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FROM “ANGEL PAVEMENT” TO “A WEEK IN DECEMBER”:
TOUCH POINTS THROUGH THE XXTH CENTURY

The paper focuses on similarities observed in “Angel Pavement” by J. B. Priestley published in 1930 and S. Faulks’s 2009 novel “A Week in December”. The two novels are set in London and are almost a century apart. Touch points between the books are numerous and can be traced at different levels: from minor details that could easily make “A Week in December” a sequel to “Angel Pavement”, to thoughts and longings of major characters which are largely unchanged although there are 80 years between them. In many aspects, however, there is significant amplification of the problems J. B. Priestley grapples with in S. Faulks’s book.

“A Week in December” is often referred to as the state-of-the-nation novel and compared to Charles Dickens’s works [1, c. 5-6]. Drawing parallels with a different author, collection and systematization of these similarities, some of them pertaining to form and structure, others involving characters and the deeper meaning of the novels, may open up a new perspective.

To start with, although there are several book cover variants for both novels, two versions bear a definite visual similarity, with the majestic dome of St. Paul’s dominating the scenery on the cover of both novels. One of the major characters in “Angel Pavement”, rogue businessman Mr. Gospie, comments on this: “Good luck to St. Paul’s! It did not challenge him: it was simply there, keeping an eye on everything but interfering with nobody” [2, p. 13].

As for the titles, “Angel Pavement” highlights a spatial dimension while “A Week in December” identifies a temporal dimension of the events, both titles reflecting the chronotope, which is almost identical in these books. The two novels take place in London, “Angel Pavement” in late autumn and winter, “A Week in December” over a week prior to Christmas. So the reader is presented with a very cold, wet and gray London, which reinforces the inner loneliness and misery of the characters.

Furthermore, for Priestley and Faulks London and the Thames become characters in the novel. The river is described poetically with an abundance of imagery throughout both novels, and these descriptions are surprisingly similar, the Thames usually gray and swollen, matching the city itself, possibly due to the time of the year: “Daylight had dwindled to a faint silver above and an occasional cold gleam on the water, and at any other time she would probably have been depressed or half frightened by **the leaden swell of the river itself**, the uncertain lights beyond, and the melancholy hooting, but now it all seemed wonderfully mysterious and romantic” [2, p. 204] (emphasis here and thereafter added by V. Dolzhenkova).

In “A Week in December” it is not only the river that is swollen, but also the oceans beyond, where the Thames is carrying its leaden waters: “**Swollen with December rain**, it was gliding on beneath the lights of the Embankment, under Blackfriars Bridge, above the embedded railway underpass, below Southwark Bridge and over the buried Cannon Street commuter lines – under, over, under, like a liquid weave, thought Gabriel, as it made its way through the old slums of Limehouse and Wapping, where watermen with lanterns in the bow had once pulled bodies from the water, and on towards the sea – or at least to the tidal barrier at Woolwich against which **the swollen oceans were rising**” [3, p. 34].

In Faulks’s novel the river actually becomes the last refuge for unfulfilled dreams and desires. It swallows an old phone of Gabriel Northwood with the only picture of his former lover, when he is ready for a new relationship, and the backpack of Hassan al-Rashid, containing bomb detonators, when he finally comes to his senses and realizes the horror of what he was about to do. Both characters make an attempt to start afresh, confiding their past happiness and anguish to the gray swollen river.

Another touch point lies in the fact that the two novels have a collection of major characters (five in “Angel Pavement” and seven in “A Week in December”) and several plot lines of equal importance, one of them exploring financial malpractices. Both Priestley and Faulks portray comparatively few events, but there is abundant psychological portrayal with deep analysis of the characters’ thoughts, dreams and feelings. The authors’ tone and attitude to the characters are well-articulated in the two novels with abundant instances of humour and irony: “Mr. Dersingham never did anything about it, because he was waiting – as he always said – until he knew where he stood financially. (From which you might gather that he knew where he stood philosophically or socially or politically or artistically.)” [2, p. 95].

An important plot strand in both novels is constructed around the relationship between true life and virtual reality. It is of minor importance in Priestley’s novel, where the author adopts a more traditional outlook with mature characters doing business and nagging the younger ones for indulging in pictures or comics: “Seems to me these young girls now haven’t a scrap of sense. The bit they leave school with is knocked out of them by pictures nowadays. They think about pictures – movies and talkies – from morning till night. They’re getting jazzed off their little

heads” [2, p. 69]. Faulks in “A Week in December” presents a much more serious situation in the modern world, where a virtual refuge is readily provided for any age or social group to avoid the minutest contact with real life: alcohol, drugs, TV shows, virtual reality games, fantasy football and even fantasy finance: “What was more important to him: his real team or his fantasy? The Aurora/Skunk Two made such a nice call hard to make. <...> And now there was no doubt at all, no choices to be made between a lifelong loyalty and a momentary gain in an imagined world – no difficulty in choosing between the real and the fantastic...” [3, p. 215-216].

“A Week in December” may have been a sequel to “Angel Pavement” due to one peculiar detail. Priestley’s novel opens up with this delicate passage: “She came gliding along London's broadest street, and then halted, swaying gently. She was steamship of some 3,500 tons, flying the flag of **one of the new Baltic states**” [2, p. 9]. This steamship from a Baltic state brings Mr. Golspie, one of the major characters and a rogue businessman, to London. The opening scene in “A Week in December”, where the author gives us a broad panorama of London contains the following detail: “... a solitary woman paid her respects to a grandfather – **come from Lithuania some eighty years ago** – as she stood by his grave in the overflowing cemetery of the East Ham Synagogue” [2, p. 1]. Further on the reader learns that the grandfather of John Veals, one of the major characters and the villain of “A Week in December” also came from Lithuania, so there may have been a dynasty of financial frauds of Lithuanian origin. It can be easily assumed that these characters could in fact be descendants of a personage from “Angel Pavement”.

So, one of the major characters is a financial fraudster in both novels and the major plot strands include fraudulent business schemes. The scale of the fraud, however, is multiplied significantly from 1930 to 2008. Mr. Golspie in “Angel Pavement” swindles just one firm, leaving four people who had been working there unemployed and ruining their private hopes for the future. Priestley portrays the *effects* the Great Depression was beginning to have on ordinary Britons, while Faulks 80 years hence explores the *origin*, the making of the 2008 financial crisis. The scale of John Veals’s business malpractices in “A Week in December” is described by one of minor characters, Roger Malpass: “It's a fraud as old as markets themselves. **The only difference is that it's been done on a titanic scale.** At the invitation of the politicians. Behind the backs of the regulators and with the dumb connivance of the auditors. And with the fatal misunderstanding of the ratings agencies” [2, p. 376]. As a “side effect” the lives of thousands of African farmers are destroyed, British pensioners lose their lifetime savings, and the backbone of the world banking system is broken.

One more interesting touch point is the description of cravings of a young man. In both novels one of the major characters is a young man in his early 20s. Priestley treats the longings of Turgis in “Angel Pavement” as constant personal battle and disappointment: “Everywhere he saw them, never missed seeing them. His mind was for ever busy with their images, for ever troubled by them. No matter where he went, he was tantalized, the path underneath his feet a narrow

dusty track of wilderness but all hung about with rich forbidden clusters of feminine fruit, shrinking, withering, vanishing, at a touch” [2, p. 128]. Faulks in “A Week in December” is more outspoken, he presents a very similar situation with Hassan as a piece of social satire highlighting the tricks media and advertising resort to in order to reap profit from human desires: “Although his understanding of Islam forbade Hassan physical contact, no amount of prayer could quell his twenty-one-year-old desires. The kafir press and media were degraded by images of sex. On quiz shows, talk shows, game shows, the most highly paid and respected presenters, with millions of taxpayers' pounds in their back pockets, talked of masturbation, genital size and sodomy. They did so with a twinkle, with a laugh, slapping their guests on the thigh, as though that made it all right” [2, p. 56].

Both novels have humorous episodes with financially pinched admirers in the center of attention. Turgis in “Angel Pavement” and Gabriel Northwood in “A Week in December” both pronounce the words inviting girls for a date at the same time frantically thinking about where they are going to find the money for these outings: “Nine bob for the pictures! This was easily his record, and it certainly seemed a lot of money, nearly as much as he earned in a whole day” [2, p. 285];

«'We could talk about work. I could take you out to dinner maybe. Somewhere local you like. Then I'd go home. We couldn't talk about anything else until after the case comes on in January.'

'So just work.'

'Exactly.' **Gabriel was wondering how he was going to pay for dinner.**

'Well, that'd be fine then. Maybe tomorrow. I'm off by six.'

'Tomorrow would be ... Perfect. OK.' **Where the hell was he going to get the money?»** [3, p. 199].

One more topic connected with both desires and money is Christmas. The perception of Christmas is very similar in the two novels. Both authors resort to hyperbole to ridicule the marketing tricks intended to lure an average person into the frenzy of Christmas shopping: “Those two miles of Xmas Gifts and lavish electric lighting and artificial holly leaves and cotton wool snow were still rolling past. The festive season – help! It was an elaborate stunt to persuade everybody to spend money buying useless things for everybody else” [2, p. 291]. The problem is further intensified by Faulks who shows how these endless festivities may actually lead to a tragedy, with Christmas being the worst time of the year for jumpers, people throwing themselves under a train: “The week before Christmas was the worst time of year for people throwing themselves on the track. Nobody knew why. Perhaps the approaching festivity brought back memories of family or friends who'd died, without whom the turkey and the streamers seemed a gloomy echo of a world that had once been full. Or maybe the advertisements for digital cameras, aftershave and computer games reminded people how much they were in debt, how few of 'this year's must-have' presents they could afford. Guilt, thought Jenni: a sense of having failed in the competition for resources – for DVDs and body lotions – could drive them to the rails” [3, p. 3].

The final touch point is a dinner party as one of the central points of the book. Both dinners turn out to be disasters, although to a different extent. The dinner party in Priestley's novel is only one episode of rising action, and although it is a complete catastrophe for the hosts, the Dersinghams, it is only their personal failure: "Half an hour later, the Dersinghams were alone, and Mrs. Dersingham was curled up in the largest chair, crying. "I don't care, I don't care," she sobbed. "They were awful, both of them. The man was nearly as bad as his terrible daughter. They were ghastly, and I hope to Heaven I never see either of them again. Or any of those people, except Mrs. Pearson. Ah, what a horrible, ghastly evening!" [2, p. 123]. In Faulks's book the dinner is the climax when the malpractices of John Veals, the financial villain, are revealed. These revelations do not change anything, Veals manages to go through with his plan, however, they definitely give other characters and readers food for thought: 'And the misdemeanours of the bankers will be paid for by millions of people in the real economy losing their jobs. And in paper money, the trillion will be repaid in higher tax on people who have no responsibility for its disappearance. And the little tossers in the investment banks who've put away their two and three and four million in bonuses each year over ten years ... <...> They'll hang on to it all. And they of course will be the only ones who won't pay back a coin. Which is bloody odd when you come to think of it. Because really they ought to be in prison' [3, p. 377].

To sum up, whereas some parallels like descriptions of the city and the river are only natural, since we are looking at two London novels, others are rather striking. The authors chose very similar structural elements, sets of characters and key lines that move the plot forward. Moreover, we see personages from different centuries grapple with similar problems: financial fraud and money issues, love affairs, "enduring" true life. Both authors hold mirrors to their contemporary societies, demonstrate their humorous and often ironic attitude to many human and social manifestations. At the same time, comparative analysis shows that Faulks's mirror gives a much more distorted and exaggerated picture.

LITERATURE

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