


6 For two useful accounts, see Paul Addison, "The Road from 1945," and Peter Hennessy, "The Attlee Governments, 1945-51," in Peter Hennessy and Anthony (eds.) Ruling Performance: British Governments from Attlee to Thatcher, (Oxford and New York: Basil Blackwell, 1987). The volume as a whole can be recommended as a coherent series of highly readable and informative accounts of successive governments, accompanied by useful chronologies of important events. The questions "What went wrong, and when?" inform each of the chapters, which contain brief but useful discussions of the primary and secondary sources available to the authors and full scholarly annotation.


Malcolm Bradbury’s *The Modern British Novel* includes a brief but fairly comprehensive survey of novels from the period I am mainly concerned with, as does Alan Massie’s *The Novel Today*. Both include serviceable bibliographies, although Massie’s is restricted to novels while Bradbury’s includes both critical and historical works. D. J. Taylor’s *After the War: The Novel and England since 1945* is a more detailed treatment of the period than Bradbury’s, although from my critical perspective its value is limited by its author’s conviction that all good novels are novels of character, that the form reached its zenith in the nineteenth century, that contemporary novels are lamentably inferior to their precursors insofar as they deviate from Victorian norms, and that this inferiority is finally to be explained by the debased conditions of modern life and thought, to say nothing of feeling. Taylor’s *A Vain Conceit* (London: Bloomsbury, 1989) is similarly quirky but entertaining and informative. Alison Lee’s *Realism and Power: Postmodern British Fiction* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990) is an intelligent and incisive study from a critical viewpoint diametrically opposed to Taylor’s, in that Lee approvingly singles out for critical attention novels which challenge those assumptions of realist fiction that Taylor thinks indispensable to its success. Alan Sinfield’s excellent *Literature, Politics and Culture in Postwar Britain* is much more sophisticated than

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Sinfield's "cultural materialist" analysis of the dynamic post-war social/political/cultural
formation seems to me to be much the most useful and persuasive of recent forays into this field. Arthur Marwick instances Sinfield's cultural materialism as an example of "current trends in cultural studies in Britain" which he finds objectionable:

Whatever the sophistication of contemporary Marxist structuralism and post-structuralism, and however emphatic their rejection of 'vulgar' Marxism's economic determinism, they still take as read certain basic assumptions of traditional Marxism which, in fact, are highly problematic: classes are assumed to be much as Marx decreed them to be, the reality of class conflict to be an ultimate truth, ideology to operate as Marx said it operated, the dialectic to be reality, so that at any time an alternative society is presumed to be in process of formation. (Culture 6-7)

Marwick's claim for the superiority of his own "simple text book" rests mainly on what he regards as his more accurate and nuanced concept of class: "What is central to the study of culture is to have a clear and substantiable mapping of class structure as it exists in the society one is studying, which may very well be different from class structure as laid down a priori by Marxist tradition" (7). His study, however, is more useful for its synoptic survey of post-war British "culture" than for its analysis of any of the productions it mentions. Marwick proceeds as if the significance of individual works is somehow indexed in the class backgrounds of their producers; this leads to "analyses" consisting in their entirety of sentences such as "Another important Wednesday Play author was working-class, but Oxford-educated, Dennis Potter, whose Vote, Vote, vote for Nigel Barton took a working-class lad through Oxford into Labour politics" (89-90). The inadequacy of this procedure becomes obvious to Marwick himself when he comes

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to survey "the world of making and enjoying music;" his class-analysis collapses into what a Marxist perspective, traditional or non-traditional, would recognize as bourgeois mystification: "That world could not simply be mapped along lines of class: the sources of cultural practice come from deep in the human spirit" (99).


29 Williams has recently been accused by Philip Goldstein in *The Politics of Literary Theory: An Introduction to Marxist Criticism* (Tallahassee: Florida State University
Press, 1990), of being "apolitical" and "humanist" because he appears to believe in the unmediated nature of personal experience: "While Althusser and Foucault root ideological discourse in institutions that reproduce it at both the formal and the experiential levels, Williams considers ideology a property of institutions and not of concrete, individual experience" (92); this argument cites a passage (Williams, *Marxism* 132), in which Williams explains his term "structures of feeling." It seems worth pointing out that Williams is not so naive. He does indeed regard the "social content" of art and literature as being of a "present and affective kind," but it is clear from the passage quoted in my text (and which in Williams appears on the page following the one to which Goldstein takes such exception) that "present" here does not carry the metaphysical contraband which Goldstein is so eager to sniff out. As early as *Culture and Society, 1780-1950* (1958; rpt. New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1966), Williams maintained that systems of belief were lived. The hegemonic ideology is precisely the one that is lived, which is why an oppositional ideology, a challenge to hegemony, is at a disadvantage; it will seem abstract: "There is always a system of some kind: one system may be established and therefore confused with permanent 'human nature'; another system may challenge it and may be called, because it is still in the stage of doctrine, dogmatic and abstract. The argument against system as such is either fretful or ignorant" (58-9). This shows that Williams does not elevate "experience" over "system," — far from it; to do so is to acquiesce in the strategy whereby socialism is dismissed as "utopian" because 'human nature' as we know from 'experience' precludes socialism's success. It also explains why Williams himself wrote novels.

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35 Giles Gordon, quoted by Massie, 3.


40 The selection of essays included by Malcolm Bradbury in *The Novel Today* (Manchester: Manchester U.P, 1977) provides a valuable rehearsal of the traditional vs. experimental debate as it existed in the 1970s, while Bradbury’s introduction is a masterly summary that places it in a wider historical context.


43 As Alison Lee reminds us, many so-called Realist novels are quite different from what Realist theory would have them be: “The doctrine of impersonality, as well as other Realist theories, is often espoused by authors in their critical writings while their novels attest to an opposing practice.... Novels of the period [the nineteenth century] which are even now reputed to be examples of high Realism — particularly those by George Eliot, Gustave Flaubert, and Henry James — are certainly aware of their own artifice and their own processes, even if their authors, in their own non-fiction texts, take a different view” (*Realism and Power: Postmodern British Fiction* [London and New York: Routledge, 1990], 9-10). D. J. Taylor puts it even more bluntly: “Increasingly, looking at the

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'realist' masterpieces of the Victorian age you are led to the conclusion that there is no such thing as realism" (*A Vain Conceit*, 12).

David Lodge draws attention to the difference and suggests why it has been so often elided: "... it is difficult to conceive of there being a conflict of interests between the novel and realism — whether one uses that elastic term primarily in a formal sense (as I do), to denote a particular mode of presentation which, roughly speaking, treats fictional events as if they were a kind of history, or in a more qualitative sense, to denote a literary aesthetic of truth-telling. For most of the novel's life-span, one of these notions of realism has tended to imply the other" (*The Novelist at the Crossroads* [Ithaca, NY: Cornell, 1971], 4).

For example, Patricia Waugh's discussion of "a sub-category of metafictional novels" which insert "real historical events or personages into an overtly fictional context" speaks of them as if their only function is to expose "the fictional construction of history" (*Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* [London and New York: Methuen, 1984; 104-108]). The danger of this emphasis is clear from her treatment of E.L. Doctorow's *The Book of Daniel*, where the twin suggestions that "history is the ultimate fiction we are all living" and that "our personalities are finally always constructed out of ideology" are held to warrant the conclusion that "individual heroism and sacrifice in a political cause is therefore ultimately futile" (107). Although this view is implicitly alleged to follow from the poststructuralists' arguments about "reality," it is really a misunderstanding of those arguments. Its whiff of despair
("ultimately futile") emanates from a sense of loss of that transcendental signified towards which the words ultimate, finally and ultimately are gesturing, and it is therefore a manifestation of the "nostalgia for origins" that characterises not poststructuralism but the very assumptions that poststructuralism is critiquing. The point of the poststructuralist deconstruction of the history/fiction or reality/illusion binary oppositions is not to leave us with "mere illusion," with the futility of a life robbed of its "reality" and imprisoned within "fiction" — it is to make us aware that because words and concepts such as fiction and illusion take their meaning and force from the oppositions within which they function, a poststructuralist critique of reality and history is simultaneously and necessarily a critique of illusion and fiction. If (to put it crudely) "reality" is different from what we thought it was, so is "fiction:" a recognition of the "fictional" construction of history is grounds for despair only in a reader who has not understood this.

46 David Lodge stipulated the term "problematic novel" for "the novel which exploits more than one of these modes [novel, non-fiction novel, fabulation] without fully committing itself to any, the novel-about-itself, the trick-novel, the game-novel, the puzzle-novel, the novel that leads the reader (who wishes, naively, only to be told what to believe) through a fair-ground of illusions and deceptions, distorting mirrors and trap­doors that open disconcertingly under his feet, leaving him ultimately not with any simple or reassuring message or meaning but with a paradox about the relation of art to life" (The Novelist at the Crossroads, 2). Alison Lee’s reading of Julian Barnes’ Flaubert’s Parrot as a modest example of this kind is very persuasive (Realism and
Power 36-40), while her similar interpretation of Peter Ackroyd’s Hawksmoor seems to me incomplete because it ignores the extent to which that novel implicitly proposes a different interpretation of history from the one it is subverting. The power of Ackroyd’s novel derives not from its postmodern “trickiness” but from its author’s interest in something beyond postmodern trickiness: as A.S. Byatt has maintained, “to be ‘good’, whatever form you use, takes more primitive gifts of curiosity and greed, about things other than literature. That these gifts are harder to discuss in academic essays is maybe part cause of our contemporary unease” (“People in Paper Houses” in The Contemporary English Novel, ed. Malcolm Bradbury and David Palmer [Stratford-upon-Avon Studies 18; London: Edward Arnold, 1979], 41.

47 Linda Hutcheon discusses historiographic metafiction at length in A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction (New York and London: Routledge 1988) and in The Politics of Postmodernism New York and London: 1989). Although she rightly foregrounds postmodernism’s questioning of “history” and how we come to know it, she also recognizes that in postmodern novels such as those of Márquez and Rushdie, “It is not simply a case of novels metafictionally revelling in their own narrativity or fabulation; here narrative representation — story-telling — is a historical and a political act. Perhaps it always is” (The Politics of Postmodernism, 51).

49 Alison Lee. *Realism and Power*. 4. Lee argues that the references to Hawksmoor’s six London churches function only to “create an illusion of ‘reality’” which the novel then deconstructs (36).


52 Emil Kaufmann argues that beyond the main trends in eighteenth-century English architecture (English Baroque, English Palladianism, Neoclassicism, and Romanticism), “there were powerful undercurrents which remained unnoticed, but which were to foretell the direction architecture was to take in the future.... It may be asked why these currents were ignored by practically all historians....” (*Architecture in the Age of Reason*, 3). Kaufmann’s Hawksmoor is by no means “a typical representative of the Baroque” (20) but an architect who, like his occasional collaborator Sir John Vanbrugh, “opposed the Baroque system in the strongest way” (18-19), failing to found a school because he and Vanbrugh were “too bold for their time” (20).

53 In its effectivity, this does not seem to me so very different from the nineteenth-century historical novel’s use of historical referent, even though the postmodern novel will profess to conceive the ontological status of its referent very differently. Citing Barbara Foley to the effect that the nineteenth-century historical novel introduces world-historical figures in order to lend “an aura of extratextual validation to the text’s generalizations and judgments,” Linda Hutcheon comments that in the postmodern

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novel, those generalizations and judgments “are promptly undercut and questioned by the revealing of the true intertextual, rather than extratextual, identity of the sources of that validation” (A Poetics of Postmodernism, 120). This, strictly speaking, may well be the case, but I am arguing that the postmodern “historiographic metafiction” is nevertheless availing itself of the authority to be derived from an appeal to the very history whose status it is questioning. This, I suggest, is necessarily so, because “realism” (in the sense of a belief in an empirically verifiable external world) constitutes something like the horizon of thought in our scientific age — if this were not so, there would be little point in the postmodernist project of challenging it.

54 Ben Okri. The Famished Road. London: Jonathan Cape, 1991. “Dad’s boots passed from hand to hand, precipitating many jokes, and were eventually thrown out of the window” (43); “The photographer snored with his nose close to Dad’s rescued boots...” (48).


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Margaret Drabble’s Pathological Novels


71 All quotations from the last three novels are from A Dance to the Music of Time: Fourth Movement. Boston: Little, Brown, 1976. This volume collects Books Do Furnish a Room (cited in my text as Books), Temporary Kings (cited as Kings), and Hearing Secret Harmonies (cited as Harmonies), but paginates each novel individually.

72 Familiar, that is, since Roland Barthes anatomised Balzac’s stratagems in S/Z.


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85 Bennett, Alan. *The Old Country*. London: Faber, 1978. 11. The play was first performed in September 1977, and presents a wonderful instance of things being out of place: although every aspect of the setting, dialogue and characters initially suggests that the action is taking place in a quintessentially-English England, the play is set in Russia, in the dacha of a fugitive English spy.


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91 Kenneth Ramchand, in a 1982 article reworked as an introduction to the 1985 Longman reissue of *The Lonely Londoners*, argues that the novel is not as loose and episodic as it has been portrayed, but he locates a novelistic structure in the development of its "central character," Moses: "the process which the whole book may be said to be about [is] Moses's individuation, and his emergence as a thinking creature...." (18).

92 E. K. Braithwaite. "Sir Galahad and the Islands." *BIM*, 7, 25 (1957); reprinted in Nasta, 25. Selvon's reader should already be aware that Galahad is not one to shirk his social obligations. When he arrives in England, Moses explains to him ("to find out what kind of fellar he really is") that he is entitled to refuse the jobs the labour exchange finds for him and go on welfare instead, but Galahad isn't even tempted: "Galahad think about all the things that Moses tell him, then he say, 'Boy, I don't know about you, but I new in
this country and I don't want to start antising on the state unless I have to. Me, I am a born hustler" (41).


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99 This occurs in a section excised from the 1984 reprint from which, for the reader's convenience, I elsewhere quote. It can be found on 109 of the original edition (London: Heinemann, 1934).


101 Citing Franco Moretti's *Signs Taken For Wonders* (London: Verso, 1983), Alison Lee makes the point succinctly: “What is seen as the usual transparency of human communication, in these stories, is criminally ruptured, resulting in a chaos of ‘semantic ambiguity’” (*Realism and Power*, 67). Moretti describes Sherlock Holmes as the detective “who cannot go wrong, because he possesses the stable code, at the root of every mysterious message — mysterious, that is, for the reader, who is kept in the dark with regard to the code, while Holmes takes in the only possible meaning of the various clues in a glance.... Holmes is... the great *doctor* of the late Victorians, who convinces them that society is still a great *organism*: a unitary and knowable body” (revised edition; London: Verso, 1988, 145).


See D. J. Taylor's *After the War: The Novel and England since 1945* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1993), for a discussion of this literary phenomenon as one of “The Literary Consequences of Mrs. Thatcher” (Chapter 12, 271 ff.)


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124 Mary Douglas. *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. New York and Washington: Praeger, 1966. St. Catherine and Sartre are to be found on pages 7 and 38 respectively. In Douglas’ text St. Catherine believed that “Sound hygiene was incompatible with charity, so she deliberately drank off a bowl of pus.”

125 For an interesting summary of the critical bewilderment and censure that greeted *The Middle Ground* when it was published — and for a staunch defense of the novel against its detractors — see Pamela S. Bromberg. “Narrative in Drabble’s *The Middle Ground*: Relativity versus Teleology. *Contemporary Literature*. 24 (1983). 468.


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