David Almond Part II
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*Heaven Eyes* depends upon a reader who has a sense of pity already formed, based on an awareness of sorrow in the world and a willingness to find satisfaction in emotions. Other members of the genre of first-person narrative offer satisfactions much more akin to media other than books and forming part of a world of consumption so that books for teenagers should resemble something other than themselves such as teenage magazines and columns of intimate advice which are juvenile forms of women’s magazines such as ‘Cosmo’. So therefore much teenage fiction becomes a form of teaching skills necessary for finding one’s place in modern society. Take Judy Blume’s *Forever* for instance, notorious in its day for its frank depiction of sex which inducts the reader into the skills, necessary knowledge of clinics and contraception and so on and at the same time reassuring the reader into their first sexual experience. What this function does to the novel can be seen in this phone conversation between the heroine and the boy who will become her partner:

The next night I asked Michael if he plays tennis.
‘Not really…….why, do you?’
‘Uh huh…….I’m on the school team,’ I said.
‘Oh, a jock, huh?’
‘Hardly…..just that and modern dance…..’
‘A dancer too?’
‘Um …..sort of ….’
‘You jump around wearing one of those things?’
‘What things?’
‘You know…….’
‘A leotard, you mean?’
‘That’s it.’
‘I wear one.’
‘I’d like to see that.’
‘Some day, maybe……if you’re lucky…..’

(Blume, 1995, p.15)
The sub-text for this conversation could be stated as the boy saying endlessly ‘I want to get you into bed’ and the girl replying ‘When I’m ready’. There is no character because the focus is on the content – preparing for first sexual experience. But the anonymity of that is completely alien to another style of teenage culture as exemplified by Georgie in *Angus, Thongs and Perfect Snogging* and yet they all come out of the same culture. Katherine in *Forever* is apparently notorious for her wit and sarcasm on very small evidence but Georgie is the full blown article on very large evidence:

M and D went out to town to buy stuff. Mum said did I want to her to buy some school shoes for me? I glanced meaningfully at her shoes. It’s sad that someone of her mature years tries to keep up with us young ones. You’d think she’d be ashamed to be mutton dressed as lamb, but no. I could see her knickers when she sat down the other day (and I wasn’t the only one).

(Rennison, 2008, p.30)

Where have we come across this tone of pitying contempt for parents before? Why ‘Bridget Jones’ of course as the reviewers recognised: ‘Bridget Jones – but funnier’. In this type of fiction parents are always so ‘uncool’: mothers always have desperately embarrassing flirtations, as Bridget’s mother does, lack any kind of decorum and refuse to lend their daughters necessary fashion items so they are forced to borrow them. Fathers are always hairy and clumsy, a bit like dogs, cuddly but basically ineffectual. Neither of course understands the heroine. They exist as do all adults for the heroine to exercise her wit on. If we look at Meg Cabot’s novel *Avalon High*, part of a series about American High School life we can see the same pose of dismissive contempt:

My dad grew up in the Bronx where there aren’t any snakes. He completely hates nature. He totally ignores our cat, Tig. Which of course means that Tig is crazy about him.

And if my dad sees a spider, he screams like a girl. Then my mom, who grew up on a ranch in Montana and has no patience for spiders or my dad’s screaming, will come in and kill it, even though I’ve told her a million times that spiders are extremely beneficial to the environment.

(Cabot, 2006, p.4)
In this kind of fiction mothers are very often rivals, the beginnings of an education in female competition; men are simply dumb and fall easy prey to women’s superior intelligence.

The heroine is not a great beauty, she is not a blond for example, but she can clown and find a way to fame through disrupting lessons and cheeking teachers and she can show the reader how to make herself famous by treating her life as a drama which she observes and invites others to observe. It is not surprising that Georgie has a poster of Reeves and Mortimer in the ‘nuddypants’ in her room (the language of the novel is very often deliberately childish as part of its attraction) since the episodic diary entries resemble sketches into which the reader can insert herself in the role of Georgie, learning the role off by heart so she can replay it in her own life. As was said before, much writing for children resembles advice columns in magazines. The drama rollercoasters from the cynical, knowing pose to ecstasy at kissing the SG or Sex God to despair and self loathing at some physical disaster like a spot which suddenly develops just when Georgie wants to be tres sexy or her obsessive awareness of her nose which she thinks is starting to spread across her face. What is being taught is how to edit one’s life, to change the speed of change, to contrast rhythms and use juxtaposition so that one’s life is attractive to oneself and to others. Life is about endlessly perfecting oneself, a compulsive setting of targets, neither attainable nor ever to be seriously pursued: the setting is the important point; life is made out of lists and a life without the intention to improve is not a life. However, nothing is to be worked at, strenuousness is to be eschewed as can be seen in any reference to anything that might require thought:

I hope I am not being driven to the brink of madness by grief. They say that some people never get over things, like whatshernamed, Kathy Thing. The one who wandered over the moors at night yelling, ‘Heathcliff, Heathcliff, it’s me a-Kathy come home again.’ Was that Kathy Bronte, one of the Bronte sisters? Or was that Kate Bush? Anyway, whoever it was wandered off into the rain and died of heartbreak. That will be me. I feel a bit tired now. If I just lie down here in the grass I might never be found.

(Rennison, 2008, p.329-30)

That’s very funny in its combination of self-pity and confusion of popular song and half-attended to class text but I find it disturbing. Partly because of the unremitting narcissism of the heroine watching herself in the private cinema of her mind and partly because of the way it reinforces
what Benjamin R. Barber sees as the core values in a consumer culture in *Consumed*:

Fast edits and jump cuts in films and videos as well as the instant pop-up ads that blitz the internet all exhibit the same frenzied obsession with speed … Seen from the perspective of adulthood, speed has become the paramount modern form of youthful vanity: time whipped, time mastered, time accelerated, time overcome.

(Barber, 2007, p.97)

This appears to confirm the earlier point about one’s life being something to be edited, to bring it under control, to give it more speed, more exciting variety, to make it a life to show off to others. Barber sees the obsession with speed as a way of achieving immortality:

With the perceived victory over time comes the illusion of victory over death – not just the would-be magic of cosmetic surgery and the promised immortality of cryonics but the total liberation from time that comes with instantaneity: ceaseless instant change, change so fast that it bypasses every terminus and overshoots the stop signs that might otherwise signal death’s approach.

(Barber, 2007, p.99)

It should be pointed out that Georgie intends to have plastic surgery on her nose as soon as her mother can be persuaded. Death and the threat of death make an appearance in every one of David Almond’s novels since his novels are patterned on the basis of the seasons and the cycle of life but Georgie never loses or risks losing; she makes a scene and everyone hurries to feed her. It’s a world of perfect babyhood where all one’s needs immediately made known are instantly supplied; the world is a large milk bottle on tap. If one compares *Angus, Thongs* with an earlier classic account of first person experience, *Catcher in the Rye*, one becomes aware that though both are based on outsider/insider game theory:

Game my ass. Some game. If you get on the side where all the hot shots are, then it’s a game, all right – I’ll admit that. But if you get on the other side, where there aren’t any hot shots, then what’s a game about it? Nothing. No game.

(Salinger, 1994, p.7-8)
Georgie’s peer group is much more able to sustain her against school than Holden’s can so she is therefore an insider who poses as a victim of school, parents and all but is in fact featherbedded. She is suspended from school because she played a joke on the caretaker and the reaction of her family is: ‘Mum went ballisticimus about the suspension’. But mother works out how to avoid her father’s wrath by persuading Georgie to feign illness so once more the world conspires to keep the comic tone intact by avoiding any form of reality. Holden by contrast has just been expelled from school when the novel opens, the latest in a series of expulsions and as he has already pointed out the penalties for failure or not taking the game seriously are much more severe than anything Georgie faces. Here Holden is on his last night at school looking at his dormitory mate Stradlater getting ready for a date:

Stradlater was more of a secret slob. He always looked all right, Stradlater, but for instance you should have seen the razor he shaved himself with. It was always rusty as hell and full of lather and hairs and crap. He never cleaned it or anything. He always looked good when he was finished fixing himself up, but he was a secret slob anyway, if you knew him the way I did. The reason he fixed himself up to look good was because he was madly in love with himself. He thought he was the handsomest guy in the Western Hemisphere. He was pretty handsome, too – I’ll admit it. But he was mostly the kind of a handsome guy that if your parents saw his picture in your Year Book, they’d right away say, ‘Who’s this boy?’

(Salinger, 1994, p.23)

The narcissism of Georgie examining her nose in the mirror is there but also something more disturbing which *Angus, Thongs* ignores. It transpires that Stradlater’s date is with Jane Gallagher whom Holden knows from childhood as he describes to Stradlater including the antics of her somewhat eccentric father:

Jane said he was supposed to be a playwright or some goddam thing, but all I ever saw him do was booze all the time and listen to every single goddam mystery program on the radio. And run around the goddam house, naked. With Jane around and all.’

‘Yeah?’ Stradlater said. That really interested him.

About
the booze hound running round the hose naked, with Jane
around. Stadlater was a very sexy bastard.

‘She had a lousy childhood. I’m not kidding.’

That didn’t interest Stradlater, though. Only very sexy stuff
interested him.

(Salinger, 1994, p.28)

During the course of the scene Holden is behaving very strangely, with no
apparent justification: he pretends to tap dance; he tries to get Stradlater in
a half nelson; and when Stradlater returns from the date attempts to hit
him. Why? If you look at the sub text it becomes very possible that what
Stradlater is doing as he shaves is gathering a sense of power and purpose
into himself that he will possess Jane, that he will score a conquest to
carve on his bedstead in the pursuit of success that includes love and sex
as its domain. He is also asserting his superiority to Holden who is a
failure in this game. Holden first tries to include Stradlater in games of
the imagination where he is superior which if Stradlater joined in would
show that his will power could be broken and therefore Jane would have a
chance to avoid the fate that Stradlater is bringing to her. Finally when he
returns Holden tries to punish him, to try and make him realise what he
has done but as he has already told us the game goes to those with power.
Because Holden’s feeling of revulsion wells up from somewhere so deep it
surprises him as it breaks through his blocks and makes him act so
strangely as if out of control. The thought that possession of a Sex God
who also just happens to be the lead singer in a band is a stroke of power
that all Georgie’s gang must admire is never explicitly admitted in Angus,
Thongs. In attempting to describe the previous sequence from Catcher one
rapidly becomes aware that though one feels it strongly it is very difficult
to define easily and this confirms something Barber held up as a principle
of modern culture that easy is preferred over hard which can be
confirmed by pointing to the end of the book where Holden is standing in
the pouring rain looking at his sister Phoebe going round on a carousel:

Boy, it began to rain like a bastard. In buckets. I swear to
Gół. All the parents and mothers and everybody went over
and stood right under the roof of the carrousel so they
wouldn’t get soaked to the skin or anything, but I stuck
around on the bench for quite a while. I got pretty soaking
wet, especially on my neck and pants. My hunting hat really
gave me a lot of protection, in a way, but I got soaked
anyway. I didn’t care, though. I felt so damn happy all of a sudden, the way old Phoebe kept going round and round. I was damn near bawling, I felt so damn happy if you want to know the truth. I don’t know why. It was just that she looked so damn nice, the way she kept going round and round, in her blue coat and all. God I wish you could have been there.

(Salinger, 1994, p.191)

How wonderfully dramatic that final image of the ecstatic child sitting on her horse going round and round laughing under the soft golden light of the carousel whilst Holden stands there watching, with his collar up in the dripping rain, crying. Although Holden’s style is made out of frequent repetition such as ‘like a bastard’ or ‘damn near’ or ‘and all’ and it’s not deliberately witty or in any way calls attention to itself, but it is physically grounded and keeps us in touch because it is exactly mapped so we know how the space is laid out and we know what the physical sensations are. If we were to say that Holden is happy because he has saved Phoebe from the world for the moment, for once has connected with someone in a meaningful way and is in despair and crying because he himself is lost that might be a starting point but it could not encapsulate the whole complex experience. In contrast this is Georgie describing the most intense moment of her life when she kisses the SG and they reach level six on the snogging comptometer:

He looked at me for what seemed like ages and ages, and then he kissed me. It was all surf crashing and my insides felt like they were being sucked out.

(Rennison, 2008, p.474)

If that’s all that happens who’s ‘bovvered’? Barber again points to a further principle of modern culture that the simple is preferred to the complex:

The preference for the simple over the complex is evident in domains dominated by simpler tastes – fast food and moronic movies, revved up spectator sports and dumbed-down video games, for example, all of which are linked in a nexus of consumer merchandizing that the infantilist ethos nurtures and promotes.

(Barber, 2007, p.91)
It’s the way it is connected to an all-embracing value system that makes *Angus, Thongs* a necessary consideration. To anyone who feels the big hitters have been brought in to crush a piece of fun I should like them to answer ‘How do you fancy reading the other eight books in the series?’ I passed on that question.

What more could be made of the scenario can be seen from reading Meg Rosoff’s book *How I Live Now* which starts out from the same initial situation of a young girl who despises her parents and makes her attitude crystal clear:

I felt too shy to come out of my room, so I stayed there and thought about my old home which unfortunately led to thinking about Davina the Diabolical, who sucked my father’s soul out through his you-know-what and then got herself knocked up with the devil’s spawn which, when it pops out, Leah and I are going to call Damian even if it’s a girl.

According to my best friend Leah, D. the D. would have liked to poison me slowly till I turned black and swelled up like a pig and died in agony but I guessed that plan flopped when I refused to eat anything and in the end she got me sent off to live with a bunch of cousins I’d never met a few thousand miles away while she and Dad and the devil’s spawn went on their merry way. If she was making the slightest attempt to address centuries of bad press for stepmothers, she scored a Big Fat Zero.

(Rosoff, 2005, p.14)

Daisy who is the heroine of course is a New Yorker of course and doesn’t believe in letting the sun go down on her scorn for her stepmother and the system which Daisy feels supports Davina and allows her to seduce Dad into despatching Daisy to England. Bit like Hamlet. If one wanted to compile a glossary of all the tricks of style available to a user of first person narrative they can be found here in all their rich variety: the use of ‘and’ to connect clauses together giving an effect of immediacy plus loud interruptions and frequent digressions to give an effect of second thoughts so that everything is spontaneous and therefore trustworthy. The viewpoint jumps around first seeming in the present and then looking back so we get a distanced perspective. Slang is used as a counter to gain access to the peer group like a code also in-cultural references as in Damian as well as nicknames such as Davina the Diabolical. Sex references are very
explicit though we notice that the narrator appears to be much more knowing than she is. Sudden adult arcane words appear amongst all the teenage dialect to remind us of how bright Daisy is in an academic, not-to-be-admitted way. No one wants to be a swot to their readers. As part of dramatising one’s life ‘Life’ is always put in capitals as if each capitalised phrase were the title in a chapter or episode in the long-running series of one’s life. Though they have a more serious underlying purpose in indicating tone since very often capitals surround official pronouncements whether institutional or parental and reveal the distance between statement and truth. This is a novel like *Catcher* which is very alert to hypocrisy. Davina the Diabolical has contrived to get Daisy sent across the Atlantic to her British cousins ostensibly for her own good which is where the hypocrisy comes in but in reality to remove her from rivalry for her father. There are a lot of fairy tale motifs here of putting a spell on the man combined with that notorious male stupidity when it comes to sex and the legend of the step mother who sends the daughter out on an errand to the local witch to get her permanently out of the way. Rewriting fairy stories and incorporating them into contemporary situations is very much part of modern feminist writing as exemplified in the novels and stories of Angela Carter or the poetry of Carol Ann Duffy. Daisy is highly conscious, aware and self analytical just as in the other novels as she determines to give battle so the mind of the narrator is the source of dramatic interest as thought and feelings pass over it, collide and conflict. However, we can also see that *How I Live Now* is closer to Holden in that the style is a disguise for pain and the cynicism and insults mask fear and uncertainty. Even the knowingness is a withdrawal from pain in leaving the particular and personal for the universal so that what is happening to the hero/heroine happens all the time and is therefore acceptable. Furthermore like Holden Daisy deals with the problem of being an outsider by becoming a catcher. The novel is set somewhere in the future when the England Daisy has been sent to has been invaded and the family she was living with, her English cousins, has been split up:

And just to complicate matters perfectly, I was starting to feel responsible for their safety and happiness and got panicked at the idea of them being captured or corrupted by the outside world. Now this was a definite shift from where we’d started which was all about them bringing me cups of tea and holding my hand and exactly when the shift occurred I couldn’t tell you.

(Rosoff, 2005, p.87)
This means Daisy voluntarily relinquishes being at the centre of her consciousness, the world no longer exists for her alone and her relationships are no longer conditional upon her self-fulfilment. However the myth Meg Rosoff has created necessary for Daisy’s realisation of leaving the city and going back to the country; of leaving the future and going back to the past; of leaving America and going to England; of leaving a life that is individualistic and competitive for one of loyalty and continuity; of going from a mental life to one that is overwhelmingly physical and much simpler, concerned with survival in its most basic form, depends upon her creation of a reality which is indefectibly real and there she fails. What she has come up with is a myth of old England, the pastoral myth, the country house and *Brideshead Revisited*, of Masterpiece Theatre, as if one’s hopes of community can only live in literature which is where Almond is so successful because his creation of community in Gateshead, Felling, Whitegates, Norton or Whitley Bay is so convincingly real. When Rosoff looks at England it is the historicity that counts as when she is shown her room upon arrival in the country:

She took me upstairs to a room at the end of a hall which was the kind of room a monk would live in – smallish and plainish with thick white walls that weren’t straight like new wall, and one huge window divided into lots of panes of yellowish and greenish glass. There was a big striped cat under the bed and some daffodils in an old bottle and suddenly that room seemed like the safest place I’d ever been in my life, which just goes to show how wrong a person can be about what’s in store for them but here I go jumping the gun again.

We pushed my suitcase into corner, and Piper came in with a big pile of old blankets and she said in a shy way that they were woven from the sheep on the farm a long time ago and that the black ones were from the black sheep.

I pulled the black sheep blanket over my head and closed my eyes and for no good reason I could think of, I felt like I’d belonged to this house for centuries but that could have been wishful thinking.

And then I fell asleep.

(Rosoff, 2005, p.11)

What counts here are not images of physical sensation but symbols of age which means security and though Daisy warns us that these symbols cannot protect against political upheaval they can secure constancy and
loyalty in affection. The protective shadow of ancient spirituality in ‘a room where a monk would live’; the old fashioned mullioned window with the coloured lights; the comfortable and comforting cat and we know from *Tom Sawyer* that no house can be a home without a large well-fed cat; the old blankets and the sense that Daisy has belonged to the house for centuries and finally has come home are all in contrast with the life of New York. Even the children have the comforting quality of having been encountered before in the pages of literature: Piper who is an angel – the eternal mother, Isaac who can talk to the animals and Edmund always likened to a dog in his sensitivity of feeling and loyalty in affection. Again Rosoff is using the literary device of the free English family with minimum supervision as in *Swallows and Amazons* or *Bewis* or in Edith Nesbit as well as recognisable types from that tradition. To the family of children motif is added the legend of the wartime return across enemy territory, a kind of childhood anabasis which we find in *Silver Sword* or in *I am David* as Piper and Daisy struggle to make their way back home to the dilapidated country house which is nevertheless home. At the end when the children are reunited and Daisy is able to rejoin Edmund who has become her lover during the book the style has changed completely from the febrile, vivacious first person whom we saw at the beginning:

I have no idea how damaged Edmond is, I just know that he needs peace and he needs to be loved. And both these things I can do.

So now I am here with him, and with Piper and Isaac and Jonathan and the cows and the horses and the sheep and the dogs, and the garden, and all the hard work of running a farm and staying alive in a country deformed and misshapen by war.

I know all about those conditions, only this time, only this time they’re outside of me. And anyway, fighting back is what I’ve discovered I do best.

(Rosoff, 2005, p.210-11)

Daisy is no longer funny as if falling in love and becoming responsible means putting away childish things rather than needing humour to cope with adulthood. If we were to dramatise this scene there is no way we could do it except by reinvention so that one might show the details of farming and the daily patient task of healing Edmond. Of course this is a mood of resolution to conclude the book but again there is no sub-text except stalwart resolution which spells out love but none of the blocks
which have to be surmounted every day to keep that love alive. It is as if it were perfect and therefore an ideal and impossible in reality but in keeping with the whole idyll of back to the garden of England. The stories of being refugees and witnessing horrors and their anabasis to get back homewards are real because they can be seen on the news most nights but the farm and the old house come from memories of the literature of old England. Rosoff appears to believe that if you strip away all details of style you must be left with naked passion, sincerity and truth. But without a physical context that simply appears as statement. Inside a physical context there is what Stanislavski called a ‘through line’ of thoughts and feelings expressed in actions no matter how small and anchored to that context. It is interesting that Meg Rosoff in a recent pamphlet entitled *How to write books for children* recommended would-be writers to ‘write fiercely. Your audience craves intensity, passion, catharsis, sex’. In the light of this principle it is instructive to wonder why she has failed to achieve her objective.

The critic James Wood in commenting on a novel by J.M. Coetzee said:

> There is a point beyond which pressurised shorthand is no longer an enrichment but an impoverishment, and an unnatural containment. It is the point at which ellipsis becomes a formalism, a kind of aestheticism, in which fiction is no longer presenting complexity but is in fact converting complexity into its own too-certain language………At such moments fiction is not open to reality. Instead it is efficiently reproducing its own fictive conventions.

(Wood, 2004, p.238)

However the instructions for any intending writer for children are to write novels as if they were film scripts:

> If you think of your unfolding novel as a film being privately screened inside your head, it will help you to establish the setting with enough but not too much description, like the mise-en-scene of film, and to vary the pace of the narrative.

(Newberry, 2008, p.12)

Notice that the scenery is not to be seen through the eyes of a character determining what is seen and how it is seen neither is the pace to be set by the characters but according to external rules of pacing according to the Hollywood rule book of how to keep an audience’s interest, very often
based on the experience of reconciling advertising and programming, Cecily Berry, the great voice coach to the RSC said:

We live in a product-orientated society where the chief function of language seems to be to give information in some way. We watch television, we watch videos, we listen to commercial jingles – often the only poetry we hear: language has become either passive and literal, or to do with selling a commodity – (perhaps yourself!). The prevailing mode seems to be either so positive that speech becomes almost aggressive which cuts out any possibility of self-enquiry or doubt, any sensibility to the language. Or it is minimal, monosyllabic, undercut and ‘cool’. Whichever it is, there is little personal imagery, only technological indifference to the emotional roots of language.

(Berry, 1996, p.286)

To have life as a character is to have a distinctive kinaesthesia composed of patterns of rhythm incorporating choices of words for their physicality, the kinds of energy they produce when spoken. The same can be said of each one of us – we have a speech DNA which is completely personal and unique though involving patterns we share with others but which we have adapted to what we sense, feel and wish to say. As Logan Pearsall Smith put it: the object of a language replete in the means to reawaken physical sensation is:

To bring back ideas from the understanding to the sensations from which they were originally derived; to reincorporate them again in visual images and above all in the dynamic sensations of the human body, its members, its attitudes and acts.

(Smith, 1957, p.276)

Developing this idea we can extrapolate from Babette Rothschild the notion that a physical language, a language which can evoke the sensation life of our body is the only way to tap the somatic part of our memory which is why Joseph Conrad in his preface to *The Nigger of the Narcissus* insisted that the writer in order to evoke ‘an impression through the senses’ because that was the only way to endow passing events with their true meaning, and create ‘the mood, the emotional atmosphere of the place and time’. Otherwise we are left with a technological language, bleakly vacant and abstract.
Without sensations we are left clueless in a world lacking shape or substance which is why Stanislavski spent so much time in actor training teaching his students how to construct a sensation life from the text and we are like actors in this that the individuals we meet in real life we absorb into ourselves in their physicality. The characters that authors create resemble the characters we all create to represent those we love and those we hate inside our heads:

Though you have no idea that this is what you are doing, in the psychological language of today we might say (as I suggested a moment ago) that your brain builds a little working model of significant others, and runs this model, in critical situations, in order to hear and see how they are likely to behave.

To help you stay one jump ahead, you may literally hear their voice, issuing their commands and prohibitions, in your head.

(Claxton, 1996, p.39)

Some of those characters are detailed and others are sketches held together by a single dominant memory or emotion or the degree of their physical life we have inhabited. Indeed the event or emotion must have physical life in order to be remembered. If we compare what Professor Claxton has to say with what Rosemary Sutcliff has to say as a representative of authors on the creation of character we can see that the two processes are in fact one and the same only distinguished in the case of the great author by the degree of research, imagination and final autonomy she is willing to allow her characters:

I know what somebody looks like; I know that he has blue eyes and speaks with a slight stammer, because I have decreed that he should, nothing to do with him at all. But once the writing starts, he begins to take on a life of his own, and he goes on doing it until the time comes when, if I make him do something out of character, I know it instantly as one knows it of a friend in whose company one has passed a good deal of time.

(Sutcliff, p.115)

Indeed so demanding is that autonomy that the character must be allowed to do his own thing even though the author wanted him to do something different and if that means making adjustments in the story so be it. The
The emerging theme of this paper is that there are two conceptions of personality at work in first person narrative: stable identities associated with traditional communities and flexible, ever-changing identities associated with a modern consumer society with David Almond representing the former and Cabot and Rennison standing for the latter. Meg Rosoff occupies a place between the two in that her heroine starts in one world and travels to the other. In the consumer world as Zygmunt Bauman says ‘The quickest way to change identity is to buy something.’ Georgia is learning to promote herself which is going to ensure her success in the future defined by her role as a consumer. Although she does not as yet have the money to purchase, she is being groomed to take part in purchasing so that learning the appropriate attitudes necessary for participation constitutes her real education. Incidentally, according to Richard Sennett, her training in the need to change will make her a desirable worker in a market which values flexibility and potential over experience and already learned skills which may be made redundant over night and along with that emphasis on the individual as consumer, meaning he or she is the focus of an entire society’s commercial attentions comes a decline in community:

The collateral victim of the leap to the consumerist rendition of freedom is the Other as object of ethical responsibility and moral concern.

(Bauman, 2007, p.92)

Of course one needs goods or favours in order to commit others to one’s projects. This is a very competitive world, because the state of being ‘in’ is declared by whoever can seize the role and persuade others that they deserve it which requires infinite negotiation, threats and bribery. It is necessary in order to belong to stay ahead of ‘the style pack’ since failure to do so leads to one feeling rejected, excluded, abandoned and lonely, resulting finally in the pain of social inadequacy. The alternative scenario is to be successful for which the reward is:

The arrival of freedom, in the consumer choice avatar, tends to be viewed as an exhilarating act of emancipation – whether from harrowing obligations and irritating prohibitions, or from monotonous and stultifying routines.

(Bauman, 2007, P.87)
So life becomes a series of dramas over the agony of choice, the pleasure of achievement and then a process of swift forgetting so one can move onto the next choice. Changing identity, discarding the past and seeking new beginnings lead to the delight of being born again endlessly. However, this is the life that Daisy has rejected because to her it means that human beings are treated as goods to be consumed and replaced. She turns to the world the characters in David Almond’s stories inhabit in which they are always part of a community, despite bad behaviour, and personality is based on modelling by father or grandfather. The boy becomes a member of that community by coming to understand his place in it which comes from seeing himself in relation to its past. As Bruce Wilshire suggested we form ourselves by reflecting on what others see of us on the principle as Shakespeare put it that no one can see themselves except by reflection and in that tension between the organic self and social ‘reflectedness’ lies the dynamic of first-person narrative. The community and family can find itself at variance with the demands of school particularly in so far as school reflects the outside world in particular the government. However in that tension between the individual and social demands lie the sparks of self-awareness and self-criticism leading to the narrator acknowledging the need to direct his becoming – he or she develops a conscience and that conscience is developed in relation to the characters in the novel but also in the relation with the reader. The reader is invited to become the friend of the speaker, that is he or she will possess experience equipping them to become involved in this process and to criticise the speaker as well as to respond to them. In fact the novel is modelling to the reader the way in which significant relationships in real life work through the fictional reality of responding to a narrator. Now this is the relationship that Maureen offers Erin at the end of Heaven Eyes only to have it rejected because she still thinks in terms of enquiries and investigations into Heaven Eyes’ background and history. She is unable to offer unconditional love to the person Heaven now is but can learn to love if she changes her identity and becomes objectified, that is someone to be measured and quantified.

If as Erikson said:

adolescent love is an attempt to arrive at a definition of one’s identity by projecting one’s diffused ego-image on another and by seeing it thus reflected and gradually clarified,

(Erikson, 1982, p.235-6)

which I would suggest is true of their relationships in general, then that fragility renders them vulnerable to being placed in a state of unbecoming,
of feeling that they are coming apart. It is what Daisy fears subsequent to her rejection by her father and his declared preference for his mistress and David Almond explores throughout *Heaven Eyes* and in the following example taken from *The Fire Eaters*:

Todd came in from the corridor with his strap in his hand. There was silence. Todd looked coldly at Miss Bute.

‘What are you learning?’ he asked us.

No one spoke.

He prodded Geraldine Pease with the strap.

‘What are you learning?’ he said.

‘About pain, sir,’ said Geraldine.

A cold grin spread over Todd’s face.

‘How appropriate,’ he murmured.

(Almond, 2003, p. 109)

The smiler with a strap may appear a little literary in an author praised for his realism particularly in an episode clearly influenced by a similar incident in *The Rainbow* which is as much to do with the breaking of a young teacher as it has to do with the bullying of children. The same is true here:

‘Miss Bute is a young teacher,’ he said. ‘It is your job to be good to her.’

‘Thank you, Mr. Todd,’ she said. ‘I am sure that things are now calm enough for me to …’

He waved her words aside.

‘And it is my job to protect her,’ he said. He smiled. ‘Do you understand the ancient theory of sacrifice, children?’

(Almond, 2003, p. 109)

This means he will select two children at random to brutalise and Miss Bute will have been proved unable to protect the innocent. But Todd’s presence so apparently melodramatic takes in reality from the context of sensation life that Almond has already created. The class is a Biology class in which Miss Bute has set up a practical experiment to show the physicality of pain:

She put us into pairs. I was with Daniel. I had to draw the outline of my hand on white paper. I had to lay my hand on the desk in front of Daniel and close my eyes. Daniel had a needle. He had to touch the back of my hand with the
needle. I had to say yes whenever I felt the needle. He had to mark the results on the outline of my hand. A cross showed where I had felt the needle’s touch. A circle showed where he had touched me with the needle but I had felt nothing.

(Almond, 2003, p. 107-8)

The language and its syntax are as precise and controlled as the movements of the boys in applying the needle and recording the results. It is their first encounter with scientific method, that is, to feel sensation but to objectify it so that it becomes a focus of observation not something that absorbs the mind but something the mind studies. Clearly from the concentration shown the boys are fascinated by what they are learning which is then followed by a burst of enthusiasm and energy as they relate what is abstract to what they know: their own experience so that learning has meaning:

I started to tell him about McNulty, how he could touch fire,
how he could push a whole skewer through himself.
‘I saw him do it,’ I said. ‘In Newcastle.’
‘It’s mind over matter,’ he said. ‘You can control anything if you put your mind to it.’

(Almond, 2003, p.108)

So great is the boy’s absorption in what they are doing that the sounds of growing disruption seem to happening at a great distance as if the sound were turned down. When we came to dramatise this we asked what was Miss Bute’s response to this and concluded that like many teachers in difficulties she kept the lesson going for the sake of the learning going on rather than halting the moment in order to control the misbehaviour. Keeping going is what one does when one is desperate to preserve any kind of positive outcome in amongst sheer survival. What Todd is doing is making Miss Bute doubt herself, that she achieved anything in the class just as he will make the children doubt their identity by the infliction of pain since pain engulfs the self. He becomes a voice within the child not created in a balanced mutual relation but forced upon them leaving behind overwhelming fragments of memory which cannot be reconciled, cannot be controlled. Because Todd cannot be predicted, he has his own rules and those rules deliberately have no logic. So therefore one cannot be a coherent identity with a past and a hope to grow into a future with Todd. If the object of therapy is to learn how to shape whole figures whose focal distance can be maintained and whose parts have a stable relationship to
one another it might be said that reading novels is an education in the same art. By focal distance I mean the state of emotional interplay between two partners which may close and then distance but always remains connected and the possibility of ‘I-Thou’ depth is never lost. The greatest children’s fiction stretches and distorts the balance as life does but in the end restores it to some hopeful conclusion. However, in the greatest adult art such as King Lear as S.L. Goldberg pointed out the focal length is never finalised and established:

Time and again the characters are seen trying to hold reality and justice in a single thought, yet every attempt visibly fails because of some crucial loss in one or the other term.

(Goldberg, 1974, p.180)

But in children’s fiction Todd is the antithesis to the establishment of normative relations. It is as if his self, his body has been projected into every corner of the school so that every transgression is felt as a sensation, as a threat to his body, to his existence and with that heightened awareness comes appalling power. If ‘L’Etat c’est Moi’ then ‘L’école c’est moi’ is equally true.

However, the support of family and community is too strong in Almond to allow this vision of evil to overwhelm the children. But in American first person narrative the discovered shame at being human at times almost drives the child out of community in Huckleberry Finn, Catcher and in How I Live Now because the hero/heroine feels connected in a metaphysical sense, complicit in the way humanity preys on itself so that the protagonists go through the agony of desiring to be separate, free from the taint of being human, to be pure, intensified in Huck’s case by the still untouched state of the American wilderness, but knowing that lighting out for the territory is less and less of an option even to the extent in Rosoff’s case of conjuring up an England that lives in books. In Huckleberry Finn it is the inescapable flaw in being human which blights all the varied human societies which Huck passes through whereas in later first person narratives the subject is betrayal shown in an abuse of trust. Yes, Jim protests against Huck’s betrayal of his trust but that betrayal stems from the human flaw embodied in a racist society. In that sense Huck revolts against a future personality established by that society which is intended to be his goal. It is not, however, a revolt against the idea of identity per se. If Georgia fears the firm establishment of a set personality, then in Almond the characters have a shared history creating a narrative which shapes the individual in terms of his/her community. However, the notion of personality also needs to include the effects of a
shared geography, a landscape or an environment. Much of his writing is devoted to the mutual creation of the physical possession of a context and that creation of a territory begins the creation of a moral context which shapes the bonds of friendship. The great work of childhood is friendship and the morality that friendship teaches is about loyalty and trust; loyalty to a territory and to a story. The raft and the river are the context for Jim and Huck which is why it matters so much that Huck has made fun of Jim using the mess left on the raft by the river. He has desecrated what is their home:

‘Oh well, that’s all interpreted well enough, as far as it goes, Jim,’ I says: ‘but what does those things stand for?’

It was the leaves and rubbish on the raft, and the smashed oar. You could see them first-rate, now.

(Twain, 1994, p.89)

To which Jim makes one of the most devastating responses in all literature:

Dat truck dah is trash; en trash is what people is dat puts dirt on de head er dey frenn’s en makes ‘em ashamed.’

(Twain, 1994, p.90)

Huck has used the privilege of the white boy, very reminiscent of Tom Sawyer, to confuse and distort Jim’s sense of what is real. In so doing he has broken the bonds they have created on the raft, which are indeed the raft itself. To live on a raft is to be insulated by the river from the communities which line the banks. So their relationship can fluctuate and grow according to developing feeling rather than be encompassed round by unchanging principles which of course will never allow Jim the right to hug Huck out of pure love. In adolescence the inner debate is always between the threat of overwhelming isolation and loneliness opposed to the threat of being overwhelmed by feelings for others which one is unused to and which threaten to destroy the newly emerging self if they are allowed in. Hence the importance of friendship and consequent need for trust as this is the first relationship the adolescent has created for himself. In it she must learn to endure the possibility of its breakdown, learn how to forgive and endure the pain of being forgiven. As Huck does. It takes him fifteen minutes to humble himself to a ‘nigger’ but ‘I weren’t ever sorry for it afterwards’. The value of a friend lies in not being an extension of one’s self as the family are in the early days of life. But that responsibility freely entered into can be as freely relinquished and
hence the need to learn how to revise and adapt the focal distance of a relationship so that the partnership remains balanced. Life is so easy on the raft because Huck and Jim achieve that balance. In Almond’s novel *Clay* which is about bullying that balance is disturbed by what Almond shows of the effect of bullying on once secure territory and how that disturbs relationships:

Mouldy was the only really evil one. His mates were ordinary kids just like us. They were playing, just like us, they were scared and excited, just like us. The only reason we battled with them was because they cam from Pelaw and we came from Felling. We pretended we hated them because they were Proddies and they pretended they hated us because we were Catholics but that was really nothing to do with it. It was just the Pelaw/Felling thing. It had gone on forever, even in my dad’s day. He used to laugh when he heard about it, still going on, and when my mam tried to get worried he told her it was nowt, it was just a game.

(Almond, 2005, p.22)

In a recent report on children’s use of territory ‘it was found that territoriality was most likely to affect young boys, most intensely between the ages of 14 and 17’ (Davis, 2008, p.2) and that adults are familiar with divides based on race, class, gang membership or family but ‘are less familiar with divides based on geography alone’ (Davis, 2008, p.1). The report also notes the existence of valuable moral qualities, that ‘territoriality may also be a way of salvaging self-esteem’ and that ‘respect, and recognition, personal protection and entertainment were all identified as key drivers of territorial behaviour’ (Davis, 2008, p.3). The effect of bullying, and in this Mouldy is like Mr. Todd in his need to possess and to have power over without limitation, is to destroy the firm outline of territory and with it the clear shape of reality:

We stopped quickly. We squeezed into a privet hedge.
My heart was thumping. I could hardly breathe.

(Almond, 2005, p. 10)

Now as any one knows who has tried it is very difficult to squeeze into a privet hedge; we used to bounce onto them and off like trampolines on our way back from school. It is as if the agony of fear has given the boys the power to shape shift, to leave oneself behind and merge with the
environment. However, the fear of losing one’s self becomes stronger than moral constraint which is why Davie helps Stephen raise the Golem, the monster made of clay, which will defeat and kill their nemesis. But the point is that Almond always starts in physical sensation. In a recent interview he said his starting point for Skellig was sound:

When I wrote Skellig – set in the streets of Newcastle – my mind was filled with sounds: the creaking of a dilapidated garage, the scuttlings and scratchings inside, a baby’s heartbeats, her breath, the songs of blackbirds, the cheeping of chicks, the hooting of owls, the dawn chorus, the voice of a girl quoting William Blake, the sound of the city beyond a small urban garden.

(Almond, 24.10.08)

Because to inhere in particulars of sense experience is to travel through them to what lies beyond and to borrow a description used of the great Russian author Andrei Sinyavsky talking about his book on Russian folklore:

The Russian folk-tale accepts the world of spirits, but it demands that this dream-life be simultaneously rooted in its own environment: that the supernatural should ‘dissolve’ into the natural, among the objects of daily life.

In Almond the more detailed the physical reality is the stronger becomes the magic and magic for him is synonymous with creation but there are fears that in his latest fiction he has exchanged the world of sense experience for a more ‘issue’-led fiction as recommended by Harold Rosen, for example, to writers of children’s fiction:

The world of children’s books is a very friendly, decent place to be. It’s full of people who are desperate to enlighten, interest and excite children in ideas, imaginary worlds and contemporary issues.

(Newberry, 2008, p.3)

The subject of his latest novel Jackdaw Summer is knife crime and the impulses that lead young people to carry and to use knives. In both Clay and Jackdaw Summer the knowing Mephistophilean figure we have seen in earlier fiction such as Askew has got closer to the hero and now speaks
for something inside him – a fascination with violence and an awareness of his own gift for violence. However, in his latest fiction his sense of community can no longer provide the counterbalancing values. Moreover Almond extrapolates from this a belief in a society that is fundamentally violent making frequent references to the Iraq war and to the violent history of the Border reivers:

> The air’s almost still. There’s the gentle sound of trickling water. The cave isn’t deep. A few strides and you’re at the back. Must have been carved out hundreds of years ago, hammered out by raiders. I imagined them gathered here, bristling with arms, boasting about their battles, their cruelty, their wounds. I imagine their tethered stolen sheep, their sacks of plunder.
>
> (Almond, 2008, p.172)

This seems to be thin, almost perfunctory, trying to work up the old depth and involvement but not making it in comparison with the past that is inside Almond: the mining and industrial past. ‘Bristling with arms’ is a cliché for example and carving and hammering are not the same action for describing making the cave though ‘hammering’ undoubtedly sounds more violent when you want to imagine the reivers in all their blood. In that radio interview Almond said that he wanted art to confront terrors, play with them and in so doing be able to pass through them but the writers has to truly believe in the terrors for himself not take the socially ready made. It is what makes David Almond a great writer for children that for the most part he has done just that.

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