Becoming Plant and Posthumanism in Jeff Noon's Pollen (1995)

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Jeff Noon's startling fiction owes as great a debt to Lewis Carroll as to William Gibson and deserves more critical attention. The reader is challenged at every turn in the treatment of difference, desire and nature. Place, identity and movement become particularly unstable but it is an openness to the posthuman which characterises Pollen (1995). Val Gough (2000) has argued that Noon presents a challenging representation in the context of gender and feminism but in this article I will suggest that other kinds of decentring are also enacted, notably in relation to spatial and species identities. The location of the action in the North of England questions the dominance of the South East. In cyberpunk, the metropolitan capital city tends to occupy the centre ground, occluding the margins and interstices that are, in Pollen, precisely where the serious challenges to apocalypse are taking place. The setting of the novel and the interaction with place and space will therefore be one area of investigation in this article. The other decentred sites in the novel concern the human itself and the extent to which the human self may retain any continuity after such radical mutations and transformations. In this regard, Pollen exemplifies the preoccupation in contemporary science fiction with life after death identified by Stephen Burt (2014). The novel presents a variety of extraordinary ways in which the human might develop, notably by defying death and becoming plant.

Pollen is the second in a series of four novels set both in Manchester[1] and in "the Vurt," an alternative reality accessed by the absurd means of sucking on a feather. It is a highly stratified society where swiftly developing conflicts arise between deviants and law enforcers. Although such features are typical of

cyberpunk, whose authors tend to “aim for a wide-ranging, global point of view” (Sterling xii), Jeff Noon places his action in an unexpectedly specific location. Noon’s work raises the profile of Manchester and retrieves the locale for consideration, possibly empowering it in an otherwise terrifying war-of-the-worlds scenario. From the outset it is clear that wider socio-economic forces, operating in an apparently chaotic fashion, have determined the unstable circumstances faced by these characters who are attempting to survive in the Manchester area. This is a warning to the rest of the world.

In Pollen it is apparent that the human species needs to be defended in the face of a reckless genetic engineering driven by international capitalism. In contemporary dystopic science fiction (sf), such experiments take place in well-equipped, secure laboratories, in a space safely segregated from the rest of the population until the predictable destruction is unleashed. Thus in Michael Crichton’s Jurassic Park (1991), an extra-diegetic narrator warned:

> The late twentieth century has witnessed a scientific gold rush of astonishing proportions: the headlong and furious haste to commercialize genetic engineering. This enterprise has proceeded so rapidly—with so little outside commentary—that its dimensions and implications are hardly understood at all (ix).

Over the decade following the publication of Jurassic Park, developments in forensic science, criminal detection and fertility treatment have attracted public attention. Questions have been raised about the ethical implications of stem cell technology and fears expressed about the possibility of human cloning. In Oryx and Crake (2005), Margaret Atwood envisaged the end of the human race, destroyed by scientists whose experiments in genetic engineering produced new creatures: some

are bizarre, hybrid animals —named “wolvogs” and “rackunks”—while others are gentle, child-like beings designed to replace the humans who have been wiped out by a deliberately propagated virus. Atwood emphasises the commercial motivation behind these experiments, exemplified by the crude language of brand and trademark. Similarly a banal, feminised and familiar discourse softened the spectre of cloning with the creation of “Dolly the Sheep” (Klotzko 2005). The impact on the population is catastrophic and the environment is also blighted; cities are razed and the inhospitable landscape is taken over by the predatory wolvogs and rackunks. The reader of Oryx and Crake is presented with a warning about the possible effects of unregulated scientific experiment driven by commercialization. At the same time, the attraction for the reader of speculative fiction (‘what if…?’) concerns the pleasure to be gained by contemplating the novelty of the results of such experiments. This is a pleasure which motivated the scientists in their work. In Pollen the reader is presented with the devastating effects and the new cultural forms and practices emerging as the population try to cope.

For some time now, the future has been appearing in a strangely familiar guise and the spatial location of imagined future worlds is often revelatory. In Archaeologies of the Future (2005), Frederic Jameson reassesses utopia and science fiction, and positions cyberpunk in the sixth and most recent stage: ‘a general period break which is also consistent, not only with the neo-conservative revolution and globalization, but also with the rise of commercial fantasy as a generic competitor and ultimate victor in the field of mass culture’ (Jameson 2005: 93). Jameson notes that Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein (1818) emerged as a fantasy in the volatile period of the industrial revolution which forcibly reconfigured the relationship between the country and the city.[1] Victor Frankenstein’s experiments began in

Geneva, in the university at Ingolstadt although they are carried out in a clandestine way. Their catastrophic effects then take Victor in pursuit of his creature across the world, in geographically specific, remote but relatively undifferentiated regions across the world: the Alps; Scotland; the arctic. Frankenstein has continued to influence sf, making it impossible to overlook the risks associated when scientists become obsessed in the pursuit of new life forms. The global effects of such an unnatural disaster are examined in Pollen.

Early twentieth-century sf engaged with the new eugenics, a theory of social engineering that promised to manage the population and control social problems, especially in over-populated urban areas. The need to maintain some kind of balance in human society has often been explored in sf novels, mediated through the interaction of humans, animals and machines. In Karel Capek's War with the Newts (1936), the newts, living parallel with but segregated from the humans, gradually emerge as speaking beings, create factories under water, develop, prosper and become powerful. The humans are slow to notice what is going on. Capek's inspiration for the novel was the following warning: 'You mustn't think that the evolution that gave rise to us was the only evolutionary possibility on this planet' (xiv). In his play, RUR (Rossum's Universal Robots) (1920), robots are manufactured on an island safely separated from human society and subsequently exported worldwide as a new, efficient labour force. Gradually they develop what appear to be desires of their own. After the revolution and the humans have been overthrown, the robots dream of a new world which they will populate, but the scientific secrets of creating robot life have been lost; the only remaining human is unable to solve the problem. The closing scene presents Primus and Helena as a robot Adam and Eve, having acquired some human characteristics. The humanist

dream has haunted the twentieth-century, when even androids have been thought to "dream of electric sheep" (see Dick). A growing source of fascination in contemporary sf concerns a fundamental question: What would the posthuman want?

In sf the promise of eradicating conflict and liberation from the restrictive aspects of the family in social relations has been associated with asexual means of reproduction.[3] However, in the form of sf known as cyberpunk, reproduction and the social structure have been less important. The enhancement of the human experience has been imagined as being realisable by means of prosthetics and consciousness-altering chemicals, the engagement with the virtual world of cyberspace and the reconfiguration of the alienating metropolis and the place of the (post)human within it. The anonymity and alienation, the body transformation and technological innovations that typify cyberpunk are all to be found in Jeff Noon's Pollen (1995). As Bruce Sterling puts it in his introduction to the influential Mirrorshades: The Cyberpunk Anthology (1988):

> Certain central themes spring up repeatedly in cyberpunk. The theme of body invasion, prosthetic limbs, implanted circuitry, cosmetic surgery, genetic alteration. The even more powerful theme of mind invasion: brain-computer interfaces, artificial intelligence, neurochemistry—techniques radically redefining the nature of humanity, the nature of the self (xi).

In Pollen (1995), sexual reproduction is one means by which the many hybrid life forms are produced, fuelled by a failed social experiment. The drug Fecundity 10 had been introduced as an antidote to a "plague of sterility": "Desire was overheated. The pure wanted more than purity, they wanted dogs, they wanted robos, they

wanted Vurt-beings. And babies were made from this. Fecundity 10 had broken down the cellular barriers between species" (115). According to Paul Taylor, who cites the species boundary-crossing in Noon's novels as an example, a hacking mentality has become ubiquitous when the inventive new uses arising from an infiltration of computer systems are similar to the scientific innovations in gene-splicing (Taylor 1998: 414). Other transformations occur asexually (notably through "pollination") but they are realised variously in terms of sexual violence and sexual pleasure. In Jeff Noon's novel, new life forms are invented, transgressing the boundaries of the human-plant and the human-animal, and radically reconfiguring death.

An androcentric perspective dominates most cyberpunk but Jeff Noon's fiction unsettles this orthodoxy to some extent. Val Gough (2000) argues that Noon's novels "offer […] a developing feminist cyberpunk sensibility" (110). Gough's analysis is persuasive, identifying aspects of characterization and narrative structure that situate Noon's fiction outside conventional cyberpunk. Gough notes that Noon's portrayal of women is "particularly open to alterity—especially the alterity inherent in hybridity" (124). She identifies the 'mythic romantic quest motifs' in Noon's novels where "the heterosexual structure of the traditional quest motif is challenged—or problematized" (116). This challenge is posed in various ways, since the quest takes place simultaneously in a parallel reality and the resolution involves the unification of mother within daughter when the spirit of the searcher enters the body of the sought. Noon foregrounds the body and sensual experience, deploying various myths, including those with unexpectedly ancient or primitive associations. In this regard, and in the shape-shifting, the "thinking-through-animals" associated with Claude Levi-Strauss and the mystical nature of the telepathic "Shadow" characters including

the protagonist and Shadow-Cop Belinda Jones, Pollen shares with other contemporary science fiction a use of totemism and ideas of the primitive. Pollen is set in a cyberpunk city-scape, with ghettoized hinterlands and a distinctly drawn tribal society whose inhabitants are hybrid figures, crossing the human and the animal as well as the plant, after the catastrophic invasion of a hayfever erupting from the parallel/under world. It is perhaps in the depiction of plant subjectivity that Pollen is most experimental, exploring the kind of 'radically nonhuman' that Jussi Parikka associates with the swarm (Parikka 2010: 204).

At some points the Vurt is reminiscent of a hallucinogenic effect; at others it is a new technology, positioning the subject as a spectator: "Cinema is what people did before Vurt was discovered" (95). The exploration of alternative states of consciousness induced by some means is common in sf and literature more generally.[4] However, in Pollen the specificity of location becomes unclear, to the extent that external and internal spaces merge. Noon imagines a parallel world which is actively seeking independence in the 'looking glass wars'. Noon's short story "Latitude 52" concludes with the assertion that "There is no Manchester. Latitude 52 is just a looking glass" (23). If Manchester is merely a mirror, whose reality does it reflect? Noon envisages the looking glass as a portal to another world. In Pollen it is a world of myths and stories that are animated, the stories themselves being driven by a desire for independent life:

> Vurt was just lying around waiting for us to find it. John Barleycorn is one of the oldest stories, and one of the most popular. One of the best. Because of this he has many names. The green man. Fertility. Swamp Thing. The horned god. Because of his pagan image he was

> stolen by the Christians, turned into the horned devil, Satan, the serpent, Lucifer. In the old Greek myths, he was called Hades. They banished him to the underworld. Because of this John Barleycorn is angry with us, still (213).

These narratives grow in power and threaten to take over, in the manner of artificial intelligence or "a globe of stories infecting reality" (326). Operating like hayfever, the viral metaphor is associated towards the end of the novel with story-telling itself.

The theme of viral transmission, taken up in Noon's fiction in different ways, is of wider concern. Noon exploits reference to topical ideas. These are illuminated by meme theory, explained here by the scientist, Susan Blackmore:

> Instead of thinking of our ideas as our own creations, and as working for us, we have to think of them as autonomous selfish memes, working only to get themselves copied. We humans, because of our powers of imitation, have become just the physical "hosts" needed for the memes to get around. This is how the world looks from a "meme's eye view" (7-8).

This idea is literalized in Noon's novel, Nymphomation (1997), where advertising is conducted by means of flies or "blurbs" who carry "blurbvurts," persuading people to play a new, addictive game. "Dominos" has been tested by the AnnoDomino company for 12 months in Manchester before extending its use to the rest of the country. These blurbs are organic: "One of the first artificial life systems. Cellular automata. You set up a map, an environment inside a hard drive, design some creatures to live in it, give them some basic rules, randomize the pattern and start

the program. Evolution inside a computer" (146). In Vurt a description of a new nanotech shampoo emphasises the ubiquity of data: "Nanosham [was] a thick green slime, like hairVaz, but living [….] a jelly base containing hundreds of baby computers. They turned dirt into data, processing hair clean, giving the people droid-locks; the ultimate crusty accessory" (76). Noon invites the reader to question the authority of information at every point in the novel, especially in the preface and prelims. At the beginning of Pollen, the reader is introduced to the strange worlds of the novel by the recognisable postmodernist device of an extradiegetic, authoritative document written in academic discourse. From the outset 'Manchester' is presented as a data construct; it is storytelling which constructs the city:

> One particularly weak point in the barrier between dream and reality existed in the psychic air which surrounded Manchester, a rain-drenched city to the north-west of Singland (which was known in those primitive days by the name 'England'). It was in this fabled city that the incident now called the Pollination took place. This is generally believed to be one of the earliest skirmishes in the Looking Glass Wars (4).

Thus Pollen goes beyond the conventions of the typical postmodernist, cyberpunk or science fiction novel, introducing the reader to the concept of the 'meme' and the social implications of such uncontrollable reproduction and dissemination.

The relevance of Manchester and its function as the setting in Pollen may be illuminated by considering the literary and cultural myths of the North and the mythopaeic aspects of Noon's novel in the use of the stories of Persephone and John Barleycorn.[5] Thus, in Jeff Noon's conflation of cyberpunk with the regional novel, the specificities of the local place are brought together with the fantastical

metropolis where anything seems possible, inviting the reader to take the north of England more seriously and to consider the broad reach of international capitalism. Noon also provides an account of the social stratification and conflict arising from the segregation of different groups in this strange world, highlighting the prejudices and hatred as well as the openness to diversity optimistically typified by Belinda/Boda. Perhaps by foregrounding floral reproduction through pollination, the novel is able to address issues of racial identities in a more speculative and systematic manner.

In cyberpunk the metropolis is characterized by descriptions of the cultural habits and ways of being in usually alienating, often vaguely located, dangerous and densely populated urban settlements. In earlier science fiction, the city is a knowable place, rendered by means of realist conventions, its familiarity being necessary to accentuate the threat of invasion. For instance, in H. G. Wells' The War of the Worlds (1898), the narrative specifies the detailed geographical location of various places in the south-eastern county of Surrey. Indeed, when the Martians have landed, the devastation renders the south demonically northern: "It was the strangest spectacle, that black expanse set with fire. It reminded me, more than anything else, of the Potteries at night" (48). These geographically locatable places are recognisable, associated with the territory of the London commuter and the safe suburban homes of the middle classes. Although the reader becomes aware of Manchester as a named place, through various fleeting but specific and recognizable references to the city and the region, the city is otherwise defamiliarized in Noon's fiction. Noon has admitted, "What I was trying to do is recreate what it's like in Manchester, and then exaggerate it" (quoted in Gough 2000: 111). In Vurt Blackpool becomes "Noir-pool" (121), the source of the music played by the DJ named MC Inky. Noon also includes an allusion to the Manchester-based television soap opera,

"Coronation Street": "Co-op Street was a real low-level blue Soapvurt. You bought it every Monday, Wednesday and Friday. It took you to a small northern terrace, gave you a house to live in, gave you a home and a husband or a wife […] unfolded" (28). In Nymphomation, the principal characters, university maths student Daisy Love, born in Droylsden, and computer expert Jazir Malik, heir to the Golden Samosa take away, both live in Rusholme. At the beginning of Pollen, the unfavourable weather in the north-west of England makes an appearance: "Sometimes Coyote thought that Manchester was the wettest place on Earth, and it was this that made him long for its dampened streets" (14). The dangers of travelling through some parts of the metropolis are emphasized, especially in the outer zones where the zombies live:

> "Later that day, Zero drove out with me, North, to the dead places. There were flowers growing from the tarmac as we travelled through the city of Manchester, and tribes of dogs gathering at our heels. The air was heavy with pollen messages. Zero was sneezing and scratching as he stuffed a blue phone-feather into his jaws. He called up the number listed on Coyote's wall-map, and then told me that only static cracklings were answering him. And then he sneezed once again, and cursed the hayfever. This journey had caused some arguments, especially when I asked for a three-car patrol: one in front, one behind. And a heavy gun presence. All of which had met with refusal. Zero was playing it strong, saying that no Zombie fucker was going to mess with him. But I could see the fear in his eyes, especially as we moved through the mutant tribes of North Manchester. "Jesus-Dog!" he said to me. "What's up with the world these days? Nobody's

> just themselves any more Jesus, will you look at that! You see that creature there, Smokey? What the hell is that? Fucking mutant!'' (p. 68).

This is a local joke at the expense of the residents of the north of Manchester. Pollen makes no attempt to represent the city of Manchester or describe it in material terms, beyond region- and street-names but it takes for granted the importance of Manchester as a place.

What is happening or 'becoming' in Manchester in the looking-glass wars, is a rapidly unfolding disaster. The transmission of a strange hayfever threatens the whole nation; a pandemic is imminent. Manchester is a test-case, a site of sudden extreme changes in society. This place appears to have become vulnerable and the rest of the world would do well not to overlook it. It is a gateway between the two semi-autonomous worlds, any travel between them having an effect which is closely regulated as if by the laws of physics:

> Whenever a Vurt creature made an illegal entrance into reality, something else, something random and therefore innocent, had to take its place in the dream. This was known as Hobart's Law of Exchange, because the two people or objects involved in the swap had to be of the same worth. A little give and take was allowed as long as it stayed within Hobart's Constant. Hobart was the discoverer of Vurt, and she had added this rule to the mechanism in order to maintain a balance between the dream and the real. […] These days the doors between the two worlds were slippery, as though the walls were going fluid. It used to be, in the old days, you got one bad exchange every five years or so. These days, it was more like one a month. It seemed that

> Manchester was a particularly thin membrane between the Vurt and the Real. Maybe this was because Miss Hobart had invented the Vurt feathers here. Whatever, Tom Dove had the nasty feeling that if the Manchester wall should dissolve then the whole country would follow (96).

Manchester is where it all began. It is the centre, origin and possible site of the apocalypse. Although a gateway between two parallel worlds features in other science and fantasy fiction, the location of the gateway and this critical moment in the "looking-glass wars" specifically in Manchester seems to question the south-east of England as a site of power. Little mention is made of the other regions.

Similarly, the striking array of life forms in the world of Pollen could signal a new posthumanism, challenging the dominance of the human as an essential, unique, knowable self. The posthuman self is, as Myra J. Seaman puts it, one of "mutation, variation and *becoming*" (247). N. Katherine Hayles notes that "the posthuman is likely to be seen as antihuman" although it is fundamentally challenging to assumptions about origins, meaning and the divination of pattern which must now give way to "unpredictability" and "randomness" (285-86). Science fiction often transposes the human perspective onto the most extreme, alien life forms, acting out conflicts which are more recognisable in the contexts of slavery, colonialism and eugenics. This presents a dilemma for the reader attempting to make sense of the points of view offered since they are not attributable to a knowable subject and they shift with regard to status and in respect of spatial and temporal location. According to Claire Colebrook, who asks what problems might arise in postmodernist fiction, 'if we extend voice beyond the human, this can have

two effects. The first would be to dehumanise voice. The second would be to humanise the inhuman' (127). By contrast, Noon invites the reader to accept the bizarre range of characters and deal with them on their own terms, such that personhood is attributed to a variety of hybrid beings.[8]

The treatment of animal-human relations in sf and their function in totemic thinking appears to be one significant trend. Thus Grace Dillon (2008) has found in the novels of Neal Stephenson, China Miéville and Nalo Hopkinson, the primitive and the native featuring in recognisable traditions in trickster figures and ritual ceremonies of rebirth. In Jeff Noon's fiction, the intertextual deployment of Lewis Carroll's Alice's Adventures in Wonderland with the myths of Persephone and the English folk myth of John Barleycorn creates a multi-layering of story, within which the real and the virtual worlds or 'the Vurt' operate. The anonymously authored folk song, describing John Barleycorn's ritualistic death and rebirth, is mediated at one remove through the lyrics of a modern song by the band, Traffic, as Andrew M. Butler points out (78):

> They've ploughed, they've sown, they've harrowed him in
> Threw clods upon his head
> And these three men made a solemn vow
> John Barleycorn was dead (*Pollen*, np)

The location of this song in the prelims of the novel significantly situates it outside the body of the text and implies a likely pre-existing resonance of the John Barleycorn myth for the reader too. In the song, the manifestation of the rebirth in intoxicating liquor, provides a possible association with the consciousness-altering feathers and other mechanisms in the novel: "little Sir John in the nut-brown

beer/Proved the strongest man at last" (*Pollen*, np). Both the myths of John Barleycorn and Persephone are stories of rebirth rooted in the natural world, predating the industrial metropolis expected in cyberpunk. Persephone spends half of the year in the real world and the other half in the underworld, a trade-off operating between life and death and regulating growth. To what extent the inclusion of these myths signifies a nostalgia for a pastoral world or a critique of capitalism is not entirely resolved. Sybil Jones ultimately appears to win in the battle with John Barleycorn and seems to have saved both her zombie-child Jewel and her daughter Belinda. Yet this is achieved by the loss of her own life, at least as it had been formerly constituted. Her spirit alone is saved by entering her daughter Belinda and through apparently consenting to a violent but redemptive sexual act with John Barleycorn.

Although the characters engage with the Vurt and the taxi-cab drivers appear to be part of a matrix or hive mind, the dominant, and perhaps most destabilising idea explored in Pollen, is the transformation of the body through the intervention of vegetation rather than the cybernetic prostheses ordinarily found in cyberpunk. The emphasis in Pollen on the natural world and the organic could appear to be retrograde or nostalgic, simply reviving the Romantic project, the human arrogantly projecting itself onto the natural world viewed only from a human perspective. Thus Val Gough argues that Pollen demonstrates nostalgia in 'the form of valorizing old-style technology and the values assumed to belong with it: professional and personal integrity' (113). However, she focuses on the feminist potential in Noon's novels with reference to characterization, especially that of the anti-heroine, Sybil, and identifies some aspects of the novel reminiscent of the 'radical gift' of French feminism (121). Although Gough does not use the theories of

Gilles Deleuze, these seem to be particularly relevant for an understanding of Noon's narrative trajectories and may help to reinforce her argument.

Noon emphasises pattern and disorientation, an anti-linear movement through the story that is reminiscent of the conceptualization of the rhizome by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari in A Thousand Plateaus (1980; 1997). The rhizome is an underground plant stem from which new connections may be made at either end. As Brian Massumi summarises, Deleuze and Guattari propose "nomad thought" as a challenge to the "arborescent model" which involves analogical thinking focusing on identity, the representational, truth, the ideal, hierarchical ranking, application of reason and judgement. Such a mode of thought is described by Luce Irigaray and Helene Cixous as "phallogocentrism" (xi-xii). Deleuze and Guattari categorize minor and major literature whereby "minor" literature is especially concerned with tendencies and process, an opening up of possibilities and a respect for differences without privileging one term in an opposition. In this regard, Pollen's most striking features appear to be, as Val Gough argues, the welcoming of difference and the exploration of virtual and corporeal worlds. However, I would argue that the most challenging aspects of the novel are those which indicate the tendencies of 'becoming plant', postulating the sensory effects and possible consciousness of such a posthuman subjectivity.

Some of the orthodoxies of the reading process no longer work with Jeff Noon's novels. They confound the presupposition that meaning unfolds in a linear manner, in causally connected chains, by means of binary oppositions created within a structure operating within two dimensions, characterized by contiguity and association. The experience of reading Jeff Noon's fiction is pleasurable, visceral, intriguing; sometimes disorientating and sometimes disgusting. The questions

arising from this process are fundamental. Those concerning the status of the subjects presented move beyond the conventional parameters of the "who": not merely what function does the character discharge within this quest narrative (agent, helper, obstacle etc) but rather what status does this character have within the world depicted in the taxonomy of species and their inter-relationships? Are they animal, vegetable or mineral? Human or other? Alive or dead? The indeterminacy of the identity is the point. The question is left open while the text ponders a process of "becoming". The hybrid forms have resulted from experiments in genetic engineering. Since police officers are hybrid beings comprising elements of robot and dog, the reader's expectation is that Kracker, the chief of police, is likely to be partly canine. But this is not the case and he is aware of his novelty as a human and the power which that brings. His identification as 'pure' raises problems immediately from a Deleuzian perspective. This highlights the strangeness of the human as the most unexpected hybridity has become so familiar by this point in the narrative:

> 'I'm pure of course,' Kracker continued. 'You know that. No robo, no dog, no powers of the Shadow, no direct access to the Vurt. Too much Fecundity 10 in my veins of course, but apart from that…sometimes I feel like I'm the last real person alive in this city. Purely human. Sibyl…all of these hybrids look to the cops with their problems. This is why I employ people like yourself: Shadowcops, and robocops, and dogcops like Clegg, and Vurtcops like Tom Dove. But the world is getting very fluid these days. Very fluid. Dangerously so. There are doors opening between the species. Fecundity 10 is partly to blame of

course, as I know to my cost. I have twenty children, and all of them demanding upkeep' (106).

Time-space relationships are blurred. The powers of telepathy in Pollen and Noon's other novels take on more complex forms. The taking of a feather into the mouth acts as a means of entering the Vurt or virtual world. The experience may be similar to hallucination or watching a film but it also may be a means of communicating, as indicated above where Zero uses a feather as if it were a telephone. The operation of characters in the novel in both worlds raises some questions about when and how any particular action is taking place in relation to others. This is exacerbated because some characters, such as Sybil Jones, the main protagonist, have special powers.

Sybil is eventually successful in her quest for her daughter Belinda, also known as Boda or Boadiccea. She is a taxicab driver who has stolen her taxi and disrupted the "map", the hive mind run by Columbus. This is achieved by means of Sybil's ability not only to read the mind of her daughter but also to enter her consciousness. Sybil's consciousness enters Belinda's body and remains there. A further complication with regard to the narrative and the domain of psychoanalysis is that sexual reproduction has broken the bounds of species and transgressed various taboos including the living and the dead. And at a local level, within the bonds of parenting, for Sybil and Boda, the mother has become the daughter. Sybil's maternal relationships are complex; she is also mother of a zombie child, "Jewel", whom she has kept shamefully hidden.

The effects of war are shown to extend beyond loss of life; the victims of the "pollination" are transformed rather than merely killed; those affected change life

form from human/hybrid to plant. At the beginning of the novel, the death of Coyote, the taxi-driver, sets in train a quest for those responsible, in the manner of hard-boiled crime fiction, but towards the end of the narrative it transpires that, even though his funeral has been held, Coyote is not entirely dead and he reappears:

> Coyote's long legs are loping along the Princes Road towards Manchester Central. He no longer feels troubled by the fever. The map is changing constantly as he runs, but that's no problem to his flowering soul. He feels like a road himself, like a part of this new world. Coyote is a flower; the road opens up to him with parted petals. This is the travelling he has always dreamt about. But still something is missing, some vehicle for his desires. The scent of blossoms from Platt Fields Park makes his hind-stalks grip the pavement. The flowers are growing out towards him. Coyote is walking through their perfumes, adding his own sweet message to their throats. It is only then that he realizes. It doesn't have to be like this; I can travel freely. The flower in me is still growing, still learning. It's easy. So easy. No one need see me. I can just … you know … just grow …
>
> So then, Coyote just folds himself into the new flower-map of Manchester, moving his patterns from stem to stem. He is living in the vegetation, remaking himself again and again like the seasons changing, from the flora that he meets upon the way. This is the coolest route he has ever travelled. Coyote Flower Dog is conjuring himself out of the petals and the leaves and the thorns, turning that greenery into a black-and-white Dalmatian plant. The Little Sir John

> seed is still growing inside his body, running with the sap; he can sense him there. All along his long and growing journey, the man in the root is trying to redirect Coyote. Coyote shrugs him off, or tries to; in fact all he can manage is to send him spinning back down in the deepest stem (269)

Literary reference points are clearly identifiable to John Wyndham's The Day of the Triffids (1951) where alien plants invaded the city. Howevever, in Wyndham's novel the human-plant relationship was clearly adversarial and distinct; the triffids blinded people rather than fused with them. Pollen also differs in its positive ending. It is a matter of life and death, a natural cycle, finely balanced and brutal, albeit dependent on force. Pollen explicitly features the folk myth used to describe the cycle of life and death in nature in the story of John Barleycorn as well as the Greek mythological story of Persephone, abducted and required to return to the underworld for part of every year. The association of Persephone in variations of the myth with fertility provides another dimension to the intertextual fabric of the novel, the plot being driven by the disasters resulting from Fecundity 10, the fertility drug.

Myth provides another layer of meanings, a parallel or simultaneously available plane of significance, problematizing the central story and defying neat resolution and closure. In Pollen, where the generic conventions of cyberpunk and the postmodernist novel are exploited, the myths function tantalisingly, giving hope of answers of another narrative in a world gone vegetable. In some ways, the Vurt takes different forms; it is an after-life; it is the underworld from where Persephone is released; and it is the euphoric 'petit mort' in the realm of both intoxication and orgasm.

The agent of destruction in Pollen is Persephone under the control of John Barleycorn. The mechanism of transmission of pollen appears to exploit the intimacy of sexual interaction and the invasion and domination of sexual violence and rape. The transformation of Manchester through pollination seems to feminise it. In the passage quoted above, Coyote perceives the journey in spatial, sexualized terms, using labial imagery, which is both penetrative and diffuse:

> Coyote is a flower; the road opens up to him with parted petals. This is the travelling he has always dreamt about. But still something is missing, some vehicle for his desires. The scent of blossoms from Platt Fields Park makes his hind-stalks grip the pavement. The flowers are growing out towards him (269).

To what extent does Coyote retain his male- or dog-self through this transformation? The reader will remember his role as taxicab driver, as Boda's lover and as a dog. Val Gough reads Noon's novels as exclusively heterosexual but this may need to be qualified with regard to Pollen. Presented here from Coyote's perspective is an experience of desire that may be attributed to female sexual experience and orgasm. If the sense of loss ("But still something is missing, some vehicle for his desires") figures castration, it is accompanied by the overwhelming compensation of a desire which is fulfilled in innumerable ways and indiscriminately. But the object or plane of desire here is floral and possibly posthuman. Stephen Burt has identified a common concern with life after death in much contemporary sf, citing Jeff Noon's Sparkletown tweet fictions as examples.

However, if in these episodes the world of Pollen appears to challenge phallogocentrism and embraces the becomings and rhizomatic connections

conceptualized in A Thousand Plateaus, the closing section of the novel needs to be investigated closely. Some of the mysteries of the story are unfolded here. John Barleycorn has sent Persephone through the gateway into Manchester. He allows Sybil to return. Sybil's exceptional qualities may privilege her at the end and inscribe a norm which would return the world of the narrative to humanism. She is the oracle, the story teller recording for posterity, immortalising them all in her tale. The realization of such a master narrative holding good seems unlikely. It is not clear whether the conclusion of the narrative reinforces power relations and brings a halt to the wild transformations that have earlier created such a disorientating effect. Apparently closed systems have a habit of opening up (Clark). In Pollen this becomes literal, as Manchester features as a physical (as well as a textual or digital) point of entry and exit, a weak-spot or gateway. The taxicab map and Hobart's law of exchange promise the maintenance of a natural equilibrium but Pollen presents the consequences of instability.

As cyberpunk/experimental fiction, Pollen provides a fascinating world that draws in a satisfying way on familiar cultural forms and phenomena: a quest narrative; a conflict between police and a subversive counterculture; a hive mind mediated through the controlled movement of taxicabs; broadcasts from pirate radio stations; telepathy; and perhaps the most ancient mutation of stories. Pollen is not a realist narrative, although as a hybrid of cyberpunk and hardboiled crime fiction, it employs some of its conventions. It addresses the social and cultural consequences of a pandemic, of scientific experimentation and unchecked polymorphous desires. The provenance of "pollen" in slang offers another possible reading of the looking-glass wars in relation to drug culture in Manchester. But to accept that reading in isolation would be to overlook the "lines of flight" opened up and the kaleidoscopic

patterns that are set in motion. Val Gough demonstrated persuasively how Noon's fiction challenged some of the conventions of cyberpunk and engaged with a relatively destabilizing position on gender. However, I have demonstrated that Pollen challenges identity more generally especially in the human-plant episodes and in the overall patterns and forces at work. The mystifying forces of globalization are given a literary manifestation in the looking-glass world of Vurt that, at the end of the novel, is put in its place by Sybil/Boda. In Jeff Noon's world, the desires of the posthuman may pursue many forms, alive or (apparently) dead, and even plant if this is the price for sustainable life. In Pollen, the urban imaginary is engaged with a specific city in north-western England—Manchester—and persuades the reader that the city is worth saving, even if it means going to hell and back.

Endnotes

1. The series began with Vurt (1993), followed by Pollen (1995), Nymphomation (1997) and Automated Alice (1997).
2. Frankenstein's monster was exploited in the press as a metaphor for the masses, threatening revolution and visibly deformed by more powerful forces; see Baldick (1987).
3. Some examples include Aldous Huxley, Brave New World (1932), Ursula K. LeGuin, The Left Hand of Darkness (1969) and Kazuo Ishiguro, Never Let Me Go (2005). New social structures and systems of child rearing have also been imagined, for instance, in Marge Piercy's Woman on the Edge of Time (1978). See Clark (2000) for analysis of new open-ended social systems.
4. In H. G. Wells' story, "The Purple Pilaeus" (1896), after the protagonist ingests a hallucinogenic fungus the mood alteration changes the course of his life.

5. See Moody (1998) and Cockin (2012) (248-50).
6. In the philosophical examination of the human-animal relationship, David DeGrazia describes the concept of the person, which may be ascribed to other beings: ‘persons as beings with certain complex forms of consciousness’ (40).

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