No novel is without its assumptions. It is important to find them out, for they are not always the same assumptions the reader is ready, unconsciously, to make.

William H. Gass. Fiction and the Figures of Life.\textsuperscript{38}

A Parochial Affair?

The time is not long past when it was common to hear the English novel spoken of as a tired, worn-out, miserably parochial affair, obstinately clinging to a traditional, realistic form in an age when continental European and American novelists had long abandoned it. "Our realistic literature," claimed Peter Ackroyd in 1975, was the sign of "a dispirited nation" in which "the social weakness runs very deep," and the root cause of literary and social decline was England’s obstinate clinging to a "humanism" and to concepts of "individual" and "community" which had elsewhere been jettisoned in the course of "that formal self-criticism and theoretical debate which sustained European modernism."
The humanism which we take to be our inheritance and our foundation — apparently unaware of its origin in the late seventeenth century — has turned out to be an empty strategy, without philosophical content or definitive form.

It is a paucity that, with certain few honourable exceptions, manifests itself in English creative writing. Our own literature has revealed no formal sense of itself and continues no substantial language. Our writing has acquiesced in that orthodoxy... [which rests] upon a false aesthetic of subjectivity and a false context of realism. And it is this conventional aesthetic which has been reified into the English “tradition.”

Ackroyd, who had worked at Yale University, was writing in the midst of the headiness of the French poststructuralism which had made Yale its U.S. headquarters in that period (there was an important outpost at Johns Hopkins in Baltimore), but the theoretical heavy artillery he acquired there simply allowed him to restate more forcefully what had already become a critical commonplace.

One way to counter Ackroyd’s claims is to object that his poststructuralism was not poststructuralist enough. If, as the poststructuralists claim, our notions of “self” and “world” are constructs rather than empirical or a priori realities, then an “aesthetic of subjectivity” and a “context of realism” cannot be in any simple way “false” — they merely constitute one set of possibilities for constructing a world and a life, and a world so constructed cannot be essentially more or less true, more or less false, than one constructed by an alternative set of concepts. As the poststructuralist philosopher Jacques Derrida has reminded us, the fact that none of our

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beliefs is warranted to be “true” by a transcendent “ground” or “centre” does not mean that we can dispense with such “metaphysical” concepts, only that we should acknowledge them to be constructs and not ultimate realities. As I shall show in a subsequent chapter, the novelist A.S. Byatt, herself quite at home in poststructuralist thought, might have written her Booker-Prize-winning Possession as a rebuttal of Ackroyd’s position — as a demonstration that a life constructed in accordance with the conventions of the Victorian novel is not only perhaps preferable to the comparative paucity and thinness of a life structured by a vulgar postmodernism but also one that it is possible for us to recover and so make “real” by an arduous and disciplined act of literary and historical imagination.

If Ackroyd held “subjectivity” and “realism” to be “false,” I suspect it was because had not entirely rid himself of a belief in a Whig-like concept of history that both poststructuralist thought and Ackroyd’s own subsequent novels are concerned to refute: Ackroyd’s position implies belief in a history whose inexorable forward march had rendered the earlier Enlightenment humanism and the “tradition” it informed permanently obsolete and therefore “false” to the brave new world of twentieth-century Modernism. This belief, or something like it, underlies much discussion of the novel’s “development.” Some denunciations of the traditional realistic novel may well turn out to rest upon hidden premises that would horrify the denouncers if they were made explicit.

But quite apart from the question of history, which I take up in some detail in a later chapter, it is important not to fall into the trap of thinking that words like “traditional,” “realistic,”
“modernist,” “postmodernist,” “avant-garde” and “experimental” denote distinct essences, for these are convenient shorthand terms for rather loosely-conceived congeries of formal devices.

As Edmund Smyth has pointed out, *postmodernism*, when it is not being used “to designate either negatively or positively the contemporary cultural condition as a whole in all its complexity,” usually describes “a specific set of textual characteristics which can be gleaned from an analysis of selected literary, dramatic or cinematographic works... in short, any creative endeavour which exhibits some element of self-consciousness and reflexivity. Fragmentation, discontinuity, indeterminacy, plurality, metafictionality, heterogeneity, intertextuality, decentring, dislocation, ludism: these are the common features such widely differing aesthetic practices are said to display.”

Insofar as these features function as formal devices or conventions, they will tend to be more or less closely associated with certain meanings, certain ideological claims. But as poststructuralism has itself taught us, the relationship between a signifier and the concept that it signifies is inherently unstable: no formal elements — be they the formal elements of natural language, or the formal elements of conventional genres — are forever immutably tied to the particular meanings with which they are associated in any given context. Hence it would be premature to conclude that the formal elements of postmodernism — even if they are *all* found in *all* so-called postmodern works (and it would be easy to show that they are not) — mean the same things in each and every case. Postmodernism may turn out to be a very broad church indeed.

What makes it even broader is the fact that the putative formal elements of postmodernism are inherently unstable in another sense. Not only does one generation’s bold experiment become

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the next generation's cliché, but "traditional" and "experimental" conventions may coexist within a single work, each serving to re-contextualize and modify the significances of the other. Modernism's paradigmatic "experimental" novel, *Ulysses*, is an exemplary instance of this coexistence. At one level, Joyce's scrupulous adherence to realism's conventions of space/time permits us to chart Leopold Bloom's peregrinations on a map of Dublin as it "really" existed on June 16 1904. At another level, the narrative's "experimental" deployment of a myriad different styles and discourses (advertising, cheap fiction, popular journalism, etc.) plots the wanderings of Bloom's consciousness on a map of the modern world's ideologies, and the claim to "realism" of this ideological map is implicitly supported by its association with the conventional verifiability of the Dublin street map that informs the novel. At the same time, the veritably "postmodern" intertextuality constituted by Joyce's systematic allusions to pre-texts (Homer's *Odyssey*, Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, etc.) may be read as locating Bloom's adventures on yet another map — the map of archetypal or essential human experience as drawn by what college curricula used to call "the Western Tradition" — so that the "postmodern" device of intertextuality paradoxically works to establish the humanistic doctrine of a timeless human essence that so much postmodernist theory is concerned to deny.

Joyce's novel, while exemplary, is hardly unique. Intertextuality — the haunting of a work by the ghostly presence of other, precursor, works — can be a conscious formal device, as it is in *Ulysses*, but it is also the inescapable condition of any text — and hence of works employing widely differing conventions and carrying very different kinds of ideological freight. As
structuralists and poststructuralists have insisted, the words, phrases, plot devices and other formal structures of which all texts are composed bear with them associations deriving from other (con)texts in which the reader has encountered them. Therefore any modern novel, however “traditional” in its design, operates willy-nilly in some of the same ways a “postmodern” novel operates. Paradoxically, indeed, the more “traditional” a novel’s form, the more the reader is likely to hear echoes of the “tradition” and to interpret the novel in terms of a “postmodern” dialogue with precursor texts. We do not have to be poststructuralists to arrive at this conclusion: A. S. Byatt makes a similar argument on the basis of Harold Bloom’s theory of “the anxiety of influence” and of her own perception that “many novelists now seem to feel that they exist in some uneasy relation to the afterlife of [the fictional texts of The Great Tradition].” But Byatt is in broad agreement with poststructuralism when she goes on to note that within a traditional novel, intertextuality can inscribe meanings “not presumably intended” by the author. For example, to a reader familiar with John Fowles’ *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* (1969) and its “games with authorial interjections”, C.P. Snow’s use of a Trollopian authorial interjection in his very traditional novel *In Their Wisdom* (1974) may appear to be “a game with the [traditional, Victorian] conventions of plot, character, probability” (174-5).

Although she would probably reject the term, it is fair to say that Byatt “deconstructs” the opposition between traditional and experimental fictions. Her conclusion is not only that “the relation to past novels brings certain firmly ‘realist’ works and certain declared experimental works curiously close together” (173), but also “that much aggressively ‘experimental’ fiction uses much more distracting devices [than the *déjà-dit*, the allusion to and/or re-working of a...
precursor] in part to legitimise echoes of old styles and straightforward realisms” (176). The self-conscious, “experimental” framework, in other words, is often to be found partly supporting and partly obscuring such traditional desiderata as a “real, concrete imagining of the past” as in John Berger’s G. (1972), or “a plain, good, unfussy, derivative realist prose that can somehow only come about by declaring that that is not what it meant to be, not what it meant at all,” as in B. S. Johnson’s work (176). For Byatt in 1979, “the Chinese boxes of fiction-within-fiction” in Doris Lessing’s The Golden Notebook (1962) “create the most complex example I know of the study of such tensions of whole styles, degrees of ‘realism’ or vision,” and yet “the splendid irony about all this obsessive narcissism and self-consciousness is that the realistic effect of the whole is amazingly reinforced” (187).

Byatt’s comment constitutes an important insight into the varying functions of the postmodern novel’s disruption of realistic conventions. That the result of this disruption in some signal instances should be that “the realistic effect of the whole is amazingly reinforced” is not just a chance irony but the structural role of at least some uses of “postmodern” self-consciousness, the end to which it is appears to be directed. This looks like a paradox, but the paradox disappears if we analyse the term “realistic” into two closely allied but importantly different senses. In the first — broad — sense, to call a work “realistic” is simply to claim that the world it creates is offered to the reader as a representation of “the way things are”. In the second and narrower sense, it is to claim that the way things really are is fully and adequately represented by a novel constructed according to the conventions of a certain kind of fiction — usually, the conventions
believed (rightly or wrongly) to have constituted the novel form as it developed in England and France in the early-to-mid nineteenth century. These two claims are quite different, although the difference is frequently elided in critical discussion. The first claim can be made of a large number of postmodern novels which overtly insist on their own status as texts, as literary and linguistic artifacts. Just like the traditional novel, much postmodern fiction wants to make us believe that it is in some important way “true,” that it is realistic in the broad sense of being at least an equally valid — and on some criteria preferable — story about the way things are. What makes it postmodernist is its insistence that the way things are is very different from the way the conventions of the “realistic” novel in the second, narrow, sense will tend to represent them.

Criticism of postmodern novels has often paid too little attention to the implicit claim of many of them to be more realistic than realism. One reason for this is that critical attempts to explain and justify postmodern narrative techniques have understandably articulated them with the arguments of poststructuralist thinkers — arguments that question all the underpinnings of the liberal humanist tradition. The result is that the novels in question may come to be seen principally as narrative instantiations or exemplifications of poststructuralism’s denial that liberal humanism’s tenets are finally “centred” or “grounded” in a knowable ultimate reality that lies beyond interpretation. Postmodern novels are therefore frequently regarded as having a purely negative programme, as being concerned only to question, subvert and deny all alleged certainties and stabilities.

Although there are some postmodern novels — literary equivalents of an M. C. Esher graphic — of which this is a persuasive reading, there are many more in which the stronger reading is to Michael Harper
see the characteristic postmodern devices as working to decentre and subvert the "realist" (in the narrow sense) interpretation of the world in order to make room for a different interpretation. This is what happens in what Linda Hutcheon has called "historiographic metafiction," novels in which postmodern self-reflexive narrative devices exist side-by-side with what appears to be a plethora of historical reference, all of which is verifiable according to realist canons of verifiability. The effect of this strategy is indeed to equate "history" and "fiction" by showing that both are discursive constructs and that neither is ultimately more "real" and "true" than the other, but this strategy works in both directions: if history as it is usually thought of is a fiction, then the fiction in which these "historical" references are embedded is history — an interpretation of world and past which we apprehend as a re-placement of the "realist" interpretation that has been dis-placed. It is simply that this replacement is not to be judged by its correspondence (or lack of it) to a reality conceived of as independently knowable, but rather by its imaginative adequacy as an explanation of the reader's "experience."

At this point, however, things become complicated. As I have argued earlier, the reader's "experience" (like all "experience") is constituted not by unmediated apprehension of the Real but by stories, and the realist interpretation of the world is, in our time, the most powerful of these stories. So a postmodern novel that goes beyond the purely negative programme of deconstructing realism must engage the story told by realism in some significant way, must show how the interpretation of the world offered by its fiction is an explanation (and a preferable explanation) of "experiences" which realism has established as "fact." As Linda Hutcheon has
argued, "In this light metafiction is less a departure from the mimetic novelistic tradition that a reworking of it," for "the work constantly demands responses comparable in scope and perhaps even in intensity to those of his life experiences." Postmodern novels of this kind are like realist novels in that they are both proposing "life's not like that, it's like this," and to do so effectively they must — as I have previously argued — make their fictions sufficiently congruent with some aspects of the conception of reality that the reader is likely to bring to the book.

One way of doing this is to incorporate "historical" realities into a fiction which then functions as a re-interpretation of them. Peter Ackroyd's *Hawksmoor* features a fictitious eighteenth-century architect called Nicholas Dyer, but the churches that "Dyer" builds in the course of the novel include (with one significant exception) the churches that the "historical" architect Nicholas Hawksmoor designed, churches which still stand in London. In his prefatory acknowledgments, Ackroyd thanks Ian Sinclair, whose poem *Lud Heat* "first directed my attention to the stranger characteristics of the London churches," and with this acknowledgment Ackroyd, in his turn, is directing the reader's attention to them. Now although a postmodernist critic like Alison Lee might wish to consider this a mere feint, a joke at the expense of the unreconstructed realist reader "who look[s] for Michael Henchard's house in Dorchester or Romeo and Juliet paraphernalia in Verona," it seems to me to be more complicated than that. At the risk of revealing my own realist naiveté, I must confess that Ackroyd’s novel prompted me to go and look at the churches in question, and the result was most unsettling. For the

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* D. J. Taylor, who quotes this formula (*A Vain Conceit*, 46), attributes it to Anthony Powell.

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churches are very different from either Wren’s work or the neo-Palladianism that quickly succeeded and eclipsed the Baroque: “Immense blocks of dazzling Portland stone clash in the air with poetic dynamism in a wondrous demonstration of Hawksmoor’s passions for archaeology, for Gothic, for Baroque, and for what one can only describe as abstract sculpture.”

Hawksmoor’s designs “disrupted unity by bizarre forms” and made “antithesis of the elements” their basic idea (at St. George’s, Bloomsbury, he piled a stepped pyramid on top of a tower); and Ackroyd’s “fantastic” novel provides an eerily-plausible explanation of an architectural phenomenon which architectural history — with its neat periodizations, its smooth and untroubled progress from one “age” and “style” to the next — for a long time largely ignored because the conventional art-historical categories could make little sense of it. The reference to the “actual” Hawksmoor churches therefore serves to make Ackroyd’s fiction more persuasive than it might otherwise be, and not just in this matter of detail. For the novel constitutes a re-interpretation of time and history which suggests that they are not linear, that the past not only survives but can violently erupt into the present. In this context the bizarre churches, whose designs suggest an older and darker provenance than that of the more familiar neo-classicism, appear to provide an instance of such an eruption.

* "Mr. Hawksmoor appears to have erred principally in his designs by attempting more than Grecian architecture will permit" wrote James Peller Malcolm in what Kaufmann, who quotes the criticism, calls "the heyday of Revivalism" (19).
dovetails with a tiny aspect of the “reality” apparently firmly outside it, and in so doing it establishes for itself a credibility, a cogency, which might otherwise be denied.⁵³

Historical referents are not the only means of establishing this credibility, but although there are others, they too involve a kind of suturing of the apparently fantastic with the apparently “real”. Take for example *The Famished Road*, the “magic realist” novel by the Nigerian-born London writer Ben Okri, which won the Booker Prize for 1991. The protagonist is a young African visionary, a “spirit child,” and the reader is at first disoriented, adrift without a “realistic” compass in an animistic world apprehended in terms of Yoruba mythology. A reader whose “experience” has been constructed in accordance with the canons of scientific empiricism — and hence of “realism” — will attempt to cope with this disorientation by “translating” the fantastic back into the codes of realism in an attempt to connect “magic realism” with “reality”

* Reviewing *The Trial of Elizabeth Cree: A Novel of the Limehouse Murders*, James Wood was in no doubt about the seriousness of Ackroyd’s purpose in incorporating history into his fiction: “The past exists for Ackroyd as an uncomplicated presence. This is at odds with his modish philosophical uncertainties about the nature of reality.... He does not want just to make use of the past; he tries to be in it, and without irony about the oddity of doing so.... He advises the reader that our reality is ungrounded while reverently presenting his own reconstructions as if they were the most real of all. For he is a religious postmodernist – happy to reconcile belief and unbelief, faith and skepticism.” *(The New York Review of Books, Vol XLII No. 14 [September 21 1995], 50.*

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in some significant way. This process is sometimes described as "recuperation," as a way of
denying and negating the shock of the new by making it over into a version of the already-
known, but to categorize it in these terms should not mislead us into dismissing it as mere
readerly pusillanimity. For in an age in which scientific empiricism and "realism" wield cultural
authority, recuperation is the very condition of intelligibility of the postmodern novel: if what is
new and unfamiliar in Okri's novel is to have any chance of altering the reader's prior
conception of the world, it must connect with that conception in important ways.

So it is not surprising to find the novel offering us various means of making this connection.
The protagonist's father's boots are thrown out of the window in the course of a wild,
phantasmagorical feast, but five pages later we are reassured to learn that they have been
rescued — reassured, that is, that the novel has not after all cut us entirely adrift from the world
we know, a world in which a poor working man cannot afford to see "his only pair of boots" (54)
carelessly tossed away. The feast itself is narrated in wildly extravagant and non-realistic
Rabelaisian terms, but the fact that it features mundane "paper plates and plastic cutlery" (41)
grounds it in the quotidian, makes it the more plausible by including a detail consonant with the
realistically-conceived socio-economic milieu in which it is taking place. We are also allowed
to infer that some of Azaro's other-worldly experiences can be interpreted as dreams (59-60) or
the result of intoxication (for example, in Book Three, Chapter 10). This ambiguity concerning
their ontological status does not mean that their force and meaning are negated; it is merely that
the peaceful coexistence of magical and rational explanations of these phenomena allows them
to do their work of ideological reinterpretation for a reader whose realist horizons might otherwise render them irrelevant because incomprehensible.

Okri’s magic realism — if that is indeed the appropriate term — is a critique of realism in the narrow sense of the term, but it is made in the interests of a claim to realism of the broader kind. In the novel it is thematized as a critique of photography, the art to which realistic fiction is sometimes thought to aspire. Commenting on photographs taken of his family and friends, Azaro comments

"...we all seemed strange. The pictures were grained, there were dots over our faces, smudges everywhere.... We all looked like celebrating refugees. We were cramped, and hungry, and our smiles were fixed. The room appeared to be constructed out of garbage and together we seemed a people who had never known happiness. Those of us that smiled had our faces contorted into grimaces, like people who had been defeated but who smile when a camera is trained on them. (91)"

This is how poor Africans are frequently portrayed in western newspaper accounts — what the western gaze of either the camera or “objective,” “realistic” reportage would see and render — but the reader at this point “knows” that the photographs were taken at the very feast at which

* Alison Lee quotes John D. Boyd S.J on the “vogue since the nineteenth century of applying the word [“realism”] to literature that deals largely with techniques akin to the photographic” (Realism and Power, 6).

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“general revelry,” dancing and singing as well as boisterousness and quarrelling, were all in evidence. The photograph — the epitome of western “realism” — distorts: the photographer “gave many instructions as he set up his camera. He went back and forth, making us contort our heads. He made Dad twist his legs, made Mum hold her neck at an awkward angle, and made me fix a quite insane smile on my face” (45). When the neighbourhood falls ill from a bad consignment of dried milk he “got the women and children to pose round” milk-heaps and vomit, and “took shots of sick children, men in contorted forms of agony, women in attitudes of hungry outrage” (132). These are the pictures the western reader sees on the nightly news and in the newspapers. They are also the pictures Azaro’s neighbours are delighted to see “on the front pages of a national newspaper” where “it was even possible to recognise our squashed and poverty-ridden faces on the grainy newsprint” (156-7). The photographer, indeed, becomes the “International Photographer” (230) and his cabinet becomes the neighbourhood’s first local newspaper (141-2), reflecting back to the people who are indeed his subjects a vision of themselves which distorts by its selectivity.

The photographer’s depictions never, for instance, include Azaro’s glimpse of his poor mother’s transformation into “something of the innocent beauty” she had once been: “And when Mum was ready, she was entirely transformed. All the tiredness, the boniness of her face, the worry expressions of her forehead, had gone. Her face sparkled with freshness, lipstick, and eyeshadow. Her skin-tone had been softened with foundation and rouge” (129). Just as Mum’s face needs the artifice of cosmetics to conjure up its authentic innocence and beauty, so
photography — and, by extension, a narrowly-conceived realism — needs to be “corrected” by the artifice of magic realism. Because realism cannot understand or capture the protean fluidity of life’s transformations, it must always reduce polymorphous multivalency to the fixed images of the already-known, to “photographic immobility” (285). Azaro’s Mum says, “We may be poor, but we’re not ugly” (130), but when her picture is printed in the newspaper “the dreadful newsprint distorted her beauty into something wretched and weird” (156). Yet these distorting photographs, like the realism they epitomize, possess cultural authority as the arbiters of what is Real and what is not: “And because the photographer hadn’t been there to record what had happened that night, nothing of the events appeared in the newspapers. It was as if the events were never real. They assumed the status of rumour” (182-183).

The realism that accompanies western technology in its rampage through Africa — the two go hand-in-hand, constructed as they both are by scientific empiricism — is as oppressive as the capitalism it serves: Azaro has a dream in which there are people inside the photographer’s camera “waiting to become real, and... trying to get out,” while Azaro himself is imprisoned “in a glass cabinet which would not break” — “trapped behind glass, a photograph” (173-174).

Realism possesses cultural authority, but there are other kinds of story which it is the business of *The Famished Road* to tell: “Mum told me stories of aquamarine beginnings,” and “I listened to the wisdom of the old songs which Dad rendered in his cracked fighting voice.... I listened to the hard images of joy. I listened also to the songs of work and harvest and the secrets of heroes” while “Outside, the wind of recurrence blew gently over the earth” (183).

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Postmodernist novels critique realism, but if they are to make their re-interpretations of reality convincing (or even plausible), they cannot afford to give up their purchase on the realistically-constructed world that the reader brings to them. So even the most radical “experimental” novel will most likely be a hybrid affair, and the apparently fixed dividing like between the “traditional” novel and its “experimental” counterpart will blur when submitted to a closer examination. Yet despite the radical instability of the traditional/experimental opposition, contemporary English novelists have usually conceived of themselves as belonging firmly to one camp or the other. And a radical, self-conscious questioning and rethinking of the novel’s powers and techniques of representation is usually left to the “(post)-modernist” or “experimental” novel; it is seldom found in contemporary exemplars of what its practitioners are likely to refer to as “the English novel tradition.”

**A Very Big House, The Novel**

In 1976 Iris Murdoch, for instance, saw no need for a radical interrogations of “the English novel tradition:”

I see no reason to leave the English novel tradition unless you have a good reason for doing so. It’s a marvellously versatile form; within what looks like — and I suppose is — a conventional novel you can do anything under the sun. You can investigate anything, you can use any mode of thought you like, you can use language almost any way you like. It’s a
very big house, as it were, the novel, within which all sorts of things can happen and a lot of experiment can take place without the reader being necessarily disturbed.\textsuperscript{55}

This is a stirring defence of the conventional novel against the onslaught of avant-gardists like Robbe-Grillet, but some important and insistent questions immediately spring to mind. A conventional novel is one in which certain formal elements are to be found, their identities and their meanings more or less secured or underwritten by conventions in force in the interpretive community in which reader and writer function.\textsuperscript{*} But to say that such elements are meaningful is to say that they encode an ideology — that they tell (or imply, or have inscribed in them) a story. And if the conventional novel, by dint of these very conventions, is \textit{a priori} committed to telling one kind of story, one may suspect that there are other kinds of story to which it is inhospitable. In other words, it will probably seem as if “all sorts of things can happen” in the conventional novel only to an author whose story does not overtly clash with the larger one being told by the form. But there is a further irony here: the “very big house” of the conventional novel turns out to be not quite big enough for Iris Murdoch herself, whatever she may think. It is

\textsuperscript{*} "Interpretive community" is Stanley Fish’s term. Despite its problems (such a community may be difficult to define with any real exactitude, so the number of such communities functioning within a particular society at a particular time will be determined by the degree of specificity in the definition, there presumably being potentially as many communities as readers), it is a useful concept as long as one does not attribute to it a specious precision.

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certainly true that Murdoch writes novels that look like (and, I suspect, are frequently read as) realist fiction, and that within them she explores a conception of reality different, in important ways, from the conception implicit in the form she has chosen. Nevertheless, it is also true that the fault-line between these two conceptions produces serious structural stresses, leading a perceptive critic like Bernard Bergonzi to include Murdoch in a list of writers “who, in some or all of their books, are at a considerable distance from the well-made realistic novel as conventionally understood” (*Situation* 75).

The apparent paradox of an author adhering to a form at odds with key elements of her vision is worth a brief glance here, because in Murdoch’s case the explanation provides a clue to an important aspect of the “traditional” novel’s implicit ideology. Although Murdoch’s form is ill-suited to some of her ends, it is indispensable for others: her novels offer many of the pleasures of old-fashioned realism, including believable (if somewhat grotesque) characters in a highly specific, richly detailed social setting, because realism is, for this philosopher-novelist, a moral imperative. The root of all vice is selfishness; hence the foundation of morality is the recognition of the real existence of others. In Murdoch’s terms, therefore, a good (in both senses of the word) writer will give the contingency of the external world its full due by portraying objects and people not as the phantasmagoria of a solipsistic central consciousness but as ends in themselves, as objectively and autonomously *there*. Nevertheless, Murdoch’s ultimate concern is not with the mundane but with the spiritual, with what one of her characters in *The Philosopher’s Pupil* (1983) calls “a spiritual world close to this world, the same as this world but
For Murdoch there is only one world but two ways of seeing it — the secular and the religious: the world of demons and saints is not some never-never land but the world we live in, seen through the lens of theology.

There is therefore a real tension in her work between its ostensible realism and its onto/theological preoccupations, with the latter increasingly threatening to “disturb” the former. Murdoch’s novels have always used discreet allusions — classical myth, religious symbol, Shakespearean drama — to point to a Real beyond the real. In *The Philosopher’s Pupil*, for example, she foregrounds her philosophical (especially metaphysical) concerns through explicit discussion and obvious allusion, emphasizing that this story of a solipsistic philosopher and his murderous pupil is more than a realistic depiction of abnormal psychology. To drive the point home, she is provocatively cavalier about plot construction and character motivation; her story calls attention to itself as fiction, insisting that there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in the “common sense” philosophy that dictates the conventions of the merely “realistic” novel. Murdoch asserts that “demons, like viruses, live in every human organism,” (428), and she asks us to consider whether theology’s “story” is not a better way of conceiving of human experience than the “story” offered by empirical science — which is paradoxically the foundation-stone of realism. There is, in other words, a conflict between the two kinds of story that Murdoch wants to tell, and they cannot exist in perfect equilibrium. Bernard Bergonzi noted the conflict, and the way in which it deformed her “realism,” as long ago as 1970: “Her later novels have increasingly turned into fantasies or myths, full of complex manipulative patterns in which the contingency of life [i.e. that opacity, that “otherness” of the other that is supposedly
underwritten by realism] is subdued by the rigid will of the author. They are very far removed from the Tolstoyan openness to which she aspires” (Situation, 47-8). Yet as we have seen, in 1976 Murdoch was insisting on the generous, almost limitless capacities of the traditional novel, and this insistence was underwritten by her willed belief that such a novel can, without difficulty, accommodate her metaphysical speculations — her novelistic purpose — while continuing to embody her morality. She was unwilling to see herself as having strayed very far from realism because she regarded its supposedly faithful modelling of experience as the formal equivalent of the ethical acknowledgment of the real existence and the real claims of others. And Murdoch’s belief is instructive: to hold that the repudiation of a solipsistic preoccupation with self is implicit in realism is to hold that liberalism is inscribed in the traditional novel’s form.

Liberalism, in other words, is at least part of the story that realism tells, and her deep commitment to the liberal ethic is why Murdoch insists on the continuing ability of the

* This "openness" to experience is always, for the novelist, a metaphysical "grail" never to be attained. As Frank Kermode attests (1967; 140), in the novel contingency is always subjugated to purposeful design. Such apparent exceptions as William Burroughs' "fold-in" method of composition, or Julio Cortazar's quasi-aleatory arrangement of chapters in Hopscotch, are not so much exceptions to this rule as evidence of both the strength of the desire to elude it and the impossibility of doing so.
“traditional/realistic” novel to represent increasingly untraditional interpretations of the world. Other authors — perhaps less fortified by philosophy and hence more vulnerable to the slings and arrows of contingency — were more likely to acknowledge in some way what Malcolm Bradbury, also writing in 1976, saw as the pressure of contemporary history on the form and its ethico-political inscriptions:

... by the later 1960s ... the historical pace accelerated, and ... it grew harder to negotiate a moral posture for readers caught up in the fashionable splendour of political, sociological and radical hypotheses. For many writers this caused a re-examination of the novel; a growing obliquity in perception, a tendency to question the functionality of realism and liberalism as the coordinates of the novel, an inclination toward introverted fictions.$^{57}$

Bradbury himself did not appear to favor this kind of questioning, but he recognized a “sense of stress” even in work which “has managed to sustain something of the negotiability of the seriously realistic novel” (40, 41). And he was surely right to identify “realism” and “liberalism” as the particular points of stress. If, despite the assurances of Murdoch, the traditional novel has its limitations, it is here that one should begin to look for them.

As regards “realism,” the realistic novel is predicated on the assumption that the various elements of “reality” as given to perception are not only sensible but intelligible — that their meanings are inscribed/encoded legibly in their appearances. Yet in times of profound and rapid social change, not to say turmoil, this legibility is put into question, since uniform and well-policed conventions of reading are no longer enforced by a more-or-less-monolithic dominant

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Towards the end of Martin Amis’ apocalyptic 1989 novel, *London Fields*, the narrator reflects:

There was a time when I thought I could read the streets of London. I thought I could peer into the ramps and passages, into the smoky dispositions, and make some sense of things. But now I don’t think I can. Either I’m losing it, or the streets are getting harder to read. Or both. I can’t read books, which are meant to be easy, easy to read. No wonder, then, that I can’t read streets, which we all know to be hard — metal-lined, reinforced, massively

* A good example of such conventions in action occurs in Kingsley Amis' *Memoirs* (New York: Summit Books, 1991), 71: "He inclined to a fancy-waistcoated, suede-shoed style with cigarette-holders and rings. They made me uneasy, especially the last two items, which at about this time were apparently compulsory for villains in British films. Even Philip Larkin, himself no ascetic in matters of dress, disapproved. 'I don't care for those rings of Bruce's,' he said. 'They're flashy.' 'Yes, and foreign.' 'Yes, and common.'"

When the conventions are no longer observed, the code no longer operational, the result is a social — not just a novelistic — crisis. The widespread hatred of long hair on men in the late 1960s, in both England and America, can be explained as a reaction to a "perverse" obfuscation of a basic legible sign of gender differentiation.
concrete. And getting harder, tougher. Illiterate themselves, the streets are illegible. You just cannot read them any more.58

What is true of the streets is equally true of the characters who people them. If the outside is no longer the inside made visible, then the novel may well become “introverted,” since exteriors are intractably problematic. Novelists who struggle on as realists despite their increasing awareness of this problem include writers as apparently different as Anthony Powell and John Le Carré.

“Liberalism” is a broad term, but with respect to the novel it indicates among other things a belief in the primacy, the epistemological priority, of the individual’s experience. For a novel to deal with the “state of the nation,” there must be some commensurability between individual experience and what is perceived as the nation’s story, between private and public, between “micro” and “macro.” This is perhaps a special case of the crisis of legibility: the state of the nation must be legibly inscribed in the individual life. Insofar as the state of the nation can be seen as the collective result of the actions of a few representative figures — Dickens’ Mr. Merdle and William Dorrit, or Trollope’s Sir Felix Carbury and Augustus Melmotte, for example — it can be so represented, yet always at the risk of oversimplification, for it is not by any means self-evident that a deplorable state of affairs must be the result of deplorable actions by deplorable people. “Evil” may be systemic, may be the outcome of a particular system — economic, political, social — operating according to inherent laws, whatever the conscious
intentions of those who perceive themselves as agents in the system. For a critic such as D. J. Taylor, a vision of systemic “evil” such as this cannot possibly inform a novel worthy of the name. For Taylor, belief in the efficacy of individual agency is structurally “essential” to the novel form: “By taking free will away from character and stressing the effects of environment,” he maintains, “left-wing novelists [such as John Fowles and Margaret Drabble] merely made their creations tedious and predictable. . . . We would prefer to think him [Clegg, the protagonist of John Fowles’ The Collector] evil rather than the victim of social circumstance, and we would prefer to see him as an individual rather than a social phenomenon. As it is, Fowles’ refusal to devictimise him robs him of an essential fictional characteristic — a life of one’s own.” Like his readings of Fowles and Drabble, Taylor’s statement of the case is far too crude: “If everything can be reduced to a question of upbringing, then the traditional situation of the novel — an individual intelligence in conflict with circumstance — no longer applies,” he declares, apparently convinced that anything short of a positively Thatcherite belief in the triumph of the will amounts to a simplistic and disabling determinism that would rob the novel of its precious life-blood, morally significant action.

* Noting that Dickens makes his aggressive capitalist in Hard Times an unpleasant character, Raymond Williams remarks justly that "The conjunction of these personal defects with the aggressive ideal is not (how much easier things would be if it were) a necessary conjunction" (Culture & Society 93).
But an important issue remains even for a reader who, unlike Taylor, is prepared to conceive of satisfactory novels in which the characters are more patients than agents: to what extent is it possible to draw a cognitive map of a whole society or a significant portion of it using only the contours of individual lives and fates? In the late twentieth-century, the "representative-figure" strategy risks breaking altogether with realism and embracing allegory. In an era in which the nation-state is dimly perceived to be increasingly irrelevant as an analytical category, in which the economic, political and social determinants of the individual life appear to be evermore remote and labyrinthine, the connection between public and private becomes problematic and difficult to represent within the terms of the realistic contract. A "liberal" novelist in this context seems not only old-fashioned but quixotically so, and "liberalism" in the novel is increasingly implausible.

A third point of stress in the traditional novel, intricately related to both its realism and its liberalism, concerns history: how can we explain the England of the 1980s when it seems to represent a radical discontinuity with the England of the comparatively recent past? The Thatcher years certainly seemed to most observers, whether admirers or detractors, to constitute a rupture. Jonathan Raban exclaimed in 1984:

"How inaccessible the past has become — even the recent past of the 1950s... The drowned village [a village in a valley flooded to make a reservoir in the 1950s, and suddenly, surreally exposed to view by the drought of 1984] really is a world and a half away from 1984; its version of society is as irretrievable as something out of folklore. Meanwhile the pound slides magnetically downward... Unemployment goes on rising. Mrs. Thatcher..."
makes more and more ebullient speeches. . . To my English eye . . . it all seems thoroughly unEnglish. Where are we at? (Love, 263).

One way to answer this question is to write an historical novel, deriving the present by narrative and moral logic from a generally accepted version of the past. Contemporary English fiction, however, includes no contemporary equivalent of Sir Walter Scott; but there are several attempts to deal with history in the short term — John Mortimer’s *Paradise Postponed*, for example — and, perhaps more interestingly, several authors (including Graham Swift, Peter Ackroyd and Ian McEwan) who explore History and Time in unusual and significant ways. Yet is worth reminding ourselves that most novels are, in a non-trivial sense, historical novels. As well as providing what I have called a “cognitive map” of the present, they will also imply, at the very least, a history of the present — will attempt not only to tell us where we are but how we got there.

**The Way We’ve Always Managed Things in England: Paradise Postponed**

To take a preliminary measure of the extent to which realism, liberalism and assumptions of historical continuity are exhibiting signs of strain in the contemporary English novel, I propose to look at how they materialize and interact in John Mortimer’s *Paradise Postponed*, an example chosen not for any excellence it exhibits but for the conjunctures it instances. It appeared in the very mid-point of the Thatcher years, 1985, and is what used to be called a “middlebrow” work.

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by a middle-class lawyer and Labour Party supporter who was now clearly discouraged. It was written at the suggestion of a television executive — "he suggested that I might write a story covering the period in England since the war---" and was conceived as both "a novel and . . . a series of one hour plays to be filmed for television." As ideology, it confronts the surface disturbance of social change in order to reaffirm the basic coherence and meaningfulness of life at a level supposedly "deeper" than that of party politics, of "who's in, who's out." It articulates public and private, political and personal, in such a way that the former is either irrelevant to, or a manifestation of, the latter — politics is the continuation of private life by other means — and the private/personal is itself conceived in terms of traditional morality. On this basis it attempts both to account for, and to reconcile its reader to, the failure of social democracy, the decline of noblesse-oblige paternalistic Toryism, and the triumph of a new Conservatism founded upon the neo-Poujadist resentments of a lower-middle class whose members, in the words of their most aggressive and successful representative in the novel,

"know the value of money because they've never had it . . . who've worked hard and don't want to see scroungers rewarded or laziness paying off . . . [who] are the backbone of our country [not] because of privilege or money, but because of their simple faith in the way we've always managed things in England!" (299).

* Mortimer, 9. The television version was exported to the United States to feature on PBS' "Masterpiece Theatre" series.

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Paradise Postponed affects realism, but its reliance on “representative” characters brings it to the very brink of allegory. It begins in Thatcher’s England with the death of a certain strain of English socialism in the person of the eighty-year-old Reverend Simeon Simcox, Rector of the village of Rapstone Fanner, veteran of Ban-the-Bomb marches and tireless organizer of all-night vigils to protest South Africa and every other manifestation of tyranny and injustice. Although he displays a bust of Karl Marx on his mantelpiece (30) and thinks of himself as a revolutionary (42), Simeon is an upper-middle class socialist with a comfortable private income from the family brewery, and his socialism is utopian in both the good and bad senses of that word — both idealistic and impractical. It is also a quintessentially English socialism, given tangible form in Simeon’s study with its

clutter of pipe-racks, walking-sticks, pamphlets, Left Book Club volumes, Penguins and blue papers, cuttings from Tribune and the News Chronicle, haphazard shelves supporting the works of Engels and R. H. Tawney, H. G. Wells and Bernard Shaw, the Webbs and Bertrand Russell. (31)

The impracticality of Simeon’s socialism is frequently criticized by other characters, both trustworthy and untrustworthy. Fred Simcox, the Rector’s son and the novel’s hero, contrasts his

* In the end it is discovered that there is no fortune, that Simeon’s shares in the family concern were worthless and the income paid regularly to him over the years paid in error, so he and — allegorically — his politics were both bankrupt.
father's politically-inspired efforts with the ostensibly non-ideological beneficence of the medical profession: "doctors weren't concerned with the reform of the world, or spiritual values, or protests about some faraway injustice it was impossible to remedy. A doctor's concern was entirely practical. . . " (136). Simeon's inefficacy is echoed in the infelicity of his well-intentioned but unsuccessful social gestures. Trying to relate to ordinary people on the Aldermaston March, he embarrasses his son by using inappropriate slang phrases (e.g. calling a pint of beer "a pint of wallop" (82)). Attempting to amuse a group of children at a birthday party at Rapstone Manor, he enters a room on all fours, trumpeting like an elephant, only to find that the children have gone and that he is playing to a shocked audience consisting of Sir Nicholas Fanner, his butler, and the local doctor (65-6). Playing Santa Claus one Christmas, he creeps into what he thinks is his granddaughter's bedroom with a sack of presents, only to surprise Fred and a house-guest flagrante delicto (311-2).

* In fairness to Mortimer, it should be pointed out that the contrast is not as simple as this, and that the novel does not unequivocally endorse the triumph of Enlightenment rationality over the claims of the emotions: the heart has its reasons that reason knows not. So the no-nonsense Dr. Salter is not as practical as he thinks he is, because life is so complex that even the best-laid plans miscarry; the terminally-ill doctor bungles his own suicide. But Fred Simcox, who represents the novel's moral center, chooses medicine as his profession, and his quiet, patient and practical caring for others in this capacity clearly functions as the novel's personal-cum-political ideal, just as it constitutes an acceptable atonement for Fred's own youthful mistakes.

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As these examples indicate, Mortimer has no problem connecting private and public, the personal and the political, because a life, in this novel, is all of a piece, is an "expressive totality" in which the essence is manifest in every part; Simeon's political acts, like his attempts at kindness, usually miss their mark. This may seem overly neat and convenient, but Mortimer is simply embracing one of the basic assumptions of the form in which he is working. The concept of the self as a consistent whole is what makes the realistic novel possible, because it licenses the figure of synecdoche — the part adequately representing the whole — which, in the last analysis, underwrites the novel's pretensions to a significance that goes beyond its invented particulars. "Realistic" novels may protest against the concept, but they cannot entirely escape it. In Martin Amis's *London Fields*, which plays a complicated game with realism's conventions, the author/narrator expostulates: "The form itself is my enemy. In fiction (rightly so called) people become coherent and intelligible — and they aren't like that. We all know they aren't. We all know it from personal experience. We've been there."(240)*

* The appeal to experience, it should be noted, is just part of the game Amis is playing, because in its conception of character the realistic novel is in complicity with the world outside its covers, where the idea of the self as an intelligible unity is one of the assumptions of "common sense" and is fundamental to the way in which we make sense of events. Amis's novel inevitably accedes to the form's demands concerning coherence and legibility, even as it protests against them. However, it sometimes makes a character's legibility plausible by the suggestion
In *Paradise Postponed* the self-consistency of character is fundamental, and it is never seriously challenged, although it appears to be called into question by the enigma upon which the plot of the novel turns: why did Simeon Simcox leave his supposed fortune to a Conservative cabinet minister, Leslie Titmuss, who grew up in a neighbouring village and earned pocket money by doing odd jobs at the Rectory? This action seems inexplicable to most people, including Henry Simcox, Fred’s older brother, who attempts to challenge the will on the grounds that his father must have been of unsound mind when he made it. But when all is revealed, and we learn that Simeon’s will was an attempt to provide for the child he fathered many years ago in a moment of madness — an affair with a “selfish and spiteful and trivial... woman who paints her finger-nails purple” (437) — the self-consistency of the self is confirmed rather than disproved. The elements of “experience” that appeared to threaten it are conveniently bracketed by being that the self may be inferred from the appearance because the self has been formed in response to others’ expectations aroused by the appearance:

... Chick Purchase, large, delicate, deliberate, thick-haired, deep-voiced, and dangerous, with hardman or just criminal glow, like an actor, like a star, who accepts the role that the ordinary imagination assigns him. In his face you could see the associated pleasures of making love to women and of causing harm to men, or beyond that even, to the links between disseminating life and ending it. ... Tonight no roadshow hopeful or wet T-shirt at his side: only, in the cream Roller, Julian Neat, who looked like what he was, a successful middleman, in an exhausted culture. (459)
specialized to sexual attraction, which is frankly allowed to be irrational, a "mystery darker than any [Simeon had] met in his profession," a brief madness from which one comes "back to some sort of sanity" (437). Although it may have consequences in the form of offspring, this "madness" itself is otherwise inconsequential, self-contained, entirely insulated from the rest of the life in which it is only an interlude. One returns from it with one's essential self unchanged, uncontaminated. This is borne out by the ways in which Simeon, unknown to his sons, has accepted and coped with the responsibility of the child he has fathered in his madness — his efforts, typically, are well-meant and ineffective. At the end we are reassured that human beings, like the world in which they live, are fundamentally self-consistent and legible, and this should come as no surprise because it is implicit in the very modus operandi of a novel in which, for example, the precise nature of a man's politico-moral character is spelled out in the clutter of his study.

One suspects, indeed, that one of the key social/ideological functions of the kind of novel that *Paradise Postponed* typifies is to exorcise the ghosts of indeterminacy, irregularity, and

* Not only is the breaching of identity contained by being specialised to sexual "madness," but the cause of it, in this case Grace Fanner, is scapegoated by being made absolutely dreadful in every way except her physical beauty. The scapegoating of women is a not uncommon strategy for exorcising the scandalous ghosts that haunt realism, and I shall have occasion to consider it in greater detail in connection with Anthony Powell's *A Dance to the Music of Time.*
illegibility by alternately raising and allaying our fears that the world may genuinely be haunted by them. So the world of the novel is one that we may, at first, misread: "The first sight of the Rapstone Valley is of something unexpectedly isolated and uninterruptedly rural," of "beech woods, thick hedgerows and fields of corn, with an occasional tiled roof over a flint and brick building, a group of barns and the distant tower of Rapstone Church," but in this case first impressions are misleading. A "deeper acquaintance" will inform us "that the flint cottages have been converted to house a pop star or a couple in advertising and the roof of what looks like a farm-building now covers an indoor swimming-pool with sauna attached in which guests flop like woozy porpoises after Sunday lunch" (15). Appearances may lie, but the truth of the matter is never deferred for very long, because the reader is securely in the hands of an omniscient narrator already possessed of that "deeper acquaintance" and ready to act as a guide proffering information and commentary in a tone of good-humored, tolerant urbanity. It is the tone of a man so familiar with the range of human folly that no new revelation can threaten an equanimity mimed in the cadences of his measured, mandarin prose:

That year the papers were full of extraordinary news; more and more scandals were unearthed, and the serious face of the nation cracked into an incredulous smile of second-hand delight, before prim looks returned and there was much talk of the need to preserve standards in public life. The Secretary of State for War was found to be sharing a mistress with a Soviet naval attaché but this was only the aperitif before a banquet of revelations which culminated in the search for a mysterious masked figure, some person of great political distinction who, naked but for his mask, was said to act as butler and enjoy other

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humiliations at the dinner parties of the rich and influential figures of the time. The masked
man serving the potatoes was never identified but the golden age of Conservative
Government, the period when the Prime Minister told the British people that they had never
had it so good and they had believed him, seemed about to disintegrate into a widespread
chorus of unseemly giggles. (212)

In this passage the Profumo scandal that shook the government in the early 1960s is firmly
placed in perspective. It is just one of those absurdities — the credulity of the hypocrites
lecteurs of the newspapers being another — that the author-itative voice can take the proper
measure of, assigning it to its appropriate circle of folly with a deft phrase like “the masked man
serving the potatoes.” Public scandal cannot disturb the omniscient narrative voice, precisely
because that voice is omniscient. It is already acquainted with all the weaknesses of human
nature, and history can present nothing new under the sun. History, in Paradise Postponed, is
effectively neutralized; although time brings changes, it can only re-enact, in new costumes,
dramas that were written long ago.

History is no more than a repository, a repertoire of moral postures and types, all of which may
live again to play their parts on the modern stage. Time in this sense can be both spatialized and
moralized in the novel’s geography. When the authorial voice announces in the first chapter that
“At the head of the valley the road divides, one way leading south to Rapstone Fanner, the other
north to the villages of Skurfield and Picton Principal,” (15) it is giving us a cognitive as well as
a spatial map, pointing not only to geographical places but to a schematization of moral types or
humors and the relationships between them. History is simply the same schematization projected back through time:

The countryside was much divided during the Civil War. The Fanners at Rapstone were Royalists, the Stroves of Picton Principal, which then incorporated the entire village of Skurfield, supported Parliament. The Fanners were known as good landlords, usually cheerful and, perhaps because of their origins in the mediaeval catering business [the family’s “founder” was Edward IV’s steward], fond of feasting the tenants on all occasions. The Stroves of Picton House were private people, often of a gloomy and withdrawn disposition, and much given to hanging their tenants from the boughs of the old yew tree by Skurfield Pond. When the young heir, Nicholas Fanner, was celebrating his twenty-first birthday at Rapstone in the usual manner with ox-roasting, bonfires, Morris dancing and a quite exceptional amount of feasting, the then Doughty Strove sent a number of Skurfield villagers to the party secretly carrying crowbars and reaping-hooks. These invaders fell upon the Rapstone tenants. . . . At the Restoration the Stroves were deprived of much of their land. . . . Magnus Strove (died 1917) improved [the family fortunes] by buying up slum property in Worsfield at a time when the biscuit factories were expanding and inadequate housing was needed there for cheap labour. . . . Doughty lacked his father’s remorseless energy. . . . Magnus [his son], however, had more of his grandfather’s business sense. (59-60)

The Fanners and the Stroves survive into the twentieth-century as two of the novel’s three types of Tory: Sir Nicholas Fanner, “a tall, comfortable and amiable man” (61), is the hospitable, Michael Harper
paternalistic landlord who chairs the local Conservative Association, while Doughty Strove is the local M.P.. As this uneasy pairing indicates, Mortimer sees the pre-Thatcher Tory Party as representing a pragmatic alliance between landed gentry and aggressive rentier. This alliance is upset when the third and Thatcherite type, which is really a lower-middle class species of the second, insinuates itself into the corridors of power: Leslie Titmuss, the ambitious grammar-school boy from Skurfield (once part of Picton Principal), son of a former kitchenmaid at Picton House and a brewery clerk who “was, undoubtedly, a direct descendant of one of those Skurfield Puritans who attacked Rapstone Manor with crowbars and reaping-hooks during the Civil War” (69), marries into the Fanners and (poetic justice!) outwits and outmanoeuvres the Stroves by cold calculation and ruthless cunning.

Politics are thus reduced to morals and humors — all the possible political/personal dispositions in Paradise Postponed have been there from the beginning. Fanners, Stroves and Titmusses are translated from the seventeenth century to the twentieth with only changes of costume in a version of history which almost entirely elides the Industrial Revolution and the formation of modern England’s middle and working classes. One reason that Simeon Simcox’s socialism seems so ludicrous is that the novel omits both the history which engendered it and the context which makes it plausible — the social conditions to which the Labour Party is historically a response. The reader is vouchsafed an occasional glimpse of the industrial city of Worsfield, but the structure of feeling invoked is almost exclusively “aesthetic” in a Betjemanesque sense: “Worsfield, home of the biscuit and an ailing furniture industry, is a place which seems like a
grim northern town set down unexpectedly in a south-west riverside landscape. Its cathedral is a barrack-like red-brick 1930s building, its university a series of concrete blocks specializing in engineering and its streets glum and ill-favored" (84).

The lack of what one may properly call an historical sense in Paradise Postponed is revealed powerfully in Mortimer's failure to realize Worsfield in any deeper way — indeed, in his failure to realize Worsfield adequately even in his own limited terms. So although we are told here that the Cathedral dates from the 1930s, elsewhere we learn that the "folly in the shape of a Gothic tower" built by an eighteenth-century Fanner (59) was "a stunted Gothic tower meant to give the casual visitor to Rapstone Park the deluded impression that he could see all the way to Worsfield Cathedral" (107). This anachronism — for the conflict in dates can have no plausible explanation within the fiction itself — might not be important in another kind of novel, but in one with claims to historical explanation it is a significant flaw. It suggests that Mortimer has too little interest in the historically-grounded actualities of England's "Worsfields" to be able to invoke in realistic-novel terms a consistent and persuasive example. "Worsfield" is just shorthand notation for a whole complex of aspects of modern life found deeply repugnant. That one of these repugnant qualities should be epitomized by Worsfield University's "specializing in engineering" smacks of the Oxbridge arts graduate's snobbish contempt for the merely useful, even as it recalls Dickens' attitude toward the utilitarian Gradgrind in Hard Times.

Whatever its implicit claims, Paradise Postponed does not see life in historical terms at all; the even more astonishing omission in "a story covering the period in England since the war" is the almost complete absence of anything of substance about the Labour Governments that held

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office for most of the period between 1964 and 1980. The reason for this absence is quite simply the irrelevance of history and politics to a novelist who has given up on them: politics are futile, and the only acts that have meaning are those that pertain to personal relationships. If Simeon is vindicated, it is because he has continued to care personally for the child he illegitimately fathered — because (as his tombstone declares) “I kept my word.” And so in a novel ostensibly about political and social change, these are shouldered aside and at best used as a backdrop for a story of personal redemption. Just as his father had done, Fred Simcox, the protagonist, himself fathers a child on a woman to whom he is not married, but he makes the human and moral mistake of allowing Agnes to have the abortion she says she wants but clearly doesn’t. As a result he loses her; but over the course of many years he matures and becomes a doctor, dedicating himself to the practical relief of individual suffering. This solitary life of atonement allows him, at the novel’s end, a second chance with Agnes, now divorced: “’It’s never really too late,’” he said. “To begin.”’ And in Paradise Postponed of course it isn’t: since all possibilities are latent within each and every moment of time, how could it ever be “too late to begin?” But the paradise promised by left-wing politics, it seems, will always be postponed, because it is predicated upon a falsely-optimistic view of fallible human nature.

The argument of Paradise Postponed is “telegraphed” in the sequence of quotations Mortimer selects as epigraphs for each of the five parts of his novel. Part One is ushered in by a passage from W. H. Auden that announces not only the danger inherent in the inexorable advance of history-as-change, but also the danger of attempting to resist it:
In the houses

The little pianos are closed, and a clock strikes.

And all sway forward on the dangerous flood

Of history, that never sleeps or dies,

And, held one moment, burns the hand.

from Look Stranger, XXX

At the beginning of Part Two, however, the notion that history can produce the genuinely unprecedented is undermined and mocked by the vulgarity and superficiality of Tory Prime Minister Harold Macmillan’s cynical but successful appeal to the electorate’s consumerism:

Let’s be frank about it. Most of our people have never had it so good. Go round the country, go to the industrial towns, go to the farms, and you will see a state of prosperity such as we have never had in my lifetime — nor indeed ever in the history of this country. Bedford, July 1957

Part Three is prefaced by Søren Kierkegaard’s dictum, “Life must be lived forwards, but it can only be understood backwards,” which, Janus-like, serves to trouble and problematize the concept of history-as-progress and pave the way for Part Four’s invocation of the autonomous individual’s struggle against history-as-determination:

‘Who breaks his birth’s invidious bar,

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And grasps the skirts of happy chance,
And breasts the blows of circumstance,
And grapples with his evil star;

from In Memoriam, Alfred, Lord Tennyson

Part Five invokes Kipling’s bleak view of an unchanging, fallen human nature as the grounds for an embittered refusal of both the Whig view of history and the social-democratic vision it underwrites:

As it will be in the future, it was at the birth of man —

There are only four things certain since Social Progress began:

That the Dog returns to his Vomit and the Sow returns to her Mire
And the burnt Fool’s bandaged finger goes wobbling back to the Fire;
And that after this is accomplished, and the brave new world begins
When all men are paid for existing and no man must pay for his sins,
As surely as Water will wet us, as surely as Fire will burn
The Gods of the Copybook Headings with fever and slaughter return!

from The Gods of the Copybook Headings

I am not suggesting that Kipling’s sentiments can simply be taken as Mortimer’s — there is nothing in Paradise Postponed to match the angry contempt that permeates these lines — but I
do think it significant that the epigraphs move from a left-wing view of history to a right-wing view, from the progressive confidence of Auden to the bitter certainties of Kipling.

What Paradise Postponed exemplifies is one of several possible responses to the situation Raymond Williams outlined in 1981:

What was plain to some from the beginning, and what for very many is now slowly sinking in, is that we have recently lived through a major defeat. We should not hide behind figures of speech. The defeat has happened, and its extent is formidable. Who among us could have believed in 1945 or 1966, or even in 1974, that at the beginning of the 1980s we should have not only a powerful right-wing government, trying with some success to go back to the politics and the economics of the 1930s, but — even worse — a social order that has literally decimated the British working class, imposing the cruelty of several million unemployed? (Resources, 247).

In the face of such a defeat — which appeared even more crushing, more likely to be permanent, after the Falklands/Malvinas war had consolidated the Thatcher government’s hold on power — Paradise Postponed attempts to explain the rise of Thatcherism in terms which avoid the conclusion that a Thatcherite Conservative Party speaks for England as a whole, that (as Williams in 1983 put the case from which he also dissented), “Thatcher has somehow encapsulated something which was endemic in the society: a peculiarly hard, authoritarian, anti-intellectual, racist consciousness, which was latent and which Thatcher has now materialized” (1989; 163). In the person of Leslie Titmuss, who is tormented and ridiculed at a Young

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Conservatives’ dinner-dance because he’s wearing a clip-on bow-tie with his rented dinner-jacket, Mortimer depicts Thatcherism as the response of a despised, humiliated and neglected lower-middle class to the contempt, humiliation and neglect it has suffered at the hands of the middle and upper-middle classes. Leslie tells the upper-class committee that chooses him as Conservative candidate for the approaching election:

My father was a clerk all his life in the Brewery. My mother worked in the kitchen for Doughty Strove. What you call your “living-room,” they call the “lounge.” What you call “dinner,” they call “tea.” Perhaps you think they talk a different language from you? . . .

I went to the village school. . . . Then I got a scholarship to Hartscombe Grammar. Weekends I used to go out on my bike and help people with their gardens. I grew up to understand the value of money because it took my father five years to save up for our first second-hand Ford Prefect. Every night he finishes his tea and says to my mother, “Very tasty, dear. That was very tasty.” He always says the same thing. He falls asleep in front of the fire at exactly half-past nine and at ten-thirty he wakes up with a start and says, “I’ll lock up, dear. Time for Bedfordshire!” Always the same. Every night. Just as he got to work at exactly the same time every morning for forty years. He’s loyal to his job and my mother was loyal to the Stroves. You know what my parents are? They’re the true Conservatives! And I can tell you this. They’re tired of being represented by people from the City or folks from up at the Manor. They want one of themselves! . . . What you need to win is my people. . . . the people who’ve worked hard and don’t want to see scroungers rewarded or
laziness paying off. . . . You need the voters I can bring you! They are the backbone of our country. . . . (299)

Thatcherism, in the terms of the novel, is a specific and limited phenomenon, the result of traditional Tories handing over the Party constituency-by-constituency to the Titmusses in a successful effort to destroy Labour by broadening Conservatism’s electoral appeal.

At a deeper level, however, *Paradise Postponed* acquiesces in what I suspect to be a powerful and widely-shared structure of feeling on the middle-class-left in the 1980s. The politics that proclaimed a New Jerusalem in 1945 are finally bankrupt; hope can be renewed only by jettisoning all the beliefs and assumptions that underwrote those politics; efforts to improve the world can be meaningful and successful only if the sphere of action contracts from the public to the private; consolation is to be found in the reflection that what looks like radical change is no such thing, for the sufficient reason that things never change essentially because human nature remains the same. England and its inhabitants and their actions are intelligible in the age-old terms of a continuity and a morality represented in the novel by “the only institutional buildings left unchanged . . . the church, with its Norman tower, its ornate seventeenth-century tomb and Victorian additions, and the Rectory, approached through an open gateway, past the dark and dusty laurels of a short driveway and entered, under a pointed, neo-Gothic porch, through a front door which is never locked” (16). At the time that Mortimer was writing his novel, Jonathan Raban was declaring that the English village of the 1950s “really is a world and a half away from 1984; its version of society is as irretrievable as something out of folklore.” In the structure of feeling that *Paradise Postponed* represents, however, the changed but still organic community of *Michael Harper*
rural England, the village dominated by squire, parson and doctor, can still provide a cognitive map. It continues to be the site of significant action, and a novel set in such a village can still serve to explain the state of the nation. Although, at the beginning of the novel Mortimer describes Rapstone as a place in which the external surfaces remain the same ("to placate the planners") while what goes on inside them has radically changed, this is a mere feint, a red herring. What the novel depicts is almost the opposite — cosmetic changes beneath which essences persist.

So Rapstone is still an organic community, in which the "outsiders" casually mentioned at the beginning ("a pop star or a couple in advertising" or "two ladies with grey hair and booming voices who illustrate children's books"), never figure. There is one apparent exception to this rule, but its resolution is significant. The organic community is breached when Doughty Strove (manipulated by Leslie Titmuss) sells to a development company the cottage that an engaged couple in the village were hoping to rent. It becomes the home of outsiders, a BBC producer and his family, and the village couple are forced to move into a flat in one of the hated Worsfield concrete blocks. But the BBC family is miserable in the country — the mother takes to drink to fill up her empty days, and the son gets into trouble with the law — and at the end they move back to London. Thus change is reversed and the breach is healed.

In *Paradise Postponed* what I analytically isolated as three distinct and problematic aspects of the contemporary "traditional" novel — the legibility/intelligibility of reality, the liberalism which affirms that truths about a larger world are inscribed within the confines of the individual
experience, and the problem of historical continuity/discontinuity — turn out to be so deeply integrated that they are at best separate emphases within a single constellation. Liberalism is both assumed and illustrated in a world in which only individual experience is meaningful and valuable; its meaning and its value inhere in the moral essence which informs each and every gesture and is legible therein; and the meanings are valuable in that they are universal, transhistorical, timeless, unchanging — history is (to borrow a phrase from Yeats) “but a spume that plays upon a ghostly paradigm of things.”

Paradise Postponed’s content, its ideology, is as suited to the “traditional” novel form as it is to what Stuart Hood calls the “traditional grammar” of the television series which was its other incarnation. It makes no unusual demands of the form, but even so there are signs of strain: the laboured construction of representative characters and of a setting that is practically a paysage moralisé push realism toward allegory, and the novel’s confusion about its own details (is Worsfield Cathedral a centuries-old Gothic pile or a 1930s red-brick “barracks”?) is a manifest consequence of representation’s careless subordination to ideology. To take the full measure of the stresses and strains afflicting realism in our time, however, will require an examination of a work of a very different order, one in which “getting it right” in matters of descriptive detail was to be the ultimate warrant of the truth and significance of the meanings and patterns that the details should generate. This, or something like it, I take to be something like the premise of Anthony Powell’s A Dance To The Music Of Time, to which I turn in the following chapter.

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