

The Goldsmiths Prize and Its Conceptualization of Experimental Literature

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Abstract: In the aftermath of a critical debate regarding the Man Booker Prize's adoption of 'readability' as the main criterion of literary value, Goldsmiths College established a new literary prize. The Goldsmiths Prize was launched in 2013 as a celebration of 'fiction that breaks the mould or extends the possibilities of the novel form.' Throughout its six editions, the prize has been awarded to such writers as Ali Smith, Nicola Barker and Eimear McBride, and has attracted a lot of media attention. Annually, its jury have written press features praising the shortlisted books, while invited novelists have given lectures on the condition of the novel. Thanks to its quickly won popularity, the Goldsmiths Prize has become the main institution promoting – and conceptualizing – 'experimental' fiction in Britain. This article aims to examine all the promotional material accompanying each edition – including jury statements, press releases and commissioned articles in the *New Statesman* – in order to analyze how the prize defines experimentalism.

Keywords: Goldsmiths Prize, literary prizes, experimental literature, avant-garde, contemporary British fiction

Literary experimentalism is a notion both notoriously difficult to define and generally disliked by those to whose work it is often applied. B.S. Johnson famously stated that 'to most reviewers [it] is almost always a synonym for "unsuccessful"' (1973, 19). Among other acclaimed avant-garde authors who defied the label were Raymond Federmann and Ronald Sukenick (Bray, Gibbon, and McHale 2012, 2-3). Nonetheless, recent years have seen a modest resurgence of that rather elusive term, which has been used extensively in *The Routledge Companion to Experimental Literature* (2012), edited by Joe Bray, Alison Gibbons and Brian McHale, in *Julie Armstrong's Experimental Literature: An Introduction for Readers and Writers* (2014) and in *Experimental Literature: A Collection of Statements* (2018), edited by Jeffrey R Di Leo and

Warren Motte. In *Avant-Garde Possibilities – B.S. Johnson and the Sixties Generation* (2014), Julia Jordan speaks of a ‘rehabilitation’ of the notion of experimental literature (4).

To begin with a most concise definition, J.A. Cuddon’s *Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* conceives of ‘experimentalism’ as an ‘intellectual/imaginative/creative activity which entails the exploration of new concepts, techniques, etc., which go beyond convention’ (2013, 261). The editors of *The Routledge Companion to Experimental Literature* begin their consideration of the vexed term by stressing the breadth of its scope, which encompasses a number of polar opposites: ‘unfettered improvisation and the rigorous application of rules, accidental composition and hyper-rational design, free invention and obsessively faithful duplication, extreme conceptualism and extreme materiality, multimediality and media-specificity, being “born digital” and being hand-made’ (Bray, Gibbons, and McHale 2012, 1). In spite of its multiple realisations, Bray, Gibbons and McHale argue, experimental literature is invariably committed to ‘raising fundamental questions about the very nature and being of verbal art itself’: ‘What is literature, and what could it be? What are its functions, its limitations, its possibilities?’ By doing so, it demonstrates its weariness of the received conventions of mainstream fiction and ‘lays everything open to challenge, reconceptualization and reconfiguration.’ Experimentation ensures that literature remains a live organism – it is ‘the engine of ... change and renewal’ (1). Since experimental literature is all about defying conventions and reinventing oneself, it cannot be subsumed under a firm definition or reduced to a closed set of formal devices. However, an examination of the contents of the earlier mentioned critical works makes it possible to distinguish several recurrent formal features and techniques that are closely associated with literary experimentation. Among them are linguistic innovation, unusual points of view and narrative patterns, metafiction, proceduralism, appropriation, multimodality, all forms of hybridity and the use of digital media (Armstrong 2014, 8-9; Bray, Gibbons, and McHale 2012, 3-16).

In Britain, the institution which has recently had the greatest influence on conceptualizing literary experimentation is the Goldsmiths Prize, established in 2013 as a celebration of ‘fiction that breaks the mould or extends the possibilities of the novel form’ (GP 2013). In order to determine the meaning of that vague description, I shall analyze the promotional material accompanying each edition – including jury statements, annual lectures, the Fantasy

Prize (awarded in retrospect to older works which would have been worthy of the Goldsmiths Prize) and the commissioned articles in the prize's media patron *New Statesman*. Following an overview of the first six editions of the prize, I will establish which features of literary experimentation are singled out most often in the promotional material and which canonical authors of the avant-garde are deemed particularly influential for the shape of the experimental British novel today.

Before embarking on the outlined tasks, it is necessary to acknowledge other academic attempts to examine the politics and the cultural functions of literary prizes. To my knowledge, the only book-length studies of British literary prizes are Richard Todd's *Consuming Fictions: The Booker Prize and the Fiction in Britain Today* (1996) and an edited volume by Wolfgang Görtschacher and Holger Michael Klein titled *Fiction and Literary Prizes in Great Britain* (2006). Reflecting on the major success of the Booker Prize in generating enormous sales figures for its winners (such as A.S. Byatt's *Possession: A Romance*), Todd diagnoses the steady commercialisation of 'serious literary fiction' as a result of the way it was marketed and received in the 1990s (1996, 128). A decade later, James F. English and John Frow note in 'Literary Authorship and Celebrity Culture' that literary prizes, particularly the Booker, 'have become so ubiquitous since the late 1970s that jokes about there being more prizes than authors are now a cliché of literary journalism' (2006, 46). They argue that 'the explosive growth of book awards' has made them a vital part of the 'institutional apparatus' that 'has been transformative of the British fiction scene.' According to English and Frow, literary prizes have had a significant influence not only on the sales figures of the awarded novels but also on the formation of the contemporary canon (2006, 47). The latter aspect of literary prizes is the focus of my article 'The Man Booker Prize and the Emerging Canon of Contemporary British Fiction' (2014), in which I consider the so called 'Booker effect' in relation to a given work's inclusion in the critical and the curricular canons of British literature. Most recently, Katy Shaw has assessed the current cultural function of literary prizes in a chapter in *The Routledge Companion to Twenty-First Century Literary Fiction* (2019). Shaw reports on the controversy around the 'exponential expansion' of literary awards, which hinges on the prizes' perceived alliance with commerce rather than culture (2019, 335). It is precisely the context which gave rise to the establishment of the Goldsmiths Prize, to which I shall now turn.

Entry rules and regulations

The founder of the Goldsmiths Prize is the Goldsmiths College of the University of London in association with *New Statesman*. Its annual commitment is to judge submitted novels (collections of short stories are not eligible) in English written by authors resident in the UK or the Republic of Ireland (for the minimum of three years) and published by a UK-based publisher between 1 November and 31 October of the following year.³ A shortlist of six novels is chosen by a four-person judging panel and announced in September, whereas the winner receives the prize at a ceremony in November (“Goldsmiths Prize”).⁴ As a result, the Goldsmiths shortlist is announced relatively early – before those of Costa and Baileys, but usually a couple of weeks later than the Man Booker. The early announcement gives it an edge over most other prizes in terms of media attention and offers it the chance to set a certain prize trend in a given year, as was definitely the case with the inaugural victory of Eimear McBride’s *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing*. The Goldsmiths’ prize money – 10,000 pounds – made it the twenty-third most lucrative prize in the UK and Ireland in 2013, far behind the International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award (worth 100,000 euros) and the Man Booker (50,000 pounds) (Stock and Rigden 2013).

Rationale for the prize

In the mission statement on the official website, the founders of the Goldsmiths Prize declare that the aims of the prize are ‘to celebrate the qualities of creative daring associated with the University and to reward fiction that breaks the mould or extends the possibilities of the novel form.’ They also commit to selecting each year ‘a book that is deemed genuinely novel and which embodies the spirit of invention that characterizes the genre at its best.’ The word ‘experimental’ is used only once, in inverted commas. That common label, it is suggested, is misleading, as it implies that formal innovation is merely an ‘eccentric deviation’ rather than an ongoing process inscribed in the very definition of the novel – that ‘most flexible and varied of genres’ (GP).

3 Originally, during the first six editions of the prize, only British and Irish authors were eligible. Foreigners resident in the UK and Ireland will be eligible beginning with the 2019 edition.

4 From now, the official website of the Goldsmiths Prize will be indicated as GP in all parenthetical references.

There are three quotations serving as epigraphs to the mission statement:

‘All great works of literature either dissolve a genre or invent one’
(Walter Benjamin) ‘I have laid a plan for something new, quite
out of the beaten track’ (Laurence Sterne) Novel, n. Something
new (OED)

In each of them, emphasis is placed on novelty, originality and invention. The quotation from Sterne is employed not only because of its content but also on account of its author. Sterne, alongside Denis Diderot, is invoked as the artistic patron of the prize. The founders emphasize that the Goldsmiths was established in the tercentenary year of their birth and is designed to ‘champion fiction that shares something of the exuberant inventiveness and restlessness with conventions manifest in *Tristram Shandy* and *Jacques the Fatalist*’ (‘About’). The connection with Sterne is further indicated by the logo of the prize, which is an illustration of the line in the air traced with a stick by one of the characters in the novel.

The mission statement ends with an assertion of yet another goal – to revive a wider public discussion about the novel. It does not mention, however, that the context out of which the prize originated was the acrimonious and surprisingly heated debate in the media about the Man Booker Prize shortlist in 2011. What sparked the controversy was the omission of several of that year’s most acclaimed novels (including Alan Hollinghurst’s *The Stranger’s Child*) followed by the chair of the judges Stella Rimington’s statement about having adopted ‘readability’ as the main criterion of selection and a fellow judge Chris Mullin’s remark about favouring novels that ‘zip along’ (Flood 2014). As a result, the Man Booker was widely accused by writers and literary editors of ‘dumbing down,’ while the jury was charged with ‘self-congratulatory philistinism’ and ‘aggressive populism’ (Lawless 2011, Robson 2014). Within a year after the shortlist controversy, two new literary prizes were established – the Goldsmiths and the Folio Prize, both in direct response to the Man Booker’s recently tarnished reputation. The Folio’s mission statement was explicit about that connection – the founders announced that the prize would favour ‘quality and ambition’ where, as ‘[the Man Booker’s] administrator and this year’s judges illustrate, it now prioritises a notion of ‘readability’’ (Singh 2011). *New Statesman*’s Leo Robson

maintained that both prizes had been initiated ‘with the aim not of stealing the Booker’s throne but of excelling where the Booker ha[d] failed’ – in rewarding ‘great but unfriendly book[s].’

In an accompanying article in the *New Statesman* entitled ‘There Can Never Be Too Many Literary Prizes,’ writer and Goldsmiths College professor of creative writing Blake Morrison extended the list of the new initiative’s literary patrons by listing works that would have competed for the award in the past: *Ulysses* and *Jacob’s Room* in 1922, *A Clockwork Orange* and *The Golden Notebook* in 1962, and *Flaubert’s Parrot* in 1984.⁵ Morrison also enumerated contemporary authors who would have probably won the prize in recent years: David Mitchell, Ali Smith, Nicola Barker, Geoff Dyer and Tom McCarthy.⁶ Morrison also made an important point about what differentiates the Goldsmiths from the multitude of other literary prizes in Britain. Whereas prizes such as the Man Booker, the Costa, the Baileys, the James Tait Black, the Somerset Maugham, the Guardian First Book Award are committed to ‘excellence’ and aim to reward the best novel by an English-language writer, female author, debutante or about a certain topic, the Goldsmiths ‘highlights what’s innovative, ground-breaking, iconoclastic’ (Morrison 2013a).

2013

The shortlist for the inaugural edition was composed of the following novels: Jim Crace’s *Harvest*, Lars Iyer’s *Exodus*, Eimear McBride’s *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing*, David Peace’s *Red or Dead*, Ali Smith’s *Artful* and Philip Terry’s *tapestry*. The prominence of little known authors, their independent publishers and the minor overlap with the earlier announced Man Booker shortlist (*Harvest* alone) confirmed the Goldsmiths’ distinct identity and its dedication to championing novelty and innovation. Each shortlisted novel was given a brief endorsement by a member of the jury, a tradition which has been cultivated in all the subsequent editions. The two notes most directly appealing to the stated aims of the prize were Jonathan Derbyshire’s praise of *Artful* and Gabriel Josipovici’s statement on *tapestry*. Smith’s novel was described as a work of ‘restless shape-shifting’ which ‘invites us to think again about what the novel can

5 The first three went on to win the Goldsmiths’ Fantasy Prize.

6 Morrison assessment of these authors’ experimental credentials was quite prophetic. Both Smith’s and McCarthy’s first novels after the launch of the prize were shortlisted, whereas Smith’s second won in 2018, Barker also won the prize.

be.’ Terry’s book, called ‘strange,’ ‘weird’ and ‘odd’ at different points of the three-sentence note, was situated in the lineage of Italo Calvino and Raymond Queneau and praised for its linguistic eclecticism (GP 2013).

In a *Times Literary Supplement* blog, Toby Lichtig (2013) called the shortlist ‘genuinely intriguing’ and ‘bursting with innovation, individuality and fresh ideas about the possibilities for fiction.’ He declared that the shortlist fulfilled the promise contained in the Goldsmiths’ mission statement and rather than attempting to take the place of the Man Booker it aimed to reward ‘genuinely novel novels.’ In *New Statesman*, Philip Maughan (2013b) quoted extensively from David Shields’s anti-novelistic manifesto *Reality Hunger* and noted that the Goldsmiths Prize might breathe life into the novel and save it from the prophesied demise. Maughan offered his own prediction about the effect of the newly established prize: ‘It will encourage young writers to write boldly, to remain faithful to their instincts, and to be formally inventive. It will provide a break-water against the common fear of a culture in which artists are dogged by the constant fear of Amazon reviews.’

On 13 November the first winner was announced in the New Cross campus of Goldsmiths College. The judging panel chaired by Tim Parnell selected McBride’s *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing*. Parnell called the Irish author’s debut ‘boldly original and utterly compelling ... just the kind of book the Goldsmiths Prize was created to celebrate’ (Bury 2013). In her acceptance speech, McBride talked about her disenchantment with the publishing industry, which for nine years consistently rejected her novel. ‘To have a prize like this is a really wonderful thing to encourage writers to be adventurous ... to encourage publishers to be adventurous ... and readers to be adventurous,’ she declared (Bury). Several press reports commented on McBride’s Joycean inspirations and her invention of an individualised language spoken by the narrator as she develops, in the course of the novel, from a two-year-old child to a woman in her twenties. The only sceptical account of the inaugural edition of the prize was Jon Day’s article in *The Telegraph*. Although Day (2013) did not express reservations about the jury’s choice, he questioned the very idea of the ‘promotion of experimentalism as an end itself,’ which he saw as ‘paradoxical’ and potentially ‘self-defeating.’ ‘What good is iconoclasm,’ he asked, ‘if it isn’t of any worth in and of itself?’

If one of the central objectives of the Goldsmiths was attracting wider attention to (otherwise frequently overlooked) innovative fiction, the inaugural edition of the prize could not have been more successful. McBride’s appearance on the short-

list and her later victory elicited a number of reviews in the most important English-speaking newspapers and literary magazines. When McBride went on to beat Donna Tartt, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Jhumpa Lahiri and win the Baileys Prize, critical interest in *A Girl* surged again. The novel continued to win consecutive literary prizes in 2014: the Kerry Group Irish Novel of the Year, the Desmond Elliott Prize, the Geoffrey Faber Memorial Prize; it was also included on the shortlist for the first edition of the Folio Prize. That staggering success of McBride's challenging debut must be attributed primarily to the Goldsmiths Prize.

2014

In the shortlist for the second edition of the prize, Ali Smith was recognised once again – for her new novel *How to Be Both*. The remaining five nominees were Rachel Cusk's *Outline*, Will Eaves's *The Absent Therapist*, Howard Jacobson's *J*, Paul Kingsnorth's *The Wake* and Zia Haider Rahman's *In the Light of What We Know*. Although that shortlist also contained two debut novels (by Kingsnorth and Rahman), it was less niche than the previous one. It also had a greater overlap with the selection of the Man Booker judging panel: three weeks before the announcement of the Goldsmiths' shortlist, both Jacobson and Smith were shortlisted for the Man Booker, whereas Kingsnorth had appeared on the Booker's longlist. In their eulogies, two jurors traced the influence of modernism in the shortlisted works: Tom Gatti called *The Absent Therapist* 'a slim but remarkable novel, somewhere between a modernist poem and an 'Overheard on the Underground' collage,' whereas Kirsty Gunn referred to *How to Be Both* as a 'renovation of the novel genre' and 'a stunning example of literary inventiveness,' whose structure is indebted to Virginia Woolf's compositional 'corridors.' In his note on *The Wake*, Geoff Dyer appears to concede that formal inventiveness comes at a cost – at first, he warns, the novel may strike the reader as 'unreadably off-putting' (GP 2014).

Most press coverage of the shortlist cited the speech of the head of the Goldsmiths' jury, Francis Spufford, who emphasized the prize's dedication to reward innovative writing and described the six chosen novels as 'captur[ing] so much of the versatility with which the novel, these days, is being stretched, knotted, rejigged, re-invented' (GP 2014). One month after the announcement of Smith's and Jacobson's Man Booker defeat against Richard Flanagan, *How to Be Both* was awarded the Goldsmiths Prize. In the chair of the judges' speech, Spufford declared

that the decisive criterion adopted by the panel was the books' success in making 'formal innovation' contribute to the 'the reader's pleasure' (GP 2014). The emphasis on the pleasure of reading may sound reminiscent of Rimington's contentious remark about the Man Booker's appreciation of readability. Yet Spufford clearly indicated that what was rewarded was the ability to bridge experimentation and delight rather than the book's capacity for simply engaging the reader. Another member of the panel, Tom Gatti (2014), made a similar point in his commentary in *New Statesman*, where he conceded that the jury decided not to 'reward writers simply for novelty: these books also had to have a life and truth of their own.' Spufford's and Gatti's remarks may be interpreted as a defence against Jon Day's earlier noted criticism (of rewarding innovation for its own sake) and an assertion of the prize's dedication to innovation leading to excellence rather to innovation for its own sake. On receiving the award, Smith highly praised the founders of the Goldsmiths for celebrating the 'multivarioussness' of the novel (Flood 2014).

Most accounts of the 2014 verdict accentuated the experimental structure of *How to Be Both* (its order of reading depends on chance), which is indebted to interactive fictions like Julio Cortázar's *Hopscotch* and card-shuffle novels like B.S. Johnson's *The Unfortunates* (a frequent reference in reviews in the British press). The novel was met with unanimous critical praise and went on to be shortlisted for the Folio Prize and to win the Baileys Women's Prize (like McBride the previous year) and the Costa Award for Best Novel. As a result, Smith won both the Goldsmiths and the Costa, awards which are located on the two extremes of the literary prize spectrum – one rewarding innovative (and hence 'difficult') fiction and the latter recognising, in Leo Robson's (2014) words, the 'most enjoyable' book of the year. Smith's victory could thus be interpreted as evidence that formal experimentation does not preclude readability and mass appeal.⁷

2015

The 2015 shortlist contained no names of winners or nominees from the previous editions of the prize. Alongside the novels of three young but already acclaimed authors – Tom McCarthy's *Satin Island* (the only nominee that year to have made

7 Before the announcement of the Baileys and Costa Awards, Leo Robson (2014) declared in *New Statesman* that Smith is a rare kind of author whose single work might win such diverse prizes as the Man Booker, the Goldsmiths, the Folio and the Costa. He called that phenomenon 'the strange case of Ali Smith.'

the shortlist of the Man Booker), Adam Thirlwell's *Lurid & Cute* and Kevin Barry's *Beatlebone* – the shortlist featured two novels of experienced but relatively little-known writers, Richard Beard's *Acts of the Assassins* and Magnus Mills's *The Field of the Cloth of Gold*, and one debut – Max Porter's *Grief is the Thing with Feathers*. It was the first shortlist without novels submitted by independent publishers or, even more surprisingly, without books written by female authors. Several articles quoted the official statement of the chair of judges Josh Cohen, who praised all the nominated books for their boldness and originality, and noted that the one thing that those six 'fascinatingly diverse novels' had in common was their 'very contemporary concern with life at its furthest edges' (Armitstead 2015). Four out of six jurors' endorsements emphasized experimental qualities of the nominated works. Jon McGregor commended *Acts of the Assassins* for being 'structurally daring' and for challenging 'received ideas' about religion and narrative. Leo Robson, in turn, calls *Satin Island* a 'thrillingly inventive' and radically hybrid novel, which creates a 'genre of its own.' Stylistic originality and linguistic inventiveness were praised by Cohen and Eimear McBride in their notes on *Lurid & Cute* and *Beatlebone*, respectively (GP 2015).

The latter work was announced the winner on 11 November. The second novel, from the 2013 winner of the International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award for *City of Bohane*, is a fictional account of John Lennon's retreat into his private-owned little Irish island, where he plans to undergo primal scream therapy. The chair described *Beatlebone* as an achievement in 'weaving and blurring fiction and life – a novel of stunning lyric and cerebral intensity' (GP 2015). When accepting the award, Barry called it 'a really cool prize, because it rewards innovation.' 'And if the novel lacks innovation,' he added, 'it's fucked' (Gatti 2015). Interestingly, both in critical and commercial terms *Beatlebone*'s post-Goldsmiths career was outdone by *Grief Is the Thing with Feathers*, which was later shortlisted for the Guardian First Book Award and won the 2016 International Dylan Thomas Prize, and elicited much praise in Britain, Ireland and the US.

2016

Rachel Cusk's *Transit*, Deborah Levy's *Hot Milk*, Eimear McBride's *The Lesser Bohemians* (all from major publishing houses), Mike McCormack's *Solar Bones*, Sarah Ladipo Manyika's *Like a Mule Bringing Ice Cream to the Sun* and Anakana Schofield's *Martin John* (the last three released by independent publishers)

were on the shortlist of the 2016 edition. After previous year's critique of an all-male cast of nominees, the jury (for the first time composed of more women than men) selected five works by female authors. Three out of six endorsements – of *Transit*, *Hot Milk* and *Solar Bones* – underlined the apparent realism and conventionalism of the work in question, which, on closer reading, is revealed to offer an inventive play with language and style. *The Lesser Bohemians* was praised (by chair of judges Blake Morrison) for linguistic originality consisting in the employment of a 'fractured syntax.' Bernardine Evaristo described *Like a Mule...* as a novel that renounces plot and uses multiple narrators and 'subtle shifts in points of view,' while Joanna Walsh commended *Martin John* for a 'virtuoso evocation of troubling states of mind' through the application of the stream-of-consciousness mode. Most of the press coverage of the shortlist quoted remarks from Morrison's official statement, which stressed that all six novels 'show the same desire to push boundaries and take risks' and credits the Goldsmiths Prize for overcoming the 'stigma of 'difficulty'' from which 'innovative novels used to suffer' (GP 2016).

In the chair of judges' speech during the announcement ceremony, Morrison continued to ruminate on the prize's legacy. He remembered his initial scepticism about its chance of coming into being and asserted its notable success, which he attributed to the founders having 'found a niche and met a need.' While the plentiful other prizes 'celebrate the best,' Goldsmiths 'celebrates the new.' What that quality consists in, Morrison admits, is 'tricky' to pinpoint by any available labels:

'Experimental' is a term that even authors to whom it's attached tend to disavow, because of the associations with difficulty, impenetrability, art more to be endured than enjoyed. 'Novelty' won't do, either – proverbially, novelty soon wears off, and its associations are with trifles and cheap knick-knacks. 'Innovation' is better, though when you hear it on the lips of politicians and business leaders it loses its lustre. I prefer Laurence Sterne when he talked of the new being something 'quite out of the beaten track.'

Besides Sterne, the patron of the prize, Morrison mentioned Joyce, to whom two of the novels on the shortlist, both by fellow Irish writers, are clearly indebted – *The Lesser Bohemians* and *Solar Bones* (GP 2016).

The speech concluded with the announcement of the latter novel's victory. As a result Mike McCormack became the third Irish winner out of four. Most articles emphasized that fact and noted that despite the prize's English background, there had not been a single English recipient. In an interview with *New Statesman*, the author of *Solar Bones* argued that British fiction was 'dominated by an intellectual conservatism,' while Irish literature was experiencing a 'rejuvenation of the experimental pulse' as a result of having 'digest[ed] the legacy' of its towering modernists: James Joyce, Flann O'Brien and Samuel Beckett (GP 2016). The formally innovative aspect of the winning novel which most newspapers highlighted (often in the very title of the article) was its single-sentence structure.

2017

The jury chaired by Naomi Wood selected the following shortlist: Nicola Barker's *H(A)PPY*, Sara Baume's *A Line Made by Walking*, Kevin Davey's *Playing Possum*, Jon McGregor's *Reservoir 13*, Gwendoline Riley's *First Love* and Will Self's *Phone*. The result was a balanced mixture of established authors (Barker, McGregor and Self) and lesser known figures, with independent publishers gaining the upper hand. For the first time, there was no overlap with the shortlist of the Man Booker Prize, with *Reservoir 13* being the only nominee to have made the Booker's longlist. Speaking on behalf of the jury, Wood declared that all the chosen books challenge 'the received idea of how a novel should be written' and 'break the rules on continuity, time, character arcs, perspective, voice, typographical conventions and structure.' Individual jurors also praised the 'linguistic experimentation' and 'acrobatics' of *First Love*, *Phone* and *Playing Possum*. A.L. Kennedy's endorsement of *Playing Possum* placed the most emphasis on its formal innovativeness; besides the linguistic daring, she noted its generic hybridity, temporal instability and 'mosaic plot,' which amount to a 'joyful exploration of the novel's boundaries as a form.' In his endorsement of *H(A)PPY*, Barry called it a 'novel-as-object' whose typographical experiments and unique design 'always ha[ve] a narrative purpose' – that of evoking a 'believable future world ... enslaved by the blandness of its technology' (GP 2017).

On 15 November 2017, Wood announced that Nicola Barker was the first English winner of the prize. From the shortlist dominated by 'wildness' and the idea of 'transformation,' the chair explained, *H(A)PPY* was chosen as the book that had – in line with the rubric of the prize – best 'expanded the possibilities

of the novel form.' Wood was also quoted calling the winner a '3D-sculpture of a novel' which 'makes the case for the novel as a physical form and an object of art.' The chair also referred to *H(A)PPY* as a perfect example of the kind of book that the prize was established to celebrate – one where 'innovation of form' serves to 'enrich the story,' as if in defence of the possible charge of promoting experimentation for experimentation's sake (GP 2017). Wood's apparent insistence on the accessibility of Barker's work was indirectly countered by the author herself, who told *New Statesman* after receiving the prize: 'I'm a niche writer and see no harm in it. I like niches' (Bourke 2017). Sam Leith (2017), writing for *The Spectator*, praised Barker as a writer whose every work so far had been 'completely original.' 'If anyone is writing fiction that deserves to be called experimental at the moment,' he declared, 'it's Nicola Barker.'

2018

Rachel Cusk's *Kudos*, Will Eaves's *Murmur*, Guy Gunaratne's *In Our Mad and Furious City*, Gabriel Josipovici's *The Cemetery in Barnes*, Olivia Laing's *Crudo* and Robin Robertson's *The Long Take* were the six novels on the shortlist chosen by the jury chaired by Adam Mars-Jones. Among the nominees were three novels from independent publishers and one which had already been shortlisted for the Man Booker – the verse novel *The Long Take*. In the customary endorsements, only one book was noted for its linguistic ingenuity: Elif Shafak praised Robertson's 'mixture of verse and prose,' calling 'the beauty of the language' instantly seductive. Deborah Levy commended *Kudos* for introducing a narrator who is 'new to literature' – 'working hard for her readers, yet never present[ing] herself as less vulnerable than her co-narrators.' *Murmur* was deemed by Levy a 'fully achieved literary experiment, digging deep into all the dimensions of human consciousness,' its originality rooted more in the 'multiple ideas' it artfully combines rather than in a specific formal device. Finally, *Crudo* was described by Mars-Jones as 'novelistic fusion cuisine' – a hybrid of 'life writing and literary ventriloquism,' indebted more to the 'anarchic voice of Kathy Acker' than to the restrained tone of Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway (GP 2018).

Commenting on the shortlist in *The Guardian*, Mars-Jones (2018) quoted a passage from Proust which the jury had adopted as a guideline – 'artificial novelty' is often 'less effective than a repetition designed to reveal a new truth.' Therefore, what the jurors chose to reward was not 'innovation as such,' but texts 'able

to take fresh possession of the form's resources.' When announcing Robertson's victory, Mars-Jones reiterated that Goldsmiths Prize 'sets out to reward ... new possibilities for the novel, which doesn't mean novelty for its own sake.' *The Long Take* met that criterion by managing to 'tap into a wide range of poetic forms, traditions and tones of voice' (GP 2018).

Guest lectures

Since 2016, the announcement of the Goldsmiths Prize shortlist has been accompanied by a guest lecture delivered by an established author associated with literary experimentation. The first such speech was given by Howard Jacobson. A former Goldsmiths nominee and Man Booker Prize winner, Jacobson (2016) defended his genre of choice – the comic novel, arguing that 'the novel is never more itself ... than when its heroes fall drastically short of that heroism whose function is to right wrongs, settle scores and put the fractured times back together again.' He argued that failure is the main subject of some of the greatest nineteenth- and twentieth-century novels, as exemplified by the works of Thomas Hardy, Henry James, Joseph Conrad and James Joyce. The novel is at its best, according to Jacobson, when it relies on comedy to expose the futility of the world and reject myth. By 'exult[ing] in the meaninglessness of things,' the novel is able to 'liberate' its readers from the illusion that 'we are here for some sacred purpose.' Conspicuously absent from Jacobson's lecture was any mention of experimentation, which is perhaps indicative of his scepticism about the notion itself. Except for Joyce, the author of *The Finkler Question* failed to invoke any usual suspects of the literary avant-garde, focusing primarily on Shakespeare, Jane Austen and Saul Bellow.

In 2017, the annual Goldsmiths lecture was offered by Ali Smith, who made more effort to engage with the politics of the prize. The driving question of her speech was why the novel matters in the age of Donald Trump. When the world of politics imposes fictions upon us, Smith (2017) argues, 'fiction lets us read and understand such fictions.' The novels best suited for that purpose are those that 'invite, or demand, that their reader take part in their making, be present in them, be creative in response to them.' Without applying any label to such works, she echoed Roland Barthes's privileging of writerly to readerly texts. On the other hand, she stated, without elaborating, that the novel also matters 'because it's a really good read,' which gestures towards the readerly and the

less demanding. That paradox is arguably embodied in Smith's own writing, which, as has been noted, was capable of winning the Goldsmiths Prize and the Costa, which are on the opposing poles of the literary spectrum. In order for 'word' to affect 'world,' she implies, literature should challenge the status quo without alienating its readers by inessential formal tricks. Unlike Jacobson, she made copious reference to literary figures associated with various aspects of experimentation: Gertrude Stein, Virginia Woolf, Muriel Spark and Georges Perec. Among the many answers to her question about the novel's continued relevance was one mirroring Jacobson's argument: 'The novel matters because it does and it doesn't matter in a world where we do and don't matter.'

The lecture given in 2018 by British-Turkish writer and Goldsmiths juror Elif Shafak was in many ways an elaboration on Smith's argument. Shafak (2018) suggested several more answers to the question why the novel matters: because 'it turns empathy into resistance,' 'gives a voice to the voiceless' and 'punches little holes in the wall of indifference that surrounds us.' Her highly autobiographical and political speech called for an engaged literature, which constitutes 'a free, egalitarian space where a diversity of voices can be heard' and which defends 'our core values,' such as 'pluralism, freedom of speech, minority rights, separation of powers, democracy.' Shafak's lecture does not address literary form, reducing the novel to a vehicle for social and political activism in defence of the right causes. Her statement that 'novels have to swim against the tide' comes closest to addressing the principles of the Goldsmiths Prize but its context makes it clear that the remark referred to literature's political rather than aesthetic stance. It is interesting to note that out of the three Goldsmiths lectures organized so far, two have practically ignored the specificity of the literature that the prize had been established to promote.

Fantasy Prize

In 2015, the Goldsmiths committee launched an ongoing competition entitled the Fantasy Prize, whose aim is to reward texts which 'embody the spirit of the Goldsmiths Prize' but were published before its inception. The selections are made by the prize's 'judges, nominees, winners and friends.' Eligible works need to have been written between 1759 (the publication year of *Tristram Shandy*) and 2013 by British or Irish authors. Although the official introduction speaks of the wish to celebrate examples of 'daring and innovative fiction that has had less

attention than it deserves,' several of the twenty-two works rewarded to date are widely considered milestones of experimental literature. Sterne's classic is, by definition, the oldest winner. Its 'restlessness with conventions,' argues Tim Parnell in a short eulogy, demonstrates the 'near-limitless possibilities' of the novel. The other predictable winners are *Ulysses* (1922) and Flann O'Brien's *At Swim-Two Birds* (1939)⁸: the former called 'the greatest single event in the history of the modern novel' (bar Proust) and a dominant influence on works as diverse as William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* and Georges Perec's *Life a User's Manual*, while the latter was credited as the 'brilliant forerunner of whole swathes of formal innovation,' particularly metafiction as practised decades later by Italo Calvino and others (GP, n.d.). As for other canonical works but not necessarily associated with formal experimentation, there is Thomas De Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* (1821), D.H. Lawrence's *Women in Love* (1920) and Virginia Woolf's *Jacob's Room* (1921).

The 1920s, customarily regarded as the decade of literary high modernism, and the 1960s – the decade of the British post-war avant-garde – prove the two most productive time-frames for experimental novels. The earlier-mentioned works by Joyce, Lawrence and Woolf are representatives of the former, while Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange* (1962), Ann Quin's *Berg* (1964) and B.S. Johnson's *The Unfortunates* (1969) exemplify the latter. If J.G. Ballard's *The Atrocity Exhibition* (1970) is also recognized as a product of the sixties, that decade gains the upper hand. Burgess's novel is praised by Blake Morrison in his brief critical eulogy primarily for its 'linguistic brilliance.' Andrea Levy calls *Berg* Quin's 'homage to the Nouveau Roman novelists she admired,' while Jon McGregor insists that *The Unfortunates* is far more than a card-shuffle experiment and that its 'real boldness ... lay in its evocation of the dislocation wrought by grief.' *The Atrocity Exhibition* is one of the very few laureates to receive a double laudation. Leo Robson calls Ballard 'a descendant of Sterne,' 'a disciple of Joyce and Kafka and Borges' and 'a source of inspiration to any novelist' who recognizes the limitations of realism. Will Self, in turn, refers to Ballard as 'incomparably the most important English novelist of the postwar period' and a 'flinty-eyed innovator,' who followed in the footsteps of Tristan Tzara and Alfred Jarry. The last winner associated with the 1960s avant-garde is Christine Brooke-Rose, awarded the

8 Flann O'Brien is the only double winner of Fantasy Prize. His *The Third Policeman*, written in the late 1930s but released only in 1967, is the second one.

Fantasy Prize for her last novel *Life, End Of* (2006) – the most recent of the 22 celebrated works. In her note of praise, Ali Smith deems Brooke-Rose ‘a writer’s writer’s writer,’ whose ‘novels are unlike anyone’s writing in English before her.’ ‘She frees up the sentence,’ Smith adds, ‘by attention to and by playfulness with its grammatical component parts’ (GP, n.d.).

Conclusions

An analysis of the variety of promotional material surrounding the Goldsmiths Prize since its inception in 2012 reveals a body of founding figures of experimental literature in Britain and Ireland, which – with the exception of Laurence Sterne – consists exclusively of twentieth-century authors. That group includes canonical modernists – such as James Joyce (a considerable influence on Eimear McBride and the other Irish winners of the prize), Virginia Woolf (often referenced in the context of Ali Smith’s fiction), Flann O’Brien and Samuel Beckett – as well as the representatives of the 1960s avant-garde: B.S. Johnson (quoted as an influence on *How to Be Both*), Christine Brooke-Rose and J.G. Ballard. Among American authors who are occasionally referenced as important to contemporary fictional innovation are William Faulkner, Henry James and Kathy Acker. It is too early to speak of the emerging canon of contemporary experimentalists, but if Goldsmiths shortlists over the first six editions of the prize were to be a marker of avant-gardism, then that list would need to feature Eimear McBride, Ali Smith, Rachel Cusk and Will Eaves.⁹

In their shortlist eulogies, winner speeches and companion articles in the press, the jury often speak of novels ‘pushing boundaries’ and ‘extending the possibilities’ of the genre. The aspects of formal experimentation most frequently recognized in those texts are – in the given order – linguistic ingenuity, a challenge to generic categories (in line with the prize’s earlier cited motto from Benjamin) and interweaving numerous voices. While only one endorsement praises the ‘innovative subject matter’ of the shortlisted novel (*Like a Mule Bringing Ice Cream to the Sun*), about a third of them stress the works’ successful treatment of socially or politically challenging themes, their exploration of human consciousness or even their ‘bright ring of truth’ (GP 2016; GP 2014). Five eulo-

9 Each of those writers won a place on the shortlists for their two consecutive works. Cusk achieved that distinction three times in a row – for each part of her *Outline* trilogy.

gies emphasize the emotional effect of the nominated novels by describing them as ‘moving,’ ‘painful’ or ‘devastating.’ A lot of emphasis has been placed on the non-conformity of the selected novels, which have been described as ‘bold,’ ‘daring’ and ‘out of the beaten track’ (the latter phrase also comes from one of the mottos – this time from Sterne). Nevertheless, following a disparaging remark made by Jon Day during the inaugural edition (about the ‘promotion of experimentalism as an end itself’), one can observe a note of caution in the jurors’ texts not to present the selected works as liable to such a charge. Since 2014, judges have accentuated the accessibility of their choices, talked of the need to bridge experimentation and readerly pleasure (Spufford), stressed that formal ingenuity should ‘enrich the story’ (Wood) and distanced themselves from praising ‘novelty for its own sake’ (Mars-Jones). Bernardine Evaristo’s remark that the 2016 winner *Solar Bones* offers a ‘wholly enjoyable reading experience’ could also be seen in this light (GP 2016).

The otherwise slightly baffling insistence on calling the shortlisted novels ‘funny’ (including the phrases ‘alarmingly funny’ and ‘horrifyingly funny’) and ‘hilarious’ – the two adjectives have been applied to as many as twelve nominated works – appears to be another strategy not to confine them to a niche, where ‘experimental’ means serious, overly difficult and pretentious. In other words, entirely understandably, the prize industry wishes to present the novels it celebrates as accessible to a broader audience and thus expand their marketing potential. So far, it has succeeded several times to attract a surprisingly wide readership to novels such as *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing* and *Grief Is the Thing with Feathers*. While that ambition is commendable, it creates a paradoxical situation – a prize launched to counter the Man Booker’s privileging of readability over formal audacity is appearing to try hard to assert the accessibility and entertaining qualities of its decidedly demanding winners.

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