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Author(s): Alice Ferrebe

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Already Seen? *Look Back in Anger*, *Déjàvu*, and Postmodern Historiography

ALICE FERREBE

Liverpool John Moores University, UK

J.P. Let me explain if I can penetrate the mists of your radical squalor. Our furry friend Teddy is *not déjàvu*, as you, and a million other clockwork cunts, would have it. Very simply because he is *not* something which you have 'already seen' — literal translation from a forever foreign tongue. Thus, *déjàvu*. The meaning of which is quite simply a deluded sense of recall, a *recherché* experience which could not possibly have taken place and most certainly not privy to the likes of canting pillocks like yourself.

(John Osborne, *Déjàvu*)

First performed on 8 May 1992, John Osborne's play *Déjàvu*, which, he suggested, 'might be thought of as *Look Back II*', is a characteristically inflammatory intervention into the intense textual activity centred on *Look Back in Anger*, the totemic play of 1950s British realist theatre that, so the dominant discourse has run, brought about a British theatrical revolution.¹ *Look Back in Anger* initiated the overthrow of a corrupt institutional structure of over-privileged London moguls, and the rallying of a jubilant mob of the young working class into a new mode of playwrighting that ushered in the sustained radicalism of the 1960s. From its opening night exactly thirty-six years before that of its sequel, Osborne's first play has reliably prompted in its many commentators some response to the idea that it is symbolic of the spirit of its times.

Déjàvu, as a sequel produced more than three decades on, provides a useful means of focusing changing responses to Osborne's original play, both in relation to its author and to the wider account of 1950s history. The speech of the angry middle-aged Jimmy Porter that functions here as epigraph (*Dv*, p. 300) is rife with ambiguous priorities towards past and present. In a familiar rhetorical mode, J.P. (as his character is now known) is deriding his abiding friend Cliff for his peasantry, in this case concerning the gap between the literal meaning of '*déjàvu*' and its now ubiquitous misuse. The irony of an older

¹ John Osborne, *Déjàvu*, in *John Osborne: Plays 1* (London: Faber & Faber, 1996), pp. 275–375 (p. 280); *Look Back in Anger*, in *ibid.*, pp. 1–95. (All quotations are from this edition, and page numbers, preceded (where necessary) by the abbreviations *Dv* or *LB*, will hereafter be given in parentheses in the text.)

Jimmy's recourse for his aesthetic distinctions to the 'forever foreign tongue' favoured by the 'posh papers' is to be savoured, but the confusions of this unfamiliar snobbery go further. J.P. derides an ignorance of French that allows 'déjàvu' to designate an experience that is *not* really 'already seen' but nostalgically invented. However, his naming of that experience as 'recherché' immediately reinstates that deluded, nostalgic experience of pastness as intellectually choice. In this sense, at least, he retains consistency with his younger self. Or, rather, he retains that self's inconsistency, for in *Look Back in Anger* Jimmy operates frenetically between a nostalgia for 'then' and its renunciation in a fierce defence of the potential of 'now'. Recent critical demotions of the revolutionary rank of Osborne's play must now initiate a reappraisal of its metonymic status, as part of the larger revision of the history of the British 1950s. This essay sets out to consider a range of the paratexts surrounding *Look Back in Anger*, among them reviews, authorial comment, academic analysis, and filmic interpretations, to trace the implications of this reappraisal. It will assess the extent to which this contemporary case of literary historiography, of reimagining history, might involve, in J.P.'s words, 'a deluded sense of recall'. In the process, *Déjàvu* is revealed not as the recreation of something 'already seen', but as the product of Osborne's aspiration towards a thoroughly *recherché*, and delusional, theatrical experience.

Defining the Zeitgeist was something of an urgent need during the 1950s. What Peter Hennessy has identified as 'the "never again" impulse' drove a cultural project to draw a line under the war era, with the turn of the 1940s, despite its inescapable psychic and economic legacies.² The publication of journalist Kenneth Allsop's *The Angry Decade* in 1958 signals the urgent eagerness to claim a distinct identity for the period before it had even reached a close: he claimed the decade to be '[t]he most profuse and *excited* — in a neurotic and superficial sense — I have lived through. So many oddly arraigned forces are at work'.³ Osborne himself, however, was already characterizing the decade as 'the fat and spineless Fifties' by 1959.⁴ Historiography has since favoured Osborne's impression over Allsop's, enshrining the decade as one of burgeoning affluence but marked by a resulting apathy, smugly unaware of the enduring cultural shift its swinging successor, the 1960s, would effect. In this way the stage has traditionally been set for *Look Back in Anger* as revolution, albeit one slow to take effect.

However, a recent and determined bout of academic revisionism has sought

² Peter Hennessy, *Having It So Good: Britain in the Fifties* (London: Allen Lane, 2006), p. xvii.

³ Kenneth Allsop, *The Angry Decade* (London: Peter Owen, 1958), p. 31 (emphasis original).

⁴ John Osborne, 'The Fifties', in *Damn You, England* (London: Faber, 1994), pp. 191–93 (p. 191).

to deny 8 May 1956 as epoch-making moment.⁵ As Dan Rebellato has put it: “This is history as fairy-tale; the smooth villainy of “Binkie” Beaumont, the self-evident wickedness of the West End, and the Court [Theatre]’s fresh-faced triumph against all the odds are there in every history.”⁶ This rewriting of theatrical history forms part of a more general reappraisal of the British 1950s that matches Kenneth Allsop’s professed experience. In recent histories by Peter Hennessy and Dominic Sandbrook, for example, the 1950s are examined as a period of intense negotiation of national identity.⁷ The spindly modern Skylon loomed above the cosy conservatism of the exhibits in the Lion and Unicorn Pavilion at the 1951 Festival of Britain in London, and the cultural demands of looking forward and looking back remained in competition long after the festival’s South Bank site was dismantled. The metonymic burden of encapsulating this newer sense of the 1950s is more than a single theatrical work can bear.

Critical skirmishing around the symbolic role for *Look Back in Anger* in relation to its decade is not just a recent phenomenon. In 1964, for example, George E. Wellwarth was strongly denying the play’s totemic qualities, claiming that it ‘was strenuously fiddled up into an epoch-making play by the London critics. It is nothing of the sort.’⁸ Yet the recent reassessments of the innovation and impact of the play by critics like Lacey, Rebellato, and Shellard signal the contemporary consensus that a reappraisal of its symbolic function in both cultural and theatre history is required. Rather than being overthrown by a realist revolution, London theatre in the mid-1950s can be portrayed as negotiating a less spectacular, but still crucial, reassessment of aesthetic practices, inspired by the formal experimentation of Beckett, Brecht, and Ionesco. Within *this* version of history *Look Back in Anger* can either be denigrated in distinction to these subtler and more powerful innovations, or included within them.⁹

The issue of Jimmy Porter’s personal ‘representativeness’ has long been fraught, and frequently paradoxical. Just as Kingsley Amis was routinely merged conceptually with his Jim, so John Osborne and Jimmy Porter swiftly

⁵ See, for example, Stephen Lacey, *British Realist Theatre: The New Wave in its Context, 1956–1965* (London: Routledge, 1995); Dan Rebellato, *1956 and All That: The Making of Modern British Drama* (London: Routledge, 1999); and *British Theatre in the 1950s*, ed. by Dominic Shellard (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000).

⁶ Rebellato, *1956 and All That*, p. 38.

⁷ Hennessy, *Having It So Good*; Dominic Sandbrook, *Never Had It So Good: A History of Britain from Suez to the Beatles* (London: Abacus, 2006).

⁸ George E. Wellwarth, ‘John Osborne: “Angry Young Man”?’ (1964), in *John Osborne, Look Back in Anger: A Casebook*, ed. by John Russell Taylor (London: Macmillan, 1968), pp. 117–28 (p. 119).

⁹ For an example of the latter, tracing some shared themes between the play and *Waiting for Godot*, see John Bull, ‘Looking Back at *Godot*’, in *British Theatre in the 1950s*, ed. by Shellard, pp. 82–94.

became a composite figure in the popular imagination, an association that Osborne only strengthened in his frequent, freebooting journalistic rants when playing the role of what Harry Ritchie calls 'The Biggest AYM [Angry Young Man] in the Business'.¹⁰ The designated iconic status of *Look Back in Anger* encouraged popular belief that the play's hero was decade-defining, while this assumption of his representativeness has earned the play its cultural privilege. The most audacious exploitation of this kind of circular thinking, of course, was that of Kenneth Tynan. His review 'The Voice of the Young', printed in Sunday's *Observer* newspaper five days after the opening night, is a crucial part of the paratextual myth-making surrounding *Look Back in Anger*. Tynan's piece performed an act of ventriloquism that provides Jimmy with a progressive stance on a range of contentious contemporary issues (corporal punishment and racial violence, for example) that are never mentioned directly in the play. Yet, if one rereads Tynan's review, its most obvious quality is its uncertain defensiveness, particularly in comparison with the critic's virtuoso insouciance in commendations of other plays. Tynan seems obliged to respond to the negative points in reviews by the daily papers, and unconvincingly fends off accusations that the marriage of Jimmy Porter and the upper-class Alison is unrealistic, that Osborne is insufficiently critical of Jimmy, and that the play has no action. The final scene (with the infamous 'bears and squirrels' game), he eventually concedes, is one of 'painful whimsy'.¹¹ Not for nothing did Osborne call the review 'the most hedging rave ever written'.¹²

Look Back in Anger itself provides a similarly unstable view of Jimmy's contemporary Everyman status, offered by his frustrated but fascinated coterie of women. Alison diagnoses both her father and her husband to be suffering from anachronism, albeit in oppositional ways. She tells Colonel Redfern: 'You're hurt because everything is changed. Jimmy is hurt because everything is the same. And neither of you can face it' (*LB*, p. 66). Later, Helena announces: 'Do you know — I have discovered what is wrong with Jimmy? It's very simple really. He was born out of his time.' 'Yes,' replies Alison simply, 'I know' (p. 88). Helena identifies Jimmy's spiritual home in the time of the French Revolution; she is a good pupil, for, as Luc M. Gilleman points out, Alison, in her resplendent speech describing their first meeting, has previously instructed Helena 'in the official Byronic image of her Jimmy, the wild and sad outsider'.¹³

¹⁰ Harry Ritchie, *Success Stories: Literature and the Media in England, 1950–1959* (London: Faber, 1988), p. 124.

¹¹ Kenneth Tynan, 'The Voice of the Young', *Observer*, 13 May 1956, p. 11.

¹² John Osborne, cited in Kathleen Tynan, *The Life of Kenneth Tynan* (London: Methuen, 1988), p. 125.

¹³ Luc M. Gilleman, 'The Logic of Anger and Despair: A Pragmatic Approach to John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*', in *John Osborne: A Casebook*, ed. by Patricia D. Denison (New York: Garland, 1997), pp. 71–90 (p. 82).

'Everything about him seemed to burn, his face, the edges of his hair glistened and seemed to spring off his head, and his eyes were so blue and full of the sun' (p. 42). The first film version of the play, produced by Osborne's own company Woodfall Productions, replaces this literary stereotype with a screen one, dampening Jimmy's unpredictable fire to a recognizably 'noirish' smoulder in its casting of Richard Burton, his brand of heroism firmly in the contemporary American mode, with its glamorous commodification of the vaguely existential Outsider.¹⁴ The film contextualizes the Porters' environment within a larger cultural space that blends the modern with the traditional: jazz clubs and street markets, urchins and immigrants. Burton's Jimmy does not rant about 'posh papers', but instead glowers longingly at his femme fatale (p. 9).

This interpretation of Jimmy's heroism reads him neither as contemporary representative nor anachronism, but as cultural anomaly: a universal signifier of the human condition, enduring precisely because of his timelessness. Such an understanding has been a popular one. Jimmy has been regularly cast as Freud's Oedipus. His anger, in this reading, emanates from a mother fixation (he dubs the grumbling storage tank at the heart of his home 'Mummy' (p. 50)), a ruthlessly repressed patricidal wish, and a sublimated homosexual tendency.¹⁵ Still more frequently, Jimmy is critically aligned with Shakespeare's Oedipal heroes, in a gambit that positions the play as universally tragic rather than contextually specific. A. Banerjee observes that 'Jimmy shares a remarkable affinity with Hamlet whose feeling and action (often inaction) are not always understandable'.¹⁶ In 'The Voice of the Young', Tynan portrays Porter as 'the completest young pup in our literature since Hamlet, Prince of Denmark'.

Tynan here touches on, perhaps, Porter's best fighting chance to be a true Zeitgeist figure: as representative of the young. It is, of course, 'the Sixties' — that iconographic decade of cultural progression — that Western historiography has nominated the decade of Youth, but any close study of the British 1950s reveals it as a period during which the concept was crucially contested. In the decade's literature and media, youth was a major spectacle, part titillating, part terrifying. Yet it was also culturally perceived and used more seriously as a site in which to negotiate predominant anxieties and aspirations regarding national and personal identity, such as commercialism, consumerism, and the politics and practicalities of education. Just as Jimmy Porter's symbolic function is riven by competing claims, so too is that of youth during the period.

¹⁴ *Look Back in Anger*, dir. by Gordon L. T. Scott (Woodfall Film Productions, 1958).

¹⁵ See, for example, David Bolt, 'Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*: Looking Back at Oedipus Rex', in *Explicator*, 65.4 (2007), 237–40.

¹⁶ A. Banerjee, 'A Modern Hamlet: Jimmy Porter in *Look Back in Anger*', *Hamlet Studies*, 15.1–2 (1993), 81–92 (p. 87).

F. Musgrove's influential *Youth and the Social Order* (1964) reinvoked the Victorian ideal of the state of youth as indicative of and contiguous with the social health of the nation: 'The status of the young has profound consequences for the kind and quality of relationship which exists between the generations; it is related to the enterprise and inventiveness which a nation shows, to the tempo of social change.'¹⁷ In contrast, for journalist and novelist Colin MacInnes, the young people of the era were noteworthy for their radical departure from the social and cultural mores of their nation: 'Never before, I'm convinced, has the younger generation been so *different* from its elders.'¹⁸ Within the culture of the 1950s, *Youth* came precariously to symbolize both the continuation of, and a radical departure from, the collective identity of the nation.

Perhaps because of this metaphorical burden, Jimmy Porter's ultimate grudge against society, if one can be singled out from such numerous and scattered resentments, is its denial of the very possibility of being truly young. The intended weight of this accusation is apparent from its reiteration by Alison in her only direct admission of her complicity in the failure of her marital relationship. She tells Cliff:

I keep looking back, as far as I remember, and I can't think what it was to feel young, really young. Jimmy said the same thing to me the other day. I pretended not to be listening — because I knew that would hurt him, I suppose. And — of course — he got savage, like tonight. But I knew just what he meant. (*LB*, p. 24)

The echo of the play's title here signals the significance of this confession. Indeed, Osborne's own defence of his hero since has relied on this mitigating sense of Alison's cruelty. In his Introduction to the 1996 Faber reprint of the play he writes of his effort to convince Emma Thompson, who played Alison in Judi Dench's 1989 revival,

that it was she, not her husband, who was the most deadly bully. Her silence and her obdurate withdrawal were impregnable. The ironing board was not the plaything of her submission, but the bludgeon and shield which were impenetrable to all Jimmy's appeals to desperate oratory.¹⁹

For Jimmy, the guarantee of youthful authenticity is the conviction of the impossibility of feeling young amid a culture saturated with representations of

¹⁷ F. Musgrove, *Youth and the Social Order* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1964), p. 1.

¹⁸ Colin MacInnes, 'Pop Songs and Teenagers' (February 1958), included in *England, Half English* (London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1961), pp. 45–59 (p. 59, emphasis original). Earlier in the article MacInnes writes: 'I have the impression that a play like *Look Back in Anger*, with its cry of protest that so shook the old and staid, would seem quite meaningless to them. What is all this about outside lavatories and having to open sweet shops when you've got plenty of "spending" money?' (p. 56).

¹⁹ John Osborne, 'Introduction', in *John Osborne: Plays 1*, pp. vii–xiv (p. xii); *Look Back in Anger*, dir. by Judi Dench, Renaissance Theatre Company production, Thames Television, 1989.

youth, and the courage to voice that conviction. (It is the latter characteristic that excludes Alison.) As usual, tempting parallels emerge with Osborne's contemporaneous experience. Cynicism is deemed a necessary response to the pre-packaged *Zeitgeist* being peddled by increasingly intrusive media. *Look Back in Anger* is the first British play to owe its success to television: an extract broadcast on 16 October 1956, five months into the play's run, boosted ticket sales from mediocre to the phenomenon we have long been encouraged to regard as instant. The play was televised in full by ITV Granada on 28 November.²⁰ Osborne proved adept in exploiting this potent new medium of publicity, all the while, he was later to claim, maintaining a *recherché* cynicism as to its distasteful ephemerality. In the interview at the premiere of *The Entertainer* in 1957 for a still new Independent Television News, Osborne's face conveys a peculiar mixture of bemusement and hauteur atop his fulsome bow tie: his intense self-awareness makes difficult viewing today.²¹ 'I was becoming aware', he wrote in his autobiography, recalling the end of 1956, 'that there was a concerted campaign to turn me into a plaything freak of what would now be deadeningly described as the "media".'²²

This kind of heroic cynicism is honoured in *Déjàvu* by Jimmy's older self. J.P. mocks his daughter Alison, his 'dear bejeaned spokesperson' of 'yoof', for her attendance at a concert, which he soliloquizes as the apotheosis of aimless consumption and consensus:

O wave new world, proud and sound, brave, young, fearless, numb and gormless, they wave, side to side, arms stretched up, worshipping, side to side, fixed on the choreographic grunt, so tangle in the fullness of its torpor. Nuremberg was never so fine, so fluent. They are young, their hard baby fists softly failing in the air, remote, in their thrumping, plaintive battering unison. (*Dv*, p. 295)

Looking back has become, for J.P., a process of nostalgia, as contemporary 'yoof' and its fashionable and artificial unities are found wanting (even fascist) in comparison with the valid and visceral rebellions of yesteryear. That enduring narrative, the decline of youth — so important to the spectacle of Porter's anger during the 1950s — is now invoked by the older Jimmy himself, and the proof of youth's decline is defined as its inability to recognize the inauthentic nature of its public image. Young people have mindlessly bought into their own commodification. Alison, recognizing this insult, throws the ironing board at her father. Some things, J.P. magnanimously acknowledges,

²⁰ Ritchie, *Success Stories*, p. 31 n.

²¹ Interview available at <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QaP4t9Rmvfw>> [accessed 11 December 2011].

²² John Osborne, *Looking Back: Never Explain, Never Apologise* (London: Faber & Faber, 1991), p. 310.

have changed for the better: 'You know, I was always hoping that my first wife would do that', he tells his daughter, clutching his head (p. 313).

The fundamental refutation of the possibility of authentic youth in *Look Back in Anger* did not persuade the play's initial reviewers. For the majority of them, the play was youth: 'young, young, young', as John Barber had it in the *Daily Express*.²³ Media treatment of the phenomenon of youth throughout the 1950s shows a marked disregard for age specifics. The term was used to signify the rise (and rising anxiety) surrounding, variously, the Teds in the early, austere years, the Teenagers as affluence was garnered, and also to define the literary Angry movement (Kingsley Amis, for example, was thirty-two when *Lucky Jim* was published in 1954, so hardly youthful). In the *New Statesman* in 1956 T. C. Worsley blithely elided two of these very different phenomena in categorizing Osborne as 'one of the modern self-destructive teddy-boy intellectuals.' His concern with the play's structural and character flaws was overridden by a desire to uphold the authenticity of its language: 'Don't miss this play. If you are young, it will speak for you. If you are middle-aged, it will tell you what the young are feeling.'²⁴ In Tynan's *Observer* review, 'The Voice of the Young', age, or rather youth, was used to guarantee the play's coinciding with the audience member's (good) taste. The piece's final paragraph is a flourish, finally casting the uncertain tone that has bedevilled it: 'I agree that *Look Back in Anger* is likely to remain a minority taste', Tynan states, apparently still hedging; then, '[w]hat matters, however, is the size of the minority. I estimate it at roughly 6,733,000, which is the number of people in this country between the ages of twenty and thirty.' Tynan's designation of the boundaries of youth just allowed him, at the age of twenty-nine, to participate in this gilded 'minority taste'.

Although Tynan's review is, of course, (in)famous, its rhetoric of spirited agitation does stand at odds with the predominant cultural perception of the British 1950s as affluent, settled, and slightly smug — historiographic shorthand for national consensus and the antithesis of political dynamism. A look at the surrounding text in that *Observer* of 13 May 1956 certainly confirms 'The Voice of the Young' as having an enviable panache despite its author's uncertainty, but contradicts any sense of Tynan as lone rhetorician in his mode. C. H. Gibbs-Smith's review of a book on Unidentified Flying Objects ends with the ebulliently hubristic claim that '[i]f no other book or article had ever appeared on U.F.O.s, this work alone would stand as an unanswerable revelation of some very peculiar things that are going on in our atmosphere — or

²³ John Barber, review (1956), *Daily Express*, repr. in *Look Back: A Casebook*, ed. by Taylor, p. 46.

²⁴ T. C. Worsley, review (1956), *New Statesman*, repr. in *ibid.*, pp. 51–53 (p. 53).

outside it'; and C. A. Lejeune's 'At the Films' column, directly alongside Tynan's 'The Voice of the Young', adopts an identically buoyant, boyish tone in its flip dismissal of *Nightmare*: 'Edward G. Robinson plays a detective. Perhaps the less said about the other parts the better.'²⁵

The free-ranging cynicism of laddishness is familiar enough to us today, yet one (and perhaps the only) unifying point of view in initial reviews of *Look Back in Anger* was the broad agreement that the play somehow sounded like its decade. In part, this new sound had come from the reviewers themselves, with a conspicuously non-deferential, Americanized tone better suited to the higher speed of a multimedia literary culture conducted, to an increasing degree, outside the Academy. Worsley claimed that, in Jimmy Porter's soliloquies, you can hear the authentic new tone of the Nineteen-Fifties, desperate, savage, resentful, and, at times, very funny. [. . .] His is the genuinely modern accent — one can hear it no doubt in every other Espresso bar, witty, relentless, pitiless and utterly without belief.²⁶

In the *Birmingham Post* even the otherwise horrified J. C. Trewin concedes an authenticity of language, if not genre: 'I felt for most of the night that I was listening to an extension of some feebly rancid short story in a highly contemporary idiom.'²⁷ As author of *Anger and After*, John Russell Taylor was largely responsible for enshrining the play's academic reputation as a revolutionary moment in British theatre history. Yet his critique of the play in 1962 was surprisingly circumspect. He rejects any claims to formal innovation, calling it 'a well-made play' that 'belongs clearly enough to the solid realistic tradition represented by, say, *The Deep Blue Sea*'. However, 'what distinguished it as a decisive break with Rattigan and the older drama was not so much its form as its content: the characters who took part in the drama and the language in which they expressed themselves.'²⁸

By 1968 Taylor had edited the *Look Back in Anger* Macmillan Casebook, and his judgement on the play shifted to concur with the representative status that such a publication infers. In his Introduction he writes:

No past is so imaginatively remote as such recent past, just out of one's own field of vision and not yet far enough away to be history. *Look Back in Anger* is a key to this period, but in order to know how to use it — and perhaps to want to use it — we must look at the outside events which brought about, in a number of young and not quite so young writers of the time, the frame of mind it embodies.²⁹

²⁵ C. H. Gibbs-Smith, 'Flying Saucers', *Observer*, 13 May 1956, p. 13; C. A. Lejeune, 'Wheels of Chance', *ibid.*, p. 11.

²⁶ Worsley, in *Look Back: A Casebook*, ed. by Taylor, pp. 51–52.

²⁷ J. C. Trewin, review (1956), *Birmingham Post*, repr. in *ibid.*, p. 45.

²⁸ John Russell Taylor, *Anger and After: A Guide to the New British Drama* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963), p. 38.

²⁹ John Russell Taylor, 'Introduction', in *Look Back: A Casebook*, pp. 11–21 (p. 12).

More modest claims for the authenticity of the play's characterization and idiolect have become claims of the representation of a 'frame of mind'; not only that, but a feeling or philosophy that is a 'key to this period'. One phrase will suffice for this metonymy, an epitaph for a decade of political stasis: the claim that, in Jimmy's experience, 'there aren't any good, brave causes left' (*LB*, p. 83). Just as youth functioned to represent both the essence of national identity and its alterity, the play has come to stand simultaneously for revolution and for the historical failure of that revolution. Its sense of stalemate, with a stalled marriage and a stalled plot, serves as a metaphor for a stalled nation.³⁰

It is this sense of stasis in *Look Back in Anger* that hampered its critics in imagining a future for Jimmy. Barbara Deming, noting how Jimmy ends the play with exactly what he has been asking for (Alison's abjection), asked in 1958: 'Now that he has it, is he gratified? Or appalled? If the curtain were to go up again on some subsequent Sunday afternoon, what should we see?'³¹ The consensus among those who choose to consider the question is resounding: nothing very different. Anthony Hartley in the *Spectator* decided that 'one feels at the end of this play that he will talk and talk and talk in his attic flat in an industrial town until he rots,'³² and Samuel A. Weiss is similarly pessimistic regarding Jimmy's dynamism:

The world has left its mark on Jimmy; will he leave his mark on it? Will this man of volcanic temperament move beyond private statement to public gesture? Will Jimmy ever write that book 'in flames a mile high?' Or will he just go on talking? The strength of our doubts is the measure of his weakness.³³

Judi Dench's televised 1989 production of *Look Back in Anger* is indicative of this sense of the play as a kind of sealed time capsule of the 1950s — a shabby, sepia-toned room, shot with a largely static camera, with a few jazz posters on the peeling wallpaper. As a spectacle it brings to mind Derek Granger's review of the original play in the *Financial Times*: 'The household squalor is a little overdone and so is all that "in the movement" trumpet playing.'³⁴ Kenneth Branagh's studiously knowing performance is a long way from Burton's moody method acting.

³⁰ Aleks Sierz, 'John Osborne and the Myth of Anger', *New Theatre Quarterly*, 12.46 (May 1996), 136–46 (p. 139).

³¹ Barbara Deming, 'John Osborne's War against the Philistines', *Hudson Review*, 11.3 (1958), 411–19 (p. 415).

³² Anthony Hartley, review (1956), *Spectator*, repr. in *Look Back: A Casebook*, ed. by Taylor, pp. 53–55 (p. 54).

³³ Samuel A. Weiss, 'Osborne's Angry Young Play', *Educational Theatre Journal*, 12.4 (1960), 285–88 (p. 287).

³⁴ Derek Granger, review (1956), *Financial Times*, repr. in *Look Back: A Casebook*, ed. by Taylor, pp. 37–38 (p. 38).

Yet using Jimmy's 'good, brave causes' proclamation to signify inescapable political stagnation, though not a misquotation from the play, is certainly a misunderstanding of the speech itself. (It is interesting that another defining sound bite of the period, Macmillan's celebration of unparalleled affluence, similarly stems from misinterpretation. In the context of the entire speech, as Hennessy points out, the Prime Minister's assertion of never having it so good was 'clothed in warning and wrapped in worry about the fragility of the new prosperity'.³⁵) Jimmy, at this point, is being ironic: of course there are causes left, *his* causes, the causes of authentic youth, honesty, and vitality. The ambiguity of his utterance, indeed of all his utterances, is insisted upon by Osborne's stage direction immediately before the line: '(In his familiar, semi-serious mood)' (LB, p. 83). A quick scan of any historical summary of the decade to this point shows all sorts of battles available to a committed young man or woman, including the H-bomb and its deathly stalemate in the Cold War, and the strictures of a dying Empire in Kenya and in Suez, together with Empire's ingrained racial attitudes. Yet the ironic tone to Jimmy's claim does not provide a satisfying match with the purported apathy of the 1950s, and its acknowledgement would disrupt the established oppositional relationship of the decade and its successor.

Recent commentary has established a means of addressing the contradictory metaphorical work demanded of *Look Back in Anger* in symbolizing both 1950s apathy and its terminal disruption. Patricia D. Denison, in her Introduction to the latest Osborne Casebook, interprets the play and its hero as characterizing 'a moment of larger cultural transition from narratives of Victorian and modern social coherence on an imperial scale to the more local and contingent social contracts characteristic of postmodernism'.³⁶ William W. Demastes, in his contribution to this collection, suggests:

Look Back in Anger is a play settled on a theatrical fault line, riding upon ground moving in two opposite directions, and being fully part of neither. One perspective reveals it is moving in a traditional, naturalist direction, while another perspective suggests it has been caught in the flow of a burgeoning, new, postmodern movement.³⁷

Considered from this perspective, *Look Back in Anger* presents us with a number of postmodern credentials to allow its admittance to the paradigm. These offer metonymic status of a different kind.

Performativity forms a defining trope of postmodernist understandings of identity, and Jimmy Porter's self-presentation provides an exemplary

³⁵ Hennessy, *Having It So Good*, p. 533.

³⁶ Patricia D. Denison, 'Introduction', in *John Osborne: A Casebook*, ed. by Denison, pp. xiii–xxvi (p. xvi).

³⁷ William W. Demastes, 'Osborne on the Fault Line: Jimmy Porter on the Postmodern Verge', in *ibid.*, pp. 62–69 (p. 63).

demonstration of it. In their quest to assure themselves of his conventional heroism and attendant authenticity of his utterances, early reviewers tended to overlook the fact that Jimmy's railings resemble a series of audition pieces of fairly randomly selected and often contradictory grievances — what Taylor was to call 'the curious interchangeability, in different contexts, of his objects of detestation and devotion'.³⁸ This mode of being can be aligned with some contemporaneous revelations of sociology. Prior to R. D. Laing's explorations of the simulations of sanity necessary for day-to-day life, and long before Judith Butler's exploration of gender as performative and the postmodernist trope of the splitting self,³⁹ Erving Goffman outlined his then radical methodology of the application of dramaturgical principles to the quotidian in his *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959). He traced a continuum of modes of selfhood based on the actor's conviction in each performance:

At one extreme, one finds that the performer can be fully taken in by his own act; he can be sincerely convinced that the impression of reality which he stages is the real reality. When his audience is also convinced in this way about the show he puts on — and this seems to be the typical case — then for the moment at least, only the sociologist of the socially disgruntled will have any doubts about the 'realness' of what is presented. At the other extreme, we find that the performer may not be taken in at all by his own routine.⁴⁰

The issue of the 'realness' of the presentation of self is continually contested in *Look Back in Anger* as Jimmy's arguments oscillate between conviction and a campy parody. Osborne's stage directions suggest an acute awareness of the inherently performative nature of selfhood, which is perhaps unsurprising in the case of one of Britain's first television celebrity writers. They suggest that Jimmy is simultaneously authentic and artificial, 'a disconcerting mixture of sincerity and cheerful malice', and opine that 'blistering honesty, or apparent honesty, like his, makes few friends' (p. 5). In a 1993 Introduction to the play, Osborne's preferred metaphor for his hero's performativity was resolutely, and a touch hubristically, musical: 'A performance of *Look Back* without persistent laughter is like an opera without arias. Indeed, Jimmy Porter's inaccurately named "tirades" should be approached as arias, and require the most adroit handling, delicacy of delivery, invention and timing.'⁴¹ In the Author's Note to *Déjàvu*, Osborne bemoaned the 'embarrassingly unhelpful' stage directions with which his prequel was 'bristling'. Yet still he felt bound to issue one

³⁸ Taylor, *Anger and After*, p. 49.

³⁹ See R. D. Laing, *The Divided Self* (London: Tavistock, 1960) and Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (London: Routledge, 1997).

⁴⁰ Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life* (1959; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990), p. 28.

⁴¹ John Osborne, 'Introduction', in *John Osborne: Plays 1*, pp. x–xi.

regarding J.P.'s speeches, which, he claimed, were intended to 'have the deliberateness of *recitative* and it may not be always easy to spot where the "aria" begins' (*Dv*, p. 279). This metaphor maintains, if obscurely, the Porterish paradox of authenticity and pretence: the hard-working recitative, driving the narrative in its rhythms of natural speech, blends into the aria, elaborate but emotionally intense.

Goffman's experimental model of self-as-performance is now ensconced in our critical episteme, and it has further fundamental implications for the interpretation of the relationship in *Look Back in Anger* between Jimmy and his nation. In 1957 an urbanely bemused Harold Clurman made an organic link between the hero and his nation:

Jimmy Porter, then, is the angry one. What is he angry about? It is a little difficult at first for an American to understand. The English understand, not because it is ever explicitly stated, but because the jitters which rack Jimmy, though out of proportion to the facts within the play, are in the very air the Englishman breathes.⁴²

Jimmy's self has frequently been couched as the site of exploration of the anxieties of contemporary England as it undergoes the end of Empire and comes to terms with the creeping revelation of its diminished world role. Viewing the play as a postmodern piece, however, necessarily entails a change in the concept of the nation against which *Look Back in Anger* can be measured. Homi Bhabha and others have examined the intricate association of nation and narrative; and the 1951 Festival of Britain pre-empted this relationship in its adoption of a strikingly literary treatment in its display of the economic, nationalistic, and aesthetic ambitions of the start of the decade, entitled in the official guide 'The Autobiography of a Nation'.⁴³ Yet the staginess of the Lion and Unicorn Pavilion peddling a gloriously whimsical, homogenous British character, together with the royal (televised) spectacle of two more national events — George VI's funeral (1952) and his daughter's coronation (1953) — reinforce Goffman's sense of a genre other than prose as metonymic for the 1950s experience: that of theatrical performance. From a postmodern perspective, Jimmy Porter, rather than being quintessentially British, successfully represents Britain precisely because of his lack of essence. Within this conceptual paradigm, nation and self are performative rather than permanent.

A postmodern awareness of this distinction between the unique and the iterable has also been detected in the play's approach to language. On the one hand, language is Jimmy's only weapon in his war on apathy and sanctimoniousness (words, Osborne claimed in a 1968 interview with Tynan, are 'the

⁴² Harold Clurman, extract from *Lies Like Truth* (New York: Macmillan, 1957), quoted in *Look Back: A Casebook*, ed. by Taylor, pp. 169–71 (pp. 169–70).

⁴³ *Nation and Narration*, ed. by Homi K. Bhabha (London: Routledge, 1990).

last link with God⁴⁴). As we have seen, the language of the play, *Jimmy's* language, was upheld in even the most hostile initial reviews as authentic. On the other hand, David Galef places Osborne within a postwar Zeitgeist of rebellion against language for its pusillanimity, its inadequacy in aiding escape from the prison of Wittgenstein's private experience.⁴⁵ By this token, words exist in the play in a kind of hopeless excess. That word 'pusillanimous', for example, is toyed with until its meaning is worn out (*LB*, pp. 17–18). Newsprint swamps the male characters, with all the book reviews apparently interchangeable, and, although Jimmy is convinced of the cultural bankruptcy of the 'posh papers', the reading of them is the only ritual he observes religiously, every Sunday (p. 9).

The repercussions of this paradox — words as vital at the same time as they are redundant — can be usefully focused on critical opinions surrounding the 'bears and squirrels' game. Very occasionally, the couple's 'silly symphony' (that music again) has been critically reclaimed as genuinely moving in its emotional honesty and fragile dignity (p. 45). For James Gindin, for example, the game becomes 'a statement of the nature of human love — the willingness to immerse oneself completely in creatureness, to share the pain and the pleasure of the limited animal.'⁴⁶ More regularly, though, the game has been cast as a cop-out, on Osborne's part, in terms of the emotional (and linguistic) questions his play raises, unsatisfactorily abandoning the play's central couple in their petting 'zoo for two' (p. 45). Yet, rather than being rejected as incompetent dramaturgy, within a postmodern critical paradigm, bears-and-squirrels can be reinstated as valuable in its revelation of the semantic gap between language and action, signified and signifier. The feyness of the game becomes indicative of the feyness of language itself, in both its 'painful whimsy' (in Tynan's words) and the original Scots etymology of the word, 'fey' meaning feeble, fevered, and close to death.⁴⁷ Osborne, predictably, resented this philosophical recuperation. In *Déjàvu J.P.*, his daughter Alison, and Cliff mock the posh papers' personal ads, each reading 'a pulsing little message of pretending unrequited, shameless love'. These messages mock the original play's ending — 'Squirrel's Drey Rent Free always and everwill for scruffy old bears' — but they also mock the placing of it within what Osborne read as an ostentatiously mournful academic language game: 'Naughty Boy Wittgenstein must have Mummy Meanie Winkle', 'Enough nausea' pronounces J.P, terminating the discussion (*Dv*, pp. 284–85).

⁴⁴ Kenneth Tynan, 'Osborne', *Observer*, 7 July 1968, p. 21.

⁴⁵ David Galef, 'Beyond Anger: Osborne's Wrestle with Language and Meaning', in *John Osborne: A Casebook*, ed. by Denison, pp. 21–33.

⁴⁶ James Gindin, extract from *Postwar British Fiction: New Accents and Attitudes* (1963), cited in *Look Back: A Casebook*, ed. by Taylor, pp. 183–85 (p. 184).

⁴⁷ Tynan, 'The Voice of the Young'.

A practised devil's advocate, Osborne used the Introduction to *Déjàvu* to bemoan his critical butchering by those he called 'dubious and partisan "academics"' (p. 279). Yet any pleasure the play affords its audience is reliant on a relentless series of in-jokes, all of which require a distinctly scholarly knowledge of the prequel's text, as well as a keen appreciation of the ironies of intertextuality. 'I *feel*. I feel: very Dayzhar Voo', opines J.P. 'Well, you always *were*, weren't you?' returns Cliff:

J.P. Not really, people thought I was.

CLIFF Get on. You were born *déjàvu*.

J.P. Actually, you are quite wrong. As always and, impeccably, fashionably wrong, ignorant and deluded. (pp. 299–300)

J.P.'s distinctions here are very finely academic, their full meaning deferred until later in the play. When J.P.'s daughter Alison, revealed as pregnant, later leaves the house, Cliff asks her father if he is angry. J.P. claims of anger that '[i]t comes into the world in grief not grievance. It is mourning the unknown, the loss of what went before you' (p. 372). Jimmy, his younger self, was never '*déjàvu*', as the condition depends on a (deluded) sense of continuity between past and present. Jimmy's anger, he tacitly claims, was authentic in its awareness that the past was unrecoverable. This, of course, is debatable: Jimmy seems to feel the loss of the gilded Edwardian era, that nostalgic period still emotionally inhabited by Colonel Redfern, too keenly to verify such closure. Yet there can be no debate that J.P.'s anger, thirty years on, is 'very Dayzhar Voo'. The play that it informs mourns, bad-temperedly, the '*recherché* experience' of 1956, before *Look Back in Anger* had been drained of meaning by its many and quarrelsome paratexts. In *Déjàvu*, Osborne, perverse to the end (and this much-derided work was to be the last of his plays), creates an epitaph for his first play that attempts to imbue it with precisely the kind of authentic experience that Jimmy Porter felt himself to be denied, in an act of 'deluded recall' that the vociferous J.P. finds so reprehensible in others (p. 300).

Yet the recent move to install *Look Back in Anger* within a postmodern critical paradigm carries its own ironies. In *Discipline and Punish* Michel Foucault admonishes the technique of 'writing a history of the past in terms of the present'.⁴⁸ Our contemporary re-envisioning of 1950s cultural history, and the understanding of the play that has traditionally formed the focus of that history, has attempted to address Taylor's sense that 'no past is so imaginatively remote as [...] recent past'.⁴⁹ This recent historiography seeks to construct an imaginative continuum between 'then' and 'now' that extends the

⁴⁸ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. by Alan Sheridan (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986), p. 31.

⁴⁹ Taylor, 'Introduction', in *Look Back: A Casebook*, p. 12.

contemporary historical moment into the past. The contradictions of *Déjàvu* are easy to mock, as Osborne's ideology often has been in the wake of his middle-aged veer to the Right. Yet we must be wary of validating the past only by making it part of the present: as Terry Eagleton has warned, 'the more *recherché* formulations of postmodern philosophy' can dissolve history into 'a cluster of eternal presents, which is to say hardly history at all'.⁵⁰ The 1960s, with its clearly contemporaneous concerns of individual freedom, has always been amenable to a narrative of continuity: the reputedly stifling 1950s less so. The rewriting of our current cultural paradigm as both retrospective and retroactive in its identity, conferring a new state of postmodern prescience on *Look Back in Anger*, is perhaps in its turn 'very Dayzhar Voo', and just as open to accusations of delusion in its sense of recall of our recent past.

⁵⁰ Terry Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), pp. viii, 46.