

HEATHER NUNN

Running Wild: Fictions of Gender and Childhood in Thatcher's Britain

It is eleven years since Margaret Thatcher resigned her premiership in November 1990. Since then she has figured prominently in political culture as emblem of a particular 1980s *zeitgeist*. Both critics and supporters share deeply gendered ways of summoning up images of her fantasised return and of the disciplinarian Conservative conviction politics and fervour that she still embodies in the cultural imagination. This paper illustrates the centrality of gender to cultural critique of Thatcher by focusing on J. G. Ballard's novella *Running Wild*¹ written as Thatcher entered her third term as Prime Minister. Ballard's dystopian fiction of Thatcher's middle England is a complex indictment that extends to New Left and feminist politics as well as to Thatcherism and the New Right. While it importantly raised the underlying violence of much Thatcherite discourse during the 1980s, it nonetheless deflects a broader political critique onto demonised examples of monstrous femininity which become equated with an amalgam of new politics. As a strategy, Ballard's text, then, illustrates some of the difficulty contemporary criticisms of Thatcher encounter in negotiating the crucially gendered aspect of her political persona.

Cultural Context

Gender was an integral part of Thatcher's political persona; as Britain's first female leader of the Conservative Party and then first female Prime Minister she provoked critical debate about the role of women in public and political life and their engagement in the political field. Her confrontational stance, and her presentation of politics as battle, posed in dramatic form questions about the gendered performance of parliamentary politics. Critical debate often focused on Thatcher's femininity and its contribution to the adversarial persona that she adopted throughout her eleven and a half years as Prime Minister. Popular cultural responses to Thatcher were often shaped through two "paradoxical and common judgements:" that she was not a real woman, or that she was "the best man in the cabinet."² These statements indicated how she often occupied a place of gender ambiguity. As a conventionally groomed and married woman, she drew on her status as wife and mother to construct the benign image of the "housewife managing the nation's budget." This promotion of domestic femininity wedded to political management enabled her to suggest her special female knowledge as she reworked a long-held axiom of British Conservatism that women were the moral guardians of "home and hearth." The distinctiveness of Thatcher's image came from the amalgamation of this highly conventional femininity with the inflated versions of militaristic and individualistic masculinity she celebrated and incorporated into her "Iron Lady" role.

Gender was also central to Thatcherite discourse, most particularly in the ideologically loaded image of the "privatised" family, a construct that involved the mobilisation of Thatcher's "feminine" knowledge of domestic life. For Thatcher, the stable, self-reliant, moral, nuclear family was the core element and measure of the nation's strength and vitality. While she endorsed economic liberalism and the

freedom of the market, the private sphere of the family embodied the space of limited freedom: the space to be free from state intervention as long as a moral and disciplined order was preserved. In her political discourse, the child was a symbol for the expression of broader anxieties about the relationship of the family to the state. These anxieties were aired in political and media discussion about parental and teacher responsibility, law and order, education and knowledge, and the place of the child in a commercial and media-informed society. Furthermore, Thatcher tapped into the electorate's contradictory identifications with the British Welfare State. In post-war political imagery, welfarism had been couched in the language of protection, care, development and regeneration. Yet the reverse of this image was an association of the Welfare State with bureaucratic control: a world of systems, institutions and information gathering.³ As an alternative to what Thatcher defined as infantile welfare dependency, she offered a vision of the self-sufficient and independent consumer. One central political backdrop to this paper, then, is Thatcher's contestation of the Welfare State and her proposed substitution of the consumer society in its place. Critically, this consumer society was invested with moral weight and responsibility through the image of the child. The idealised child within the space of the consumer-laden family home was a motif of stability, harmony and discipline that would infuse the nation under a Conservative government.

The "family" and the politicising of domestic space had also been central to second-wave feminism. On the back of two decades of feminism, Thatcher had been elected as Britain's first female Prime Minister. On a simple level, these two political facts can be placed on either side of an ethical and political gulf. Without the feminist questioning of masculinist political culture and the vociferous claims for equal representation in public and political life, she may not have achieved ministerial, let alone, prime-ministerial status. However, her outspoken distancing from feminism,

her engagement with a chauvinistic political style, and her reactionary use of a domestic maternal femininity caught somewhere in the 1950s, proved difficult, if not outrageous, for many feminist critics. For many, the compulsion to repel Thatcher, to place her as uniquely “other,” and beyond even the category of “woman,” was overwhelming and the disengagement from any attempt to understand her was enabled through the label “token man.” Maureen McNeil has noted the broader problems of cultural commentary on Thatcher in which a strange inversion of the 1970s feminist slogan “the personal is political” captures a misogynistic brand of attacking Thatcherite politics through personal caricature. She cites examples from popular music to high cultural critique which indicate a violent artistic response to Thatcher: from Elvis Costello singing of stamping on Thatcher’s grave in *Tramp Down the Dirt* to the more oblique attacks such as David Hare’s treatment of sexuality and power in *Secret Rapture* or *Strapless*.⁴ These dissenting responses were a repudiation of the political *woman* as much as an attack on a political party leader. In such critical representations, fantasies of the violent political woman meld with fantasies of reciprocal violence enacted upon such women. McNeil concludes that not only any representation of Thatcher which deals with her as a woman but also “any representation of gender relations linked to Thatcherism” risks “a slide into misogyny.”⁵

J. G. Ballard’s novella *Running Wild* was written at the time of Thatcher’s re-election to a third term. To many political observers on both the Left and the Right of the political spectrum she and her party appeared unstoppable. His text addresses the specific cultural context of the affluent British south and attempts to signal the repressed violence both of Thatcher’s idealised self-supporting family and of self-contained “Little England.” But the text is also a complex engagement with a political moment marked by feminism, New Left politics and the libertarian individualism of

the New Right which fed into Thatcher's discourses of individual and familial responsibility. Furthermore, the violence that erupts in the "Little England" of *Running Wild* is not only a British but also a transatlantic story, in which Ballard nods to the violent shattering of American society and particularly of the secure upper-middle class suburb and the idealised family. The child and certain formations of childhood that Ballard clearly identifies as emblematic of this political moment are central to his novella. Importantly, his critique of Thatcherism is refracted through a critique of certain forms of child-rearing within a consumerist society. Before a closer analysis of Ballard's text, then, it is valuable to situate it within the context of Thatcher's idealised consumer society.

"Let Our Children Grow Tall:" Thatcher's idealised consumer society

"What is right for the family is right for Britain"
(Margaret Thatcher, *Sunday Express*, 29 June 1975, 17)

In September 1975, on her first intensive tour of the United States as new leader of the Conservative Party, Thatcher drew upon the symbol of the child to animate her vision of a Thatcherite future. In this future, healthy competition and the success of the fittest meant that some children would "grow taller than others."⁶ Her New York audience was told that her legacy to future generations would be freedom from dependency on the state, and moral and economic vitality. The speech, "Let Our Children Grow Tall," introduced what would become a long-term strategy in which she contrasted "ordinary people" with "pressure groups outside Parliament and the democratic framework."⁷ She maintained that past political attempts to redress genuine "injustice and inequality" in society had been replaced in contemporary Britain by groups with fabricated social injustices: "You know how it goes. It is 'my rights at all costs regardless of who has to pay,' or 'society has a duty to me,' not 'I have a duty to

society.’”⁸ The contemporary child was hindered by this iniquitous system and Thatcher implied that she would return the child to its rightful owners, ordinary parents, and would redress the imbalance of power wrought by the state through her promotion of individual economic rights. In December 1976 she informed the Social Services Conference that the child and the parents’ desire for their child were instrumental to the establishment of a stable and moral society. She stated, “We believe the family is the foundation of society and the desire of parents to give their children a better start in life is honoured as one of the most powerful influences for good.”⁹ By 1979, the year in which she commenced as Prime Minister, the family had firmly become the “driving force” of society, and the desire of “millions” for “a better life” for their children was the motor of that drive.¹⁰ The family was society’s basic “building block,” the place where values were instilled in children as tomorrow’s citizens. Throughout her time as premier she continued to reiterate that “children come first because children are our most sacred trust.”¹¹

Her tale of sociality and dependence contradicted the post-war emphasis on welfarism, and reworked the conventional Conservative emphasis on kinship as exemplar of social stability through inheritance of property and wealth. She latched the child’s evolution as a social being to the impulses informing consumerism:

Self-regard is the root of regard for one’s fellows. The child learns to understand others through its own feelings: at first its immediate family; in course of time the circle grows....Because we want warmth, shelter, food, security, respect and other goods for ourselves, we can understand that others want them too....People must be free to choose what they consume in goods and services.¹²

Here the child illustrated the movement from self-regard to consumption based on empathy. Thatcher suggested that the child’s “self-regard” and subordination to the natural hierarchy of the family provided a model for the “drives” of a free consumerist

society. In this process desire for material goods, consumer services and prestige developed into a recognition of one's moral obligations and responsibilities: "Choice [of goods and services] in a free society implies responsibility. There is no hard-and-fast line between economic and other forms of personal responsibility to self, family, firm, community, nation, God."¹³ The child, then, both symbolised the stable, natural foundation of social life and also a social anticipation that he or she would fulfil their civil duty in the transmission of "traditional" moral values. Furthermore, the child naturalised the market as the impetus to self-improvement and exchange.¹⁴

In her speeches and interviews throughout the 1980s, the idealised scene of family life was a commonplace reference, the home pictured as shelter, replete with material goods, in which the child and its mother were the anchor-points. This harmonious private sphere was set up as essential counterpoint to the autonomous, enterprising responsibility of the adult realm of consumerist capitalism. This adult (often implicitly masculine) world of enterprising consumption, in its turn, was invested with sincerity and worthiness by its contrast with the alleged "dependency culture" of the Welfare State. The self-reliant consumer was compared to the unworthy recipient of state benefits who was captured as a figure of infantile and immoderate greed, rising up to claim his or her "rights" with an all-consuming appetite.

In a speech to the 1986 Conservative Women's Conference, Thatcher conjured up the typical little "Heaven on Earth" that the female Conservative canvasser would happen upon. She described a comfortable home in which security was evident in a plethora of consumer and financial goods: videos, deep freezes, telephones, the possession of privatised company shares. In the midst of this scene she pictured the figure upon whom the women canvasser's eyes would finally rest: a child, in the warmth of the sitting room, using a home computer, moreover using it more

“expertly,” “far better...than mother or father.”¹⁵ The inspection of the consumer goods on display assumed consumer knowledge on the part of the Conservative women, but more importantly it offered a vision of a better present and future in which consumer capitalism relieved everyday hardships and ensured self-fulfilment.

The fantasy of the comfortable home has been a central component of Western capitalism. It has provided ideological justification for the public world of work where labour, particularly men’s, has been legitimated as “for the good of the family,” its needs and desires. Women and children have peopled and secured the harmony of the private family refuge, away from the masculine sphere of politics, culture and production. Expressing anger at accusations of greedy materialism, Thatcher asked the female readers of *Woman* magazine, “What’s wrong with wanting to have enough to enable [your children] to have private music lessons, to take them abroad, to see that they have better clothes and better food?”¹⁶ Furthermore, the child of her imaginary domestic scene was a signifier of the “euphoric values” of consumerism—a life of possibilities, a life without restraints.¹⁷ But this child was also carefully contained to avoid the disruptive potential of a purely libidinous existence which, for example, might occur if the child became entranced by the computer screen. To deflect such concerns Thatcher frequently presented the child as motivated, more skilled than his or her parents, and morally policed by the loving family. Importantly the disciplined child enriched by educative consumer goods represented a childhood off the streets and never running wild. Revealing how the adult projects his or her own desires onto the child, Thatcher’s vision was of the child as repository of Conservative family values retained from the past, but also of a dynamic potential Thatcherite adult who would satisfy the technological and political needs of the future.

Such fantasies of soft-carpeted, warmly heated, private homes cannot

completely conceal the instability and unfulfilled lack that also enthralls family life: the petty squabbles, private rivalries and the conflict borne of intimacy that are also present in the lived reality of any “family” home. In Thatcher’s speeches, subversion and discontent fissured the external political world; the imagery of social instability and volatile public battles deflected from and partly consolidated the unreal harmony of the private sphere. Conflict and dispute on the part of unions, nuclear protestors, and social movements, were continuous throughout the Thatcher years and she presented such challenges as irrational, disharmonious and often dangerous infractions of an otherwise prosperous and secure nation and private life. While the hardworking and parentally monitored child closed down adult fears of the transgressive or dangerously immature aspects of childhood, the well-armoured family home secured child and adult from the dangerous public world that populated Thatcher’s speeches. Her secure and exclusionary family home then was “ground” won through the Government’s “many battles,” from the Falklands to the recent Miners’ Strike and the current union protest at Wapping.¹⁸ She warned Conservative women that, alongside her, their “first duty” was “to defend and hold that ground against all-comers.”¹⁹

You are the best guardians of our liberties. Continue with the Conservative Party to build on the great open site of human freedom: the homes, the families, the values, the enterprises—in a word, the good society. For it’s that which can bring... a little bit of Heaven on Earth.²⁰

Running wild in Thatcher’s consumer-family

The child and the family, then, were powerful motifs in Thatcherite discourse. On the part of Thatcher they were a way of addressing a female audience without contesting the conventional Conservative association of women with the private sphere where, as guardians of moral values, they represented a limited political power outside

mainstream politics. Secondly, Thatcher could mobilise her own gender and her status as wife and mother to claim an especial knowledge of the moral responsibility of the hard-working family and its right to material comfort. Here she maintained a strict gender divide between the active masculine public world of aggressive-defensive politics and the small, still potentially vulnerable, feminine world of private family life. As a woman at the summit of high political office who advocated an adversarial style of politics and who thrived on images of conflict and political unrest, the “Iron Lady” was presented as an exceptional woman who could successfully cross that divide.

Against the political and cultural backdrop outlined so far, the remainder of this analysis will explore Ballard’s *Running Wild* as fictionalised social commentary on the Thatcherite “privatised” family and child. Ballard’s novella was, as I have indicated, written against the background of Thatcher’s third successive electoral victory, a point when it seemed for advocates and critics alike that Thatcherism was insurmountable. Ballard’s reputation as science fiction writer lends to this narrative—set in the present with a postscript in the near future of 1993—the function of the science fiction genre: a shocking and cautionary new perspective on the dangerous complacency of the present. In the creation of a dissenting text, he slips into the misogyny that some feminist critics have noted as the danger of any critical representation of Thatcher that focuses on her gender.²¹ But I will illustrate how *Running Wild* also taps into the fantasised potential violence that was integral to Thatcher’s political persona. It contests her idealised consuming family and the transgressive libidinous drives kept at bay in such political fantasies. Furthermore, it also challenges the political movements arising out of the 1960s: the New Left and second-wave feminism. These are presented as politics weakened into a liberal dogma of an everyday tolerant and nurturing lifestyle that saps life itself of any brutality or

strong, dangerous emotion.²² Thatcher, feminism, the New Left, and the 1980s *zeitgeist*, then, are worked into a complex and troubling metaphor. They represent the source of a symptomatic violent insurrection by children brought up in a model, consumerist family community of 1980s Britain.

The story that unfolds is that of the “Pangbourne massacre” of ten professional and business families, with domestic staff and security employees, in an English village estate of executive housing built in the 1980s on deregulated farmland, thirty miles west of London. The narrative opens with details of the brutal and swift, organised murders of thirty-two adults in barely twenty minutes on the exclusive estate one summer morning. The victims are found in various states of early morning preparation for those of comfortable circumstance: “Husbands and wives were shot down across their still-warm beds, stabbed in their shower stalls, electrocuted in their baths or crushed against the garage doors by their own cars.”²³ Mysteriously, the thirteen children of the massacred families have disappeared, assumed by the police to have been kidnapped.

Built by Camelot Holdings Ltd., the site of the murder, Pangbourne Village, represents the numerous, self-contained, new executive housing estates built in semi-rural areas during the decade. As an emblem, it captures the blend of new purpose-built accommodation and nostalgic simulacra of “character” housing through which such mock villages were constructed and marketed. Furthermore, in Ballard’s text, Pangbourne epitomises the fantasy of the self-sufficient family residing in a purpose-built pastiche of England’s communal past that populated much Thatcherite discourse. This is an “imagined community,” sealed off from the outside world by a *cordon sanitaire* of steel-mesh fencing, electrical alarms, surveillance cameras, guard dogs and radio-equipped handlers: “entrance was by appointment only.”²⁴ There is a sense that the topos of Thatcher’s imaginary Britain—forever England, forever secure—has

become self-sustaining, and that the fantasies of Thatcherite secure individualism have mutated into dehumanised isolation: “Indifferent to the lives and deaths, negotiated within its walls, Pangbourne Village would endure. Once the mystery of the mass-murder and the kidnapping had been solved...a new cast of tenants would soon be recruited to fill those calm drawing rooms.”²⁵ The Village just prior to the crime was captured on security camera, and the “minimalist style of the camera-work” as it offers up to the police viewers the fetishised imminent crime scene emphasises and mirrors the “strangely blanched,” unemotional tone of this carefully constructed environment. With its gatehouse controlling access to the well planned ten mansions, a recreation club, gymnasium, private cinema rooms, optional stables and swimming pools—the site bereft of its inhabitants invites comparison with “a high-tech science park where no human operatives are employed.”²⁶

Ballard’s economical and bleak fiction combines the narrative trajectory of the male detective’s search for an answer to the enigmatic murders with the police procedures. The tale is written in the form of a forensic diary in the chief authorial voice of Dr. Richard Greville, Deputy Psychiatric Advisor of the Metropolitan Police Force. Presented as on the boundaries of the law and alienated, indeed increasingly repulsed, by the safe and secure artificiality of the violated estate, Dr. Greville develops his own unpopular thesis on the catalyst for the massacre and slowly develops a sketch of its perpetrators. His thesis contrasts with the more conventional and hide-bound proposals of the police force and government authorities. They put forward an array of possible suspects. These are either the popularly demonised enemies within the Thatcher state or potentially corrupt adults within the family space: Soviet agents, disaffected servants, terrorists such as the Baader-Meinhof gang or the Italian Red Brigades, one or more parents on the estate, or criminals from London’s East End or Glasgow.

In *Running Wild* the fictive crime is infused with the substantiality of the violent real by placing Dr. Greville as author not only of the Pangbourne diaries but also of a report on the (real-life) Hungerford killings of August 1987: Michael Ryan wreaked havoc in the English village of Hungerford by shooting citizens in an unprovoked and unexpected murderous trawl through its streets before taking his own life. The murders had prompted wide media coverage and led to speculation on corruption surfacing at the heart of Thatcherism's middle England. Here Ballard arguably picks up on news coverage at the time which speculated on the Hungerford events as a copy-cat enactment of "Rambo"-style violence: "As with the Hungerford killer, Michael Ryan, or the numerous American examples of crazed gunmen opening fire on passers-by, the identity of the victims probably had no significance for them."²⁷ The transatlantic references are not coincidental here, as the complex elision of political and revolutionary violence is slowly unveiled. The various hypotheses about the potential killers include: "The Lone Assassin," "The Thrill Killers" (defined as "a group of Michael Ryans"), "perhaps five or six deranged members of a local rifle club," or "A Misdirected Military Assault."²⁸ These potential perpetrators suggest an elision between misdirected individualism and the aggressive militarism of Reaganite and Thatcherite politics, tipped into a violent revolt against Pangbourne's symbolic system of containment. In Ballard's narrative, it is the children of Pangbourne Village who rise up against their parents, "wreaking a terrible vengeance upon the heart-land of the affluent English South."²⁹ Slowly, the missing thirteen children are revealed as the likely killers. David Glover and Cora Kaplan have suggested that Ballard "effectively re-mythologizes the Hungerford murders," but does so by drawing on the affective power of that real-life crime to invigorate "a new political fable."³⁰

The aetiology of the fictional Pangbourne massacre is located in a complex network of seemingly antagonistic political movements. Dr. Greville postulates that the extreme state of alienation that compelled these children to kill in such a methodical and bloody way was brought about by the liberal, devoted and supportive regime of child-rearing enacted in the village. The moral and cultural influences that shaped the newly prosperous, once New Left and feminist parents—the psychiatrists, concert pianists, TV executives, health-food executives—are crudely signified in bookshelves that contain “an A-Z of once modish names from Althusser to Husserl and Perls.”³¹ These inhabitants are sketched in easy companionship, living in the village community at one with the capitalists and social conformists that they once politically opposed: the investment broker, merchant banker, Lloyd’s underwriter and business bureaucrat. Ballard draws the two groups as indistinguishable and now both comfortable inhabitants of Thatcher’s consumerist utopia. They share the same parenting methods, deck their homes with the same hi-tech consumer goods, employ and exploit the same under-class of domestic servants, border their mansion homes with the same carefully clipped grass verges, ornamental shrubs and dry-stone walls.³² Their traffic to and from the semi-rural retreat is along the same arterial lifeline, the M4 highway “to the offices and consulting rooms, restaurants and private clinics of central London.”³³

The children of the village are presented as the prisoners of a too-tolerant but implicitly stifling regime. In Pangbourne’s effusive liberal environment, the parents tacitly tolerate the teenage boy’s collection of soft-core erotica and indulge his collection of *Playboy* and *Penthouse* magazines hidden under the mattress. Yet they reveal their own strict cultural contours of taste and acceptability in the creation of a home environment where the child’s writing of a fictional “bodice ripper” or reading of pulp horror magazines is construed by parents, and therefore offspring, as a

subversive teenage act. In seventeen-year-old Jeremy's bedroom, soft-core magazines conceal the "real porn," gun and rifle magazines with the mail-order coupons missing.³⁴ The contradiction highlighted here is between the attempted parental separation of libidinous sexual drives and violent drives, the former endured within a broader pedagogic attempt at containment, the latter associated with a demonised "low" culture. The narrator Dr. Greville constructs the tableau of a child imprisoned by close-circuit TV, computer-assisted learning and a crowded recreation schedule in which the adults fully participate with an almost compulsive sense of enlightened parental obligation. Like Thatcher's consumerist family haven, this is an environment in which the dangers of unconstrained consumerist desire are held in check by a disciplined regime: "This was a warm, friendly Alcatraz. Swimming at eight, breakfast eight-thirty, archery classes, origami, do this, do that, watch the *Horizon* repeat on the video together, well done, Jeremy..."³⁵

Here the share-owning, home-owning democracy of Thatcherite consumerist utopia melds with the tolerant, egalitarian and cultured registers of the New Left and feminism to, in the words of Dr. Greville, "censor" and "overcivilize" the "senses" of children. The surveillance of the housing compound is echoed in the computerised surveillance by the parents of their children's bedrooms and Ballard's "return of the repressed" is the violent collective outrage of the terrorist gang formed by the children. The terrorist gang is personified in the fey blonde-haired figure of eight-year-old Marion Miller, found some time after the crime, catatonic in a garbage bin, clothed in an expensive blood-stained Harrod's dress and exclusive monogrammed brogues. The luxurious clothing and seemingly innocent victimhood of this small girl belie her hidden violence, and are revealed almost as feminine masquerade. Marion is eventually rescued by the child-killers and escapes concerned police custody to lead the terrorist gang in their ultimate attack.

The narrator presents the catalyst to the children's act of massacre as, firstly, the reports of the planned new construction of a super-Pangbourne in the immediate future, which would combine several executive estates within an even more secure complex. The hypothetical second trigger to the crime is the forthcoming televising of Pangbourne for a proposed documentary with the provisional title "The New Samoa:" "a reference to Margaret Mead's influential but partly discredited work in which she described the idyllic world of these unrepressed islanders."³⁶ Dr. Greville muses that "the prospect of this glib sociologist" analysing the village for three months may have pushed the children over the edge and galvanised them into murderous outrage. The third and related source of the children's pathology is signalled in the surname of the leading terrorist: Miller. This can be read as an oblique reference to the work of Alice Miller, the Swiss psychoanalyst whose controversial theories on the roots of adult violence in child rearing were published in the mid-1980s. Marion Miller arguably represents the strict correlation between caring but instrumentalised parental discipline and the child's violent response to powerlessness that Alice Miller lays out in her work.³⁷ Miller argued adult needs are projected onto the child who becomes the object of desires both to protect the child and to control and punish the child. Through the child, adults re-enact their own repressed experiences of childhood humiliation and disempowerment. Consequently, in *Running Wild*, the children's violence could be interpreted as a striking-out at the disciplinary surveillance of the parents and media that melds with the vigilance of the modern professional's executive domestic fortification to become a "poisonous pedagogy."³⁸

Ballard's narrative appears to be partly a cry for the surfacing of repressed drives.³⁹ As such it locates the family unit as the source of madness. In doing so Ballard reiterates long-held Western cultural fantasies of the child as "natural," untainted by civilisation and in need of the space to freely express his or her

untrammelled emotions. But critically, Ballard's text is also an indictment of the false utopias of the New Left and the New Right. The narrator likens the children's "schizophrenic detachment" to the Manson gang, Mark Chapman, and Lee Harvey Oswald, as well as guards at Nazi death-camps. Dr. Greville comments:

One has no sympathy for Manson and the others—an element of choice existed for them all—but the Pangbourne children had no choice. Unable to express their own emotions or respond to those of the people around them, suffocated under the mantle of praise and encouragement, they were trapped forever within a perfect universe. In a totally sane society, madness is the only freedom.⁴⁰

The cult leader Charles Manson is a recurring reference throughout the novella. In 1968, Manson loaded up a bus with the teenage followers he had acquired after his release from prison and set up a commune in Death Valley. "The Family," as the group was known, was involved in a range of (often drug-accompanied) sexual or pseudo-religious role-playing. The evolution of Manson's allegedly loving and peaceful commune into the armed and blockaded encampment it became, and the subsequent set of horrific murders enacted by his teenage followers, form a barely concealed symbolic underside to the fictional Pangbourne Village. Most obviously, "The Family's" murders of wealthy media professionals in their secluded security-protected Californian homes are mirrored in the Pangbourne massacre. But it seems likely that Ballard was well aware of Manson's well-publicised defence of his followers' acts. In the published testimony from his trial, Manson locates his young followers' crimes in the strictures and social demands of their parents. He warns those who judge him, that in projecting monstrousness onto him as warped substitute father of "The Family," they disavow their own culpability in neglect of the young. Fear of the child and of its libidinous potential is disguised as caring regulation, which then corrupts into their children's murderous rage:

I'm only what lives inside of you, each and every one of you. These children take a lot of narcotics because you tell them not to. Any child you put in a room and you tell them, "Don't go through that door," he never thought of going through that door until you told him not to.... You only give them your frustration; you only give them your anger.... You should all turn around and face your children and start following them and start listening to them.⁴¹

"The Family," then, is one aspect of the social-political template for Ballard's child-killers, and *Running Wild* appears to reiterate Manson's accusation: "These children come at you with knives, they are your children. You taught them. I didn't teach them. I just tried to help them stand up."⁴² Ballard's alternative family of terrorist children appears partly, then, to echo Manson's self-defence that his alternative "Family" merely projects back to conventional society the horrors and the violence their civilised structures create, through control disguised as nurture. Dr. Greville concludes: "they were choking on the non-stop diet of love and understanding being forced down their throats.... This was an idea of childhood invented by adults. The children were desperate for the roughage of real emotions."⁴³

Mother England

Running Wild foregrounds the reticulation of crime, murder, surveillance, law and order that arises out of a particular political melting-pot. The violent symptoms of the underside of civilised and protected middle-England converge and coalesce in one emblematic figure: Margaret Thatcher. In a concluding "Postscript" dated 8 December 1993 the narrative jumps to the future to underscore its dystopian message. The postscript recounts an unsuccessful attempt on the life of an unnamed retired British prime minister in her high-security estate in Dulwich, south-east London—a figure still enjoying wide-spread respect, if not affection, from swathes of the British public. Obviously she is Margaret Thatcher. The reader is informed that she is still popularly

known as “the Mother of her Nation” or “Mother England.” It is reported that a stern-faced teenager with blonde hair and the compulsive mannerisms of Marion Miller, progeny of Pangbourne, led a terrorist attack in an armoured truck that burst through Mother England’s security gates.

Although the narrator states ominously that “all authority and parental figures” are now the terrorists’ “special target,” the revenge of Marion against “Mother England” is more than this barely disguised parental attack.⁴⁴ Reminiscent of *film noir*, the male narrator on the outskirts of the law leads the reader through to the enigma to locate the cause of the crime clothed in female form. Margaret Thatcher becomes a metaphor representing a curious amalgam of Conservative protective individualism and a hyper-rational civilising consumerism melded with a politically-skewed Left politics of “kindness and care” and overwhelming disciplinary nurture. It is notable that the authorial voice is that of a renegade psychiatrist, an outlawed male on the cusp of institutionalised law and order and that his account of the massacre is suppressed by the government. Notable too is the fact that the surfacing of a rogue terrorism that bites the hand that fed it is aligned with an almost mythic transgressive violent masculinity—Nazi guards, Charles Manson, Lee Harvey Oswald—yet the emblem of this terrorism is a fey blonde girl.

The text is complex, perhaps a critique of high art—the “right” films and books that the Pangbourne children are fed, culture that is positioned as lacking, beside the earthy pleasures of the bodice ripper and the combat magazine. In this sense the text would fit in with Ballard’s earlier pop-art allegiance.⁴⁵ Here Ballard partly allies himself with the 1960s counter-cultural movement, and indeed the children of Pangbourne produce their own subversive texts. These include “Free Pangbourne,” a six-episode cassette audio-programme comprised of random sounds interspersed with breathing and silence, a series of mock Jane Austen-type journals in

which the young female writers feature as prostitutes servicing both genders on the estate, and a home video of Pangbourne in which footage of domestic life is intercut with media footage of “car crashes, electric chairs and concentration-camp mass graves.”⁴⁶ Here Ballard partly aligns himself with the children and refers the knowing reader to his fictional treatments of atrocity in texts such as *Crash* and *The Atrocity Exhibition*. More broadly, I would suggest that the text evokes a nostalgia for a political moment devoid of the ethical consciousness of the New Left, feminism and its constructed corollary, the skewed libertarianism of the New Right. In this sense the child becomes Ballard’s symbol of an innocent, unrestricted, and transgressive free politics. In an oblique way, *Running Wild* is also written into the political battle for a public memory of the 1960s in the 1980s, which fuelled much Thatcherite attack upon the social democratic gains of primarily the Labour governments of the post-war years.⁴⁷ Consequently, through the indictment of “Mother England” and her spawn, Ballard inadvertently replicates the Thatcherite theme that the radicalism of the 1960s and 1970s gave birth to the criminality and delinquency of the 1980s. In the narrator’s words, the regime of care launched in southern England and prompting imitations in western Europe and the United States gave “birth to its children of revenge, sending them out to challenge the world that loved them.”⁴⁸

There was a generational aspect to the rhetoric invoked by Thatcher and her acolytes of the alien and profligate “permissive sixties;” the denial of the recent radical political past was a denial of the politics of the first beneficiaries of the Welfare State. This Welfare State, in populist Thatcherite terms, resulted in an enfeebled generation of socialist radicals and subversives derelict of political and familial responsibility. As I have indicated, Ballard’s tale is perhaps also inspired by a generational angst, exhibiting a nostalgia for the fantasy of a subversive and insurgent politics which exorcises those undesirable aspects of the Left as well as the Right. In

Running Wild, Thatcher becomes an icon for the feminisation of politics: of the Left into the “soft” New Left and also of Conservatism into a pastiche of mansion facades, neo-liberalism and the soft world of consumer goods. Like the closing image of Mrs Thatcher handing out tea to the police, Ballard’s image of Pangbourne is both maternal and profoundly domestic yet “antiseptic,” devoid of “every strain of dirt and untidiness.”⁴⁹ The only form of opposition created is a band of violent, transgressive paramilitaries who, with shades of the Patty Hearst story, recruit a female to front it.

Thatcher removed the child from the welfarist paradigm that predominated as the model of collective responsibility in Britain from the late 1940s until the 1970s. Ballard’s text reveals how the child within the Thatcherite privatised space nonetheless remains the receptacle for adult aspirations, hopes and desires for a prosperous equal society. He seems to indicate how the shift of the child into the interior consumerist haven involves an emasculation of the child’s libidinous “natural” state of being, as if consumerism stifles affect. In Thatcherite discourses, the libidinal aspects of consumerism—of treating oneself, of letting go, of indulgence—and adult fears of the uncontrollable, undirected drives of their young, were obscured and contained within imagery of consumerism as familial responsibility, parental control and investment in the future. Similarly, in Ballard’s Pangbourne Village, the euphoria and excess of childhood are closed down and the parents are seen to legitimate consumer goods—the computer, the swimming pool, the books, video-tapes and music—only if associated with educational guidance. However, throughout the 1980s in Britain, the political imagery of vulnerable and innocent childhood often became irreconcilable with representations of dangerous children who had slipped the net of childhood and the confines of the proper home. There is a sense in which Ballard foregrounds broader cultural fears of the child who slips across the categories of childhood and past adult regulation of his or her pleasure and knowledge. However,

his narrative interprets these vulnerabilities and anxieties at the core of Thatcherite consumerist family values as resulting from the feminisation of politics. In doing so, he indicates the centrality of gender to Thatcher's image and discourse, but then reinterprets that centrality as a dilution of the "roughage" of emotional life. An attack on the isolation of Thatcher's idealised consuming family then turns into an attack on inadequate nurture, domesticity and overweening love.

It seems that a profoundly masculine-inflected fantasy is at the core of Ballard's text and it highlights the difficulty of engaging with Thatcher in gendered terms. Thatcher's own persona was dependent on a careful mobilisation of her femininity at the same time as it was being disavowed. The ability to do battle and to aggressively challenge opponents was a central aspect of her image. In a sense she positioned herself both inside and outside the establishment: as a "rebel" in the British government and the Conservative Party but also as a spokesperson for the full restoration of governmental power, law and order. This self-positioning inside and outside the predominantly masculine arena of high politics was enhanced by her being a woman and, as such, she was both "terrorist"⁵⁰ attacking the system and also emblem of the political state system at its most rigid and disciplinarian. One could suggest, then, that Ballard's fictional text precisely captures the ambivalent positioning of Thatcher herself through the juxtaposition of "Mother England" and Marion Miller: two inter-linked extremes of women's engagement with power. But this also is a too easy way to deflect broader issues about the creation of a privileged consumerist realm, barricaded from fantasised violent others, onto the simple clarity of a gender-divide. Fantasies of violent dissent against the system are re-routed into fantasies of the eruption within the system against a cultural, familial and political coalition that has become too soft, too feminised. But women become the subject and object of that violent dissent. The references to a range of rogue-male killers indicate

the extent to which individual violent insurrection is the desired fantasy at the heart of *Running Wild*, at the same time as that potential for aggression is deflected onto the figure of a female Prime Minister and a traumatised girl.

Conclusion

Ballard's novella was written in the late 1980s when Margaret Thatcher appeared immovable and her hold upon the British political imaginary was seemingly at its most secure. The response both in oppositional political discourse and in the cultural fictions of artistic dissent was not only to challenge Thatcher directly but also to attempt to imagine political voices that moved Britain on to "new times."⁵¹

Significantly Ballard's text, appearing in this volatile moment for oppositional politics, inadvertently perhaps, signals broader contemporary questions about the complex place of certain authoritative political women in relation to state power, and the integral role of compensatory gendered representation in articulating that relationship. He reveals the ways that protest against a populist authoritarian politics can be deflected onto a simpler, cruder attack upon the symbolically aberrant female leader. In Ballard's text, failed or fatally flawed family life and retributive political protest are intertwined and invigorated through the reassertion of an extreme gender divide in which the political woman—murderous girl or suffocating disciplinarian premier—becomes cause and motor of the social's undoing. Crucially here, masculinity as knowing outsider to the state, and as rogue killer, appears as the counterpoint to this aberrant femininity.

Ballard's text is not exceptional in this representation. The co-ordinates of violence, the family flawed or fractured by rogue crime, and the interweaving of that violence with Thatcher's leadership, appear with different but related emphasis in other cultural texts produced in the mid-to-late 1980s. Ian McEwan's novel *The Child*

in Time and Troy Kennedy Martin's televised drama *The Edge of Darkness* were texts that individually achieved critical acclaim.⁵² The former won the Whitbread Prize for Fiction in 1987; the latter received six BAFTA awards for 1985.⁵³ Both texts feature the lone, gradually enlightened, male outsider who is crucial to the concluding implicit idealisation of a "purer" politics (that is, a politics without Thatcher). They also share the motif of the lost female child as catalyst of psychic and/or social violence, a violence that is integrally linked to the Thatcherite state.

In *The Child in Time*, Stephen Lewis, an author of children's books and a liberal educationalist father, is present when his three-year-old daughter Kate is abducted from a supermarket amidst its noise and distraction at the checkout. He, unlike Kate's mother who retreats from the world into private grief, searches in fantasy and reality for her. His tale of loss is central to the narrative and Thatcher appears in the novel as counterpoint to his paternal grief—she is the flawed and monstrous mother of the nation, "a repository of collective fantasy."⁵⁴ In contrast to the aims of the Childcare sub-committee on which Stephen sits, the Prime Minister promotes reactionary policies that praise harsh discipline and a strict gender divide in education, under the guise of governmental concern for the well-being of the child. She travels with a panoply of government officials and the nuclear hotline, insists on the signing of the Official Secrets Act before intimate conversations with Stephen, and has military intelligence spy upon a young male politician she admires, as he retreats from Conservative politics into a nervous breakdown and suicide. Stephen's grief for his lost daughter serves as proof of his real commitment to caring familial and political beliefs in contrast to the sterile ideology of Thatcherism. The birth of Stephen's second child at the novel's conclusion offers personal redemption, marred with broader knowledge of a "harsh" social and political world.⁵⁵

In *The Edge of Darkness*, the central male protagonist, Ronald Craven, a detective in the West Yorkshire police force, also loses his political innocence through the loss of his daughter. Emma is murdered by a gunman as Craven returns with her from a political meeting she was chairing. His quest to find her killer reveals that she was a terrorist fighting the Thatcherite-Reaganite nuclear state. Her enemy is ultimately the powers of Whitehall and Washington that are contending for the possession of the undercover industrial plant that she had infiltrated to reveal its reprocessing of plutonium. Emma's ghost appears at intervals throughout the narrative to complain, coax, or motivate her father. His investigation, leading to his own death by radiation poisoning, personalises the state's production and industrial mobilisation of nuclear weaponry. He is pushed to death because he infiltrates the power structures that form Thatcherite Britain.⁵⁶

These texts are incisive explorations of Thatcherism. They underline the ability of fictions to pinpoint undercurrents of violence that subtend the political state, and most particularly Thatcherism's populist forms of individual and national self-sufficiency and disciplined self-direction. As fictions they highlight an aggressive undercurrent to a form of ascendant right-wing politics. However, they also illustrate that indictments of Thatcherism from a broadly liberal-Left perspective have distinct problems, and these are foregrounded in the questionable treatment of femininity that appears as both victim and source of violence. Daughters in these texts are presented as in need of male protection or investigation to uncover the enigma that their violent deaths, disappearance and/or hidden terrorism represent. The resulting resurrection of alienated masculinity becomes emblematic of a return to "correct" political values and a proper gender order, in which the male hero holds the truth within his grasp. A woman in control of political office comes, perhaps partly correctly, to represent the authority of the state taken to excess, but this excess is simplified to a misogynistic

representation of aberrant or unhinged maternity. The resulting idealisation of masculinity and paternity arguably represents a retreat from the challenges of thinking through the complex implications of Thatcher's deeply gendered populist political appeal.

Notes

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- ¹ J. G. Ballard, *Running Wild* (London: Arrow Books, 1988).
- ² Wendy Webster, *Not A Man To Match Her* (London: Women's Press, 1990), 1.
- ³ Stuart Hall, *The Hard Road to Renewal* (London: Verso, 1988), 50-51 and 271-283.
- ⁴ Maureen McNeil, "After Thatcher: Reflections on Eleven years of Gender Politics" in *Magazine of Cultural Studies* 3 (1991), 12.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*
- ⁶ Margaret Thatcher, "Let Our Children Grow Tall" in A. Cooke, ed., *The Revival of Britain: Speeches on Home and European Affairs, 1975-1981* (London: Aurum Press, 1975), 3, 16.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, 12-13.
- ⁹ Margaret Thatcher in S. J. Thomas, *Margaret Thatcher, Religion and Morality* (University of Sheffield, M.Phil. thesis, unpublished, April 1992), 64ff.
- ¹⁰ Thatcher in M. McFadyean and M. Renn, *Thatcher's Reign: A Bad Case of the Blues* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1984), 15.
- ¹¹ Thatcher in M. John, "Children's Rights in a Free-Market Culture" in S. Stephens ed., *Children and the Politics of Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 122.
- ¹² Margaret Thatcher, "The Dimensions of Conservatism: The Iain Macleod Memorial Lecture" in Cooke ed., 54-5.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, 55.
- ¹⁴ Here the influence of New Right economic thinking on Thatcher is evident. In particular we can discern the New Right emphasis on the free market propounded by Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman. Also the influence of the ideas of early liberal economists like Adam Smith can be traced in the emphasis on exchange to the mutual benefit of all concerned, the consumer as sovereign and the emphasis on the market as non-coercive exchange between free individuals.
- ¹⁵ Margaret Thatcher, "Conservative Women's Conference 1986" in Cooke ed., 212.
- ¹⁶ *Woman*, 4 June 1988, 30.
- ¹⁷ Roland Barthes in "Rhetoric of the Image" referred to the "euphoric values" of certain advertising images, in *Image, Music, Text* (London: Fontana, 1977), 35. I am drawing here on Patricia Holland's analysis of "the child" in advertising imagery in her analysis of contemporary childhood, *What is a Child? Popular Images of Childhood* (London: Virago, 1992), 18.
- ¹⁸ Thatcher, "Conservative Women's Conference," 220.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 219.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, 221.
- ²¹ McNeil, 12.
- ²² David Glover and Cora Kaplan, "Guns in the House of Culture? Crime Fiction and the Politics of the Popular" in L. Grossberg, C. Nelson and P. Treichler, eds., *Cultural Studies* (London: Routledge, 1992), 221.
- ²³ Ballard, 11.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, 13.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, 12.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, 7.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, 63.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, 18-19.
- ²⁹ Glover and Kaplan, 220.

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- ³⁰ Ibid.
- ³¹ Ballard, 29.
- ³² Ibid., 9.
- ³³ Ibid., 13.
- ³⁴ Ibid., 31.
- ³⁵ Ibid., 33.
- ³⁶ Ibid., 65.
- ³⁷ Alice Miller, *For Your Own Good: The Roots of Violence in Child-Rearing* (London: Virago, 1987).
- ³⁸ The term comes from Alice Miller in her discussion of the correlation between strict discipline in child rearing and a general receptiveness to social and political violence. For a discussion of Miller see Diana Gittins, *The Child in Question* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1998), 94.
- ³⁹ Glover and Kaplan, 221.
- ⁴⁰ Ballard, 64.
- ⁴¹ Charles Manson, "Testimony," in B. Massumi ed., *The Politics of Everyday Fear* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 68.
- ⁴² Ibid., 66.
- ⁴³ Ballard, 51.
- ⁴⁴ Ibid., 80.
- ⁴⁵ Glover and Kaplan, 221.
- ⁴⁶ Ballard, 56.
- ⁴⁷ Glover and Kaplan, 221.
- ⁴⁸ Ballard, 80.
- ⁴⁹ Ibid., 9.
- ⁵⁰ For an account of Thatcher as "terrorist" and "executioner" see Jacqueline Rose, "Margaret Thatcher and Ruth Ellis," first published in 1998 and republished in Jacqueline Rose, *Why War? Psychoanalysis, Politics and the Return to Melanie Klein* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1993).
- ⁵¹ The "new times" debate started on the pages of the journal *Marxism Today* and was an attempt to engage with some of the powerful co-ordinates of Thatcherist authoritarian populism and to produce a new, invigorated, left-orientated politics.
- ⁵² Ian McEwan, *The Child in Time*, (London: Picador/Pan Books, 1987); Troy Kennedy Martin, *The Edge of Darkness*, broadcast on BBC2, November 1985.
- ⁵³ Ten days after the transmission of the final of the six episodes on BBC2, *The Edge of Darkness* was repeated on three consecutive days on BBC1, "an unprecedented achievement for a drama serial." See A. Lavender, "Edge of Darkness" in G. W. Brandt, ed., *British Television Drama in the 1980s* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 104. The drama was subsequently sold to nineteen overseas TV broadcasters.
- ⁵⁴ McEwan, 83.
- ⁵⁵ Ibid., 220.
- ⁵⁶ Lavender, 116.