



# Revising the Future: M[ike] Gilliland's *The Free*, 1986-2014

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*In my real world,  
outside the nightmares you're trapped in,  
of course we share and are cared for.  
I'm already in that real world.  
**Here are the keys!***

— Mike Gilliland, *The Free* (2011) 350.

In 1986, at the height of the Irish Troubles and the administration of Margaret Thatcher, Hooligan Press issued *The Free*, by one “M. Gilliland,” its lurid cover explicitly advertising a scenario of urban combat: rebels perched on the roofs of high-rise buildings, above a street filled with hellish smoke and flaming debris, exchange fire with a helicopter gunship. This edition is hard to find, at least on this side of the Atlantic. Hang around anarchist bookstores long enough, though, and you might just find a copy of the 1990 printing, with its striking cover image – a black-and-white photo, apparently snapped during the Hungarian uprising of 1956, of a young woman in a black jacket with a machine gun slung over her shoulder, eyes defiantly gazing out at us.<sup>1</sup> From the ashes of a failed revolution, she speaks to us of nobility in defeat: the “doomed proletarian romance” of which Mark Fisher writes. “The 80s,” Fisher notes, “were the period... when Margaret Thatcher’s doctrine that ‘there is no alternative’ – as succinct a slogan of capitalist realism as you could hope for – became a brutally self-fulfilling prophecy.” (2010: 8). These are two images of heroic resistance to the inevitable, of radical aspirations running aground in political impossibility.

The story between those two different covers is the same: in a derelict State vaguely resembling Ireland,<sup>2</sup> a working-class teenager, Linda, breaks away from her abusive parents, her

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<sup>1</sup> The picture of Erika, 15 years old, later killed by the Soviets, was taken by Vagn Hansen in Budapest, 1956.

<sup>2</sup> No less an authority than jailed Provisional Irish Republican Army bomber Patrick Magee, in his study of “Troubles Fiction,” lists *The Free* as an example of such. (1999: 243)



Church, and her authoritarian school, falling in with a rapidly growing counter-community simply called “the Free,” part of a dense network of anti-authoritarian Co-ops, Free Schools, and syndicalist Free Unions. Having been introduced to this scene by Linda, who shucks off her old name and adopts the nom-de-guerre “Maxie,” we meet a series of protagonists of what shapes up to be a mass contestation of power and ultimately a revolution: Barney the Playworker, lesbian feminist Maggie, Macker the traveller kid, old-guard union rep Christo Rylee, posh turncoat and movement spy James Smith, and others. All of this ends poignantly: the initially successful revolution is bloodily suppressed by a NATO invasion, the old order is restored with a vengeance, and we see one after another of our protagonists jailed, tortured, and killed. Our only consolation is to see Maxie, the runaway, still at large, living in hiding (under a new name, “Tricia”), as a kind of urban guerrilla – still “free,” but only as a desperate fugitive. (TF 149-50). Let’s let the last sentences of chapters eight, nine, ten, and eleven stand as a kind of plot summary:

And soon there were more explosions. (115)

“Here come the fucking helicopters. Hide well if you’re alive!” (133)

In the next box McDermott survived a few minutes longer. (142)

“Okay let’s go then” I said. (150)

None of this plot synopsis can really give you the feel of the novel, its remarkable sense of voice – or should I say voices? The first-person voice of Linda/Maxie grips us right away with its proletarian immediacy: “Didn’t she start going on about my Da, you know, him slavin away all his life to bring us up respectable, and the Sacred Heart of Jayzus, and he a real credit, having risen to assistant sales manager in the bottle factory.” (11) But even in this little snippet, we can hear a kind of layering or overlapping effect: nested inside the voice of the rebellious fifteen-year-old girl, in mocking paraphrase, is the moralizing voice of her mother, which is perhaps also imitating another class-laden discourse, the discourse of “respectab[ility]” and upward mobility. In fact, with her split name, Linda/Maxie herself is a composite of many heterogeneous voices, what the Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin might have called “polyphony.” Indeed, in some respects, *The Free* itself is a “polyphonic” novel, presenting “a plurality of consciousnesses, with equal rights and each with its own world, [which] combine but are not merged in the unity of the event” (2013: 6-7). David Bruce identifies something similar in the post-Paris Commune novels of Jules Vallès – a phenomenon he calls “[i]nterdiscursive mixing”: “the interweaving of different discourse types by juxtaposition.” Whereas for Bakhtin, the multiplicity of voices within a novel tends to de-stratify the society it documents, undermining its hierarchies, Bruce finds that the interdiscursive mixture “demonstrate[s] that language is *not transparent*, that the meaning of language has a *social* source, a *class* source, and within capitalist society is used to hegemonic ends” (1994: 68).



Apropos of this attention to language and its opacities, we may note that one more voice makes a very brief appearance: in chapter two, we witness Barney the Playworker sitting up at night, “writing furiously [...] doing this paper on the potentialities of words, fuck knows why, claiming that our very words, our ordinary phrases, hold us fixed in a society where we are functions, objects and subordinate clauses.” (TF 18) Here is an echo of a young Mike Gilliland, studying literature at university, where Dale Spender’s *Man Made Language* (1980) makes a very similar argument. (Gilliland, personal communication, Feb. 2015; Spender 1980). In this way, *The Free* reflects another aspect of the era: the reign of “Theory” and “critique,” of that which Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick would later brand “paranoid reading” (2003: 123-51). The paranoid reader knows in advance that language itself is patriarchal, that one is always already in the grip of ideology (all the more so when one thinks one has slipped out of it), that subjectivity is overdetermined, that nothing escapes power.

The novel’s original audience was not slow to draw out its conclusions. Reviewing *The Free* for the Detroit-based anarchist newspaper *Fifth Estate* in 1986, Peter Werbe, writing under the pseudonym “E. B. Maple,” compares it with Jack London’s *The Iron Heel*, noting that “[b]oth novels dwell considerably on the viciousness by which the capitalist state is willing to protect and perpetuate itself” (Maple [Werbe] 1986: 6). Ultimately, however, Werbe concludes that Gilliland’s scenario resembles reality even more: “what is chronicled here in fiction is no less than what radicals (and ordinary people) suffer in reality in the torture states of Central America and in the prisons of South Africa and Northern Ireland.” He also finds the fictional scenario, in which a revolution in the global semi-periphery is quickly crushed, to be “a strong dose of the reality”: “the book’s suggestion that revolution hasn’t a ghost of a chance unless it occurs in the heartland of the empires – the US or the USSR – rings true as recent history illustrates.” Nonetheless, the novel’s pessimism is so grim as to make Werbe wonder “what message the author is trying to convey”: is resistance to capitalism heroic but ultimately futile? (Maple [Werbe] 1986: 6)

Fast forward to 2007. *The Free* has gone out of print. The publisher PM Press contacts Gilliland to ask permission for a reprint; “I said yes of course,” Gilliland recalls, “but I would have to type it up in digital form and wanted to change a few things. Once I started to copy it I decided to update it more and more [...]” (Gilliland, personal communication, Feb. 2015). Before long, the manuscript has been roughly doubled in length, new chapters and characters have been added, the style has undergone some significant changes, and – most notably – the ending has completely changed. It is, in fact, no longer a tragedy. The new version of *The Free* – I should say “versions,” for it has undergone several rounds of revision since then – is a utopia that no longer makes the dark bargain demanded by readers’ expectations of realism, the narrative contract of Ursula K. Le Guin’s “The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas”; it no longer sacrifices the bodies of



characters we have come to care for in order to make even a moment of utopian joy “credible.”<sup>3</sup> Here is Gilliland’s own synopsis:

The State is going bottoms up, the Climate is going crazy, we’re living the collapse of capitalism, blow by blow, with a rainbow.

Maxie and her new friends get free of their traumas, and get into dealing subversive death blows, to a skinhead gang, a bankrupt school and the testerical special police.

Next thing they flee to Ragwort CoOp Pool, in a big safe occupied working class area. We play the adventure live through their eyes, laughing and lamenting... inventing social revolution.

The PIF [Pacification Intervention Force] soldiers eventually arrive, to restore capitalist chaos, Macker and Maxie are missing, the hunt begins, while the spaced out invaders get subverted, corrupted, swallowed and (burp) digested.

Our odd family puzzles with the pieces.. finding a fun lifestyle, a coppice farm, and bright ideas for saving The Planet, but keep your hankies ready, folks... click on your giant wings, for the fantastic FLYING finale! (Gilliland 2020: n. pag.)

While we are warned to “keep [our] hankies handy” (perhaps for some “lamenting” of our own), the emphasis on “laugh[ter],” “play” and “adventure” are a pretty radical departure from the mood of the original novel. We have in our hands not so much a revision of an old book as a new book with some of the old words embedded in it. *The future is open to revision.*

What happened between 1986 and 2007? Gilliland moved to Barcelona, which might be bound to cheer up any resident of the famously rainy islands north of the English Channel. More fundamentally, though, the weather of the world was changing, both politically and physically, in ways that get reflected pretty directly in the narrative. If we place the original version of *The Free* in the context of the political realities of early-1980s Ireland and England, we can see all kinds of echoes and resemblances. As a member of the Dublin Anarchist Group circa 1980, Gilliland collaborated on the short-lived newspaper *Resistance*, which, in its brief run, chronicled a number of facts that would later appear as fiction in *The Free*: the defense of a community-run Adventure Playground (much like the one Barney the Playworker ran), a School Resistance campaign, the creation of police-free “No Go Areas,” feminist critiques of male anarchists’ attitudes, and so on – but also, quite centrally, “stories about ‘state repression’ (H Block,

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<sup>3</sup> Gilliland even reimagines climate change – so often associated with post-apocalyptic survival scenarios of the Mad Max variety – not only as a survivable condition but as another condition for utopian abundance: “Climate Meltdown has caused constant gale force winds which are used to fill gas bottles with compressed air. You need lots of them, but they’re free and eco-friendly. All manner of devices are powered by pneumatics, new pre-heat technology and added catalysts make it efficient, powering Air-Tools, Air-Cars, guns and even the Eagle suits’ wings” (TF 437).



Mountjoy jail, the Curragh military prison, Noel & Marie Murray, torture of criminal suspects,” and so on. (Irishanarchisthistory 2012: n. pag.). This is rather precisely the atmosphere of the 1986 novel.

By 2007, not only had the political weather in Ireland changed quite a bit (following the culmination of peace talks in the Good Friday Agreement of 1998), but the global climate for radicalism had improved considerably. What used to be called the New Social Movements had undergone some important developments, for instance, in the emergence of third-wave feminist and queer contestations of gender and sexuality. At the same time – notwithstanding the tremendous challenges posed by ascendant neoliberalism and neoconservatism – anarchism itself had emerged from its period of deepest historical eclipse, becoming a critical factor in what Richard Day had called “the newest social movements.” (2005) These currents converge in the development of “Tactical Frivolity,” as described by Amory Starr:

Pink Bloc[s] [...] carnivalesque Reclaim the Streets tactics [...] creative blockading methods such as fake car wrecks, tripods, puppets, music, and dance in festive celebration which asserts confidence in happy and creative alternatives to the oppressive structures being confronted and the joy in struggling for liberation even in the face of frightening oppression. (2006: 68-69)

So it is that we find anarchists in the streets, circa 2002, chanting things like “Fat is sexy, bears are hot,/Saddle up and ride my cock,/I’ll strap it on, you wanna watch?” (Cochrane 2002: 25) The next year sees the publication of *We Are Everywhere: The Irresistible Rise of Global Anticapitalism* (ed. Notes From Nowhere), and another nine years later, *Why It’s Kicking Off Everywhere: The New Global Revolutions* (Mason 2003).

Is it any surprise that this “carnavalesque” atmosphere and the “confidence” that rides with it permeates Gilliland’s revised future scenario? Here, Bakhtin once again makes a good guide: it is Bakhtin, after all, who most thoroughly explored the “carnival” – once embodied in the medieval festival day, when the entire world of social and religious rules was turned upside down. For Bakhtin, novels were little sanctuaries for that festive spirit, preserving a “carnival sense of the world,” mixing together “serious and comic,” “prosaic and poetic speech.” (107-8) Interdiscursive mixing, you might call it. Gilliland calls it “taking the mickey.”

“Taking the mickey” (or “taking the piss”) is an Irish expression of apocryphal origin, possibly from Cockney rhyming slang, possibly playing off the slang term “mickey” in the sense of “penis,” meaning “to make fun of someone, to pull someone’s leg; to jeer at; to deride,” or more generally “hoaxing, mocking, or other insincere behaviour or speech.” (Victor/Dalzell 2007: 1623; Kallen 2013: 201) All of these senses are in evidence in chapter 11 of *The Free*, “Cuddly Toys,” wherein we meet Macker and his friends in the midst of a police raid on the aftermath of an especially



wild celebration:

And what a crazy party... Starring Macker the Magician... Leaping up on the table, holding a mock auction among the clothes and toys.

Inventing outrageous but fitting characters and jobs. Insisting they bid for goods and speak on stage.

It was so mad it was cool, and Macker had triumphed. The street gang had all dressed up. Swapping dares for promises, and rolling in helpless laughter.

Teasing and throwing poses. Bidding for each others [sic] erotic treasures...

Macker had been a panic. Doubling as a bumpkin, arguing with himself, switching character, and taking off snatches of pop songs.

We laughed so hard you wouldn't have noticed us choking. (TF 2011: 79-80)

Our Enemies in Blue rudely appear at the door, like Coleridge's Man From Porlock, to disrupt this little carnival. How to resist, how to escape? Macker rises to the occasion, assuring his mates that instead of fighting – in which event they'll be creamed – he'll buy them time by “wind[ing] them up”: donning a wig and a “high enraged housewife voice,” he blasts them with a farrago of stolen discourses:

*-Stop that right now. Stop now, get away from that door. You. Fat fella. I know you, that's private property you're destroying. For God's sake officers, there's children sleeping here, get out. Get away from that. Have you no shame sir, I'll have the law on you. You with the tattoo. Officers, arrest that man, my husband's in the Pool. They'll have your guts for garters, you there, you'll pay for this. There's decent people here, get back in your van right now you're a total disgrace to the force. You're.-* (TF 2011: 83)

Simultaneously invoking and mocking all the gods of the police – “private property,” husbands, decency, For the Sake of the Children, etc., etc. – this tactic doesn't work half bad: it sows confusion, scrambling the codes by which the smooth application of violence is managed. (Thompson 2010: 38-40). While the police hesitate, they are pelted with toys and clothing, until

a sudden gust of wind blew my black wig right off! Just like that. I snatched but lost it and it fell down among the officers. A riot cop lifted his visor and pointed up at me in the window.

*-That's Macker Mucdunna Sir.-* he shouted. *-That's a wanted man. He's only taking the mickey Sir.-*

*-Almighty shite.-* I remarked.



A kid had caught the wig and run off with it, dodging through the jam. Then I shouted in my little boy voice

-*'You listen to my Mama. Get out of here now this minute.'*- (TF 2011: 84)

A minute is all that is needed for our heroes to make their getaway – one of those “beautiful escape[s]” of which the historian Michelle Perrot speaks. (Qtd. in Colson 2019: 39)

Something similar is deployed as a strategy of resistance much later, after the initially successful revolution has been met with invasion. In the original version, this invasion is a nearly apocalyptic event, as the revolutionaries' guns and makeshift bombs are drastically outmatched by the might of an overseas military power. In the post-2007 versions, the primary response to this counter-revolutionary incursion is instead nonviolent resistance – “subvert[ing], infiltrat[ing], convert[ing] and corrupt[ing]” the occupation forces, while presenting them with an “Ultimatum”: back off or face a program of violent reprisals, “starting with their officers.” (TF 2011: 264, 310) The expiration of the Ultimatum deadline is preceded by “a program of entertainment” (TF 298) featuring a comic impersonator: “-*'Ladies and Laddies... Goodies and Baddies!... I give you!... Exclusively here today!... The right Horrible!... GENERAL... TOOTSY.. COOPERS!...'*” Stupid, complacent, cheerfully insisting on his good intentions, General Tootsy is a perfect straw-man target for mickey-taking (mockery), and he is, of course, himself a mickey-take (a hoax, a fake), albeit one that reveals the truth – claiming to be the saviors of “law and order,” promoters of “prosperity,” they are really here to demonstrate that “nobody can escape.” (TF 2011: 307-308) The invader's phallic power – his mickey, if you will – is well and truly taken.

But does taking the mickey really disarm dictators in the real world? How effective is this kind of carnivalesque protest against twenty-first century surveillance and military might? Isn't something like the ending of the original novel still quite a bit more probable? Such are the questions that might occur to a reasonably anxious (if not paranoid) reader.

Some commentators have commended *The Free* – in both its incarnations – for its realism in representing the possibilities for an anarchist revolution in the contemporary world as well as the seemingly impossible challenges facing such a revolution (cf. Jackson 1986: 6; Jaeckle 2015). It *is* realist, in the sense that Dickens' novels and Ibsen's plays were: namely, it's populated by human beings of fairly ordinary, limited power, rather than allegorical Prometheuses à la Percy Bysshe Shelley or superheroes à la *V For Vendetta*.<sup>4</sup> “Realism,” however, means one thing to political scientists and quite another thing to literary scholars. In political science, “realism,” in all

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<sup>4</sup> “It's about the revolution of the people, the dispossessed of this world [...] ordinary people, the dockers, the unemployed, the co-ops, the squatters, the rail workers [...] [p]eople who have boring jobs, suffer from hangovers, fuck, drop acid now and again and say silly things, swear, lose their tempers, are not immune to sexual jealousy and crack jokes [...]” (Jackson 1986: 6).



its varieties, is synonymous with the assumption that human beings are innately selfish and warlike, and that the future promises only “the same depressingly familiar things happening again and again.” (Elman 2005: 707-8, 710) In literary studies, “realism” is just another word for “verisimilitude,” a set of conventions for representing what a particular readership will take to be “like” life – as artificial, as arbitrary, as made-up as anything else. (Belsey 1989: 113) (It’s all a mickey-take, you might say.) Political transformation, from an anarchist perspective, is likeliest to happen precisely when our expectations about what is “likely” start to shift, when what we take life to be “like” *changes*.

From that perspective, the carnivalesque aspects of *The Free*, post-2007, are not a failure or even a refusal to accurately represent an objective reality; they are devices designed to “shift stances and open subjects to new becomings,” as J.K. Gibson-Graham put it. (2006: 9) They are an attempt to get paranoid readers to loosen their anxious grip on “reality,” or rather, to move away from an overly rigid and narrow sense of what is real that obscures our view of what is possible. It is we, the readers, who have invaded the pages of *The Free*, who are temporarily occupying its imaginary territory; it is we who are in need of being “subvert[ed], infiltrate[d], convert[ed] and corrupt[ed]” (or seduced!) by its vision of joyous potentiality. We need to explore its plausible scenarios and tactics for revolution, to be sure; we profit from its strategic thinking. But we also badly need to take the mickey out of the military and monetary realism in which we are trapped – material forces, to be sure, but also so many “words” and “phrases” that “hold us fixed in a society where we are functions, objects and subordinate clauses.” We need uses of language that invite us to play, to adventure. It is we who need to revise our visions of the future.

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