been keen to reject the idea of a parallel world:

None of my books are set in parallel worlds – though critics frequently describe them as exactly that. The worlds in which I set my fiction are all around you, if only you look carefully enough. (Lawless, 2005)

Thomson, one might say, is interested in more frequent and resonant intersections between his fictional world and the real one than a 'parallel' world would permit. In terms of genre, like many of Thomson's books, *Divided Kingdom* seems to challenge and blur strict distinctions between realism and fantasy, and operates at the intersection of philosophical writers like Voltaire, modernist innovators like Jean Rhys, and pulp sci-fi writers like Philip K. Dick. The author has claimed in interview that, 'I want to be able to look at reality from a standpoint that feels unpredictable, surreal, and yet, at the same time, entirely cogent. I seem to be attracted to ideas that allow me to do this' (Hynes, 2006), and the complex system of the divided kingdom is clearly designed to produce such opportunities. Thomson's fictional experimentation traverses generic boundaries and interrogates the very nature of borders as both constitutive of identity and dangerously limiting, maintaining for the reader a balance between disorientation and strangeness on the one hand and familiarity and security on the other.

In terms of emotional charge, the wandering 'tour' that Parry and the reader follow maintains a careful balance between threat and intrigue, between the anxiety produced by the unfamiliar and the dangerous on the one hand, and the seduction and liberation of the new on the other. To be a stranger is to be vulnerable, and as Parry is warned by the attendant at the Bathysphere in Aquaville, 'You're choosing without knowing what you're choosing. You're taking a chance. You're going into the unknown' (116). Looked at from this perspective, Thomson's narrator is the reader's guide on an unpredictable journey, so that the novel performs an insistent probing of the importance of security, and its dual role as a nurturing, protective force and as a rigid, imprisoning structure (the dual role of secrecy is explored in similar ways in Thomson's most recent novel). Security, in the form of some boundaries and limits is a fundamental requirement, however the opportunity to exceed limits, cross borders

and encounter novelty and alterity is also required. The abduction described in *The Book of Revelation* is, among other things, an exercise in oppressive nurturing, an evil cradling, to borrow from the title of Beirut hostage Brian Keenan's memoir (1993). 'Border games' in *Divided Kingdom*, where Parry must play a new role each time he wishes to cross a border, are the opposite of the aggressive tribal football encounters that accompany what a newspaper vendor calls an 'important game' (346). Instead, Parry's multiple border games are steps, against a background of security, on the road to possibility and a different future.

It is perhaps in his novels' endings that the unconventionality of Thomson's work is at its clearest, and *Divided Kingdom* is no exception. In its rejection of customary or predictable resolutions that are themselves apparently opposed, we can see how Thomson's fiction pursues its own path at the interstices of established literary conventions. The quest for his missing mother and for the reestablishment of lost family bonds that Parry initially embarks upon becomes less important as the narrative progresses, and the novel does not conclude by staging the longed-for reunion with the mother and offering a return to some kind of prelapsarian state. Such an ending would have fallen within the conventions of what Bakhtin calls the family novel:

The [family] novel's movement takes the main hero (or heroes) out of the great but alien world of random occurrence into the small but secure and stable little world of the family, where nothing is foreign, or accidental or incomprehensible, where authentically human relationships are re-established, where the ancient matrices are re-established on a family base: love, marriage, childbearing, a peaceful old age for the in-laws, shared meals around the family table. (Bakhtin, 1981: 232)

Unlike many literary classics of the nineteenth century, such as *Jane Eyre* or *David Copperfield*, *Divided Kingdom* leaves the family matrix as it has been shaped within the

narrative, now permanently incomplete, in place. Nor does Thomson's novel offer a 'solution' to the political divisions of the country: Parry will not become a revolutionary hero to overthrow the Rearrangement and generate a (national) reunion and a return to a prelapsarian (nation) state. Bakhtin's discussion of the theory that the nineteenth-century novel existed to educate the reader for life in bourgeois capitalist society offers a useful description of such scenarios:

This educative process is connected with a severing of all previous ties with the idyllic, that is, it has to do with man's *expatriation*. Here the process of a man's re-education is interwoven with the process of society's breakdown and reconstruction (1981: 234)

Expatriation is an excellent term for what goes on in *Divided Kingdom*, and indeed elsewhere in Thomson's oeuvre. However, despite Parry's 're-education' in the wide world there is little sign of the kingdom's breakdown and reconstruction along new lines. As Moretti has argued:

Internal borders define modern states as composite structures, then, made of many temporal layers; as *historical* states – that need historical novels.

But need them to do what? To present internal unevenness, no doubt, and then, to *abolish* it. Historical novels are not just stories 'of' the border, but of its erasure, and of the incorporation of the internal periphery in the larger unit of the state: a process that mixes consent and coercion. (Moretti, 1998: 40)

Divided Kingdom by contrast is conspicuous by the persistence of unevenness and internal borders, and by the lack of a subsuming national context. Parry's expulsion from the idyll does not lead to national salvation and the constitution of a new order of things, but to the prospect of a fulfilling romantic relationship and the unobtrusive and private undermining of the system: 'We would be undermining the system, of course – its ethos, its integrity... We'd

be making a mockery of it. I don't care, though, not any more. I owe the system nothing' (395).

On the other hand, while Thomson begins his novel with the epigraph from Rhys, by the end of it he has granted his protagonist a fate far happier than that suffered by most of Rhys's expatriate heroines. The anticipated destructive suicide of Antoinette in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Sasha's descent into alcoholism and penury in Paris in *Good Morning Midnight* and the death of Anna Morgan after an illegal abortion in the original ending of *Voyage in the Dark* collectively attest to the suffering and extermination of those who exist between worlds, whose connections to place are attenuated and multiple, and who are 'misfits' according to narrow notions of what is proper. The tragic undoing of these heroines is part of Rhys's humane and searing indictment of mores, and 'she is most scathing about what she sees as the English bourgeois desire for conformity' (Carr, 2003: 104). Between the conventional kinds of victory and defeat that Thomson eschews, there is instead in *Divided Kingdom* an attempt to normalise relations between the different sides of Parry's self, and to create the possibility of mobility, experimentation and growth. By the end of the novel Thomson's hero has gained a new insight into the arrangement of the zones as 'an order of things', a particular regime, rather than the truth of existence or a destiny. He learns how to exist productively at the interstices of the zones, and realises his potential to move and change, not to fall-in-line or become lost in the White People's 'pocket of history'. The novel ends with him imagining telling his birth parents '*I'm going to be alright*' as he is taken away from them (396).

In Thomson's surprising narrative, to exist between places is not to be doomed to destruction, as so often occurs in the works of Jean Rhys, who once described herself as a doormat in a

world of boots, but nor is it necessarily a predicament requiring the re-establishment of lost family ties or revolutionary reform. In *Divided Kingdom*, this book that moves between dream and reality, between Rhys, Dick and Voltaire, to exist between zones is to learn how to use space rather than being fixed in place, to experiment with change and mobility and so ultimately to learn how to practice everyday life.

ⁱ 'Is it true,' she said, 'that England is like a dream? Because one of my friends who married an Englishman wrote and told me so. She said this place London is like a cold dark dream sometimes. I want to wake up.'

'Well,' I answered annoyed, 'that is precisely how your beautiful island seems to me, quite unreal and like a dream.'

'But how can rivers and mountains and the sea be unreal?'

'And how can millions of people, their houses and their streets be unreal?'

'More easily,' she said, 'much more easily. Yes a big city must be like a dream.'

'No, this is unreal and like a dream,' I thought. (Rhys, 1997: 49)

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