

ALEXANDER TROCCHI was born in Glasgow in 1925, the son of a Scottish mother and an Italian father. After one year of studying at Glasgow University, he was called up for war service in 1943, and joined the Royal Navy. He returned to complete his degree three years later. Afterwards he travelled in Europe, and settled down in Paris, where he edited *Merlin*, an avant-garde literary journal. He also started his writing career, producing work for the controversial publisher Olympia Press, including the first version of *Young Adam* in 1954. His lifelong drug habit began in this period. He then moved to the US, settling first in New York City, where he worked on a scow on the Hudson River, then in California, where the Beat community had relocated. It was during this time that he wrote possibly his most famous novel, *Cain's Book* (1961). He moved to London in the 1960s, where he more or less ceased his writing activities and remained until his death in 1984.



# *Young Adam*

Alexander Trocchi

With an introduction by Stewart Home



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Young Adam



## *Introduction*

ALEXANDER TROCCHI was born in Glasgow in 1925 and died in London in 1984. His life, as much as his writing, is the stuff of legend. Considered by many to be the most dissolute of the beats, for a time it looked like he was more likely to be remembered as “The Lord of Junk” than as a writer. Trocchi was notorious both for his prodigious chemical intake and pimping his wife Lyn to get money to pay for drugs. But times change and fashions do too; and now “Scots Alex”, as Trocchi was known on the west London drug scene, has become an almost respectable literary figure.

For contemporary Scots writers Trocchi’s immersion in the hippy counterculture makes him a more attractive literary figure than the country’s other relatively visible modernists of the Fifties and Sixties, such as Edwin Morgan, Ian Hamilton Finlay and Hugh MacDiarmid (all principally poets). Irvine Welsh has been quoted as calling Trocchi “the George Best of Scottish literature”. Other Scots writers owe even deeper debts to Trocchi; former boxer Barry Graham went as far as penning a Trocchi parody novel *The Book of Man* (1995). In London, where Trocchi settled in the early Sixties, he towers over those who might be seen as his most immediate English literary heirs, such as Ann Quin, B.S. Johnson and Alan Burns. Trocchi did little writing after washing up in London, but he cut a doomed and dashing figure hanging out with the likes of black power leader Michael Abdul Malik, and fellow beat generation stalwart William Burroughs.

There is considerable division over which Trocchi book is his best, but the consensus of opinion is either *Young Adam* (1954) or *Cain’s*

*Book* (1961). *Young Adam* tends to catch the attention of those less interested in drugs and literary experimentation. To date this book has suffered from being seen as a work of late-modernism cast in the same mould as Beckett, Genet and Ionesco. Trocchi had a hand in publishing all three of these writers when he lived in Paris in the early to mid-Fifties.

Trocchi's importance as a proto-postmodernist has been obscured by what in retrospect appears an arbitrary division between his porn novels and "serious" works. In fact *Young Adam*, the earlier of his two "serious" novels, was first published under the pseudonym Frances Lengel as a "dirty book" by Olympia Press in 1954. The other titles written by Trocchi and published by Olympia under this name are *Helen and Desire* (1954), *Carnal Days of Helen Seferis* (1954), *School for Sin* (1955) and *White Thighs* (1955).

Trocchi re-edited *Young Adam*, removing a number of the erotic passages, so that it might be issued by a "reputable" publisher at a time when the use of extended pornographic tropes in literary novels had yet to become an accepted postmodern practice (cf. Kathy Acker, Bret Easton Ellis and Chris Kraus). What Trocchi excised from his "definitive" version of *Young Adam* were principally sex scenes, with one important exception. This is a climactic passage where Trocchi's narrator Joe recalls an argument with Cathie, his former lover, whose dead body he helps drag from a canal at the beginning of the book. Cathie is supporting Joe as he unsuccessfully attempts to complete a novel. Joe describes a day on which instead of writing he made custard, and when Cathie comes home this leads to a row. She refuses to eat the custard, so Joe throws it at her as she is taking off her work clothes, then he thrashes her with a rough slat of wood, before proceeding to tip ink, various sauces and vanilla essence over the girl:

I don't know whether she was crying or laughing as I poured a two-pound bag of sugar over her. Her whole near-naked body was

twitching convulsively, a blue breast and a yellow and red one, a green belly, and all the colour of her pain and sweat and gnashing. By that time I was hard. I stripped off my clothes, grasped the slat of the egg crate, and moved among her with prick and stick, like a tycoon.

When I rose from her, she was a hideous mess, almost unrecognizable as a white woman, and the custard and the ink and the sugar sparked like surprising meats on the twist of her satisfied mound.

Trocchi is clearly using a fictional voice and, although it might be argued that he shares some of the Joe's misogyny, he was not prone to the racism implicit in the term "white woman". Likewise Trocchi's decision not to use Cathie's name at any point during his description of the "splashing" and "thrashing" is clearly a conscious device aimed at revealing Joe's dehumanized "nature" as he reduces the object of his lust and fury to the same base level. This is just one of many passages that demonstrate Trocchi did not want Joe to be a sympathetic "character", or for the reader to trust him as a narrator. Joe's claim, sustained pretty much throughout the second and third parts of *Young Adam*, that Cathie met her death accidentally is not necessarily to be believed, just as at the end of *American Psycho* (1991) by Bret Easton Ellis the reader is left uncertain as to whether the narrator Patrick Bateman is a psychotic serial killer or a pathetic fantasist.

Another contemporary New York writer who retrospectively helps illuminate Trocchi's aesthetic stance here is Lynne Tillman. At the climax of her novel *No Lease On Life* (1998), the narrator Elizabeth Hall is so frustrated by her inability to find any peace in her Lower East Side apartment that she sends a rain of eggs splattering onto those making noise in the street below her. Tillman's book is loosely modelled on James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922). The action

takes place over twenty-four hours, but the tenor of the work and its denouement mark it as self-consciously postmodern. Tillman and Trocchi, who knew each other briefly, share a love of classic modernist literature, but at the same time both have moved beyond what even by the early 1950s was an exhausted literary form.

Trocchi's narrator, Joe, only admits that he knew Cathie halfway through *Young Adam*. Joe claims he'd wanted to focus on his attraction to his subsequent lover Ella, and therefore didn't explain how Cathie fitted into the overall picture of his life. At this point it is Joe and not the reader who has lost the plot. He is confused and says he killed Cathie: "There's no point in denying it since no one would believe me". To underline his sense of disorientation, Trocchi makes Joe speak of police "sensationalism" being reported in the newspapers, a reversal of commonplaces about "media sensationalism". The reader only has Joe's version of events, and Trocchi goes to great lengths to underline his unreliability:

It was an odd thing that I, who saw Cathie topple into the river, should have been the one to find her body the following morning at one mile's distance from where she fell in. I felt at the time that it was ludicrous, so incredible that if Leslie had not happened to come up on deck at that time I should most certainly have refused to accept such an improbable event and tried to thrust her away again with the boat hook.

While life is full of coincidences, the plots of novels are the result of conscious design. Most writers would avoid happenstances like the one Trocchi employs here, because although it just might occur in life, it isn't plausible as fiction. Trocchi, of course, uses it to undermine Joe's believability as a narrator. *Young Adam* has been called an "existential thriller" and compared to *The Outsider* (1942) by Albert Camus, but such descriptions rest on a misreading

of Trocchi's text as being modernist. An unreliable narrator like Joe cannot be an existential protagonist because the philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus and their various followers is predicated on notions of authenticity. Joe is not even an authentic bargeman, he is a university drop-out who works on the canals for at most a few months.

*Young Adam* is neither an "existential thriller", nor merely a parody of that genre, but rather an entirely new type of work. Among the many indications that *Young Adam* is a postmodern fiction is the fading away of geographical descriptions as the book progresses. The first part of the narrative is a burlesque of exhausted modernist literature. Trocchi makes his prose deliberately awkward, thereby reversing the tactic he employed to parody pornography, which he wrote both too carefully and too well. Towards the end of *Young Adam* Trocchi has Joe tell us:

I was out in the street early and found myself walking along Argyle Street in the general direction of the courts. I stopped for a cup of tea at a snack counter, smoked two or three cigarettes, and then continued on my way. As I walked through the town, a strange feeling of confidence settled upon me.

There is a pleasing vagueness to this passage, allowing the reader to draw their own associations from the name Argyle Street. Given that this is one of the longest boulevards in Glasgow – running from the High Street out to Kelvingrove Park in the west end – a conventional (as opposed to a pulp or postmodern literary) novelist would have described the section of the road they passed along in some detail. It should go without saying that Argyle Street today is very different to the one being invoked when these lines were written more than fifty years ago; to the east it is now littered with pound shops and dominated by the glass hulk of the 1980s St Enoch

Shopping Centre, while the M8 motorway completely separates that part of the avenue from the more residential section to the west. Notice also *Young Adam*'s trademark sloppiness in the passage quoted above, achieved via Trocchi's self-conscious repetition of words such as "street" and "walked/walking",

Returning to Joe, he is confident he won't have to answer to the police or courts (or indeed his less sophisticated readers) for killing Cathie. At the end of *Young Adam* an innocent man is condemned to death for the girl's murder; and Joe's cold psychotic nature is underlined by his reaction as he watches the drama unfold in court: "The man who was created in the speeches of the procurator was fitted admirably to the crime which the police had invented – a very gratifying thing indeed to see two branches of the public service, the judiciary and the police, work together in such imaginative harmony." Joe can't even stay on this train of thought; he breaks to write two sentences about playing pinball in a Jamaica Street dive, then returns to the courtroom to hear the inevitable guilty verdict on the innocent man. Joe is cast very much in the same mould as another of Trocchi's "anti-heroes", the murderous and lustful Saul Folsrom in *White Thighs*. Both these non-characters owe something to Lee Anderson, the narrator of Boris Vian's *I Spit on Your Graves* (1946).

*I Spit on Your Graves* was a literary hoax that was first published as if it had been written in English by an Afro-American author called Vernon Sullivan, and Vian was merely its translator. In fact there was no Vernon Sullivan, the ostensible author of this work was a figment of Vian's imagination and the book was written in French. Vian's first-person narrator, Lee Anderson, adopts a prose style and worldview heavily influenced by Henry Miller and James M. Cain. Although Anderson identifies himself as an Afro-American male, he is able to pass as white and revels in seducing privileged southern girls who have no idea that he is black. These

sexual conquests are presented as a form of revenge against the white racists, who Anderson tells us murdered his darker-skinned brother. However, Anderson's sexual shenanigans are a mere prelude to him slaughtering two white sisters, Lou and Jean Asquith.

*I Spit on Your Graves* was hugely controversial and there was much speculation about its authorship until the hoax was finally revealed. Trocchi's greatest success through scandal in the dirty book business was a faked fifth volume of *My Life And Loves* (1959), supposedly written by the philanderer and literary middleman Frank Harris. Again this was Trocchi engaging in a burlesque – he disliked Harris as a middle-brow literary figure and, although the book was accepted as genuine upon publication, it was an opportunity for its real author to parody and pillory the man who was supposed to have written it. This is typical of Trocchi's approach to writing fiction, and the only real exception to it is *Cain's Book*, which in any case is fictionalized autobiography alchemized into an “anti-novel”. The jury is still out on whether *Young Adam* or *Cain's Book* is Trocchi's greatest work but, regardless, the former remains the best introduction to his writing, because it is so much more typical of his proto-postmodernist approach.

– Stewart Home, 2008



Young Adam



## Part One



# 1

**T**Hese are times when what is to be said looks out of the past at you – looks out like someone at a window and you in the street as you walk along. Past hours, past acts, take on an uncanny isolation; between them and you who look back on them now there is no continuity.

This morning, the first thing after I got out of bed, I looked in the mirror. It is of chromium-plated steel and I always carry it with me. It is unbreakable. My beard had grown imperceptibly during the night and now my cheeks and chin were covered with a short stubble. My eyes were less bloodshot than they had been during the previous fortnight. I must have slept well. I looked at my image for a few moments and I could see nothing strange about it. It was the same nose and the same mouth, and the little scar above and thrusting down into my left eyebrow was no more obvious than it had been the day before. Nothing out of place and yet everything was, because there existed between the mirror and myself the same distance, the same break in continuity which I have always felt to exist between acts which I committed yesterday and my present consciousness of them.

But there is no problem.

I don't ask whether I am the "I" who looked or the image which was seen, the man who acted or the man who thought about the act. For I know now that it is the structure of language itself which is treacherous. The problem comes into being as soon as I begin to use the word "I". There is no contradiction in things, only in the words we invent to refer to things. It is the word "I" which is

arbitrary and which contains within it its own inadequacy and its own contradiction.

No problem. Somewhere from beyond the dark edge of the universe a hyena's laugh. I turned away from the face in the mirror then. Between then and now I have smoked nine cigarettes.

It had come floating downstream, willowy, like a tangle of weeds. She was beautiful in a pale way – not her face, although that wasn't bad, but the way her body seemed to have given itself to the water, its whole gesture abandoned, the long white legs apart and trailing, sucked downwards slightly at the feet.

As I leant over the edge of the barge with a boathook I didn't think of her as a dead woman, not even when I looked at the face. She was like some beautiful white water-fungus, a strange shining thing come up from the depths, and her limbs and her flesh had the ripeness and maturity of a large mushroom. But it was the hair more than anything; it stranded away from the head like long grasses. Only it was alive, and because the body was slow, heavy, torpid, it had become a forest of antennae, caressing, feeding on the water, intricately.

It was not until Leslie swore at me for being so handleless with the boathook that I drew her alongside. We reached down with our hands. When I felt the chilled flesh under my fingertips I moved more quickly. It was sagging away from us and it slopped softly and obscenely against the bilges. It was touching it that made me realize how bloated it was.

Leslie said: "For Christ's sake get a bloody grip on it!"

I leant down until my face was nearly touching the water and with my right hand got hold of one of the ankles. She turned over smoothly then, like the fat underbelly of a fish. Together we pulled her to the surface and, dripping a curtain of river-water, over the gunwale. Her weight settled with a flat, splashing sound on the wooden boards of the deck. Puddles of water formed quickly at the knees and where the chin lay.

We looked at her and then at each other but neither of us said anything. It was obscene, the way death usually is, frightening and obscene at the same time.

“A hundred and thirty at eleven pence a pound”: an irrelevant thought... I didn’t know how it came to me, and for more than one reason, partly because I knew Leslie would be shocked, I didn’t utter it. Later you will see what I mean.

The ambulance didn’t arrive until after breakfast. I don’t suppose they were in a hurry because I told them she was dead on the telephone. We threw a couple of potato sacks over her so that she wouldn’t frighten the kid and then I went over and telephoned and went back and joined Leslie and his wife and the kid at breakfast.

“No egg this morning?” I said.

Ella said no, that she’d forgotten to buy them the previous day when she went to get the stores. But I knew that wasn’t true because I’d seen her take them from her basket when she returned. That made me angry, that she didn’t take the trouble to remember how she’d examined the shells because she thought she might have broken one of them, and me there in the cabin at the time. It was a kind of insult.

“Salt?” I said, the monosyllable carrying the cynical weight of my disbelief.

“Starin’ you in the face,” she said.

It was damp. I had to scrape it from the side of the dish with my knife. Ella ignored the scratching sound and Leslie, his face twitching as it sometimes did, went on reading the paper.

It was only when I had began to eat my bacon that it occurred to me they’d had an egg. I could see the traces on the prongs of their forks. And after I’d gone all the way across the dock to the telephone... Leslie got up noisily, without his second cup of tea. He was embarrassed. Ella had her back to me and I swore at her under my breath. A moment later she too went up on deck, taking the kid with her, and I was left alone to finish my breakfast.

We were all on deck when the ambulance arrived. It was one of those new ambulances, streamlined, and the men were very smart. Two policemen arrived at the same time, one of them a sergeant, and Leslie went ashore to talk to them. Jim, the kid, was sitting on an upturned pail near the bows so that he would get a good view. He was eating an apple. I was still annoyed and I sat down on a hatch and waited. I looked out across the water at the black buffalo-like silhouette of a tug which crept upstream near the far shore. Beyond it on the far bank, a network of cranes and girders closed in about a ship. "To sail away on a ship like that," I thought, "away. Montevideo, Macao, anywhere. What the hell am I doing here? The pale North." It was still early and the light was still thin but already a saucer of tenuous smoke was gathering at the level of the roofs.

Then the ambulance men came across the quay and on to the barge and I pointed to where we had put the body under the sacks. I left them to it. I was thinking again of the dead woman and the egg and the salt and I was bored by the fact that it was the beginning of the day and not the end of it, days being each the same as the other as they were then, alike as beads on a string, with only the work on the barge, and Leslie to talk to. For I seldom talked to Ella, who appeared to dislike me and who gave the impression she only put up with me because of him: a necessary evil, the hired hand.

And then I noticed Ella pegging out some clothes at the stern.

I had often seen her do it before but it had never struck me in the same way. I had always thought of her as Leslie's wife – she was screaming at him about something or calling him Mister High-and-Mighty in a thick sarcastic voice – and not as a woman who could attract another man. That had never occurred to me.

But there she was, trying very hard not to look round, pretending she wasn't interested in what was going on, in the ambulance men and all that, and I found myself looking at her in a new way.

She was one of those heavy women, not more than thirty-five, with strong buttocks and big thighs, and she was wearing a tight green cotton dress which had pulled up above the backs of her knees as she stretched up to put the clothes on the line, and I could see the pink flesh of her ankles growing over the rim at the back of her shoes. She was heavy all right, but her waist was small and her legs weren't bad and I found myself suddenly liking the strong look of her. I watched her, and I could see her walk through a park at night, her heels clacking, just a little bit hurriedly, and her heavy white calves were moving just ahead of me, like glow-worms in the dark. And I could imagine the soft sound of her thighs as their surfaces grazed.

As she reached up her buttocks tightened, the cotton dress fitting itself to their thrust, and then she alighted on her heels, bent down, and shook the excess water out of the next garment.

A moment later she looked round. Her curiosity had got too much for her, and she caught me looking at her. Her look was uncertain. She flushed slightly, maybe remembering the egg, and then, very quickly, she returned to her chore.

The police sergeant was making notes in a little black notebook, occasionally licking the stub of his pencil, and the other cop was standing with his mouth open watching the stretcher-bearers who seemed to be taking their time. They had laid down the stretcher on the quay and were looking enquiringly at the police sergeant, who went over and looked under the sheet which they had thrown over her when they put her on the stretcher. One of them spat. I glanced away again.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Ella's legs move.

Four kids from somewhere or other, the kind of kids who hang about vacant lots, funeral processions, or street accidents, stood about five yards away and gaped. They had been there almost since the beginning. Now the other policeman went over to them and told them to go away.

Reluctantly, they moved farther away and lingered. They grinned and whispered to each other. Then they whooped at the gesticulating cop and ran away. But they didn't go far, just round the corner of the shed across the quay, and I could see them poking their heads out round the corner, climbing over each other into sight. I remember one of them had flaming red hair.

The ambulance men had lifted the stretcher again but one of them stumbled. A very naked white leg slipped from under the sheet and trailed along the ground like a parsnip. I glanced at Ella. She was watching it. She was horrified but it seemed to fascinate her. She couldn't tear her eyes away.

"Woah!" the man at the back said.

They lowered the stretcher again and the front man turned round and arranged the leg out of sight. He handled it as though he were ashamed of it.

And then they hoisted the stretcher into the back of the ambulance and slammed the doors. At that moment Jim finished his apple and threw the core at the cat, which was crouched on its belly at the edge of the quay. The cat jumped, ran a bit, and then walked away with its tail in the air. Jim took out a tin whistle and began to play on it.

The sergeant closed his notebook, looped elastic round it, and went over to speak to the driver of the ambulance. Leslie was lighting his pipe.

Leslie had been a big man when he was younger, and he was still big at the time, but his muscles were running to flesh and his face was heavy round the chin so that his head had the appearance of a square pink jube-jube sucked away drastically at the top, and, as he didn't shave very often, the rough pinkness of his cheeks was covered by a colourless spreading bristle. He had small light blue eyes sunk like buttons in soft wax, and they could be kind or angry. When he was drunk they were pink and threatening. The way he was

standing, running forwards and outwards from his razor-scraped Adam's apple to the square brass buckle of his belt, you could see he wasn't a young man; in his middle fifties, I suppose.

The ambulance was driving away and the sergeant was going over to talk to Leslie again. I remember it struck me as funny at the time that he should address all his remarks to Leslie. I watched the cat sniffing at something which looked like the backbone of a herring near the quay wall. It tried to turn it over with its paw. Then I heard Ella yelling at Jim. It seemed she hadn't noticed him before.

"I thought I told you to stay down below! I'll get your father to you!"

And then she turned on me and said I ought to be ashamed of myself for not keeping the boy out of the way. Did I think it was good for him to see a corpse? She said she thought I put the sacks over the body so as not to frighten him. I was about to say he didn't seem very frightened to me – sitting there playing "Thou art lost and gone forever, oh my darling, Clementine" on his tin whistle – but I could see she wasn't very angry. I could see she was in some way trying to get her own back for the long look I had at her backside, and that amused me and I didn't say anything. She turned away, lifted the basin which had contained the wet clothes, and I heard her clump down through the companionway into the cabin. Then, suddenly, I laughed. The kid was looking at me. But I went on laughing.

There was the discussion about suicide or murder. She asked him about it as soon as the police were gone, as soon as the ambulance moved away and the sergeant had finished with Leslie, who with an unlit pipe in his mouth, came back aboard.

"What did the police say?"

I watched her carefully. She was inquisitive but wanted at the same time for us to think that she was above that kind of thing if we weren't.