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The Last (Resort) of England. Melancholy, Delusion and Disillusion in the Mid-Eighties

Silvia Albertazzi
Alma Mater Studiorum Università di Bologna
silvia.albertazzi@unibo.it

In 1986, the photographer Martin Parr published *The Last Resort*, a controversial collection of shots taken at the popular beach of New Brighton. At the time, the book caused a great upheaval: Parr's view of the working-class holidaymakers was considered too grotesque, sarcastic, and patronising. Only much later did critics realize that those photos were the expression of Parr's anger about Thatcher's social politics and her neglect of the proletarians' needs. Starting from Parr's images, I will analyse some British cultural products of the same period that reflect a similar sense of melancholy, desolation, and disillusion, often under an ostensible use of irony, parody and/or black humour. First, I will retrace this mid-Eighties Zeitgeist in works that appeared the year before Parr's collection (the films *My Beautiful Laundrette* and *Brazil*, respectively by Stephen Frears and Terry Gilliam, and the album *This Is the Sea*, by the Waterboys). Then, I will refer to the Smiths' album significantly called *The Queen Is Dead*, which appeared the same year as Parr's photos.

Silvia Albertazzi is Full Professor of English Postcolonial Literature and History of the English Culture at the University of Bologna. She is the author of the first Italian book on Postcolonial Theory, *Lo sguardo dell'Altro* (2000), updated and reissued in 2013 under the title *La letteratura postcoloniale. Dall'Impero alla World Literature*. She has published two volumes on literature and photography, *Il nulla, quasi. Foto di famiglia e istantanee amatoriali nella letteratura contemporanea* (2010), and *Letteratura e fotografia* (2017). Her latest works are *Leonard Cohen. Manuale per vivere nella sconfitta* (2018) and *Questo è domani. Gioventù, cultura e rabbia nel Regno Unito 1956-1967* (2020). She is a book reviewer for *Alias. Domenica*, the literary supplement of *il manifesto*.

In 1986, *The Last Resort*, a collection of pictures by a 34-year-old photographer from Bristol, Martin Parr, shook the torpid world of British photography, shocking critics and the public alike with ludicrous shots taken in New Brighton, a popular beach close to Liverpool. Parr's photos were characterized by a peculiar ambiguity: you could interpret them both as a grotesque satire of the ordinary working-class family fun seen from a mischievous middle-class viewpoint, and as a melancholy document of how they spent their free time in a period of recession.

Parr's shots show the uncommon talent of common people for making a virtue out of necessity - lying on a concrete pavement to get a tan, picnicking among the garbage, elbowing their way to catch the attention of a bored ice-cream seller. A social – or better, anthropological – dossier on the working class in Thatcher's Britain.

Just from the title, (which obviously can also be read metaphorically) *The Last Resort* implies its author's ill-concealed wish of social denouncement. New Brighton, which was built in the mid-Nineteenth Century as a replica of Brighton, then an exclusive seaside resort, more than a century later came across as the useless clone of an outdated holiday destination. While in the Nineteenth Century "old" Brighton was cherished by the aristocracy and the upper middle classes, in the late Twentieth Century, New Brighton was the *enclave* of the working class, the class most affected by Thatcher's economic politics.

Not by chance, still in 1995 Henri Cartier-Bresson dismissed Martin Parr's photos as "works from another planet". In fact, one cannot imagine something more distant from Bresson's poetics of the decisive moment. While the great French photographer tries to catch the instant, the plenitude of the moment when the poetry of reality reveals itself – in a detail, a gesture, a light or an intersection of lines and geometrical figures – Parr steals the embarrassing moments no one wants to show, the grotesque backstage of everyday life. You can measure the distance separating Parr from his previous colleagues by recalling the reaction of a group of photographers lead by Philip Jones Griffiths to his request to be admitted as an effective member of the prestigious Magnum Agency, in 1994. In a notorious letter, Jones Griffiths wrote:

> Martin Parr [...] is an unusual photographer in the sense that he has always shunned the values Magnum was built on. Not for him any of our concerned 'finger on the pulse of society' humanistic photography. [...] his membership would not be a proclamation of diversity but the rejection of those values that have given Magnum the status it has in the world today. [...] I have great respect for him as the dedicated enemy of everything I believe in and, I trust, what Magnum still believes in. (quoted in Prodger 2019, 29-30)

Actually, to the photographic humanism of Magnum, Parr opposed images that emphasised the vulgarity of the world of consumerism by using saturated colours, artificial light, and paying attention to details, gestures, stereotypes which were usually avoided by his colleagues. Many things have changed since 1986 (or even 1995): nowadays it is almost impossible to see the pictures of *The Last Resort* as a patronizing look on the 'subaltern' classes. As the photographer himself declared, "those photos were born out of anger against Thatcher's politics" (quoted in Albertazzi 2017, 3). Those beaches crowded with soggy white bodies, where children eat cones of melting ice creams, their mouths ringed with vanilla, and young mothers change their babies' nappies on a shore full of trash, stigmatised the situation of the less fortunate under Thatcher's government.

Yet, they also recalled, with ironic melancholy, other popular beaches photographed in previous times. Indeed, Parr's *Last Resort* owes a lot to the photographs taken in Margate and Blackpool two decades previously by Tony Ray-Jones, a photographer whose "ability to construct complex images, with everyone perfectly placed in the uniquely English atmosphere and surroundings" (Parr 2013, 13) inspired Parr at the beginning of his career, as he himself later acknowledged. For Ray-Jones in the Sixties, as for Parr up to the present day,[1] the beach is the main scene "where personal dramas can be explored and constructed" (14). Yet, while with his black and white shots, Ray-Jones wanted to show "the sadness and humour in a gentle madness that prevails in people" (quoted in Mellor 2013, 48), Parr's coloured palette of commercial photography paints the photographer's disillusion with his present-day reality. There is not much gentleness in the "madness" of Parr's subjects: Ray-Jones, returning from the States in the second half of the Sixties, decided to take pictures in black and white because he "found everything so grey that [he] didn't see any point in shooting in colour" (48). Twenty years later, Parr chose colour and artificial light to stress the paradoxical vitality of a discoloured world.

Nobody would define Ray-Jones's universe "nightmarish", the term some critics used when Parr's shots where exhibited for the first time at the Serpentine Gallery in 1986 (see Badger 2015, 7). In fact, whilst a certain "quotient of madness" mitigated social pathos or hidden melancholy in Ray-Jones's photos, behind Parr's grotesque gaze appears a concern for a way of life which is already disappearing, under the threat of Thatcher's liberalism, and industrial decline. As David Alan Mellor noted, in his 1967 tour of English holiday resorts, Ray-Jones pursued "eccentrics on the loose", thus creating a "disjointed communalist utopia" made of "grotesque figments of the burlesque of the seaside imagination" (Mellor 2013, 54).

There is neither utopia nor burlesque in Parr's *Last Resort*: even though for him, as for Ray-Jones, the seaside is "a liminal zone of lowered inhibitions" (Mellor 2013, 58), his photos do not set out to encapsulate the "festive", as Ray-Jones's did, but "resilience" (see Badger 2015, 7). In an unfashionable tearoom, an elderly couple wait for their order without looking at each other: the man stares into the void, a cigarette between his lips; the woman hangs her head. Two middle-aged ladies play on slot machines, while a baby dressed like a 19th century porcelain doll strolls barefoot in the deserted playhouse, her empty pram parked in the middle of the corridor. Several children, naked or in their Sunday dresses, eat ice creams or icicles, ride on a carousel, splash around on the seashore full of rubbish, take part in beauty contests, or queue in a disorderly manner for hot dogs. If Ray-Jones believed that photography was a way to walk through the looking glass, like Alice, to find another world (see Mellor 2013, 61), Parr walks through the mirror just to find the defeated expectations of ordinary people and represent them with "a poignancy bordering on melancholy" (Prodger 2019, 32-33).

Indeed, many things had changed since the times when Ray-Jones toured the British coastline. On the one hand, in the Eighties British seaside resorts resented the sudden growth of organized trips abroad, particularly European package tours, which had become rather popular, even among the working classes. On the other hand, the almost complete disappearance of heavy industry marked a change both in the quality of life of the masses and in their amusements. As Gerry Badger observed, entertainment and

[1] One if his latest works, *Beach Therapy* (2018), is devoted to beaches and holiday makers all around the world.

consumer goods became more and more important, especially for those who could not afford many of them (Badger 2015, 8). *The Last Resort* reflects this paradox even from the choice of the location: "By 1986 the original Brighton had declined significantly, so the idea that a community might aim to be a 'new' version of another rundown seaside town was itself ironic" (Prodger 2019, 33). After reminding us that some viewers interpreted Parr's pictures "as a thinly veiled criticism of Thatcherite policies, which privileged middle-class enclaves over working-class haunts such as New Brighton", Phillip Prodger underlines that "throughout *The Last Resort*, Parr uncovers ingenuity in the face of imperfect circumstances", concluding that "[t]he point is not that these circumstances are seedy or degraded, but that people transcend them" (34).

In this sense, Parr's 1986 collection appears as a disillusioned picture of the English Eighties. A French chansonnier, Vincent Delerm, understood and explained this better than anyone else in a 2008 song titled "Martin Parr", where he sums up all the situations you can find in *The Last Resort*. The song is composed of four strophes; each ending by referring to a typical action of seaside holiday makers, from the most obvious one – swimming – to the most ambiguous – sleeping – which, coming after references to "growing old", "blue haired granny" and "heart ache on the dry land", reminds one more of the eternal rest than the afternoon siesta. For Delerm, the images in *The Last Resort* are a perfect representation of British working-class fun in the Eighties. In this sense, the lyrics of the song, where the ekphrasis of Parr's photos is counterpointed by the repetition of the photographer's name, are emblematic:

> Ice-cream balnéaire / Martin Parr /Eighties, Angleterre /Martin Parr / Ventre blanc à l'air / Martin Parr / Nager quelque part // New Brighton, caissière / Martin Parr / Caddie, pack de bières / Martin Parr / Plastique dans la mer / Martin Parr / Jeter quelque part // Casino désert / Martin Parr / Vert fluo, dessert / Martin Parr / Cheveux bleus, grand-mère / Martin Parr / Vieillir quelque part //Martin Parr / Gasoil ou super / Martin Parr / Enfant à l'arrière / Martin Parr / Mal au cœur sur terre / Martin Parr / Dormir quelque part (Delerm 2008)

Soon after the first line, evoking the cover of the book, with the image of children eating ice creams, Delerm positions Parr's work in time and space, emphasizing the chronological data by using the English term for "the Eighties". The indeterminacy of photographs, which, as Susan Sontag noted, are only fragments, whose moral and emotive weight depends on the situation where they are inserted (see 1973, 93), is stressed by the adverb "somewhere" ("quelque part") at the end of each strophe. Delerm himself explained that with this song he wanted to pay homage to the English photographer and his poetic world, whose almost nauseating tints are, for him, the colours of the Eighties (see Pilon 2008). Nobody could deny the sense of melancholy that pervades this undefined "somewhere" where you swim, throw away rubbish, grow old and sleep, and the "deserted casino", the "fluorescent green dessert" or the "white belly in the open air".

It took thirty years and a French singer songwriter to detect the melancholy hidden in Parr's images. Yet, the same melancholic indignation was already apparent in an album that had appeared the year before *The Last Resort*, *This is the Sea* by the Scottish band The Waterboys. The songs in this collection reflect the disillusionment of Thatcher's times in natural images such as "a rocky shore" and "the crescent" as opposed to "the whole of the moon", "a black wind blowing /a typhon on the rise / pummelin rain / murderous skies", "the driving snow", "a yellow sky", a "howling dawn", and a

"rain dirty valley". While the metaphor of wings – wished for, spoken about, clipped, impossible to obtain – recurs throughout the album, the depiction of the human universe is discouraging: even on sacred ground or under "skies so blue", people go on "bang[ing] the drum / like monkeys do". The denouncement of the acquiescence and lack of individuality of the Eighties everyman is opposed to the achievements of those who "get too high / too far too soon". In fact, for Mike Scott, the leader of the band and the writer of all the songs, "too much and too soon" is not "too frightening", as it was for a Ted Hughes who was scared of the 1968 riots (see Hughes 2012). On the contrary, Scott's heroes are those who "stretch for the stars", "cut through lies", "climb the ladder" and "know how it feels /to reach too high / too far / too soon". It is only a matter of learning to see things in their wholeness: "I wandered out in the world for years / while you stayed in your room / I saw the crescent / you saw the whole of the moon".

The title track, which closes the album, is about change. It is an invitation to leave hard times behind and move on, remembering that, "That was the river, this is the sea." Once again, the imagery is pantheistic and the metaphors are taken from the natural world: "the expectations of happiness and security were only the river, while the unpredictability and difficulties of life are the sea. Yet the final message is one of hope" (Romagnoli 2014 – my translation):

> 'Now I hear there's a train, it's comin' on down the line. / It's yours if you hurry, you've still got enough time. / And you don't need no ticket and you don't pay no fee. / Because that was the river, and this is the sea.

The album also boasts an explicit anti-Thatcher song, "Old England", with a refrain, "Old England is dying", taken from James Joyce and two central lines, "You're asking what makes me sigh now / What it is makes me shudder so", from W.B. Yeats' poem, "Mad as the Mist and Snow". "Old England", a strong criticism of the Iron Lady's policies, is certainly worth mentioning not only for the illustrious quotes but much more. While the whole album is remarkable, not least for the innovative use of musical instruments such as trumpet, saxophone, piano and drum machine (besides the usual guitars, drums, harmonium, and synthesizer), "Old England" stands out as a perfect example of the "dark side of the Eighties":

> Man looks up on a yellow sky / And the rain turns to rust in his eye / Rumours of his health are lies / Old England is dying / His clothes are a dirty shade of blue / And his ancient shoes worn through / He steals from me and he lies to you / Old England is dying / Still he sings an empire song / Still he keeps his navy strong / And he sticks his flag where it ill belongs / Old England is dying / You're asking what makes me sigh now / What it is makes me shudder so well / I just freeze in the wind and I'm / Numb from the pummelin' of the snow / That falls from high in yellow skies / Down on where the well loved flag of England flies / Where homes are warm and mothers sigh / Where comedians laugh and babies cry / Where criminals are televised and politicians fraternize / Journalists are dignified and everyone is civilized / And children stare with Heroin eyes / Old England! / Evening has fallen / The swans are singing / The last of Sunday's bells is ringing / The wind in the trees is sighing / And old England is dying.

It is the image of a dying country, whose terminal condition, denied by popular rumours, is confirmed, at a figurative level, by natural elements turning to unnatural colours - the sky is "yellow", the rain, "rusty" – and on a more realistic level, by the extreme destitution of its people, with dirty clothes and worn out shoes, who steal and lie to

survive, and yet persist in mourning their lost empire and fighting absurd wars of conquest (here the allusion is, of course, to the Falklands War). The picture of England offered by Scott is hopeless: a bandwagon of duplicitous politicians, self-confident journalists, criminals and comedians; miserable families, and drug addicts. Actually, Thatcher's "period in office coincided with the worst job losses in British history, the collapse of [...] manufacturing heartlands, the death-throes of the steel, motor and mining industries, and an unprecedented rise in homelessness and drug addiction" (Sandbrook 2016, 536). It is no surprise, then, if the last strophe of "Old England" shows a series of idyllic landscape stereotypes, both visual and aural – the swans singing, the Sunday bells, the wind in the trees – as marks of a dying world.

Scott's reference to the "empire song" reminds one of the articles that Salman Rushdie wrote in the mid-Eighties against heritage films such as *Passage to India*, directed by David Lean, *Ghandi*, directed by Richard Attenborough and nostalgic tv series such as *The Jewel of the Crown* whose success, according to him, was "the artistic counterpart of the rise of conservative ideologies in modern Britain" (Rushdie 1991, 92). Collected in 1991 under the title *Imaginary Homelands*, Rushdie's articles are fundamental for a dispassionate analysis of the Eighties. I have already dealt at length on other occasions with this collection and its importance for the study both of its author and of that decade (see Albertazzi 2007 and 2014). Here I would just like to remember how, taking a cue from the film, *Brazil*, by Terry Gilliam, that appeared in the same year as *This Is the Sea*, 1985, Rushdie wrote a sort of manifesto of his poetics, "The Location of *Brazil*".

In Gilliam's *Brazil*, a postmodern dystopia where Orwell's *1984* is uncannily revisited, the future takes on the connotations of a recent past, and, at the same time, hints at the evils of a disquieting present. Not by chance, Rushdie affirms that the film is set in a "cancelled future" (1991, 122): since he had observed before that "[n]owadays tomorrow is not only a place that hasn't arrived yet, but one that may never arrive at all" (120), the allusion to his own present as a time whose future has been cancelled is apparent. The only possibility to survive in this "present without future" is by contrasting the 'real' world with the power of dreams. In *Brazil*, "we are being told something very strange about the power of imagination", Rushdie writes, "that is, in fact, *at war* with the 'real' world, the world in which things inevitably get worse and in which centres cannot hold" (122, emphasis in the original). Yet, according to Rushdie, Gilliam's film hints at the possibility of reconstructing the future out of destruction through imagination: "Unreality is the only weapon with which reality can be smashed, so that it may be subsequently reconstructed" (120).

It is not by chance that images of wings and flight recur in Gilliam's film as in Scott's lyrics, signifying the need to escape from a society that robs individuals of their personal dreams. At the end of *Brazil*, after his torturers ascertain that he has died with the words, "Look, he's gone away", the protagonist really "goes away", growing wings to fly above the clouds like an up to date version of a Frank Capra angel. Indeed, the very title of the film is taken from the soundtrack of the main character's dream, a popular song whose chorus runs: "Brazil, where hearts were entertained in June / We stood beneath an amber moon / and softly murmured: Someday soon". As I noted somewhere else, it was precisely in this "someday soon", in this near but indefinite future, that Rushdie found a possible location not only for Gilliam's film, but for the fantastic in general (see Albertazzi 2014, 26).

In another essay from the same period, which is not collected in *Imaginary Homelands*, Rushdie discusses another film, which shocked British audiences of the time, Stephen Frears's *My Beautiful Laundrette*, whose Oscar nominated script was written by a young and still unknown Hanif Kureishi. In *Brazil* ,Terry Gilliam pushed to the extreme "the image of Britain in the 1980s as a society drenched in selfish consumerism, obsessed with style and image, in thrall to stockbrokers, entrepreneurs and advertising men" (Sandbrook 2015, 528) by mixing Monthy Python, Fellini, Fritz Lang, and Kafka, to create a dystopic world alluding both to early 1980s Latin America and to Mrs Thatcher's "ideas about free enterprise, individual responsibility and the virtuous pursuit of material self-interest" (532).

Stephen Frears and Hanif Kureishi, on the contrary, concocted a film that "could be an everyday story about life in Thatcherite Britain except that the Thatcherites are Asians", as Rushdie acutely observed (Rushdie 1988, 40). In *My Beautiful Laundrette*, a young man of Asian origins, Omar (who, certainly not by chance, is surnamed Omo like the famous washing powder which claimed to "wash clothes whiter") becomes the manager of a decrepit laundrette, owned by his uncle, a rapacious businessman, and turns it into a glittering Hollywood-style laundromat, with the help of a British friend, an ex-National Front hoodlum who, on top of all this, becomes his lover. There is enough material to frighten the British middle classes proud of their "Victorian values": "respect for the individual, thrift, initiative, a sense of personal responsibility, respect for others and their property", in Maggie Thatcher's words (see Sandbrook 2016, 534). If *Brazil* was a sort of post-Fellini *1984* (Kezich 1986, 35), *My Beautiful Laundrette* is a new very ironic inversion of the classic *Cinderella* plot: Prince Charming is an ambitious black boy; Cinderella is a wretched white skinhead, who, instead of slaving by the fireside, among ashes and dirt, works hard to refurbish a place where clothes are cleaned. If the comparison with Perrault's fairy-tale might seem too farfetched, nobody can deny that Frears's film follows a classic 19th century plot, cherished by sentimental novelists and filmmakers ever since (see, for instance, Garry Marshall's 1990 blockbuster *Pretty Woman*).

In his study of European cinema, Pierre Sorlin notes:

> Adopting a traditional motif, repeatedly used by 19th century novelists, [Frears] told a story of passage. Omar, who is not the main character, was the centre of the film. [...] the audience discovered his world through his eyes [...] It was his experience that revealed the ambitions and the strategies of the others. To complete the information, the director added another protagonist who did not have a leading role in the story, Omar's father, who commented and asked, underlining what happened. Even though the shots were technically perfect, they mainly counted as an illustration or an extension of the subjects, while the dialogues explained the respective positions of the characters and the phases of the story. The fact that all the other men, the family, and the sentimental relationships pivot around the same guy, made Omar's universe seem very limited, even intimate, to the audience. [...] It was the narrative that suggested the ability of Pakistani people to integrate into England. (Sorin 2001, 209; my translation)

In the film, the hedonistic side of the Eighties is represented by Selim, Omar's cousin, who deals drugs to maintain his luxurious lifestyle, while his father, Nasser, a rich slum landlord, boasts of being a professional businessman, not a professional Asian, when a black tenant protests about being evicted. A similar picture of Asian people was seen as offensive by the Asian community, while white audiences were not prepared to see a film

where a poor white boy did menial work for a black one and even had a sexual relationship with him. Shortly after the release of *My Beautiful Laundrette*, Salman Rushdie wrote:

> It is not often that a film love affair looks like an adult relationship, but this one manages to do just that, and it is also of course a metaphor of hope. The relationship is subject to colossal stresses, both from the Asian and the white side. [...] There is a kind of heroism, but it is not the kind of heroism which will satisfy people who want positive images of the blacks. (1988, 40-41)

The reversal of roles at the core of the film – the English are all poor, the Asians are rich; an immigrant is the employer of a white man – surely is not in line with the spirit of Thatcher's England; moreover, with the transformation of a run-down laundrette into a dazzling sort of boudoir Frears and Kureishi seem to be making fun of the glittering Eighties.

Proclaiming that he "would defend *My Beautiful Laundrette* against all colours" (41), Rushdie concludes:

> The reason for my defence is that there is nothing in it that is imaginatively false and because it seems to me that the real gift we can offer our communities is not the creation of a set of stereotyped positive images to counteract the stereotyped negative ones, but simply the gift of treating black and Asian characters in a way that white writers seem very rarely able to do, that is to say as fully realized human beings, as complete creatures, good, bad, bad, good. To do anything less is to be captive to the racist prejudices of the majority, and that complexity is what Kureishi's script strives for. (41)

Behind Martin Parr's grotesque and irreverent images of common people there is the same will to catch "human beings as complete creatures", with all their defects, their bizarre attitudes, their tics, and idiosyncrasies. Human beings at large, on the beach, on a Bank Holiday Monday, without the safety nets of work clothes, and everyday habits. This attention to extraordinary ordinariness is the trademark of the band who, more than anyone else, represent the melancholic side of the English Eighties, The Smiths. Just from their name, the members of the band underline their desire to distinguish themselves from the glamorous scene of New Romantic groups or from the excesses of punk rock. As everybody knows, Smith is one of the most common family names in the anglophone world: in a period where British pop and rock bands cherished bizarre names such as Spandau Ballet, or Wham!, the name 'the Smiths' evoked ordinariness. Actually, their clothes were ordinary, their music was neither electronic nor experimental, it reminded one of the sixties rhythms, but adapted "to interpret the new trends of the Eighties" (Spaziante 2010, 177); their lyrics were defined "poetry of normality" by an Italian music critic, Alessandro Campo (1987, 16). While their "no look" seemed "a choice in utter counter tendency" if compared with the obsession for look and image that characterized their times (see Spaziante 2010, 178), a light melancholy suffused with irony dominated their songs, in which literary echoes were mixed with references to the films of the British new wave to tackle adolescent memories, unhappy love stories, but also homosexuality, protest against the government, and corrosive parodies of the monarchy and the Church (see Martino 2007, 99-102). Not by chance, The Smiths have been defined an "antidote" (Calcutt 2000, 303) to the luxurious pretentiousness of the Eighties.

Their masterpiece, *The Queen Is Dead*, appeared the same year as Parr's *The Last Resort*. At first glance, the title of the album, taken from a section of Hubert Selby Jr's cult novel, *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, where the term "queen" is used as slang for "male prostitute", might lend itself to an ambivalent interpretation. Yet, the title track leaves no doubts on the identity of the "Queen", with its allusions to "Her very Lowness" and one Charles who craves "to appear on the front of the *Daily Mail* / dressed in [his] mother's bridal veil".

The main question is "has the world changed, or have I changed?" The answer is to be found in the most melancholy of the tracks on the album, "There Is a Light that Never Goes Out", where the singer asks to be taken away from a home which he does not feel his own any more: "Please don't drop me home / because it's not my home, it's their home / and I'm welcome no more". If the allusion to Britain is apparent, the choice of death instead of "home" is less predictable: "And if a double-decker bus / crashes in to us / to die by your side / is such a heavenly way to die / and if a ten ton truck / kills the both of us / to die by your side / well the pleasure, the privilege is mine". Black humour? Surely. But one cannot help thinking of Vincent Delerm's melancholic reading of Parr's flaccid white bodies sleeping on the beach. If seemingly nothing seems more distant from Parr's uncultured New Brighton than the gates of Manchester cemetery where Morrissey and Marr of the Smiths imagine strolling with Yeats, Keats and "weird lover" Wilde, the same grotesque sense of humour is at the core of Parr's more irreverent images and of songs like "Vicar in a tutu", the story of a priest who likes to preach wearing ballet clothing. Like the Waterboys' songs and Frears and Kureishi's film, they are all products (or "living signs", to quote Morrissey) of an opposition to the hedonistic Zeitgeist of the period.

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