

A meditation on *l'établissement* and *November* **by Christopher Woodall**

1.

How is fiction seriously to be written at a time when public attention is both instantly and continuously fragmented and outraged by rulers whose beguiling utterances are concoctions of denial and fantasy, operating as if all truth were a discursive trick of power, with signifiers caught in promiscuous freefall: when, that is, a certain kind of post-modern fictioneer has, in very actual fact, stormed the reality-show palace?

2.

In the summer of 2015, *Les Temps Modernes*, a French review founded in 1945 by Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir and in 2015 still edited by the writer and filmmaker Claude Lanzmann (best known for *Shoah*), devoted a special double issue to a remote 1960s-1970s phenomenon, a social movement which, though it had echoes and followers in Italy, Germany and across Europe, and even as far afield as Britain and the US, found its most numerous, engaged and durable recruits in France. (1) The said double issue presented thirty-four chunks of writing ranging from personal memoir to cultural portraiture, sociological analysis, political commentary and historical leave-taking.

The very word for this movement (*l'établissement*) has been so thoroughly forgotten that, as Juliette Simon remarks in her preface, young French people nowadays on hearing the term will tend to confuse it with the English loanword *l'establishment*. It's a confusion that comes close to a 180-degree misconstruction: *l'établissement* in fact denotes the process by which young leftist women and men, often students from comfortable backgrounds or young workers with technical or clerical skills, gave up their studies or careers, often abandoning home and family and switching or faking their identities, in order to apply for unskilled jobs in factories, with a view to "establishing themselves" (*s'établir*) within the working class.

The motivation to become "volunteer workers" was overwhelmingly political, *gauchiste*, and frequently Maoist. What began as early as 1967, in response to calls inspired by the Chinese cultural revolution to join the toiling masses, share in their working and living conditions and agitate to hasten revolution, gained broader appeal after the exhaustion and suppression of the 1968 student revolts but then, with the prospects of revolution in the West receding and the reality of Maoist mass murder penetrating finally even the awareness of French intellectual elites, the movement seemed to lose its *raison d'être*. Some *établis* remained in place, embracing working-class life, sometimes becoming lifelong trade-unionists or agitating for equal pay, fighting racist exclusion, etc.

In the summer of 2016, as I read the *ouvriers volontaires* issue of *Les Temps Modernes*, the remoteness of the social phenomenon documented in those, mostly first-person, accounts could hardly have been starker. I was contemplating a time within my own vivid living memory when rational people had believed with such steady conviction in the tangible possibility of an egalitarian *and* libertarian revolution that they were prepared to uproot themselves, wager their futures, place their bodies in direct play, embracing conditions and joining with people (workers and migrants) remote from their own previous experiences – or indeed, to use a comically anachronistic expression – from their "comfort zones".

Unheroic, indeed avowedly misguided, as such "volunteer workers" may have been, their social commitment was largely admirable. Each time I lay the volume down my thoughts re-homed giddily to more current concerns: the fearful populist tide astutely conjured by the Brexit campaign in the UK; a stateside variant that threatened to carry Donald Trump to the White House; the apparently inexorable rise and rise of Marine Le Pen in France and Geert Wilders in the Netherlands; the widespread blaming of such trends on migrants and workers, the former for being too visible, too

needy or too numerous, the latter for voting the “wrong” way, against their own interests or in unwitting subservience to distantly orchestrated manipulation.

As I began to tap out this essay in November 2018, one particular question was ringing in my ears. Following a lecture in Bratislava, given by the historian of Eastern Europe Timothy Snyder (*Bloodlands, Black Earth, On Tyranny, The Road to Unfreedom*), a young student had asked the professor: “what was it like to grow up with a future?” (2) Snyder’s reframing of this arresting question involved an earnest appeal to support investigative reporting, a defence of “factuality” and its painstaking construction by a dwindling band of heroic investigative reporters, and an emphasis on the importance of history itself, that is to say, of a politics of historical responsibility, an essential bulwark against the twin temptations Snyder terms the *politics of inevitability* (essentially, the forlorn post-89 faith in liberal-democratic progress) and, on the other hand, the *politics of eternity* (the doom-laden, cyclical, proto-fascist fear-mongering that hoists an eternal, congenitally innocent “us” over a dangerous, invasive time-immemorial “other” while occluding the future altogether).

3.

My debut novel, *November*, set in November 1976, makes no allusion to the *établissement* phenomenon, despite the fact that it is set among workers and migrants in France and plays out largely within a factory, indeed among the thirteen members of a factory nightshift.(3) *November*’s sequel will certainly make good what might, in retrospect, appear to be an omission, yet in truth was not. There is in fact one person in *November*, a certain Philippe, often referred to as “the Marseillais”, who partly fits the *ouvrier volontier* profile documented by *Les Temps Modernes*: the son of traditionalist Communist-voting workers, Philippe had been radicalised at school and college in the 1960s, becoming a committed “gauchiste”. Yet *November* only considers the workers’ and migrants’ social and political backgrounds and involvements glancingly, tangentially, so that to go into Philippe’s route into factory work would have been, as it were, outside the novel’s remit, beyond the narrators’ various purviews.

By November 1976, in any case, most revolutionaries in search of foreign utopias had been forced to give up on China, the Soviet Union, Cambodia, Albania, and were increasingly and very understandably disillusioned with Cuba, the Sandinistas, Portugal, etc. Moreover, the group of nightshift workers featuring in the novel, far from being left-wing working-class “entryists” might be better characterised as *déclassé* “exitists”: most finding themselves engaged in factory work not as a matter of class destiny but by reluctant choice – *faute de mieux*. Thus, to run quickly through the roll call: Jacques, unable to make a living on his failing hill farm, drives down to the city each evening to supplement his income; Luigi works by day as a butcher’s apprentice; the Romany Marcel, fresh out of prison, is busily looking for a better prospect; Bobrán, Marcel’s cousin, does casual work on a building site by day; the Polish nightwatchman is a daytime sculptor; the Ivorian has theatrical aspirations; the Englishman Eric has fetched up in the factory in bewildered flight from class, family, nation, even language; Mathieu, the supervisor, a former army man, awaits his pension; the Sicilian attends university; the Algerian Rachid and the Portuguese Fernando, in different ways, bide their time. Perhaps Jean, the only member of the shift to have been born locally, is also the only stereotypical worker, neither entryist nor “exitist”, a man who, unlike all his “misfit” workmates, occupies his foreordained place yet, equally unlike them, is a conscious self-educating rightist.

November could not have been written had I not in 1976 found myself employed in just such a factory, on just such a shift, with workmates who were, to reverse the roll call: local, Portuguese, Algerian, Sicilian, army veteran, Ivorian, Romany, hillside peasant, etc. The mix of migrant, deracinated and transient-yet-stable workforce made for deceptively rich collective and individual experiences perhaps typical of nightshifts. Yet rather than chronicle the factual lives of the factual people – whom, after all, the author never came to know in any depth – *November* takes the exuberant liberty of imagining in sometimes intimately mental and physical, indeed visceral, detail

each of the fictional workers in the novel, his [sic] thoughts, dreams, memories, yearnings and also, as if cantilevered from each worker, a further array of predominantly female loved-ones, partners, relatives, enemies, friends, acquaintances. As I have described elsewhere (4), while I slowly pieced the novel together, my ambition was simultaneously to present each of the main characters by means of a relentless perspectivism, through the churning of momentary shop-floor encounters as well as through an evolving narratorial optics, but also to draw out the shared and collective nature of each individual's relative isolation.

With regard to "character", my practice was thus to view each person as infinite in both depth and breadth and as almost systematically non-coherent, radically divergent not just from others but from his own prior and future selves, any representation of which could only be reprised and deferred. Thus, not only is Salvatore, say, seen differently at different moments by each of his workmates, he also experiences himself and others differently, behaves differently, uses different language, feels differently according to such variables as mood, memory, sensation or stimulus; and all this before any passing narrator, as it were, "gets hold of him." One of the capacities possessed by fiction is the communication of something approaching consciousness, allowing writer and reader to experiment what it might feel or be "like" to be somebody else. This is part of what *November* attempts, while assembling a group that, however disparate, is very much more than the sum of its colliding and intersecting parts.

What drove the writing of *November* and now, with a quite different and explicitly socializing emphasis, drives its sequels, is a relentless curiosity in the people and situations I have chosen to explore. My concept of fiction is that of a pursuit that is *cognitive* (in the sense of fact-finding or investigative), a means of exploration bringing together real-world research driven and fed by a determinedly forensic imagination. I have no doubt whatever that there are solid facts and truths to be known about the present and the past yet many more, though equally real, can never be known: such as the (proverbially precise-yet-unknowable) number of birds in the sky above the world at any given instant. Similarly, the precise individual and collective experiences that night of November 9th 1976 of people at least superficially resembling the characters in *November* will remain unknowable; the tantalising truth of *November* is that those experiences might, just might, in fact have been something close to the account given.

The rhythm and forward momentum of the text is provided therefore not by suspense mechanisms, cliffhanger devices, plotting paraphernalia, but by the insistent unveiling and expansion of character itself: the events, such as they are – an altercation between the Romany cousins, the discovery of a note secreted in his jacket by Rachid's wife, the sharing of a secret between tentative new friends, the discussion of future strike action, the announcement and celebration of a wife's pregnancy – all flow directly from the workers themselves, with all the inevitable attendant contingency, redundancy and fortuitousness. There is indeed a prevailing sensation that, as one of the workers puts it, "nothing can happen here", though this contradicts the narrator's own claim on the first page of the novel that "things never stopped happening."

My aim with *November*, the first of a suite of four novels, was to reproduce a minutely constructed *simulacrum* of the individual and collective experience of individualised *simulacra* of workers, loosely based on that actually existing night shift to which I belonged in 1976. While experience and consciousness are plumbed in uncommon detail, the book is a machine of words, divided into five parts, each part of eleven chapters, each chapter accounting for approximately three minutes, the entire work spanning just two and a half hours – save for miscellaneous excursions, diversions and temporal wormholes. The brute human and material reality or, to borrow Snyder's cumbersome term, the "factuality" on which the novel continually insists, is thus placed within a pointedly artificial structure which serves to underscore at every moment the constructedness of both facts and fictions and the investigative drive that serves to seek out both.

4.

I shall conclude this essay with two passages from the closing pages of *November*, the first of which patrols the novel's own perceptual limits, while the second seeks momentarily to leap free of its temporal confines.

In the last of a handful of appearances by the self-styled “story-teller”, he [sic] simultaneously bewails the implosion of his narrative powers and boasts the fulfilment of his original remit. He then speaks of a successor who will “have to begin where [I] left off, tracking society deeper into each person's mind and thoughts while contrariwise, projecting even the tiniest of unique human vagaries onto a magnifying social canvas...” Thus is the task of locating each of the workers in *November* within a particular social constellation and positioning them also amid the roar of contemporary conflicts defined and deferred to *November's* sequel.

A few pages earlier, the machines are halted, production suspended, while the men gather to celebrate the news that Rachid's wife is expecting a child. Biscuits and drinks are brought forth and various men call for a speech. With Rachid's approval, the shift supervisor Mathieu invites Philippe to say a few words. The Marseillais, alive and acutely conscious at a time when everyone knew what it felt like to grow up *with* a future, ends his little speech as follows:

This child will not only outlive us, he or she may, we hope, outlive the very way in which we work and live. This child will come of age on the eve of a new millennium, with opportunities beyond our present dreaming – opportunities to grasp or to fail to grasp. While there is no blueprint for the changes to come, surely the energies, intelligence and creativity of working people will not be squandered and denied and mocked forever! So let us raise a glass to the child and to the world that he or she must build anew. To Rachid, his wife and his child! To freedom! To the future!

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Notes.

1 *Les Temps Modernes*, no. 684-685, “Ouvriers Volontaires. Les années 68. L'établissement en usine,” Paris, 2015.

2. Timothy Snyder, speaking at de Balie, Amsterdam: <https://bit.ly/2AJJrRa>

3 *November*, 2016, Dalkey Archive Press, McLean IL-Dublin-London, 2016.

4 Joe Milazzo, ‘Conversation with Christopher Woodall’ in *Entropy Mag*: <https://bit.ly/2KOJShM>

Christopher Woodall's first novel *November* was published by Dalkey Archive Press in 2016. His first collection of stories, *Sweets and Toxins*, was published by Dalkey in 2018. For further information and contact details, please visit the author's website, www.christopherwoodall.org