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Culture in Crisis: The English Novel in the Late Twentieth Century

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**Culture in Crisis: The English Novel in the Late
Twentieth Century**

Michael F. Harper

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Introduction: “Where Are We At?”

Suddenly we're going into production at the beginning of January, shooting early in March, as Frears' Indian project has been delayed. So the script has to start looking ready. Try to get the story going earlier, Frears says. And the riots: we're too familiar with them from television. Something more has to be going on than people throwing bottles at policemen.

*Hanif Kureishi, Sammy and Rosie Get Laid*¹

Jerome: *You walked from the railway station to here?*

Zoë: *Yes. I've just said. And then these monsters . . . came from nowhere. What sort of area is this? Don't you have any police at all? Any security patrols?*

Jerome: *Not any more.*

Zoë: *Neighbourhood vigilantes?*

Jerome: *Not lately*

.....

Zoë: . . . *You mean this is a genuine no-go area? My God, I've only read about them till now. Mind you, I've never been this far up the Northern Line before. Where are we? Somewhere extraordinary. Edgware.*

*Alan Ayckbourn, Henceforward*²

It is a truism that every age, in the historian's eye, is an "age of transition," but the last quarter-century in England has seen changes so rapid and so far-reaching as to have occasioned a kind of cultural trauma. "*Where are we at?*" demanded Jonathan Raban in 1984 as he watched television footage of "picketing miners dressed in pastel summer clothes . . . hurling rocks, bottles, pieces of timber" at police in riot shields, one of whom — "a handsome young policeman" — was "apparently battering the brains out of a striking miner with his club."³ Such violent confrontations seemed outrageously un-English — the kind of thing the English were used to seeing, if at all, on their television screens in news coverage of the bewildering behavior of foreigners. But in 1984 the violence that marked the miners' strike and the policing of it was not unprecedented. Apart from the continuing bloodiness involved in English football hooliganism, which scandalized continental Europe and for a while caused British teams to be banned from international competition, there had been urban rioting (mostly directed against police) in Bristol in 1980 and in London and other cities throughout the country in the spring and summer of 1981. By 1988, riots had become such a familiar television news item that film

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director Stephen Frears thought that images of “people throwing bottles at policemen” had become “too familiar,” while urban violence was so common that playwright Alan Ayckbourn had to look no further than his television screen for models for the “no-go” areas of *Henceforward’s* not-too-far-in-the-future London. By the end of the decade rioting appeared to have become a quasi-traditional form of protest, as the demonstrations against the replacement of rates (property taxes) by a poll tax showed.

What had happened? Urban violence was only one symptom of a divisiveness now marking a country that — in its own conception, at least — had operated since the 1880s under a consensus designed to minimize the kinds of social rift that erupt in rioting. A century or more ago, Sir William Harcourt had proclaimed “We’re all socialists now,” and although, as Brian Barry has argued,

Sir William Harcourt was, no doubt, exaggerating... the element of truth in what he said is that, from the 1880s onwards, a broad agreement developed about the responsibilities of the state. Among the propositions that would have found general support... one is that taxes on wealth and income should be seen not only as a way of raising revenue but also as a way of bringing about a fairer distribution of wealth and income; the other is that the state should define a level of material well-being below which none of its citizens should fall, and then provide the resources necessary to ensure that nobody does fall below that level.⁴

It is important not to overestimate the degree of unanimity obtaining in a society that has never completely overcome its deep class divisions and concomitant inequalities of wealth and

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opportunity. To claim, for example, that “The history of Britain has for centuries been in the direction of caring, sanctified by a willing acceptance of gradual and imposed sacrifice,” as Peter Calvocoressi claimed in 1978 in the conclusion of his *The British Experience 1945-75*, is to ignore the role of conflict and struggle so completely as to be guilty of willful (or at least *wishful*) misrepresentation.⁵ But I suspect that Calvocoressi was simply projecting into the distant past the dominant British — and specifically English — self-image that emerged from World War II, and it is certainly plausible to argue “that the moral basis of the post-war Welfare State was laid in the common experience of the Second World War and in particular the sense of common vulnerability and interdependence generated by the blitz.... That disasters, natural or man-made, stimulate social solidarity is one of the best-documented findings in social science” (Barry 539). At any rate, for many years after the war a seemingly endless stream of films about the wartime experience emphasized the cheerful cooperation, good-humored stoicism, courageous self-sacrifice, and unity of purpose that marked Britons under fire, whether in the armed forces or in the air-raid shelters during the blitz. And this self-image, however tempted one may be to debunk it as mere “ideology” or “myth,” achieved an important kind of reality when it inscribed itself into the social and political arrangements that governed Britain in the postwar years.⁶ These arrangements remained more-or-less unquestioned until comparatively recently: “The significance of Mrs. Thatcher’s term of office as Prime Minister is that we can no longer take it for granted that the government is committed to” redistributive taxation and the provision for all of its citizens of a minimum level of material well-being. “Although she and

her ministers may not have explicitly repudiated them, their actions have been such as to lead us to the conclusion that they have in fact abandoned them as guides to policy” (Barry 526).

At one obvious level Britain had certainly been unified during the war: Labourites and Conservatives suspended party politics to form a coalition government. It is also easy to see how six years of wartime restrictions and emergency measures might well have curbed rampant individualism, while also serving to normalize the idea of a government-managed economy (the invisible hand of the market, whatever its virtues as a mechanism for balancing and prioritizing a multiplicity of complex objectives, is not as efficient as centralized planning when it comes to achieving a single objective like winning a war). After the war, an absolute majority of the British electorate gave the parliamentary Labour party a mandate to build a society which, in its ethos and its institutions, would embody the sense of the social — the feelings of interdependence and fellowship — fostered by six years of collective resistance to foreign enemies.

This was a formidable task, for the post-war years were necessarily years of austerity, in some respects more strict than that which had obtained during the war itself. Britain in 1945 was essentially bankrupt, needing substantial American loans to fuel economic recovery.* Recovery

* War damage to Britain and to British shipping totalled some £3 billion (*British* billions, i.e. £3 million millions or £3,000,000,000,000), another £1 billion in overseas assets had been sold or lost, and the income from foreign investments was halved. The war itself had, of course, completely disrupted foreign trade, making it impossible for Britain to produce the manufactures
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was slowed down by many factors, including the unexpectedly high levels of defence spending judged necessary for adequate responses to the cold war and the Korean war. A large part of British production was earmarked for export; many commodities, including some basic food items, continued to be rationed for many years. But whatever the hardships, Britain remained a relatively stable society: there was little money available for large-scale changes in either private or public life, and the social spirit fostered by the experience of the war is usually held to have persisted for a long time after it. It is certainly demonstrable that the social solidarity produced by experience of disaster diminishes as things return to normal, and it may well be true that "Britain in the post-war period... illustrates this" (Barry 539). But as Barry elsewhere notes, "the 1950s and the first half of the 1960s" were "a period of peace and prosperity among all the

with which it was accustomed to pay for necessary imports of food and raw materials. In 1945 the country was spending more than £2,000 millions abroad, not counting munitions, and earning about £350 millions. The Lend-Lease program, under which Britain had been able to buy American goods on credit since it had run out of money in 1941, was abruptly and unexpectedly discontinued by Truman in August 1945; although a £20 billions debit balance was generously cancelled, the new loans from the US that the country desperately needed were obtained only on stringent conditions that made it impossible to balance overseas accounts. These facts are taken from Peter Calvocoressi, *The British Experience 1945-1975* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1979), which gives a useful and succinct summary of the post-war economic situation.

advanced capitalist countries” and consequently a period in which democratic institutions went unchallenged, by and large.⁷ (58). Even if the social solidarity produced in Britain by the war was dwindling as the war itself became a gradually-dimming memory, the fact that Britons were becoming progressively more affluent in these years meant that there was little incentive to question the fundamental premises of the welfare state or the legitimacy of government intervention in a market economy.

So the defeat of Labour in 1951, although it ushered in thirteen years of Conservative rule, led to no dismantling of the National Health Service, no wholesale privatization of nationalized industries, while increasing prosperity in the 1950s created only modest and gradual changes in established patterns of living, at least until the last years of the decade. There was racial violence in Nottingham and in Notting Hill, London, in 1958, but immigration from the West Indies, India, and Pakistan, while increasing, was not yet large enough to make English xenophobia and racial prejudice the widespread problems they would become in later years. Casual contempt for the Irish was endemic, but religion itself was not a sufficiently important aspect of English culture to cause problems, and sectarian violence between Catholic and Protestant in Northern Ireland did not erupt on a scale thought large enough to warrant military intervention until the late 1960s. Regional differences among the various parts of England were real, but most aspects of life (health and education, for instance) were organized on lines largely mandated — and on funds largely controlled — by central government in Whitehall. In any case, regional differences were minimized by cultural institutions: wherever in England you lived, your morning newspaper was likely to be one of the major dailies produced in London’s

Fleet Street;* the BBC long enjoyed a monopoly of both radio and television broadcasting, so that most people watched or listened to the same shows at the same times.** Whatever changes may have been taking place at a deep, structural level, they were effectively concealed under the surface continuities of tradition and custom.

So what happened? The answer to this question will depend on whom you ask. The 1960s, as everyone knows, saw the rapid growth of a consumer society, which brought with it a ferment in what came to be known as “lifestyles,” and Mrs. Thatcher herself in 1982 declared, “We are reaping what was sown in the Sixties . . . fashionable theories and permissive claptrap set the scene for a society in which the old virtues of discipline and restraint were denigrated.”⁸ Those who do not altogether share Thatcher’s own commitment to the “enterprise culture” are more likely to point to Thatcherite individualism and acquisitiveness as dissolving the old

* There were still some morning newspapers published in the provinces, but not many, and the best-known of these, the *Manchester Guardian*, eventually moved to London and dropped the “Manchester” from its title. Locally-written newspapers were more likely to be evening papers (in the larger cities) or weeklies (in the towns).

** I recall a production of Pinter’s *The Lover* in the middle 1960s where the producer was able to signify to the audience the rapid passing of time from early morning to late afternoon merely by playing as background music the signature tunes of a single weekday’s radio shows in the sequence in which those shows had been broadcast for years.

“national communal values to which all but the most desperate and alienated subscribed As acquisitiveness was now being publicly sanctioned, why not brutally attack those blessed with goods that one did not have oneself? Structural trends were breaking up old national loyalties and communal networks: those in authority were hastening the trends, and putting nothing appropriate in the place of the loyalties and networks Britain at the beginning of the nineties was still, as never before since 1945, a country of confrontation (as poll tax demonstrations showed) and separate sub-cultures. (Marwick, *Culture*: 140)

Any consideration of “structural trends” would be likely to focus upon the economic malaise which began to take over the newspaper headlines in the late 1960s and to dominate them in the decades that followed: Britain’s industrial base declined, unemployment figures steadily grew, and so did inflation. This malaise produced many divisions within the country — rich and poor, people in work and people out of it, the hard-hit industrial north and the comparatively prosperous service-industry-dominated south — as it intensified political strife. When consensus policies seemed unable to solve the pressing economic problems, the parliamentary Conservative Party was taken over by a new, hard-line, right-wing front bench under the leadership of Mrs. Thatcher. Meanwhile internal dissension grew in the Labour Party, (which governed the country from 1964 to 1970 and from 1974 to 1979), leading to internecine struggles after the Tories won the 1979 election (with a minority of the votes cast but, because of the “first-past-the-post” electoral system, a comfortable majority of seats in the House of Commons).

Even a keen analyst of structural trends in these years, however would probably not have predicted the bitter conflicts and divisions that came to seem normal in the 1980s, just as he or *Michael F. Harper*

she would never have expected to see homeless beggars sleeping in cardboard boxes in doorways or warming themselves by extemporized fires under the arches of railway bridges in the nation's capital. One such analyst, Peter Calvocoressi, confidently stated in 1978, "The weaknesses of Britain are weaknesses in a tough structure. Much of this toughness comes from respect for law. Britain is a singularly law-abiding place. Whoever said in the seventies that Britain was becoming ungovernable made the silliest remark of the century" (230). In his 1982 Penguin history, *British Society Since 1945*, Arthur Marwick was equally confident that "It would be a mistake to see the Conservative election victory of 1979 as marking anything like a revolution in British social and political values." He was still looking hopefully for "sane, considered remedies which will cash in on that humane spirit which, despite everything, has been a characteristic of British society since 1945."⁹ But in 1983, after the British victory over Argentina in the Falklands/Malvinas, and on the eve of a general election that Margaret Thatcher's Conservatives were clearly going to win, Raymond Williams registered the incredulity which transfixed the Left:

How can it be, and who at any period could have predicted, that the most open right-wing government for half a century in Britain, coming after the supposed liberal and social-democratic consensus of the post-war years; a government, directly responsible for massive de-industrialization of the British economy and for massive unemployment; engaged in an absurd military adventure twelve months ago; virulent in cold war attitudes; rigid and resistant to all initiatives towards disarmament and the problems of nuclear weapons; how can such a government outstrip, as it has done so far, not merely the challenges of the Left

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(we have been accustomed to being in a minority), but all those apparently solid formations of British society . . . the liberal, social-democratic and right-wing Labour consensus? How can it outstrip both?

It is so unreasonable that much of the time one thinks, and not just as a pleasant kind of fantasy, that it cannot be objectively true One would have been reckoned deranged rather than merely mistaken . . . if in 1960, 1968, or 1974 we had said, look, in 1983, there will be this kind of situation. It would not have seemed possible.¹⁰

Even when the Left had accepted the actuality of Thatcher's first two electoral triumphs, this new brand of Toryism still seemed an aberration which Britain would surely shake off at the next opportunity. Before the June 1987 election, Hanif Kureishi campaigned for Labour, recording in his diary both the euphoria of hope and the bitterness of disillusionment:

[10 June 1987] The feeling in the committee room, where people are squatting on the floor addressing envelopes, is that it'll be close. No one actually thinks we'll put an end to Thatcherism this time, but at least Thatcher won't have put an end to socialism At the end of the meeting the crowd sings 'We Shall Overcome' and 'The Red Flag' and we cheer and cheer. For these two hours I can't see how we can fail to win the Election.

[15 June 1987] Everyone reeling from the shock of the Election defeat and from the knowledge that we were completely wrong about the extent of the Labour failure. We lost in Fulham by 6000 votes, though we'd won the seat at a recent by-election. Someone tells me that the people on the estate I leafleted voted 3 to 1 for the Tories. What this Tory victory

means is the death of the dream of the sixties, which was that our society would become more adjusted to the needs of all the people who live in it; that it would become more compassionate, more liberal, more tolerant, less intent on excluding various groups from the domain of the human; that the Health Service, education, and the spectrum of social services would be more valued and that through them our society would become fairer, less unequal, less harshly competitive, and that the lives of the marginalized and excluded would not continue to be wasted. But for the third time running, the British people have shown that this is precisely what they don't want. (1988, 124-5).

What happened? *Where are we at?*

The purpose of this book is twofold: first, to look at some of the answers suggested in English fiction of the period; and second, and to take account both of the ways in which the task of providing answers has exerted pressure on the traditional novel form, and of the ways in which that form may itself have helped to constitute the shape of the answers. I do not attempt anything like an encyclopaedic account of the English novel over the last twenty or thirty years, or even a synoptic survey of those novels whose claim to literary eminence would appear to be more or less generally accepted.¹¹ The novels I single out for detailed exegesis have been chosen for their thematic and formal interest in relation to my overarching concern, which is to provide both an answer and a rebuttal to the kind of accusation trenchantly summarized by D.J. Taylor: “why devote so much attention to an art-form which nearly everybody admits is in a wretched state, and in which large numbers of intelligent people have lost interest?”¹² The short answer to what Taylor calls this “more or less unanswerable” question is simply to deny its unargued

premises — to point to the annual Booker Prize shortlist and the brouhaha that surrounds it as evidence both of the novel's continued good health and of the intense and widespread interest it still commands. A longer, more complex but also more satisfactory answer, however, will take us to the very heart of our notions of "fiction" and "non-fiction," of "imaginative literature" and its relationship to "lived experience."

Part One: The Realism Problem

“This feels like a good bit of work to me. It’s certainly unusual,” he said. Doris Arthur’s screenplay lay cracked out on his lap. He had been flicking through it confidently. Are these your jottings? What’s your problem?”

“We have a hero problem. We have a motivation problem. We have a fight problem. We have a realism problem.”

“What’s your realism problem?”

I told him. It took a long time.

Martin Amis, Money.¹³

One: Mapping Experience

HIRST: *You speak with the weight of experience behind you.*

SPOONER: *And beneath me. Experience is a paltry thing. Everyone has it and will tell his tale of it. I leave experience to psychological interpreters, the wetdream world. I myself can do any graph of experience you wish, to suit your taste or mine.*

*Harold Pinter, No Man's Land*¹⁴

“Experience” in ordinary usage is a very accommodating concept: it implies *directness* and *immediacy*, yet is frequently used in contexts in which those implications are not warranted. What we are likely to think of as our “experience of the world,” for instance, involves claims to knowledge that stretch far beyond anything strictly underwritten by the evidence of our five senses. *Experience*, that is, can paradoxically turn out to be something we fail to *live*: “To be part of a huge crowd in a flat space is to fail to live the experience. One is aware at the most of five or six hundred people around one and, even if one moves through the crowd and causes the five or six hundred slowly to shift and change, they still never add up to more.”¹⁵ Novelist Julian Rathbone is describing one person’s “experience” of a political demonstration, but his description will serve as an apt metaphor for any individual’s apprehension of his or her socio-historical context.

Whether or not we believe in the possibility of unmediated, “first-hand” experience, it is clear that any such direct perception could encompass only a small part of the “world” we somehow think we “know.” At any given period, a single consciousness plays its part on a stage which features only a few scene-changes and a cast of characters unlikely to exceed “five or six hundred people,” perhaps fewer, if one takes account only of speaking parts. Yet somehow, we build a world: a “London,” a “Britain,” a “Seventies” or an “Eighties.” How?

Once again, Julian Rathbone provides a helpful metaphor. The demonstration features platform speakers, who provide the crowd with a story, and hence an identity: “Sisters, brothers — I only wish you could stand where I am and see what I can see. Then you would have something to tell your friends at your workplaces on Monday, then indeed you would have something to remember when your grandchildren and great-grandchildren gather around you in the evening of your lives If, I say, you could only see yourselves, believe in yourselves as a mighty army dedicated to peace and progress . . . “ (89-90). What we like to think of as our “experience” of the world is just as certainly (if less obviously) mediated as the demonstrator’s “experience” of the crowd of which he/she is a part. We too are harangued, cajoled, flattered and entreated by a multitude of voices; we are bombarded with images and interpretations, with “information” and narratives, from myriad sources; and although the process is by no means simple, it is these heterogeneous and often contradictory materials that intersect and combine in peculiar configurations to constitute self and world.

Self and world are fictions in the sense indicated by the etymological root of the word: they are things *made, fashioned*. As one of A. N. Wilson's characters puts it, "we are all walking about and spinning about ourselves not cocoons — we aren't caterpillars — but yarns — self-pictures — three-volume shockers, perhaps. We're living in the stories of our own composing, what?"¹⁶ To what extent the stories are "of our own composing," however, is moot, since neither the materials nor the narrative structures we employ are of our own devising. As Alan Sinfield asserts in *Literature, Politics, and Culture in Postwar Britain*:

Societies have to reproduce themselves culturally as well as materially, and this is done in great part by putting into circulation stories of how the world goes. . . . It is through. . . stories, or representations, that we develop understandings of the world and how we live in it. The contest between rival stories produces our notions of reality, and hence our beliefs about what we can and cannot do. . . . The stories through which we make sense of ourselves are everywhere. . . . [They] are *lived*. They are not just outside ourselves, something we hear or read about. They make sense for us — of us — because we have been and are in them. They are already proceeding when we arrive in the world, and we come to consciousness in their terms. As the world shapes itself around and through us, certain interpretations of experience strike us as plausible because they fit with what we have experienced already. They become common sense, they 'go without saying'.¹⁷

"Reality" consists of the fictions that have so deeply insinuated themselves into our consciousness — have constituted our consciousness — that in normal circumstances we

can no longer appreciate their fictiveness. The only sense in which we can be said to “live” what we call our “experience” is this sense: we “live” the “stories through which we make sense of ourselves” because we are no longer aware of them as stories, as mediations, and therefore apprehend them as *immediate* experience. And indeed it *is* misleading to think of them as “mediations,” because that term itself implies a story (a very powerful and persistent story which won’t go away because it is built into the very structure of our language and therefore of our thought) according to which we could simply get rid of *mediation*, of everything that stands in the middle ground between us and the Real; we could, it seems, at least aspire to tear aside the veil, dispense with all fictions, and confront “reality” directly. But we can’t; we “live” interpretations, not perceptions. The fiction/interpretation that we live discloses itself as a fiction (i.e. as *made*, not *given*) only when we leave it for a different story, one that has for various reasons become more powerful, more persuasive. That is why stories — including novels — are important; and it is why they become crucially important at moments of social crisis, when different stories compete fiercely for our allegiance.

Between the fictions that we call “reality” and the fictions that we call “novels” there is a complicated relationship, asymmetrical, reciprocal and dynamic. On the one hand, it is clear that the power of a conventional (i.e. “realistic”) novel depends to a large degree on its ability to persuade us of its “truth,” and that this “truth,” or plausibility, is in turn a function of how well the novel’s fictions dovetail with the fictions that have already constituted our sense of the real. On the other hand, such a novel exerts its own power on our conception of reality: provided that its fictions are sufficiently congruent with some aspects of that reality to earn our credence, it can persuade us to modify our beliefs

concerning other aspects.* A novel we find convincing will, at the very least, confirm and reinforce the beliefs, the “knowledge” that we brought to it; but it may also deepen, develop, elaborate and significantly change that “knowledge” by persuading us to incorporate our own “experience” into its novelistic fiction, reinterpreting and reconceiving that experience in a new way. The appeal of novels consists precisely in this function: like other forms of narrative art — the theatre, the cinema — novels provide structures of significance which offer to organize and integrate the disparate fictions of “experience.”

Coping with Reality: England’s Storied Present

Long before the influence of poststructuralism made itself felt in literary criticism, it was widely recognized that language inevitably interprets what it claims merely to represent: in lectures delivered in 1965, Frank Kermode was insisting that the novel, like all other discourses, imposes pattern, coherence, meaning:

It has to lie. Words, thoughts, patterns of word and thought, are enemies of truth, if you identify that with what may be had by phenomenological reductions . . . ; truth would be found only in a silent poem or a silent novel. As soon as it speaks, begins to be a novel, it imposes causality and concordance, development, character, a past

* As I shall argue in a later chapter, this is true not only of conventional/realistic novels but also even of “postmodern” novels which insistently claim to be nothing more than literary and linguistic artifacts.

which matters and a future within certain broad limits determined by the project of the author rather than that of the characters. They have their choices, but the novel has its end.”¹⁸

For Kermode, this end, this function, is the reason that “in our phase of civility, the novel is the central form of literary art. It lends itself to explanations borrowed from any intellectual system of the universe which seems at the time satisfactory. . . . From Cervantes forward it has been, when it has satisfied us, the poetry which is ‘capable,’ in the words of Ortega, ‘of coping with present reality’” (128-9).

Whatever else they may be, the novels that form the principal focus of this study are all attempts to cope with the “present reality” of “England” at various points during the last quarter-century. “England” is not a single, stable entity: like any such concept, it consists of the stories that people tell about it, and there are as many “Englands” as there are stories. “England,” that is, is not a monolithic concept (although if one particular story about it becomes widely accepted it may seem to be), but is always and endlessly fissured and divided.* These different stories of England have various relationships to each other:

* It is, of course, fissured and divided in ways that can never be completely grasped, because whatever categories of analysis are employed are themselves part of one story or another and hence not finally grounded and not value-free. The critic may choose to explore the fault-lines of a culture in terms of concepts which he/she sees as informing and organizing many of its stories (*class, region, and gender*, for instance), but it is a mistake to think that this strategy provides access to a uniquely privileged vantage point.

some are complementary, some are slightly differing versions of each other, but many are in conflict: indeed, politics and civil society may be conceived as arenas in which stories compete for broad public acceptance. A period of comparative social stability is a period in which the dominant story or ideology has won very wide acceptance and is not facing a significant challenge; a period in which no story can win sufficiently broad acceptance and in which the competing stories are mutually antagonistic is one in which a “society” may disintegrate into civil war, as the recent history of Northern Ireland illustrates.

Once upon a time in the nineteen-fifties and sixties, the dominant story that structured mainstream English political life prophesied increasing prosperity for everyone.

Capitalism had been tamed by Keynes; the disastrous effects of the “business cycle” with its boom/bust alternation could be averted by prompt government action, and the continuously-increasing wealth of the nation would trickle down to the meanest of its citizens. Some kind of “safety-net” in the form of a welfare state would protect the least fortunate from harm, but the extension of higher education to all and the increasing automation of tasks previously performed by unskilled labour would eliminate the traditional working class altogether within a generation or so, leaving an egalitarian middle-class to share peace and prosperity with a dwindling aristo/plutocracy which progressive taxation would in time confine to a purely ornamental role. This story, or

Because the critic is always within a story, and because criticism itself can never be anything but a way of telling a story, a study such as the present one will inevitably be polemical and contestable.

something like it, was at the heart of what has come to be known as “The Consensus,” because it was accepted by mainstream Left and Right.* The “Right,” in the form of the Conservative Party, accepted that one of the functions of government was to look after the interests of the least fortunate, that some form of welfare state was therefore acceptable, and that the government should intervene in the economy to alleviate the harsher consequences of unfettered market forces. The “Left,” in the form of the Labour Party, broadly accepted that the Keynesian revolution — using comparatively modest government intervention in the economy to prevent the systemic evils of capitalism — had made public ownership of the means of production and distribution supererogatory.** Politics therefore became an argument about just how much of a welfare state was

* By 1990, the existence of this "Consensus" in the post-war decades was disputed in many quarters, but this dispute is itself evidence of the break-up of consensus since the "Consensus" was a notion that had gone unchallenged for a long time.

** After a bitter intra-Party struggle, the Labour Party under Hugh Gaitskell — and contrary to his wishes — reaffirmed Clause Four of its constitution, which specified public ownership as the goal of Labour Government, but the affirmation was more a sentimental tie to Labour's past than the focus of a political program. Clause Four was eventually abrogated in 1995 as the Party moved decisively to the right under the leadership of Tony Blair.

desirable, and about which set of “managers” was better qualified to manage the business of the government.

Sometime in the 1960s or early 1970s (different stories specify different moments), this Consensus broke up, and rival stories competed for acceptance. The competition involved political and social action on a broad front.* Conspiracy theories abounded, the specification of the conspirators changing as one moved across the political spectrum; the nation’s collective imagination was obsessed with spies and betrayals. One story that received sufficiently broad assent to thrust its author/protagonist into the highest office in the land was called “Thatcherism.”** Thatcherism was sufficiently different from the dominant story that preceded it to pose a real problem for any new, would-be meta-story (“How on earth did we get from there to here?”), and the struggles that led to its electoral victory involved challenges to the stories that the English were accustomed to tell

* Some of the more institutionalised expressions of this ferment included the formation of new political groups such as the far-right, neo-Nazi National Front, the extreme left-wing Militant Tendency, and the centrist Social Democratic Party.

** At least, it won at the polls. How far the electoral triumph of a new kind of Conservative Party led by Margaret Thatcher represented a change in the national story is itself a matter of dispute, since the Thatcher-led Conservative Party never received an absolute majority of the total votes cast and since polls of people’s attitudes and beliefs on political and social questions revealed a significant divergence between their answers and the attitudes and beliefs of the government they had helped to elect.

themselves about many different aspects of their lives, their country, their values. The break-up of the Consensus inaugurated a period in which everything was challenged, pressured, stressed, “up-for-grabs,” not only in the realm of politics narrowly construed but on a broad socio-cultural front.

New stories, or attempts to refurbish old stories, abounded during this period. Bernard Levin saw the Sixties as a time in which “Teachers, prophets, sibyls, oracles, mystagogues, avatars, haruspices and mullahs roamed the land, gathering flocks about them as easily as holy men in nineteenth-century Russia, and any philosophy, from Zen Buddhism to macrobiotics and from violence as an end in itself to total inactivity as an end in *itself*, could be sure of a respectful hearing and a group of adherents, however temporary their adherence might prove.”¹⁹ In a story of a different political stripe, however, Levin’s account of — and curmudgeonly contempt for — this social ferment with its rapid proliferation of stories were themselves typical of “the rising tide of reactionary punditry in the newspapers and on the television screen” — a punditry designed to lend “a feverish semblance of life” to “moribund national institutions” embalmed by the oil that gushed from the North Sea in the 1970s.²⁰ Some very troubling stories eventually became widely accepted, in Britain and abroad, and on one issue at least there was a new kind of consensus:

All the British — left, right, and center — agree that by 1979 Britain’s fortunes were at a low ebb. The Welfare State had failed to fulfil its early promise. In an era of harder economic times, socialism was almost universally in retreat. There was a questioning, if not yet a dismantling, of Labour’s postwar social gains. Strikes,

lockouts and turbulence swept Britain as displaced miners, dockers, and factory workers struck back.²¹

In the stories told by economists, Britain was “the sick man of Europe,” and *The Sun* newspaper’s headline-characterization of 1979’s strike-torn winter as “The Winter of Discontent” was a powerful stimulus that helped elect Margaret Thatcher’s first government.

The stories that filled the media during the 70’s and 80’s are not themselves the subject of this book, although they profoundly affected the stories which are. My main, although by no means exclusive, interest is in a heterogeneous collection of novels that may be called “realist” insofar as they derive their power and their significance from their relationship (variously conceived as representation, commentary, explanation, criticism) to “real” life, and this choice of focus is grounded in the belief that such novels are still the imaginative centre of our culture. Given what appears to be the dominance of film and television in our culture, this belief requires a little justification.

The Eldorado Way: Look For What People Like, And Give It To Them

It is a truism that our collective consciousness is increasingly permeated by television and the forms (commercial, newscast, soap opera, sit-com, etc.) on which it thrives. Furthermore, much programming consists of narrative forms obviously derived from realist fiction, while such “non-fiction” presentations as the news are informed by suppressed but significant narrative structures.²² It would therefore seem necessary to

consider these fictional structures alongside the traditional novel — indeed, to give them pride of place insofar as their wider distribution makes them more influential. Now it is certainly true that a great deal can be learned from television (and from the popular press) about the stories or ideologies that achieve the widest currency, and within the field of cultural studies there are many explorations of these sources. But it is also true that the very conditions of production that obtain in television conspire to produce programs which, however brilliant technically, are ideologically simple and homogenous. As Stuart Hood puts it:

An evening's viewing soon demonstrates that the output has been homogenized. The 'regular strike' [a production rhythm that can be calculated and repeated with ease] does not like programmes which make what are seen as exorbitant demands on resources or require longer to produce than normal; nor does it encourage experiment or thought about the use of the medium. In commercial television innovations are particularly difficult to introduce because there is no guarantee that they will draw the same audience and therefore have the same ratings as what they have displaced; which is one of the reasons for the extraordinarily long life of a programme like *Coronation Street* [a soap opera set in the working-class North]. The result is that programmes tend to fall into well-defined categories, to be made according to formulae which will 'work', and to be turned out using a limited number of well-tried production techniques. These techniques . . . are rarely questioned, although it is clear that there are other and equally effective ways of presenting pictures on a television screen. Instead they have been accepted as 'the grammar of television'. Variations — departures from the traditional grammar — it is argued will simply

confuse the audience. If the product is acceptable to the audience why alter anything? Why disturb the smooth flow of the production line?²³

The repeated use of a limited vocabulary of techniques to present formulaic plots, situations and characters serves, whatever its economic and other determinants, to create in its audience a consensus, an interpretive community: “The consensus reading is presented in such a way by the medium . . . that it attempts to disregard and override dissident readings. It is the essence of the idea of a consensus that it attempts, at a conscious and unconscious level, to impose the view that there is only one ‘right’ reading. Dissenting readings should be rejected by the audience” (Hood: *Television*, 3).

All this means that a study of television is ideally suited to the task of identifying the broad consensus that is the hegemonic or dominant ideology, the generally accepted story, but it will turn up comparatively little material that represents an attempt to test, extend, and transgress the limits of the dominant story. A writer who challenges the consensus reading may well meet outright censorship, as Dennis Potter found when his play *Brimstone and Treacle* was cancelled by the BBC.²⁴ So when Stephen Frears suggested that he and Hanif Kureishi get the BBC to do *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* — “If they like it he says they’ll pay for it and our problems will be over” — Kureishi countered “by saying they’ve become too reactionary, terrified of ripe language and screwing, cowed by censors. If you want to show an arse on the BBC, they behave as if their entire licence fee were at stake” (*Sammy*, 64).

But my interest is precisely in the attempt of fiction to test the adequacy of old stories and to forge new ones, and a television establishment dedicated implicitly and explicitly

to the creation and maintenance of a consensus is more likely to frustrate than to encourage this attempt. I do not want to be understood as asserting that all television is necessarily less interesting than all novels or all theatre; as Raymond Williams has remarked, “today you can find kitsch in a national theatre and an intensely original play in a police series,”²⁵ and some of the best of contemporary British cinema has been developed in association with Channel Four. So some unconventional work will turn up on the airwaves from time to time but — and this is increasingly the case as Thatcherism’s single-minded espousal of “market forces” erodes the BBC’s comparative autonomy by forcing it to compete for audiences against the commercial channels — it doesn’t turn up very often. Any television service that competes for viewers will be inherently conservative: it will resist change until change is forced upon it by other socio-cultural forces, and then it will change just as much as is necessary to create a new consensus, consolidate a new status quo. For example, it is a commonplace that England in the 1970s and 1980s was in the grip of nostalgia, dwelling on past glories in order to compensate for a painful sense of the inadequacies of the present; so it comes as no particular surprise that nostalgia should saturate the telyscreens in the form of *Brideshead Revisited*, *The Jewel In The Crown*, and a hundred lesser lights, since it is not the aim of the television establishment to challenge that structure of feeling. If, however, nostalgia should turn out to be an important structure of feeling in left-wing novels and plays in the same time period, this would indeed be significant for my purposes, since it would signify much more than some corporate determination of what “the audience wanted:” it would suggest the depth and extent to which the imaginative possibilities of conceptions of the social had been preempted and determined by the dominant story, and

it might also indicate real limitations of the literary forms concerned — limitations of their power to represent the social in terms appropriate to the politics of their practitioners. But no such inferences can be drawn in the case of television, precisely because “television is a collaborative medium, made out of many inputs and outputs,” as Malcolm Bradbury emphasizes in *Cuts*.²⁶ In this satirical novella Henry Babbacombe, a minor avant-garde novelist whose innocence of the larger world is worthy of *Candide*, is hired to write a 13-part dramatic series for Eldorado television:

“Scenes and acts and episodes began scrolling out of the battered roller of the old Remington portable; reams of paper stacked up on his desk. What he wrote he passed on to Brad, who rewrote it and handed it to Pride, who rewrote it and handed it on to one of Mark Hasper’s several secretaries, who rewrote it and sent it on to Henry to be re-written. For television was indeed, as Lord Mellow said, a collaborative medium, and nothing was really written, but rewritten. Nothing held stable, nothing stayed the same, as it did with novels. The Japanese samurai had somehow become an old Scots ghillie. The great country house had somehow become a castle on a foreign lake. New ideas came from nowhere, had their time, then ended up back in nowhere. (93)

Many of the changes to the script are determined by extra-dramatic considerations:

‘Well, Henry, this is your big final scene.’

‘Why are we shooting it first?’ asked Henry.

‘Because it fits in with the Swiss schedule,’ said Joss Pride.

'I wrote it for an English country house,' said Henry.

'I remember,' said Joss. 'Somewhere like Castle Howard but bigger, I think you said. But if we shoot the whole thing with Swiss backers on a continental location we don't have to pay British tax.'

'He's supposed to be a faithful ghillie, not a Swiss mountain guide,' said Henry.

'The Swiss backers demanded some Swiss actors,' said Joss Pride. (119)

Whatever the details, however, the overall result is pre-determined to be "a tale of reassuring characters, traditional and solid houses, established customs, sunlit lawns, sentimental feelings, flowing nostalgia and an all too happy ending" (90). When Henry first sees what the "team" have made of his initial idea, he blanches — "'You don't think it's a bit banal and conventional?' he asked" — but the response is forthright: "'Henry, ask yourself, why do conventions exist? . . . They exist because people need them and love them and understand them. They don't want surprises. They don't want unfamiliar stories.'" And when Henry persists — "'I feel it could be missing something . . . some element of experimentalism, some sense of surprise, some . . . difference'" — the discussion is firmly closed: "'Eldorado is not an experimental company. Our people don't go to Cannes. They don't give lectures at the ICA on the frontiers of television drama. They look for what people like, and they give it to them. That's the Eldorado way'" (86).

Similar arguments apply, although to a lesser extent, to the British cinema where, despite some extremely interesting films made against the grain, the conditions of production (including the need for large amounts of financing, usually American, and the

collaborative nature of the enterprise) usually serve to dull the edge of innovation and reaffirm the formulae. Hanif Kureishi noted that

British films are often aimed at American audiences and attempt to deal with ‘universal’ or ‘epic’ themes as in *Gandhi*, *The Mission*, *The Killing Fields*, *Cry Freedom*. . . . a lot of English ‘art’ also dwells, gloats on and relives nostalgic scenarios of wealth and superiority. It’s therefore easy for Americans to see Britain as just an old country, as a kind of museum, as a factory for producing versions of lost greatness. After all, many British films do reflect this: *Chariots of Fire*, *A Room with a View*, the Raj epics, and the serials *Brideshead Revisited* and *The Jewel in the Crown*. Even the recent past, the Beatles, punks, the numerous Royal Weddings, are converted into quaintness, into tourist mugs and postcards, into saleable myths. If imperialism is the highest form of capitalism, then tourism is its ghostly afterlife in this form of commercial nostalgia which is sold as ‘art’ or ‘culture’ (*Sammy*, 81-2).

The huge amounts of money involved in making almost any film, and the consequent need to recoup it by tailoring the product to a wide — and specifically American — audience, clearly help to determine the scope and shape of the film. I am not arguing that novel-writing is entirely free of such constraints — obviously a novel will have to be seen as saleable in order to be published through the usual channels, which are themselves subject to economic and other forces — but at present it is safe to say that there is more room for innovation and idiosyncrasy in novels; this is simply because the amounts of venture capital involved in getting a novel to the bookshops are derisory in contrast to those demanded by the visual media, while the role of the publisher’s editor, by tradition,

is flexible but usually less intrusive than the roles of the myriad functionaries whose financial stake in a film licenses their unbridled interference. Although one should be careful not to fall into a simple idealism here, it remains comparatively true that the constraints within which novels are realized are much broader because less extrinsic, more the ideological constraints limiting/constituting the form and the author than the exigencies of the mode of production. As Malcolm Bradbury has claimed, novelists we call “major” have earned the label because they “challenge, re-examine and extend their form in the light of the experience and the dominant ideas, the ideologies and the anxieties, of their own times, hoping to extend the distinctive knowledge that may be carried by the novel itself.”²⁷ At some level we believe something very like this: the “realist” novel still occupies a dominant position in our culture because we still, collectively, believe in its explanatory powers.*

* Richard Gott complained that the 1992 finalists for Britain's most prestigious and widely-publicized literary award, the Booker Prize, did not perform this central duty of explaining the world: "These are extraordinary times, yet they have not been adequately reflected in the work of British novelists, who stumble blindly about in the ruins of contemporary Europe with little empathy or understanding" ("Shortlisted for Booker," *Guardian Weekly* September 20 1992, 27). One of the Booker judges, Victoria Glendinning, offered a furious ("I am enraged by Richard Gott's weary cliches") rebuttal and defense of the Booker shortlist on the grounds that "Each of the six novels is precisely what he says a Booker novel should be — 'a reading of the modern world that helps us to understand our present predicament.' All of them . . . are entertaining and readable but are fuelled by concerns about displacement,

Mapping Our Many Worlds

That we should still believe in the novel's explanatory powers is hardly surprising: if the stories in which we most deeply believe are those which "go without saying" because we "live" them, then it is to be expected that the competing stories which succeed in getting our attention should be those which appear in the guise of "vicarious experience."

Furthermore, although no way of writing can transcribe an unmediated reality, the novel's claim to present us with something richer and more complex than "mere ideology" — the claim which undergirds its appeal and its power — demands to be reinterpreted, rather than glibly dismissed. It is important to remember that none of the stories our society tells us about ourselves is complete, all-embracing; some areas of our lives will therefore be apprehended in terms of other — perhaps newer, perhaps older, but in any case different — stories, and a novel will seem richer and more complex than a tract because its narrative form can accommodate a broader range of stories than a logical argument can. Raymond Williams has stoutly maintained that the "social content" of art and literature "cannot without loss be reduced to belief-systems, institutions, or explicit general relationships, though it may include all these as lived and

racism, greed, and violence. If the legacies of the second world war, the slave trade, or the kind of deprivation that turns a child into a psychopath are not relevant to what he rightly calls our extraordinary times, then I don't know what is," ("Gott and Booker," *Guardian Weekly* September 27 1992, 27). What is important here is that beneath the bitter disagreement there is absolute unanimity concerning the relevant criteria for judging novels.

experienced, with or without tension, as it also evidently includes elements of social and material (physical or natural) experience which may lie beyond, or be uncovered or imperfectly covered by, the elsewhere recognizable systematic elements” of what we may properly call an ideology.²⁸ Williams does not deny here that belief-systems (i.e. ideologies) are lived and experienced, or that experience is thereby ideologically constituted, or that art and literature inevitably reproduce ideology by representing experience; but he does maintain that no particular ideology or set of intersecting ideologies can wholly saturate experience, and that therefore some elements of our social/material experience, while being ultimately ideologically determined, may escape the determination of any given ideology or belief-system at any given historical moment.²⁹ It is in its ability to include a range of areas of experience, variously constituted by different belief-systems, that the novel’s complexity — i.e. its very “realism” — is rooted; and it is in the potentially fruitful tension between different areas of experience (and hence the belief-systems “experiences” implicate) that the novel’s power to change our minds (and our lives) lies.* This complexity and power are akin to what Keats called negative capability, and what Bakhtin anatomized in his exploration of “dialogism” and the novel.³⁰

* Cf. Catherine Belsey's appropriation of Pierre Macherey's claim that within the ideological text there are gaps, contradictions, silences which can provide what Belsey calls "a knowledge of the limits of ideological representation" (*Critical Practice* London, Routledge 1980, 109; see 106ff).

The dialogue enacted in and through novels is preeminently a social dialogue. “More than any other literary form, more perhaps than any other type of writing, the novel serves as the model by which society conceives of itself, the discourse in and through which it articulates the world,” claims Jonathan Culler, who quotes Philippe Sollers: “Le roman est la manière dont cette société se parle.”³¹ There is thus a deep complicity, memorably and brilliantly explored by Roland Barthes in *S/Z*,³² between the conventions (which Barthes terms the “codes”) of the classic novel and the ways in which we make sense of the world, and this complicity explains why even a practitioner of the avant-garde such as Nathalie Sarraute believes that “[the traditional novel’s] generous and flexible form can still, without resorting to any major change, adapt itself to all the new stories, all the new characters and all the new conflicts which develop within successive societies.”³³ Such a sweeping claim as Sarraute’s needs very careful examination, and one of the questions this study will ask is to what extent the form of the realist novel constrains explanations, permitting some kinds and excluding others. Nevertheless, Sarraute’s belief is widely shared. “Traditional” fiction is arguably more important than non-fiction as a form in which our society’s influential stories are elaborated, tested, refined, given depth and resonance; the novel is where ideas acquire, in their fullest and most worked-out incarnation, the “realism” and conviction that allow them to gain currency and cogency in the wider culture. Several authors have noted what Allan Massie calls “the resurgence of the traditional novel and the weakening of interest in formal experiment,”³⁴ although explanations of this phenomenon are varied. My claim is that the social ferment of the last three decades has called the English novel back to perform the important social function for which there was a less pressing need in earlier

years, when traditional novels were reduced to offering “unambitious but competent slice-of-life mediocrity.”³⁵

This important social function is what Fredric Jameson has called “cognitive mapping,” extrapolating the term from the “low-level subdiscipline” of that name that deals with people’s mental maps of city space and applying it to “that mental map of the social and global totality we all carry around in our heads in variously garbled forms.”* During the years of “Consensus,” a widely-shared cognitive map was already in place; the English novel, not being called upon to provide a new one, could content itself with drawing detailed street plans — “slice-of-life” — of individual sections of it, but the breakdown of consensus has called for wholly new or drastically-revised maps. Whether the best way to produce these new maps is to abandon formal experimentation and return to the conventions of the traditional novel is highly questionable, however, for to adopt Jameson’s metaphor is also to begin to see the potential for a crisis of representation/figuration in the novel. As communications proliferate and the world contracts, our lives are increasingly determined by the bewilderingly complex network of

* For Jameson, cognitive mapping is an analogue of “Althusser’s great formulation of Ideology itself, as ‘the Imaginary representation of the subject’s relationship to his or her Real conditions of existence.’” Here “Real” means something like ‘the true conditions of existence as revealed by Marxist analyses,’ but one does not have to share Jameson’s faith in Marxism to accept that literary works provide readers with cognitive maps of the world they live in and locate them figurally in relation to the other elements of that world.

economic interrelationships that comprise late capitalism's global village; yet this network is hidden from our view, cloaked in the invisibility of a cyberspace which we inhabit but never behold, and it therefore escapes representation in conventional terms:

“ . . . the phenomenological experience of the individual subject — traditionally, the supreme raw materials of the work of art — becomes limited to a tiny corner of the social world, a fixed-camera view of a certain section of London or the countryside or whatever. But the truth of that experience no longer coincides with the place in which it takes place. The truth of that limited daily experience of London lies, rather, in India or Jamaica or Hong Kong; it is bound up with the whole colonial system of the British Empire that determines the very quality of the individual's subjective life. Yet those structural coordinates are no longer accessible to immediate lived experience. . . . ”³⁶

The problem is not an entirely new one, for surely this was what E.M Forster was grappling with as long ago as 1910 in *Howards End*. One implication of that novel's famous injunction “only connect” bears upon the need to map the “real” (read “economic”) relations between people who, in the normal course of things, are hermetically sealed off from each other by class and upbringing. Forster was already (and notoriously) straining the bounds of realism, employing improbable coincidence and obvious symbolism to allow the Schlegel sisters of England to make the connection between their own cultured leisure and the philistinism of the despised Wilcoxes, those captains of industry whose exploitation of the lower-class Basts provided the dividends off which the Schlegels lived. Just as *Howards End* attempted a cognitive map which

would plot the “real” relationships obtaining between social strata in England, *Passage to India* (1924) essayed a larger chart involving the relations between the British middle class and the inhabitants of the “jewel in the crown” of the British Empire. But the growing difficulty of representing such relations in the novel is signalled by the fact that Forster published no more novels after *Passage*, although he lived until 1970.

Yet the need for cognitive maps remains, which is why the regularly-published reports of the death of the novel have so far proved, in Mark Twain’s words, “greatly exaggerated.”

In 1970 Bernard Bergonzi, pondering the claim that the novel is a moribund form tied to a passing historical epoch, cited Robbe-Grillet’s accusation that “the formal devices of the traditional novel” are “all ways of reinforcing the basic coherence of the world.”³⁷

Robbe-Grillet is correct in his analysis but beside the point in his condemnation: the “basic coherence of the world” may be metaphysically moot but it is psychologically necessary, and reinforcing it is the task that the novel is called upon to carry out in societies in which that basic coherence is threatened. The interesting question for the critic is not whether a novel reinforces that coherence but upon what terms it does so; for in the course of performing this essential task, authors/novels may well find that the formal devices of the past are stressed up to and beyond their limits, demanding either skilled re-affirmation on new terms or subtle revision and development. Since a challenge to dominant stories is a questioning of “reality” and hence of how we can know and represent that reality, the challenge (whether accepted or not) extends to the accustomed modes of representation (i.e. various “realisms”) themselves. The scope of this book therefore includes not only “state-of-the nation” novels but others in which — whatever the subject or preoccupation — the possibility and means of representation

itself are put into question, for cognitive mapping is an intrinsic function not just of the so-called “traditional” novel but of any novel whatsoever. The difference between “realist” and “experimental” fiction, in other words, is at most a difference of means, not ends: different conventions will furnish different cognitive maps, different patterns of coherence.

Two: New Maps and Old

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*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.”³⁹

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.⁴⁰

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

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.”⁴¹ 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
Michael Harper

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].”⁴² 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 *Michael Harper*

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.⁴³ These two claims are quite different, although the difference is frequently elided in critical discussion.⁴⁴ 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.⁴⁵

Although there are some postmodern novels — literary equivalents of an M. C. Escher graphic — of which this is a persuasive reading,⁴⁶ 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.⁴⁷ 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.”⁴⁸ 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,”⁴⁹ 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

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

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."⁵⁰ 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);⁵¹ 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.⁵² 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.* So the fiction of the novel

* "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.

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,⁵⁴ 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).

“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).

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 line 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.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.* 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 *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

* "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.

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

absolutely different.”⁵⁶ 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

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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 *un*traditional 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

ideology.* 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 action⁵⁹.

* 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
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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

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”⁶⁰ — 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.

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 fingernails 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 uninterrupted 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

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 authoritative 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,

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

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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

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.

Three: Getting It Right

You have to get life right before you start going on about its meaning.

*Martin Amis, The Moronic Inferno.*⁶¹

What is truth? said jesting Pilate, and would not stay for an answer.

*Francis Bacon, Of Truth.*⁶²

Hitherto a comparatively sustained chronological narrative has been achieved, but the last twenty or thirty years are not always tractable to continuity of design. As one picks ones way between the trees of Dante's dark wood of middle life its configuration becomes ever less discernible. All one can say of the trees is that most are gnarled, some hollow, not a few struck by lightning. Books are published; professional schemes take shape or fade away; journeys are made; new persons met. All the time a perspective that once gave at least the illusion of order to the past diminishes. The outlines of individuals and events, perhaps clear enough in themselves, grow ever more blurred in relation to each other....

Then uncertainties invade the mind as never before regarding what is true, what worth writing about. Fallibilities of reportage become only too apparent after reaching an age when biographies begin to appear dealing with personal friends, or even individuals known slightly. I reflect on the extraordinary views and remarks attributed to myself from time to time by newspaper interviewers. Pilate certainly had a point.

*Anthony Powell, The Strangers All Are Gone.*⁶³

The Tottering Data Of The Contemporary

On a canvas that stretches from the 1920s to the 1970s, Anthony Powell's novel-sequence *The Music of Time* delineates the complex patterns of fate and fortune that shape the lives of a large and variegated cast of characters. Set principally in London, the books focus upon the historical experience of Powell's own generation, which came of age in the aftermath of the First World War and was young enough to serve in the Second. While most of the central characters belong to Powell's own class (upper-middle), the novels' sweep includes denizens of the arts, the academy, the army, politics, business, and "Society," along with a less-easily-categorized miscellany of the eccentric, the bohemian, and the bizarre. In 1960, when only five volumes of this *roman fleuve* had appeared, it was frequently compared with Proust's *A La Recherche Du Temps Perdu*. A decade-and-a-half later, however, when the re-titled *A Dance To The Music Of Time*

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came to an end with the twelfth novel in the suite, it seemed clear that Powell was concerned more with manners than with metaphysics, more with chronicle than with consciousness. Accordingly, to many readers a more fitting counterpart than Proust presented himself — John Aubrey, the seventeenth-century antiquary chiefly remembered by posterity for his gossipy biographical sketches posthumously published as *Brief Lives*.⁶⁴

The comparison was hardly fortuitous: Powell had spent the years between the last of his pre-war novels (*What's Become of Waring?* 1939) and the first installment of *The Music of Time* (*A Question of Upbringing*, 1951) writing a life of Aubrey and editing a selection of his writings. But whether or not critics specifically invoked Aubrey, several of them echoed Bernard Bergonzi's perception that "The appeal of Powell's work is of a suspiciously simple kind: it is, above all, to a love of gossip...." Jonathan Raban memorably damned *The Music of Time* with the faint praise "an epic of beautifully orchestrated gossip," while even Powell's friend Kingsley Amis conceded that the work's "interest in families, forebears, descendants, relatives. . . can also slip here and there into something not far from mere gossip."⁶⁵

To convict Powell's fiction of "gossip" is not definitively damning, of course: as another contemporary English novelist, A.N. Wilson, reminds us, "Conrad's Marlow, in *Chance*, expounds the idea that fiction and gossip spring from the same wells of curiosity in the human mind," wells from which can spring "compassion, charity, indignation, the sense of solidarity; and, in minds of any largeness, an invitation to that indulgence which is

next to affection.”⁶⁶ In any case, my concern here is neither to bury Powell nor to praise him, but rather to register that quality of Powell’s novels that “gossip” points to: what Bergonzi calls “the unfailing fascination with the oddities of human behaviour” (*Situation* 120). A deeply conservative man, Powell is nevertheless *liberal* in the sense at issue here: he believes that whatever significant pattern of history emerges as the dance to the music of time, its basic components are the movements of each individual dancer, which must be studied and anatomized in all their apparent idiosyncrasy. This does not, of course, necessarily imply that the dance as a whole can be either apprehended or comprehended in a single step; but it does mean that any concept of the dance of history that elides or simplifies the quirks and oddities of the individual gyration will be false. So Powell more than most authors is determined to give contingency its due by practising what Kingsley Amis found to be an extreme and even “un-literary” realism:

. . . the sequence as a whole was more like life, in a way more realistic, than its components [the individual novels], with for instance characters such as the painter Barnby coming and going haphazardly. Thinking about this more recently has suggested the odd conclusion that, if a comparison can be ventured, I am a more literary novelist than Tony [Powell]. Two tiny incidents seem to me to bear this out. In one of my novels, *Girl, 20*, the narrator and others visit a horrible flashy eating-drinking-dancing club of the period (early Seventies); I had to get the decor and such off my son Martin. Tony complimented me mildly for making the food at this place, to my character’s surprise, ‘excellent’. I had done that for, well, a little artistic

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reason, feeling it would have been too dull and predictable to make the food as nasty as everything else there. But he, Tony, observed that he, or perhaps his son Tristram, had in fact found the food at such a joint to be okay; I had got it right in that sense. On a later occasion, interviewing him for a Sunday paper, I asked what all this card-reading stuff with Mrs. Erdleigh was doing there, meaning, ahem, its artistic function; Martin saw this point at once when I put it to him. Ah, said Tony, a lot of people had been in fact very keen on that sort of stuff at the time in question, so he had got it right. (*Memoirs*, 153).

“Getting it right” means fidelity to the convolutions, the contours, of the contingent as Powell apprehends it in the world outside the novels.

Yet Powell, as if heedful of Sir Joshua Reynolds’ dictum that to paint particulars is not to paint Nature, merely to paint circumstances, clearly had an ambition that went beyond writing what one critic has called “the most substantial English account of social life and manners in the twentieth century.”⁶⁷ That aim, I suggest, was nothing less than the great Modernist project of reconciling the realm of absolute contingency with the realm of absolute necessity. Fellow-novelist Alan Massie thought that Powell had pulled it off:

Powell’s achievement, unmatched by any contemporary, and indeed unique in the English novel since Henry James, was to render social reality convincing, in a rich expressive prose, while at the same time revealing the inadequacy of any attempt to understand human nature, and the human condition, only in such terms. Adroit in his

deployment of factual detail, the accumulation of which makes every page ring true to life, scenes of social, army and business life all being presented with fidelity to common experience, Powell nevertheless, by the vividness of his imaginative perception, bathes the world he has called into being in the golden light of timeless myth.⁶⁸

This is hardly a unanimous verdict, for other critics have felt that Powell's "deployment of factual detail" overwhelmed any overarching significant form.* Massie, in hailing Powell's unmatched "intertwining of art and reality" (9), simply misses the drama of a

* This, surely, is what Bergonzi meant when he described Powell's method as "anecdotal" and *The Music of Time* as "in essence, a vast intricate collection of anecdotes, some of them . . . brief and cryptic . . . others of them very prolonged and circumstantial . . ." *Situation* 120. Neil Brennan, writing before Powell's sequence was completed, leaves open the possibility that it might yet achieve significant form, but thinks it doubtful: ". . . the length of *The Music of Time* may be determined by Powell's own longevity; its shape, by vicissitudes of health and accident. Critical judgment on such a projection would tend automatically to be negative. The esthetic creed seems betrayed. Form is the essence of a work of art, and *The Music of Time* would seem destined to have a form shaped not by the artist but by chance." *Anthony Powell* (New York: Twayne, 1974), 208.

struggle being waged at a deeper level in Powell's text, and I shall argue in this chapter that the attempt to render the world legible and intelligible in Powell's liberal-realist terms involves some characteristic self-deluding ruses. It is clear, however, that Massie is correct about Powell's aims, and that a successful depiction of the *dance* to the music of Time would paradoxically reveal the timeless pattern that informs and redeems the historical and circumstantial fact, would depict the apparently random and contingent accident as the exfoliation of some eternal essence, and would thereby show the futility of attempting to distinguish the dancer from the dance.

Whatever the justice of designating John Aubrey's anecdotes as the measure of Powell's achievement, an appropriate yardstick of his ambition might be the Modernist monument of his great precursor, James Joyce. *Ulysses* explores in unprecedented detail the contingent, quasi-historical "facts" that make up a day in the life of Dubliner Leopold Bloom, and yet it assimilates all these particulars to the archetypal patterns — father-and-son, journey-and-homecoming, betrayal-and-reconciliation, usurpation-and-conquest — that Joyce identified in Homer's *Odyssey*. Like Powell, Joyce was fanatically anxious to "get it right" in the matter of contingent detail — so much so that, like Powell, Joyce wrote a novel that in parts approaches a *roman à clef* — but Joyce's scrupulosity with regard to realism went even further. For example, Joyce wrote to his aunt to ask her to measure the height of the railings around the area of the actually existing house in Eccles Street that Bloom was supposed to have lived in, so that he could assure himself that it was feasible for Bloom to have climbed over them. And when he wrote the "Wandering

Rocks” episode of the novel, he armed himself with a map of Dublin, a pair of compasses, and a stop-watch, in order to ensure that the peregrinations of the various characters who meander through the chapter were “realistic” in the sense of “plausible.” But contingency was redeemed, transcended, rendered Significant, in what one may call Joyce’s ultimate Homeric simile: when *Ulysses* appeared, T.S. Eliot proclaimed Joyce the originator of “the mythical method,” which Seamus Heaney has wickedly and perceptively glossed as “the art of holding a classical safety net under the tottering data of the contemporary, of parallelling, shadowing, archetypifying — the art practised in *Ulysses* and *The Waste Land* and the early sections of Pound’s *Cantos*.”⁶⁹ Powell embarked on *The Music of Time* without such a safety net; but as the sequence progressed and the time-being-written-about more closely approached the time-of-writing, the “data of the contemporary” indeed began to totter.* The orderly pattern of a dance refused to emerge from the carefully-chronicled twitchings of contemporary history, and Powell looked increasingly to myths for models and to other stratagems for support.⁷⁰

* “When Powell began work on the sequence in the late forties he did not know how it was going to end, though he knew it would take twelve volumes to complete. This openness to contingency was courageous and admirable; but the future, when it arrived, proved intractable.” Bergonzi, *Situation* (2nd. edition, 1970), 241.

In the fourth and final “movement” of the sequence — *Books Do Furnish a Room* (1971), *Temporary Kings* (1973), and *Hearing Secret Harmonies* (1975) — the signs of strain are clearly showing. The flow of time itself is more fitful and the novels more episodic: they focus on incidents occurring years apart, and the three of them together cover a period approximately equal to the quarter-century dealt with in the first nine. It is as if after World War II the comedy of manners that is social history no longer makes coherent sense, and the increasingly overt resort to myth in these novels is a kind of last-ditch stand against the onslaught of history-as-change, an onslaught which renders realism impossible because it destroys the terms in which Powell’s world has been intelligible to him. In *Hearing Secret Harmonies*, Powell’s narrator, Nick Jenkins, clings to the old, known verities, explicitly embracing myth as truth confirmed by experience when he declares that one of the compensations for growing old is “a keener perception for the authenticities of mythology, not only of the traditional sort, but — when such are any good — the latterday mythologies of poetry and the novel” (30).⁷¹ And there is no ironic gap between Jenkins and Powell here.* Indeed, it is almost fair to say that in this final movement Powell, who began his sequence determined to be open to contingency, is now determined to conquer it, to assimilate its illimitable variety to a few set patterns. History becomes the novelist’s enemy because it engenders difference and change, and it

* Or, as far as I am able to tell, anywhere else in the novel.

is appropriate that *Harmonies* (and therefore the sequence as a whole) closes with a quotation that represents history as “a vast confusion”:

‘I hear new news every day, and those ordinary rumours of war, plagues, fires, inundations, thefts, murders, massacres, meteors, comets, spectrums, prodigies, apparitions, of towns taken, cities besieged, in *France, Germany, Turkey, Persia, Poland, Etc.*, daily musters and preparations, and suchlike, which these tempestuous times afford, battles fought, so many men slain, monomachies, shipwrecks, piracies, and sea-fights, peace, leagues, stratagems, and fresh alarms. A vast confusion of vows, wishes, actions, edicts, petitions, lawsuits, pleas, laws, proclamations, complaints, grievances, are daily brought to our ears. New books every day, pamphlets, currantoes, stories, whole catalogues of volumes of all sorts, new paradoxes, opinions, schisms, heresies, controversies in philosophy, religion, &c. Now come tidings of weddings, maskings, mummeries, entertainments, jubilees, embassies, tilts, and tournaments, trophies, triumphs, revels, sports, plays: then again, as in a new shifted scene, treasons, cheating tricks, robberies, enormous villainies in all kinds, funerals, burials, deaths of Princes, new discoveries, expeditions; now comical then tragical matters. Today we hear of new Lords and officers created, to-morrow of some great men deposed, and then again of fresh honours conferred; one is let loose, another imprisoned, one purchaseth, another breaketh; he thrives, his neighbor turns bankrupt; now plenty, then again dearth and famine; one runs, another rides, wrangles, laughs, weeps, &c. (271-2).

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The source of the quotation is not John Aubrey but Robert Burton, another seventeenth-century miscellanist and the one upon whom Jenkins has written a book. The spirit in which the passage is quoted is the spirit of *Ecclesiastes*, world-weary, elegiac, with Jenkins using a screw of newspaper (“new news every day”!) to light a winter bonfire of “an untidy pile of miscellaneous debris” (243). This is history-as-one-damned-thing-after-another finally disposed of.

The Eternal Parade

In order to see how Powell arrived at this point, the reader might think it necessary to retrace his steps from at least the beginning of the novel’s last movement. To do so, however, is to discover that this view of history, this consignment of contingency to the bonfire, has long been implicit in the novel celebrated for its fidelity to the contingent circumstance. The repudiation of contingency in favor of iron laws of human behaviour is what underwrites the absolute assurance of interpretation that is one of the most striking features of these first-person novels. Nick, ostensibly a character in the novel, seems to have a kind of authorial omniscience: everything he encounters is confidently placed and interpreted, because everything is always already known, and the locutions are the familiar locutions of that realism in which claims to see the real significance of a particular detail are based upon a (usually-hidden) major premise encapsulating some *idée reçue*.⁷² For example, when Jenkins goes to visit Sillery, his old Oxford tutor, he

meets Ada Leintwardine, Sillery's editorial assistant, and is a witness to the scene in which she informs Sillery that she will be leaving his employ in order to work for a London publisher: "The girl's nervousness, now confession had been made, well illustrated that odd contradictory feminine lack of assurance so typical of the moment when victory has been won — for there could be little doubt that progression onto the staff of Quiggin & Craggs represented a kind of victory over Sillery on her part, escape from his domination" (25). Jenkins has met Ada only a moment before, and knows nothing of the nature of her relationship with Sillery; yet he confidently asserts ("there could be little doubt . . .") that her new job represents a "victory" for her over Sillery. Possible evidence to the contrary ("the girl's nervousness" appears at first to be a "contradictory" signifier) is just as confidently explained away; what appears to be a problem for Jenkins' inference becomes a confirming detail once it is referred to the strange and contradictory nature of Woman ("that odd contradictory feminine lack of assurance so typical of the moment when victory has been won"). Jenkins, of course, has long been familiar with the paradoxical essence of the Eternal Feminine, so he can also confidently describe this behavior as "typical".

This is no isolated example. Every nuance of Sillery's behavior in this scene is confidently interpreted from the privileged position of a narrator who knows both past (e.g. "This irresolution, in any case observable only to those accustomed to the absolute certainty of decision belonging to Sillery's past...." [18]) and future-as-past (e.g. "She was giving nothing away that evening. This attitude was probably due also to other

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matters...which only came to light some minutes later" [22]). The narrator of this dance to the music of Time knows all because he is, like God, himself outside Time. This is possible because, as another character puts it, "human life always remains the same" (119). Indeed, *Books* is inaugurated by a kind of repudiation of history and time as Jenkins returns to Oxford to carry out research for his book on Burton:

Reverting to the University at forty, one immediately recaptured all the crushing melancholy of the undergraduate condition. As the train drew up to the platform . . . a more imminent gloom was re-established, its sinewy grip in a flash making one young again The odd thing was how distant the recent past had also become, the army now as stylized in the mind — to compare another triumphal frieze — as the legionaries of Trajan's Column, exercising, sacrificing, sweating at their antique fatigues, silent files on eternal parade to soundless military music (1).

On the one hand, time is abolished "in a flash" as Jenkins feels once more his undergraduate melancholy. On the other hand, time appears to receive its due in the distance that now separates Jenkins from the recent past of his war service, but this apparent acknowledgment proves to be a feint; even in this instance time is abolished by

being converted into space — “stylized” into the spatial art form of a frieze in which figures are “frozen” in the postures of eternal parade.*

Time is abolished in other ways, with gritty English rock-buns wittily performing (but at one remove in the chain of reminiscence!) the function of Proust’s madeleine:

To enter Sillery’s sitting-room after twenty years was to drive a relatively deep fissure through variegated seams of Time. The faintly laundry-cupboard odour, as one came through the door, generated in turn the taste of the rock-buns dispensed at those tea-parties, their gritty indeterminate flavour once more dehydrating the palate. The props round about designed for Sillery’s nightly performance remained almost entirely unaltered. Eroded loose-covers of immemorially springless armchairs still precariously endured . . . (5).

But it is not just Sillery who has outwitted Time, for the novel is liberally sprinkled with similar indications. “In some sense history was repeating itself..”, Nick reflects at one juncture (214), and this is made plausible by the claim that people are stable entities: “people stay themselves” (195). Just as Jenkins’ undergraduate melancholy returns “in a

* Cf. Georg Lukacs' remarks in "The Ideology of Modernism" on how the Bergsonian identification of "experienced" or "subjective" time with "real" time leads to a condition in which "the inner world of the subject is transformed into a sinister, inexplicable flux and acquires — paradoxically, as it may seem, a static character."

flash” when he enters Oxford in the first chapter, so his “boyhood returned in a flash” when he runs into his old housemaster in the last (231).

Sameness, continuity, stability: they are what underwrite Jenkins’ ability to read the world, what render its inhabitants transparent. Experience is a welter of citations from the already-written Book of Human Nature, which remains One and The Same. For Jenkins even culture is unproblematically monolithic, internally undifferentiated: terms like “American” and “European,” which one might take to denote loose and frequently conflictual agglomerations, instead connote essences manifest to the observant eye in every tiny detail of physique and demeanour: “That he was American scarcely appeared on the surface at first, then something about the thin bone formations of arms and legs, the sallowness and texture of the skin, suggested the nationality. The movements of the body, supple, not without athletic promise, also implied an American, rather than European, nervous tension; an extreme one” (*Kings*, 20).

In the interest of verisimilitude Powell occasionally gestures towards the opacity of the other, but the gesture is usually a feint. Jenkins, for example, is occasionally ready to confess uncertainty about minor characters and unimportant matters (e.g. “At least Blanche always appeared uncomprehending. Possibly she really grasped a great deal more than her own relations supposed” [41]). But if Jenkins is uncertain about anything of importance, his ignorance is usually a temporary deficiency, a mere deferral of the revelation that is speedily supplied. For example, we find on page 18 that Sillery “for once, a rare thing. . . appeared uncertain,” but three pages later “These last sentences put

an end to doubt, explaining Sillery's momentary uncertainty. . . ." The novel is peppered with similar locutions: "That was the immediate response. Almost at once this turned out an incorrect as well as priggish judgment" (107), or "For a moment I wondered whether that had been the real reason for making such a point of introducing himself. . . . Any such guess turned out wide of the mark" (136). To the narrator, nothing is truly hidden: although he is a practised dissembler, Sillery "could not conceal relief at this withdrawal" (25) and "His manner of enunciating the remark. . . made one suspect Sillery meant the opposite to what he said." (26). Jenkins is an excellent reader with a keen eye for the significant, the revelatory, detail: "The fact that his demeanour stopped just short of being aggressive was no doubt in the main a form of self-protection, because a look of uncertainty, almost of fear, intermittently showed in his eyes, which were dark brown to black. They gave the clue to Trapnel having been through a hard time at some stage in his life..." (107).

Jenkins' perspicacity, his ability to decode the most elusive and ambiguous signifiers, is arguably a large part of the appeal of Powell's work, for Jenkins' point-of-view is perforce the reader's. At a time of rapid and dizzying social transformation which seems to have scrambled all the established codes by which an Englishman of Powell's generation and class has made sense of the world, Jenkins' narration provides a profound reassurance that there is after all no final, unbridgeable gap between signifier and signified, between appearance and reality; what at first seems opaque is shown finally to be transparent when subjected to Jenkins' informed scrutiny. A large part of Powell's

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skill consists in the ways in which he renders this ultimate transparency plausible, including not only the various feints and deferrals of the kind already cited but wider detours in which many dimensions of the climactic event of one novel are not fully known and delineated until at some point in the next. The death of Pamela Widmerpool from a drug overdose, for example, is certainly the climax of *Temporary Kings*, but since Jenkins did not himself witness it or the events leading up to it, exactly what happened and why must be painstakingly pieced together from a variety of imperfectly-congruent accounts, with further detailed confirmation being deferred until *Hearing Secret Harmonies*. Powell insists again and again upon the difficulty of knowing:

One hears about life, all the time, from different people, with very different narrative gifts. Accordingly, not only are many episodes, in which you may even have played a part yourself, hard enough to assess; a lot more must be judged by haphazard accounts given by others. Even if reported in good faith, some choose one aspect on which to concentrate, some another. This truth, obvious enough, was particularly applicable to the events following the *Seraglio* party. (*Kings* 252).

Nevertheless, the task of knowing is not as hopeless as it sounds. “Even so, essential facts were scarcely in question,” Jenkins declares, affirming that “there was no irreplaceable divergence between” the accounts of Moreland and Stevens, his principal informants, even though “when it came to telling a story in which veracity had to be measured against picturesque detail, neither could be called pedantically veracious” (252).

Some minute details may never be known with certainty, but they are irrelevant, the concern of the pedant rather than the novelist. For although *A Dance To The Music Of Time* seems determined to give the contingent and the aleatory qualities of experience their due, in the last three books of the sequence Powell is at pains to insist that the novelist's real business is with the essential patterns — the patterns already inscribed in Myth and Art — that redeem contingency and give it meaning. Because we know these patterns, we know what *must have happened* even when eyewitness testimony is lacking. So Gwinnett “did not, of course, disclose whether he had ‘known’ Pamela’s condition before she came to the hotel. How could he disclose that?” But his reticence on this point is neither here nor there: “The fact is, Gwinnett must have known. Otherwise there would have been no point in Pamela making the sacrifice of herself. Her act could only be looked upon as a sacrifice — of herself, to herself” (269). It can only be regarded in this light because otherwise her death would be meaningless, an accidental miscalculation or an insufficiently motivated impulse. Since this possibility — meaninglessness — is ruled out *a priori*, we know that she deliberately took the overdose in order to make the supreme offering of her still-warm corpse to the necrophilic Professor Gwinnett, and that he in turn must have known of her condition. To Moreland’s question, “You really think she took the overdose, told him, then ... ,” Jenkins replies with another question, “What else could have happened?” And Moreland agrees that this version of events is necessarily true, not least because it abolishes the gap

between signifier and signified by literalizing a metaphor: “Literally dying for love” (270).

Jenkins, to be sure, does not know for certain whether Gwinnett actually coupled with the dead Pamela: “The sole matter for doubt, in the light of inhibitions existing, not on one side only, was whether, at such a cost, all had been achieved. One hoped so” (269).

Jenkins hopes so, but Powell goes further and assumes so, for it is only on the basis of this assumption that the important “Gwinnett-thread” of the tangled narratives in the final two novels of the sequence can achieve the kind of meaning that Powell is striving for: Gwinnett, drawn to death in life as in the literature he studies, performs something of a descent into the underworld to gain wisdom by his “release of sexual energy in literally necromantic circumstances. . . in short, direct contact with the dead” (*Harmonies* 180) and is prepared for his eventual reclamation by the forces of Life in the person of Fiona, whom he happily marries.

Femininity And Unintelligibility: Woman As Scapegoat

There is an even stronger reason, however, for Powell and his reader to believe that Gwinnett does indeed have sexual intercourse with the dead Pamela, for this act resolves a tension and an enigma that has been the driving force of the novel-sequence as a whole and which bears directly on the question of the legibility/intelligibility of the phenomenal world. As I have shown in some detail, one of the major satisfactions of Powell’s fiction is that it shows that the apparently inscrutable face of experience yields its hidden

meaning to a skillful reading of the kind that Jenkins is able to provide, allowing the reader confidently to negotiate what would otherwise remain confusing and — literally — insignificant. But as I have emphasized in an earlier chapter, the plausibility of such readings in life or novels rests upon the prior existence (or widely-held belief in the existence) of a well-established social code, whereby minute details of dress and manner are apprehended as transparent signifiers of moral and psychological qualities. As D. J. Taylor points out, “In seeking to establish the salient features of their characters, English novelists generally rely on externals — accent, dress, real or imagined status,” and Taylor quotes a passage from an earlier installment of *A Dance To The Music Of Time* (“Intricacies of social life make English habits unyielding to simplification, while understatement and irony ... upset the normal emphasis of reported speech”) as going “some way towards explaining the very strong feeling one obtains from a novel of the Angus Wilson/Laura Talbot type that the whole thing is being written in an immensely subtle and sophisticated code, whose solution presupposes a highly developed social, as opposed to literary, sensibility on the part of the reader.”⁷³

Now Powell, as we have seen, appears to presuppose such a highly developed social sensibility but actually does nothing of the sort. His very subject in *A Dance To The Music Of Time* is the constantly-accelerating and dizzying changes that he believes to have taken place in England since the First World War, and these changes have progressively weakened and scrambled any code that might once have existed. No longer able to count on a reader’s ability reliably to decode social appearances, Powell must

therefore embody this power in his narrator and render the processes of inference explicit in the narration. This is Jenkins' only function in the books, for he is always marginal and peripheral to the main action, rarely present at decisive events, and (as many frustrated readers have discovered) he is not, like the other personages of the novel, a "character" whose actions and motives supply any significant part of the novels' interest. So although Jenkins functions in the novels as a means of rendering the world legible, the very necessity for him or someone like him to perform this function is Powell's implicit admission that the world is not by any means as transparent, as easily-intelligible, as Jenkins' narration makes it seem. The demon of illegibility, of unintelligibility, of senselessness, in other words, haunts the margins and the interstices of Powell's world; as one might expect, its ghostly presence becomes harder to ignore as the time of the novels' action approaches the 1970s. The locutions and strategies of Jenkins' narration already examined are Powell's means of warding off the appalling possibility that the world refuses, in the end, to make coherent sense, but these prove insufficient: to exorcise the demon of unintelligibility Powell must finally incarnate it in a character who can be scapegoated and driven out of the novel. The role of scapegoat, as I shall show, is occupied first by the enigmatic Widmerpool and then taken over by his even-more-enigmatic wife, Pamela. When Pamela sacrifices herself, when she bridges the gap between signifier and signified in her literalizing of the metaphor "dying for love," then "all is achieved" in Powell's project.

Right from the beginning of *A Dance To The Music Of Time*, Jenkins' usual perspicacity is frustrated and defeated by the character of Kenneth Widmerpool. In Powell's upper-middle-class England Widmerpool is the intruder, the outsider, a man without irony or humour and with no apparent centre of gravity except what is supplied by his own ambition. His climb up the greasy pole of power and influence functions in the novels as an index of the decline of English institutions; he is Powell's version of the "new man" who features in much contemporary English fiction as both the embodiment of and the reason for moral and social decay. Widmerpool achieves positions of importance by allying himself with every fashionable trend that sweeps the nation. The Labour landslide of 1945 puts him into Parliament, where he quickly becomes Parliamentary Private Secretary to a Cabinet Minister and then a Junior Minister himself. After losing his seat in the 1955 election, he is made one of the first Labour life peers, and continues to be something of a public figure. A suspected fellow-traveller, he dabbles in espionage but escapes the disgrace of a trial and a long jail sentence because "it's been found 'not in the public interest' to proceed with the case" (*Kings* 231). Finding it convenient to leave the country for a while, he takes up an appointment at the Institute of Advanced Study at an unnamed Ivy League university and then at a "noted Californian centre for political research." Returning to England, he becomes a minor television "talking head," Chancellor of a provincial university, self-appointed champion of the 'Sixties youth movement, and devotee of a suspiciously satanic "New Age" cult led by a sinister 'Sixties youth.

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Widmerpool incorporates, in other words, social and political developments that Powell strongly deplores, but his outrageousness goes beyond the scurrility of any particular view or act that is attributed to him. In the scheme of *A Dance To The Music Of Time* Widmerpool is monstrous because he has no centre, no stable identity by which his present actions can be understood and his future actions predicted; he is an exorbitance, an outrage — literally a *scandal* or stumbling-block to Powell's (and the reader's) adherence to the faith that the world is legible and intelligible. He operates in the novel as a constant irruption, a perennial surprise.* His motives are incomprehensible: he pursues power and celebrity for no easily-grasped reason — certainly not because they bring a plenitude of worldly goods, since he is not driven by fleshly appetite. Ponderous, pompous, and devoid of irony, he is also incapable of cynicism, and would have to be called sincere in his espousal of each passing fashion of thought and belief if it did not seem absurd to attribute sincerity to such unreflecting, un-self-critical fickleness. He is propelled by ambition, by sheer will-power, but his will is never clearly anchored to any deeply-held desire or project of a positive kind. He is unknowable: even Bagshaw, "adept

* At Erridge's funeral "a noise, quite a commotion," accompanied by voices "raised in apparent argument, if not altercation," precedes the entrance of Widmerpool, whose "appearance at this moment was wholly unexpected" (*Books* 44-5). It always is: "Suddenly...Widmerpool appeared" (*Books* 170), and "The figure waiting on the doorstep was not the newspaper-man, but Widmerpool" (198), are typical Widmerpool entrances.

at setting forth the niceties of political views, if these happened to attach to the doctrinaire Left,” finds it impossible to pigeonhole Widmerpool: “From time to time I detect signs of fellow-travelling. Then I think I’m on the wrong tack entirely, he’s positively Right Wing Labour. Again, you find him stringing along with the far, but anti-Communist, Left. You can’t help admire the way he conceals his hand. My guess is he’s playing ball with the Comrades on the quiet for whatever he can get out of it, but trying to avoid the appearance of doing so. He doesn’t want to prejudice his chances of a good job in the Government when the moment comes” (*Books* 93-4).

Finally and appropriately, in *Hearing Secret Harmonies* Widmerpool explicitly assumes the role he has been playing all along, in one guise or another, in Powell’s novel — saboteur of all the regularities and consistencies that make knowing, reading and writing possible. At a dinner convened to bestow a prestigious literary prize, he springs to his feet with an impromptu speech: “I take pride in ridiculing what is — or rather was — absurdly called honour, respectability, law, order, obedience, custom, rule, hierarchy, precept, regulation...” (111). His end — he collapses and dies while running naked through the woods in one of the rites of the cult he has joined — is ignominious and, in terms of his own life, as meaningless as anything else in it; but it completes the cycle of *A Dance To The Music Of Time*, for Widmerpool departs the scene in the same way he arrived on it in the first novel of the sequence — running grimly through the countryside in a sheer act of unremitting will that finally proves self-destructive.

Structurally, Widmerpool is clearly designed to function as the Enemy of both Meaning and the Possibility-Of-Meaning; his departure from the novel-sequence should mend the breach in the walls of the citadel of realism and allow Powell's project to reach its triumphant conclusion. But there is a problem here: Widmerpool as the Great Anarch fails to convince. His character, exorbitant though it is, cannot sustain the burden of representation it is called upon to assume, and the novel seems both aware of and troubled by this failure. For example, Widmerpool's unexpected speech at the prize dinner is obviously intended to be taken seriously as a meaningful repudiation of all conventional values "in the name of contemporary counterculture" (110), but it is more likely to strike the reader as self-parody rather than as serious threat. Powell himself presumably felt that there was something lacking, since he chose to supply dramatic enhancement; Widmerpool's ramblings are interrupted by "a loud crackling explosion, like fireworks going off in an enclosed space, followed by a terrific bang. Widmerpool's table was enveloped in a dark cloud that recalled 'laying down smoke' in army exercises. Within half a second all that end of the room was hidden in thick fumes... At the same time a perfectly awful smell descended" (112). Pandemonium duly ensues, but again the effect is that of self-parody, since the explosions are not real bombs but smokebombs and stinkbombs detonated by the two students who have come as Widmerpool's guests. Earlier in the novel Jenkins reflects that British students in the 'Sixties are becoming like their traditional continental counterparts, "young men for ever rioting, undertaking political assassination, overturning governments" (45), and the explosions that bring the

dinner to a sudden conclusion seem designed to conjure up in the reader's mind the figure of the stereotypical bomb-tossing anarchist. But if Powell meant this implied similarity to magnify the threat posed by Widmerpool's philosophy and its youthful adherents, he seriously miscalculated. Stinkbombs and real bombs belong to such different orders of experience that any comparison between them emphasizes the differences much more than the similarities. The result here is that Widmerpool's pretensions to sacrilege and desecration are assimilated to student prank rather than to terrorism.

The structural reason why Widmerpool can never be completely, satisfactorily "other" is that he is *male*; hence he can differ only in degree, not in kind, from the norms of Powell's imagined world, for these are distinctly gendered norms. Their "masculinity" is usually implicit in their embodiment in a male narrator and a male point of view, but it occasionally becomes explicit, as when Jenkins reflects that his old housemaster "belonged to a generation which continued throughout a lifetime to use that excellently masculine invocation of surname, before an irresponsible bandying of first names smothered all subtleties of relationship" (*Books* 232). The implications of this statement are profound. Not only the realistic novel but the very possibility of meaningfulness/intelligibility/legibility depend upon relatively stable systems of distinctions and differences (the "subtleties") which, in Powell's novel, are maintained and defended by *excellently masculine* forces. Hence everything that threatens to blur these important distinctions — "smothering" them by means of an "irresponsible

bandying” of signifiers — ought to be conceptualized and represented as intrinsically anti-masculine (i.e. castrating) or at least non-masculine (i.e. feminine, homosexual, or neutered).

Since the fundamental values of the novel are so strikingly gendered, the character of Widmerpool — enemy of all distinctions, all “order, obedience, custom, rule, hierarchy, precept, regulation” — demands a non-masculine inflection. But Widmerpool cannot plausibly be represented as overtly effeminate and at the same time a man who climbs to power and prominence within traditional male institutions (public school, the City, the Army, Westminster and Whitehall) — indeed, a Whitehall insider dismisses the rumour that Widmerpool was mixed up with the Soviet spies Burgess and Maclean because “I don’t believe the man’s a bugger for a moment” (*Kings* 39). And Widmerpool as castrator is even less plausible, although Powell makes one tentative gesture in this direction: a witness to Widmerpool’s sulphurous after-dinner tirade jokingly compares his sacrilegious assault on civilized values to “the Mutilation of the Hermae” (113), the famous incident in fifth-century Athens in which Alcibiades was accused of desecrating the sacred statues of Hermes by breaking off their prominent genitalia. But this off-hand comparison clearly will not stand close examination (Widmerpool is no Alcibiades, after all), and Powell does not elaborate upon it. Instead he reserves for Widmerpool’s private sexual life the inflection of a passivity that makes him less than a man, portraying him as a voyeur who spies on his wife’s extra-marital couplings (see especially *Kings* 261 ff.)

The choice of perversion seems, at first glance, a suitable one: for Powell, it is “the love of power that makes the true voyeur” (*Kings* 270), and Widmerpool is driven by that kind of “love” as opposed to more “normal” fleshly appetites; and at the same time the comparative passivity of the voyeur’s role (particularly when it is his own wife’s penetration he is watching) places it at the feminine rather than the masculine pole of the conventional-cum-Freudian conception of human sexuality. But the opposition between Widmerpool as radical deviance and Jenkins as healthy norm deconstructs itself quite strikingly when expressed in these terms. The problem with making voyeurism the sign of radical deviance from male norms is that the role of the realistic novelist — and certainly that of first-person-narrator Nick Jenkins, whose function in the novels is both to narrate and perform those norms — is a kind of voyeurism. As Wayne Brown has written of V. S. Naipaul: “A novelist, whose potential material is everyone and everything, learns early to watch: to watch himself; to watch everyone and everything around him; to watch himself watching them. And the better the writer, and the longer he persists in his writing, the more ascendant grows The Watcher in him: and the more insubstantial by comparison he himself, the mortal man, perceives himself to be. It is as though that daemonic or spectral Watcher were blooming invisibly in him, in the process increasingly draining him, for its own sustenance, of the sense of personal authenticity, autonomy and potency, which the mortal man needs and which constitute the basis of his well-being.”⁷⁴ Draining the novelist of personal authenticity and potency, novel-writing is structurally so close to sexual voyeurism that the latter stands inescapably as an apt

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metaphor for the former. This certainly fits Jenkins, whose narrative is rooted in his often-prurient interest in and speculation concerning the manners, dispositions and motives of a broad range of figures purportedly representative of modern England. Reticent about his own affairs while ceaselessly interrogating the doings of others, Jenkins is a passive witness to the happenings he recounts, not an active participant. So Powell's stigmatization of Widmerpool as a voyeur is a dangerous tactic, because it threatens to rebound and contaminate the representative of the very norms with which Widmerpool's behaviour must be starkly contrasted. The distinction between the norm and the abnormal is thus inadvertently deconstructed by the novel, which structurally performs as narration the very outrage it seeks to condemn as content of the narration. In what one may usefully term the novel's "unconscious," it appears to have some inkling of this; and in order to avoid the abyss that its inadvertent deconstruction reveals, it attempts to recuperate voyeurism as "normal." "Most men have a bit of Candaules [the mythical/artistic pattern of the voyeur] in them. Your friend Widmerpool seems to have quite a lot, if he really liked exhibiting his wife" says Moreland (269). Widmerpool, in other words, is exorbitant in degree but not in kind, not so radically "other" after all. Accordingly, the diffuse threat of the irrational, the illegible, the unintelligible — the threat posed by all the elements of post-war England that disrupt and destabilize the old, fixed codes that supposedly made knowledge possible and underwrote the realistic novel — is concentrated in the figure of Pamela Widmerpool née Flitton, and specifically in her mysterious and destructive sexuality. Pamela is strikingly beautiful, but Jenkins

declares that what makes men catch their breath at the sight of her is not “her slim figure and pent-up sullen beauty” but a “closeness to Death... carried within herself” (*Books*, 46-7). This Death that she embodies is the death of meaning; since meaning demands difference, its death is manifest first of all as *indifference*, both in Pamela’s attitude to others and in the resolute blankness and indecipherability of her own behaviour. “Apart from the instant warning of general hostility to all comers that her personality automatically projected, an unspoken declaration that no man or woman could remain unthreatened by her presence, she did not appear displeased at this encounter, merely indifferent,” says Jenkins when he meets her in Venice (*Kings* 78), and at Florian’s “Pamela appeared indifferent to whether they stayed or went” (169). Her response to meeting another old friend is “a neutralization of Ada’s affectionate embrace” (98), but this neutralization or *neutering* is itself neutral, indifferent, indecipherable: “Pamela’s reception of this greeting was less obviously approving of reunion, though her accustomed coldness of manner was not to be constructed as pointer in one direction more than another... It was impossible to judge from outward signs” (93). Powell’s representations of Pamela insist on this indifference: “Pamela gave him one of her blank stares” (100) and “as usual registered no immediate reaction to his first statement” (101); she “showed not the least recognition of the fact that her husband had just arrived” (105), and when Widmerpool appears at the door of the flat she shares with her lover Trapnel “so far from showing any wonder, she made no sign whatever of even being aware that another person had entered the room” (*Books* 199).

Pamela's indifference, her blank stare, is the Gorgon-face of her destructiveness. Jenkins speculates that she leaves Widmerpool for novelist X. J. Trapnel because the "violent antithesis" of the two men "promised anarchic extremities of feeling of the kind at which she aimed; in which she was principally at home. She liked... 'to try conclusions with the maelstrom'" (192) The rumours that surround her relate "that one of the generals at a NATO headquarters had fallen out with another senior officer, when she was staying with him; that her visit to an embassy in Asia had resulted in a reshuffle of diplomatic personnel; that the TUC had been put in a flutter one year at their conference by her presence with a delegate at a local hotel" (*Kings* 37). She is especially inimical to Art: when she becomes ill at the reception after Erridge's funeral, she shocks the other guests by vomiting into an enormous Chinese vase but herself displays no embarrassment: "The way she brought it off was remarkable, almost sublime. She stepped down from the plinth with an air of utter unconcern" (82). And in "an extraordinary incident at the French Embassy in London... Lady Widmerpool, quite deliberately, broke the back of a small gilt chair during supper" (*Kings* 47).

Powell insists that the source of Pamela's indifference is sexual — "outward expression, no doubt, of an inner sexual condition" (78). This Medusa is an all-devouring nihilism operating under the sign of castration. "I'd like to ask you about this girl — the castrating one," says Gwinnett to Jenkins after meeting Pamela (*Kings*, 27), and he repeats the characterization a few pages later ("the castrating girl" 36). This is no throwaway description; telling Jenkins about his meeting with Pamela in the Basilica of

San Marco in Venice, Gwinnett “gave an embarrassed laugh. ‘She grabbed hold of me,’ he said. ‘You mean—’ ‘Just that.’ ‘By the balls?’ ‘Yeah.’ ‘Literally?’ ‘Quite literally’” (158). Powell makes it abundantly clear that Pamela’s impulse to castration is intimately connected with her hostility to all systems of differences, particularly those that undergird the novel. In *Books Do Furnish A Room* Pamela symbolically castrates her lover, novelist X. J. Trapnel, by destroying the only manuscript of his new work. “‘We never seem to agree about writing, especially my writing,’” Trapnel tells Jenkins. “‘It’s almost as if she hates it, doesn’t want me to do it, and yet she thinks about my work all the time, knows just where the weak places are’” (*Books* 219). Within minutes he finds his precious pages dumped irretrievably into the local canal:

‘She brought the MS along, and chucked it into the Canal... She must have climbed over the railings to get to the water. I’d liked to have watched her doing that. I’d thought of a lot of things she might be up to — doctoring my pills, arranging for me to find her being had by the milkman, giving the bailiffs our address. I never thought of this. I never thought she’d destroy my book... In a way I’m not surprised. Even though this particular dish never struck me as likely to appear on the menu, it all fits in with the cuisine.’ (*Books*, 223-4).

That Pamela’s act is to be apprehended as a castration is underlined when Trapnel, on discovering his manuscript pages floating on the water, throws away his most valued possession, the phallic death’s-head swordstick that has been his constant companion:

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“Then an extraordinary thing happened... He lifted the swordstick behind his head and, putting all his force into the throw, cast it as far as this would carry, high into the air. The stick turned and descended, death’s-head first. A mystic arm should certainly have risen from the dark waters of the mere to receive it. That did not happen. Trapnel’s Excalibur struck the flood a long way from the bank, disappeared for a moment, surfaced, and began to float downstream. ‘Now he really has become unmoored,’ said Bagshaw. (223)

After this unmooring/unmanning, Trapnel disappears from sight. Occasionally an article or story appears, but “nothing comparable with the old Trapnel standard” (*Kings* 26). He dies bemoaning his losses: “I haven’t got a stick any longer, have I? I sacrificed it. Nor a bloody novel. I haven’t got that either.’ Then he heeled over into the gutter” (34).

What makes Pamela’s sexuality *castrating*, what constitutes it as annihilating the ordered systems of differences that enable meaning, is its peculiarly *paradoxical* character: “One of the paradoxes about Pamela was a sexuality, in one sense almost laughably ostentatious, the first thing you noticed about her; in another, something equally connected with sex that seemed reluctant, extorted, a possession she herself utterly refused to share with anyone,” declares Jenkins (81). Pamela’s “ostentatious” sexuality is contradicted by her essential frigidity, her deathlike inability to truly *articulate* or *connect* with a lover in the sexual act: “She wants it all the time, yet doesn’t want it. She goes rigid like a corpse. Every grind’s a nightmare” says Trapnel (*Books* 225), and on the basis of Trapnel’s confession Jenkins describes her matter-of-factly as “frigid but

wanted a lot of it all the same” (*Kings* 84). Pamela’s sexuality, her corpse-like frigidity belied by her obvious sexual allure, is a threat to the legibility of the world in general and to the enabling preconditions of the realistic novel in particular because it sunders the conventional connection between signifier and signified. To emphasize the enormity of the negation of meaning that Pamela represents, Powell infuses into his novel the “cabalistic dialectic” of the clairvoyante Mrs. Erdleigh, who warns Pamela that she is “near the abyss” and urges her “to evade the ghostly cataract:” “Court at your peril those spirits that dabble lasciviously with primeval matter, horrid substances, sperm of the world, producing monsters and fantastic things, as it is written, so that the toad, this leprous earth, eats up the eagle.” Putting these words into the mouth of Mrs. Erdleigh, of course, allows Powell to avail himself of their apocalyptically extravagant imagery without having to take responsibility for it, but the recipient of the warnings takes them seriously: “The extraordinary thing was Pam more or less understood the stuff,” says Odo Stevens, who witnesses the scene, and “Pamela began to scream with laughter again, shriller even than before. ‘You know, you know, you know. You’re a wonderful old girl’” (260-1).

Since Pamela is Powell’s scapegoat, she has to be sacrificed — more precisely, she has to sacrifice herself in a ritual death that will symbolically make whole what she has rent asunder. The abyss that yawns between signifier and signified, between appearance and reality, must be safely bridged so that the world can once again be legible, the noumenal reliably inferred from the phenomenal, and the traditional realist novel placed on a solid

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epistemological foundation.* The woman who wanted it all the time, who was metaphorically “dying for it,” must literally die for it, offering her poisoned and still-

* The scapegoating of a character who embodies the “scandal” of the work in which he appears is by no means unknown in literature, but the most obvious examples I have noted come from the drama, in which the appearance/reality opposition is structurally-inscribed in the form. Dramatists sometimes feel (consciously or unconsciously) the need to exorcise it by displacing theatrical qualities onto characters who are held up to the audience’s censure or ridicule. Thus Volpone, the eponymous protagonist of Ben Jonson’s play, is finally punished not for what the audience is likely to perceive as his true crimes, but for his *theatricality*, and his punishment is expressly designed to heal the appearance/reality breach: since his wealth “was gotten by imposture, / By feigning lame, gout, palsy, and such diseases, / Thou art to lie in prison, cramped with irons, / Till thou be’st sick and lame indeed. Remove him” (V, 12, 121-4). Similarly his servant and co-conspirator, Mosca, is punished for the theatrical wearing of a costume or habit to which he is not socially entitled: “You / ...Have with your impudence abused the court, / and habit of a gentleman of Venice, / Being a fellow of no birth or blood” (V, 12, 107-12). Jonson thus exorcises the animating spirit of his own work. In a comparable fashion Terence Rattigan’s *The Winslow Boy*, feeling the need to establish the seriousness and weightiness of its theme, disavows its own theatricality by displacing its necessary interest in theatrical properties (literally, *stage* properties) onto a female newspaper

warm body to her necrophilic lover in a sacrificial death that will resolve the paradox of her sexual being: the woman who “goes rigid like a corpse” in her lovers’ arms must become a literal corpse in a final amorous embrace. “The sole matter for doubt... was whether, at such a cost, all had been achieved. One hoped so.”

From one point of view, all that Powell could achieve was achieved with Pamela’s death, which comes at the end of the penultimate novel in the series. The final installment, *Hearing Secret Harmonies*, is rather poor stuff in comparison with what has gone before, a kind of mopping-up operation which has none of the energy and conviction that informs the novel’s battle with Pamela and all that she represents. Widmerpool remains to be killed off, of course, but as the smokebombs that accompany his silly speech suggest, he is by now more of a pantomime demon than the real thing. Much the same thing can be said of Scorpio Murtlock, the mesmeric satanist who leads Britain’s youth astray and who functions unconvincingly as the centrepiece of Powell’s myopic depiction

reporter: Miss Barnes interrupts Arthur Winslow’s declamation of his intention to seek justice (“I shall continue to fight this monstrous injustice with every weapon and every means at my disposal”) with a “typically-feminine” (and hence characteristically-trivial) question — “Oh, what charming curtains! (*She rises.*) What are they made of? (*She crosses to window, examines heavy curtains. Arthur sits for a moment in paralyzed silence.*)” [Terence Rattigan, *The Winslow Boy*, New York: Dramatists Play Service, n.d., I, 2, p. 38. The play was first performed in 1946.].

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of the 'Sixties. As an incisive and persuasive comedy of manners, this last volume falls far short of its predecessors, arguably because Powell's uncomprehending disapproval of a younger generation forecloses the kind of imaginative sympathy with which he chronicles his own.

From another point of view, however, the death of Pamela achieves nothing whatsoever. She, after all, is not the problem, and her death is not a solution: she is merely a projection of her creator's deepest epistemological and ontological anxieties, a displacement of his anxieties about a world that increasingly refuses to make sense on the terms which Powell proposed to himself as the basis of his *magnum opus*. Pamela herself "makes sense" only as a scapegoat, a *function* rather than a character. Any attempt to understand her in "realistic" terms is likely to end in the exasperation that Patrick Swinden typically articulates: "To discover that the reason a woman has been behaving as she has is because she is sexually frigid tells one very little. Why is she frigid? What link is there... between Pamela's offensive self-advertisement... and her present (supposed) frigidity? Powell's representation of her character does not allow us to answer these questions. Or, rather... we are at liberty to create in our minds almost any picture of the sort of person she is. That is taking relative interpretation too far. Really, a character you can do that with is scarcely a character at all"⁷⁵ Precisely: one can make sense of Pamela only by abandoning the conventions by which the novels implicitly ask to be read and instead employing the kind of critical remove which my reading exemplifies. Pamela's sacrifice is ultimately pointless, since it cannot re-establish the

legitimacy of the novel of character as plausible socio-historical explanation. As the “centre” of the novel, her character is a ruse of the unconscious, a dream-figuration of the “real” dramatic centre which is the subversion of the realistic project. The novel thus resembles a sixteenth-century historical text examined by Antonio Benítez-Rojo — a text “built on a dramatic structure whose nub, whose bundle of conflicts, permits a reading of the literary uncanny that follows Freud’s way of reading such things... this nub or conflictive “center” has displaced, within the text, an unavoidable historical presence, and has usurped its place in the tale.... The uncanny comes from “within”; it has much in common with certain dreams — hence its asymmetry, its inscription within the catalog of the extraordinary —, since in Freud’s experience it precedes the repression of a castration complex that appears in disguise.”⁷⁶ Powell’s representation of Pamela as a castrating female allows him to both figure and repress the real threat, which is the gelding of his realistic novel by a social text that refuses to adhere to a stable system of differences.

As we have seen, *A Dance To The Music Of Time* was launched in the faith that fidelity to the contour of contingency — “getting it right” in matters of detail — would yield a vision of the meaningful pattern constituted by all the apparently-meaningless details; chronicle would be redeemed as History. As the sequence progressed, however, that initial faith became harder to sustain. The world’s recalcitrance was initially apprehended only as a new and unpleasant but quite limited and specific social phenomenon, and it was personified as Kenneth Widmerpool in the confident belief that it would eventually turn out to be a central thread in the yet-to-be-revealed pattern. But

when Powell came to deal with the immediate postwar period, the period of *Books Do Furnish A Room*, he was writing in the late 'Sixties, and the uncertainties and turbulences of those years did not provide a vantage-point from which a redeeming pattern could be glimpsed. In the eyes of the patrician Right to which Powell belongs, things had gone horribly wrong, but to an extent which could not all be laid at the door of the real-life counterparts of Widmerpool. No character, in fact, could represent a plausible, naturalistic explanation for a confusion too diffuse and widespread to be attributed to a single type of social agency; so Widmerpool's centrality is usurped by his wife, who is not the cause of what ails the novel, merely the scapegoat.

Pamela's sacrificial expulsion from *A Dance To The Music Of Time* could not allay an increasing and manifest uneasiness about the project's prospects of success as originally conceived, so Powell attempted to redefine the aims and methods of the work. In *Books Do Furnish A Room* Powell uses X.J. Trapnel as a mouthpiece for what must surely be his own anxieties about the way in which his work is perceived. Trapnel calls himself a naturalist writer, but insists that Naturalism is not to be understood as the faithful registration of contingent fact. "People can't get it right about Naturalism. They think if a writer like me writes the sort of books I do, it's because that's easier, or necessary nowadays. You just look round at what's happening and shove it all down. They can't understand that's not in the least the case. It's just as selective, just as artificial, as if the characters were kings and queens speaking in blank verse" (214). This assertion is, of course, quite unexceptionable; what is interesting however is Powell's felt need to recur

to Trapnel's pronouncements on the subject again and again in the last three novels, alerting the reader to the fact that the "Truth" of art is quite different from the "truths" of biography, for instance (*Harmonies* 85). Powell is certainly trying to preempt a particularly prevalent misunderstanding of "naturalism" (a term which I have been using interchangeably with "realism" in this study), but the fact that he feels it necessary to hammer the point home again and again surely has something to do with the new direction his novel is taking. There is less preoccupation with the registration of surface detail and increasing recourse to myth and symbol to supply organizing patterns in the two final novels in particular. *Temporary Kings* is replete with references to myths and works of art seen as repositories of essential, eternal Truth; much of the book takes place in Venice under the aegis of Tiepolo's *Candaules and Gyges*, which is held to represent the type not only of various Widmerpool-Pamela-lover triangles but also of all heterosexual relationships: "This last minute retardation in coming to bed had, at the same time, something of all women about it; the King's anticipatory complacency, something of all men" declares Jenkins (84). *Hearing Secret Harmonies* invokes an even greater array of literary, artistic and mythological models, forsaking "realism" for something like the "magic realism" of Shakespeare's last plays to adumbrate its themes of regeneration and redemption.

There is a distinct difference between the modality of these books and that of the earlier ones, suggesting that the Powell/Trapnel disquisitions on Naturalism are not merely clarifications of the original project but markers of a substantial modification of it.

Michael Harper

Powell, in other words, is finally driven to the allegedly-timeless patterns of Art to seek the meanings that have refused to emerge from the everflowing stream of history. His scapegoating of Pamela can hardly have been the result of fully-conscious intention; it was more probably the expression of an unconscious wish, the performance of a magical rite that provided psychological satisfaction but of course changed nothing. Powell's novel killed her off and buried her, but what she represented finally did the same to *A Dance To The Music Of Time* as originally conceived. The final installments tacitly admit this by abandoning history and turning to Myth, deserting "life" for "Art". Near the beginning of *Hearing Secret Harmonies*, Jenkins discusses Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* and its representation of Time, which is "a writer's Time... far less relaxed" than the "unhurried" figure of Time ("a painter's Time") in Poussin's famous picture "where the Seasons dance, while Time plucks his lyre to provide the music" (33). Since the novel is a temporal art form, it is Ariosto's Time, a Time whose ministrations constitute our human lives as transient and ephemeral, that ought by rights to preside over Powell's work. But history frustrates History, and change overwhelms his attempt to make sense of modern England; it is Poussin's Time — a Time which is timeless because it belongs to a spatial art form — that supplies the novel's final stasis: "Even the formal measure of the Seasons seemed suspended in the wintry silence" that accompanies Jenkins' bonfire of the "miscellaneous debris" of life (272, 243). And it is Poussin's *A Dance To The Music Of Time* — a dance which is no dance because it is without motion — that graces the dustjacket of Powell's novel.

Despite the refinements of naturalist theory Anthony Powell puts into the mouth of X.J. Trapnel in the later volumes, *Dance to the Music of Time* represents (in its ambition, if not its achievement) one of the strongest forms of realism — the belief that meaning is intrinsic to the phenomenal world, a property of events rather than interpretations of events. The art of the realist, on this view, consists of depicting the phenomenal world in such a way that its meaning simply announces itself. This entails “showing” and not “telling,” because to “tell” is implicitly to admit that meaning belongs not to events and objects but to ideologies — to stories told *about* events and objects. The aim of a “strong” realist project such as Powell’s sequence is to tell a story about the world while concealing from itself the fact that it is telling a story. Instead of self-consciously taking responsibility for the meaning embodied in its story — which is what the self-reflexiveness of the postmodern novel performs — the realist enterprise wants to believe (and to make its reader believe) that its interpretation of the world is not an interpretation at all, but the true structure and meaning of Reality. Realism, in other words, constantly aspires to the cogency of non-fiction; but *non-fiction* so conceived is an impossible dream, as I shall try to show in the next chapter.

Four: “Real People, Real Joys, Real Pains”

NICOLA: *Write something new, Philip. You should write something else.*

MARLOW: *Oh? like what?*

NICOLA: *Like this — what has happened to you. Like real things.*

MARLOW: *Pooh.*

NICOLA: *Use your talent, Philip.*

MARLOW: *Bugger that!*

NICOLA: *Write about real things in a realistic way — real people, real joys, real pains — not these silly detective stories. Something more relevant.*

MARLOW: *(with contempt) Solutions.*

NICOLA: *What — ?*

MARLOW: *All solutions and no clues. That's what the dumb-heads want. That's the bloody Novel — He said, She said, and descriptions of the sky — I'd rather it was the other way around. All clues. No solutions. That's the way things are. Plenty of clues. No solutions.*

It's difficult to write accurately about real people in fiction — however much you might want to — because the demands of the idea are usually such that you have to transform the original person to fit the constraints of the story.

*Hanif Kureishi, Some Time With Stephen: A Diary*⁷⁸

In an earlier chapter, I argued that the kind of “knowledge” offered by avowedly fictional works is not *essentially* different from the kind of “knowledge” to be gleaned from the various kinds of “non-fiction” — newspaper, documentary, sociological analysis — by which we are continually bombarded. All these *genres*, whether we call them “fiction” or “non-fiction,” are imaginative constructs, and so is what we call our “experience.” Although *genres* differ from each other with respect to the truth-claims they make, the crucial differences concern not the different kinds of knowledge they ultimately offer but the conventions within which they are both constructed and comprehended.

Conventions — including our shared agreements about what kinds of evidence are required to support different kinds of truth-claim — are accompanied by their own ideological baggage. To identify something as “fiction” is not only to read it differently from the way we read a “hard news” item in the newspaper but also — given our age’s privileging of “hard” data, of scientifically-validated “fact” purportedly grounded in sense-experience — to accord it a different status. And so it is hardly surprising that novelists, in an attempt to make themselves heard at moments of social crisis, should themselves temporarily abandon the novel in order to claim the conventional privilege of non-fiction. I am thinking particularly of a whole slew of “non-fiction” books whose

authors attempt to answer the question of “the state of the nation” by undertaking a journey around the country and publishing their findings. Jonathan Raban, whose agonized “*Where are we at?*” was uttered in the course of a review comparing Beryl Bainbridge’s 1984 *English Journey*⁷⁹ with its illustrious predecessor of a half-century before, J.B. Priestley’s epoch-making *English Journey*,⁸⁰ commented: “It is a fair measure of our present disquiet that the last couple of years or so have seen English journeys cropping up in publishers’ lists as if they were a genre, like gothics or romances” (264). What of these English journeys? Why not interrogate this “genre” rather than the novel?

I Suffered, I Was There

I shall begin by examining two of these documentaries of exploration, but not because so-called “non-fiction” is inherently more “truthful” than novels. There can be no question here of using non-fiction as a “reality-check” against which to measure the relative accuracy of a novel’s vision because, as I have been arguing, non-fiction is not essentially different from fiction. Travel-writing, which has experienced a remarkable resurgence in the last two decades (as numerous issues of the magazine *Granta* attest), certainly employs different narrative conventions from those that inform novels, and the genre so constituted invites reading and judgment according to different criteria of truth and plausibility. Yet these differences are largely rhetorical: although a travel book, like a black-and-white photograph, insists by its very form that “This really happened; I was there, and I witnessed it,” it is just as firmly in the realm of interpretation as a painting or a novel. To give a fuller specification of what I mean by this (and to offer some support

for what may seem at first a perverse claim hitherto argued in purely theoretical terms), it will be useful to look more closely at the two examples of the form — Priestley's and Bainbridge's — that Raban was considering, and to ponder some of his judgments upon them.

Raban quite rightly considered Priestley's journey into the Depression of the 1930's to be the more impressive document:

In 1933, when Priestley made his English journey, the number of people registered as being out of work was 2,498,100. That is the dominant fact of Priestley's book. It sets him travelling and it colours almost every perception that he has of England. One sentence echoes through the book like a ground bass: "Never were more men doing nothing and there never was before so much to be done." This forthright apprehension of what was wrong with the country gives the journey point and clarity, turns it into a serious quest for a solution, and leads Priestley to the passionate flights of description of the decaying industrial landscape that make the book at least as vivid as anything else that Priestley ever wrote. (266)

Bainbridge's book was built upon the notes she made after each day's filming of a television documentary series in which she was one of an eight-person production team following in Priestley's fifty-year-old footsteps, and Raban suggested that its comparative failure was in part the result of these conditions of production. For he did judge the book a failure, although his admiration for Bainbridge as a novelist led him to be both generous and gracious in saying so. Still, the best he could say of it is that it is symptomatic of the state-of-affairs it would describe: ". . . her book manages to catch

(often in an oblique and inadvertent way) a lot of the atmosphere of contemporary England. . . . She catches the spirit of 1983 best in the uncertainty of her own tone” (270). Raban excused her failure and explained Priestley’s success by assuming that the scenes of human desolation Priestley described could be recognized as such by any casual passer-by, whereas the desolation of the 1980’s was hidden from view as a result of the privatization of life that had occurred in the interval. His argument is so forcefully put as to demand serious quotation:

Whatever else was wrong with Priestley’s England, it was recognizable. People had been taught to see it through the eyes of Dickens and Gustave Doré. The slums looked like authentic slums. The poor were dressed in what were obviously rags. The unemployed stood in the street, their pathos visible and affecting. The period photographs in the new edition of Priestley’s journey bear this out brilliantly: for photographers like Bill Brandt, Humphrey Spender, and Edwin Smith, the Depression was eminently picturesque. The camera dwells on each familiar scene as if it were a famous beauty: the lines of washing, hung up to dry in a blackened street; the queues of men patiently waiting for work at dawn on a dockside; the back-to-back tenements, overhung with smoke; the slag heaps, outdoor privies, grubby children, dank canals. In the north of England at least, the Depression produced scene after scene that looked as if it had come out of a painting or a book. . . .

It is not surprising that Priestley was able to write so well about it. Nor is it surprising that Beryl Bainbridge finds herself at a loss when she follows Priestley’s route. For although the statistics [of people registered as unemployed] have increased

[to 3,104,700 in 1983], the images have disappeared. She goes hopefully to Newcastle in search of the unemployed, and finds only a shopping precinct full of people spending money. . . .

For in 1933, most of English life took place out of doors. You even left your house to go to the lavatory. Out of a job, you stood in full view on the street. Because the slums were usually two storeys high at the most, their streets and backyards became communal living spaces, open to the gaze of visiting writers and photographers. It would have been possible for Priestley to see unemployment at first hand without stepping from his Daimler.

It is not so now. Since the 1950s we have moved, or been moved, indoors and upstairs. Unemployment, like so many other features of our social life, has gone private. It happens on the 20th floor, in a room full of plastic furniture, where a man in an ill-fitting but not ragged polyester shirt and jeans watches an old episode from *Dallas* on the video and listens simultaneously to a cassette on his Sony Walkman. As an image, it's not a patch on the lines of washing (now dried in a machine, probably in a public launderette) or the men in scarves and flat caps loitering under the rusty girders of a railway bridge filmed *contre jour*. It is an image that would make any television cameraman yawn. Considered not as an image but as a plight, it is surely just as shocking, pitiable, and arousing as anything described by Priestley. To convey it requires the right of access not just to the outside of the man's house, to his squalid and depressing plot of civic green space, but to the inside of his head.

This, one might have thought, was a classic job for a writer, to go into regions prohibited to the television camera and make the condition of unemployment legible — as it was legible in 1933. But Bainbridge is not that writer. She is the eighth member of her T.V. crew, looking for recognizable pictures that turn out to be in bafflingly short supply. (270-2).

Raban's argument about the privatization of life and hence of misery is a very persuasive one, but he is doing something less than justice to Priestley by assuming that "it would have been possible for [him] to see unemployment at first hand without stepping from his Daimler." Raban's claim that "it is not surprising that Priestley was able to write so well about [the Depression]" proceeds directly from his assumption that in 1933 images of industrial squalor and urban poverty were "ready-mades" because people had already been provided with the images and their meanings by nineteenth-century writers and artists (Dickens and Doré). But this is to scant Priestley's achievement in *English Journey*: as the "publisher's note" prefacing the University of Chicago Press' Jubilee Edition makes clear, it was not Priestley who went north in search of familiar images, but the image-makers and the sociologists who went north in search of what Priestley had taught them both to look for and to *see*:

This book . . . had a vast influence on public opinion, paving the way, amongst other developments, for the Mass Observation movement of the later 'thirties, and ultimately for Mr. Priestley's memorable radio 'Postscripts' during the Second World War. One immediate consequence of its publication was to send several brilliant

young photographers to Lancashire and the North of England to make sociological records of scenes that the fashionable photographers had hitherto ignored.

Indeed, the illustrations in the Jubilee Edition bear this claim out; although the archives have supplied some photographs (usually by “photographer unknown”) of Depression squalor predating the publication of *English Journey*, the classic photographs of Bill Brandt, Humphrey Spender, Edwin Smith and Reece Winstone were all taken in its wake.*

* Of the photographs in the edition that predate Priestley, only one (“Phoenix Passage, Dudley, c. 1930) presents a vision of Depression squalor; of those which are of urban scenes, most are more-or-less-neutral records, while at least one — S. Charles Dietterle’s “Salthouse Dock by Night,” c. 1933 — bathes its subject in a romantic glow that makes it more akin to an eighteenth-century “picturesque” scene (e.g. Richard Wilson’s “Snowdon by Moonlight”) than to Priestley’s Stygian Liverpool dockside:

We reached the docks, put out our pipes and entered their precincts, where a vast amount of gloom and emptiness and decay was being carefully guarded. It was deep dusk. There were some last feeble gleams of sunset in the shadowy sky before us. Everything was shadowy now. The warehouses we passed seemed empty of everything but shadows. A few men — far too few — came struggling along, their day’s work over. . . . We walked slowly along the waterfront, from nothing, it seemed, into nothing; and darkness rose rather than fell; and with it came a twinkle of lights from Birkenhead that reached us not across the river but across a gulf that

Inventing The Depression

It is tempting to adapt Oscar Wilde's epigram about the effect of Impressionist paintings on people's perception of London fogs, and to say that although there may have been a Depression in England before Priestley wrote about it, no one had ever noticed it.** This is clearly an exaggeration, but a useful one in that it focuses our attention on the ways in which Priestley's prose — his rhetoric, his art — created a national sense of crisis and of shame. For the 1930s Depression was no more simply *there* to be seen than the 1980s Depression, and an examination of the two books reveals that the difference between them can hardly be explained by the claim that Priestley was more amply provided with material. It is true that in 1982 Beryl Bainbridge could find no trace of what is now called a "recession" in a shopping centre in Newcastle-upon-Tyne — "an area

could not be measured. I have rarely seen anything more spectral and melancholy.

(185-6)

** "Where, if not from the Impressionists, do we get those wonderful brown fogs that come creeping down our streets, blurring the gas-lamps and changing the houses into monstrous shadows? . . . At present, people see fogs, not because there are fogs, but because poets and painters have taught them the mysterious loveliness of such effects. There may have been fogs for centuries in London. I dare say there were. But no one saw them, and so we do not know anything about them." From "The Decay of Lying," in *The Soul Of Man Under Socialism and Other Essays*. New York: Harper, 1970. 61.

traditionally depressed, the place in England most vulnerable to recession, an area of high unemployment and lack of opportunity”:

. . . we visited the Eldon Square shopping precinct. It’s the largest covered shopping area in Europe. I have never seen so many people in my life, more than at a football match or a pop music festival, thousands and thousands of them milling under the neon-lighting and being born [*sic*] upwards into the miracle parlours of Top Shop. They were young people mostly, dressed in the latest modern fashions, and I swear that in their hands they carried wads of five-pound notes, credit cards and cheque books. They weren’t buying one jumper or one pair of jeans, but half a dozen woolly tops and several pairs of trousers, and jackets and floppy hats and boots and shiny belts and handbags. They queued at the clothing rails and they queued at the cash-desks. They carried fat babies in fur-coats, and they studied the racks of dresses and shirts and trousers, heads nodding to the beat of the music blaring from the amplifiers, as though their lives depended on their choice. (121)

Bainbridge and her crew “went back to the hotel and we couldn’t stop talking about it. We button-holed waiters and residents and the porter and asked if Newcastle was doing well and they all said it wasn’t, that there weren’t any jobs. Isn’t that a mystery?”

It is a mystery only if one is content to look no further. For in 1933, Priestley had gone to Newcastle, and had had an experience similar to Bainbridge’s: he had found that “the sad trade depression into which most of the district has fallen is not immediately noticeable here in its capital. The city looked busy and quite prosperous” (220). But Priestley, unlike Bainbridge, was unwilling to declare the whole affair a “mystery” and

leave it at that. He believed that there was indeed a “sad trade depression,” and he sought it out, contacting a bookseller with whom he had once corresponded and who undertook to “show me what there was to be seen” (222). And Priestley did see quite enough of desolation and despair, despite an elusiveness which meant that he was never able to plumb their depths or measure their extent:

My companion was anxious that I should have a talk with one or two men of his acquaintance in Jarrow and Hebburn, and I might as well confess here that we never succeeded in finding any of those men, though we spent most of the afternoon asking our way in a labyrinth of little streets trying to find them. But if we did not see the men, we certainly saw the towns, though we did not find our way into them without difficulty. They are plainly there, along the river bank, and I was with a Tyneside man who knew them, but nevertheless we had to ask our way several times and twist about and turn back before we contrived to reach Jarrow from South Shields. I suspect that devilish agencies were at work trying to prevent us from ever seeing Jarrow and Hebburn. They did not succeed. We managed at last to thread our way through a maze of monotonous streets, complicated by a spider’s thread of railway lines, and then went round and round Jarrow chasing two elusive officials. I will not add that these two officials had vanished into thin air because there is no thin air in Jarrow. It is thick air, heavy with enforced idleness, poverty and misery. (235-7).

The images and metaphors Priestley deploys in this passage are important: the truth of the Depression, Priestley declared, was “enforced idleness, poverty and misery,” but this truth — far from being something that Priestley could behold “without stepping from his

Daimler” — lay at the heart of a “labyrinth,” a “maze,” a “spider’s web,” guarded by “devilish forces”. As these figures of speech suggest, *English Journey* is structured according to the conventions of a thoroughly fictional *genre*: it is a *Romance* in which knight-errant Priestley set forth to do battle with the Beast, an heroic journey in which the intrepid traveller had to penetrate the veil of appearances in order to come face-to-face with his quarry. This meant turning aside from the main roads into the byways and alleys that the middle-class traveller never glimpsed, for the quarry — the Depression — dwelt at the heart of a labyrinth built and guarded by the forces of darkness.

So when Priestley went to a mining community in East Durham, it was a deliberate expedition into a territory that lay beyond the *given*, beyond the landscapes the tourist knew:

Most of us have often crossed this county of Durham, to and from Scotland. We are well acquainted with the fine grim aspect of the city of Durham, with that baleful dark bulk of castle, which at a distance makes the city look like some place in a Gothic tale of blood and terror. The romantic traveller, impressed by the Macbeth-like look of the city, will be well advised not to get out of his train at Durham station. Some of us, wise or lucky, know West Durham, especially Weardale and Teesdale, which are very beautiful: rocks and heather, glens and streams flashing through the golden woods. . . . But who knows East Durham? The answer is — nobody but the people who have to live and work there, and a few others who go there on business.

(244)

Priestley himself did not want to go to East Durham — “for I knew that it would be ugly and I had had enough of ugliness” — but he forced himself to confront it because “I felt that I should be a fraud . . . if I went sneaking past” (245). And Priestley did find the ugliness he anticipated in Seaham Harbour, a colliery town on the coast — “a town on these wages [about two pounds a week — with luck] is not a pretty sight” (246) — but made it clear that the traveller who did not expressly seek out the industrial hinterlands would form a very different and very mistaken impression of the area’s well-being: “though there is, I believe, considerable unemployment and distress in the town [Sunderland], it looked fairly prosperous, clean and bright that morning” (245).

Priestley’s perseverance was often “rewarded” with just such a spectacle of poverty and degradation as Raban assumes was ubiquitous in the north. Yet he did not stumble onto his scenes; he *achieved* them, and he was able to do so because he was convinced by the unemployment figures that they had to exist somewhere, however carefully concealed.

Such scenes, however, were comparatively few and were comparatively isolated;

Priestley’s real importance lay in his persuasive insistence that even where no wounds were visible, serious injuries had been sustained:

These Lancashire towns — and this excludes industrial villages, one or two of which, I believe, are completely ruined — have not the derelict look of some places elsewhere, to be described later in this book. The streets are not filled with men dimly loafing about. You do not see abandoned shops, which look as if they are closed forever, down every street. Everything that was there before the slump, except the businesses themselves, is struggling on. In nearly every instance, the whole town

is there, just as it was, but not in the condition it was. Its life is suffering from a deep internal injury. (211-2)

Passages such as this — and there are many of them — should have indicated to Raban that Priestley’s work was not a matter of simple transcription, but the diagnosis of economic trauma despite the absence of “men dismally loafing about” in streets of “abandoned shops.”

When Raban wrote his review of the Bainbridge and Priestley *Journeys*, he was in the midst of his own attempt to ascertain the state of the nation; and in the non-fiction book that reports his findings, *Coasting*, he repeats his argument about the lack of readily-available images of the 1980s depression:

Unemployment had been a public event; it was now a private misery, to be borne alone, behind the curtains. It was identifiable, not by things you could photograph and write heartstring-tugging reports about, but by gaps and absences. It was in the sound of a single car backfiring in a street where there should have been a continuous surflike wash of traffic. It was in the shops that weren’t there, in the eerie feeling that the population had shrunk inside its walls, leaving a surfeit of unoccupied air.⁸¹

This is exactly right; but Raban seems not to have noticed that “gaps and absences” are exactly what Priestley was most sensitive to. Priestley’s journey began in the south of England, where indeed there were few signs of extreme poverty and want. When he went to Bradford to attend a reunion dinner of his old World War One battalion, however, the most eloquent witnesses to Depression were absences: those old soldiers who were missing from the reunion, not because they perished in the war but because they were

perishing in the peace. Even though Priestley and others had ensured that free tickets would be available to those who needed them, several old comrades had excused themselves: “They were so poor, these fellows, that they said they could not attend the dinner even if provided with free tickets because they felt that their clothes were not good enough. They ought to have known that they would have been welcome in the sorriest rags; but their pride would not allow them to come. (It was not a question of evening clothes; this dinner was largely for ordinary working men). I did not like to think then how bad their clothes, their whole circumstances, were: it is not, indeed, a pleasant subject.” (132). After recalling what those men had been through in the trenches and how they had been celebrated (in theory, at least) while the War was still being fought, Priestley reflected bitterly that “now, in 1933, they could not even join us in a tavern because they had not decent coats to their backs. We could drink to the tragedy of the dead; but we could only stare at one another, in pitiful embarrassment, over this tragicomedy of the living, who had fought for a world that did not want them, who had come back to exchange their uniforms for rags. And who shall restore to them the years that the locust hath eaten? (132-3). Here Priestley was describing nothing that could be positively seen, but was conjuring up a vision of the invisible, the absent, the forgotten, the unwanted, and making them appear in all their pathos while yet evoking their dignity, their pride.

One might almost say that the rest of his book is a quest for the absent ones, a journey into the dismal underworld to which they had been consigned so that — like Odysseus in Hades — he could give blood to their shades and restore their voices. His language indicates that he was well aware of the nature of his quest:

When I called, one evening, the house seemed very quiet and there was a dim light in the bedroom. My heart sank: I had a vision of death, long dreadful illness, misery and evil. Dubiously, tentatively, I tried the bell. Mr. W. himself opened the door and peered at me through his steel-rimmed spectacles. We had not seen one another for at least ten years. Recognition, joy; no death, no dreadful illness! (151)

Priestley's art was to raise the dead and to make the dumb speak, and this meant not only lending his voice to those effectively silenced by poverty and powerlessness, but teasing the latent significance out of inanimate objects. So when he confronted a heap of industrial refuse which "looked like an active volcano . . . the notorious Shotton 'tip', literally a man-made smoking hill," his task was to render visible what was *not* there, "all the fine things that had been conjured out of it in its time, the country houses and town houses, the drawing-rooms and dining-rooms, the carriages and pairs, the trips to Paris, the silks and the jewels, the peaches and iced puddings, the cigars and old brandies. . . (259)."

Similarly, Priestley's self-appointed mission was not to describe slums — anyone could recognize a slum for what it was — but to convey the poverty of spirit inherent in the surroundings in which the bulk of England's population lived: "during the half-hour or

* Shotton tip may have been "notorious," but like much a great many things that Priestley ferreted out, it was well hidden: ". . . it seems incredible. I cannot help feeling that I shall be told that there is no such place, that I have invented my Shotton; and already I have examined no less than three good maps and failed to find it." (259)

so I sat staring through the top windows of that tram, I saw nothing, not one single tiny thing, that could possibly raise a man's spirits. Possibly what I was seeing was not Birmingham but our urban and industrial civilization. . . . It was not, you understand, a slum. That would not have been so bad; nobody likes slums; and the slum hits you in the eye and you have only to make an effort to get it pulled down. This was, I suppose, the common stuff out of which most of our big industrial towns are made. . . there was nothing, I repeat, to light up a man's mind for one single instant" (69-70). As this passage makes clear, Priestley's main concern was with that poverty of spirit which can be found everywhere but is nowhere to be seen as such because it manifests itself in absences — "nothing, not one single tiny thing, that could possibly raise a man's spirits." His task, in other words, was no easier than Beryl Bainbridge's as Raban represented it: if hers was to make visible the spiritual plight of the polyester-shirted man watching an old episode of *Dallas* on the video, or the lemming-like crowds in the shopping malls, Priestley's was to ventriloquise on behalf of those whose spirit was malnourished by "the whole long array of shops, with their nasty bits of meat, their cough mixtures, their *Racing Specials*, their sticky cheap furniture, their shoddy clothes, their fly-blown pastry, their coupons and sales and lies and dreariness and ugliness. I asked myself if this really represented the level reached by all those people down there on the pavements" (70). He would have asked the same question about *Dallas*, and about the shopping mall with its admittedly more colorful "coupons and sales and lies," and he would have given the same answer.*

* This sort of critique of mass consumerism is hardly original with Priestley, and by the

Who Speaks For England?

So what does account for the vast difference between Priestley and Bainbridge? Quite simply, it is that Priestley felt with perfect confidence that he could speak for England, could truly represent the people he met and the scenes he witnessed, while Bainbridge did not. Priestley confidently spoke for others because he assumed that they were, in all

1980's it has crystallized into a very *topos* of middle-class jeremiads lamenting the aesthetic and cultural pauperization of working-class and lower-middle-class life. The "flyblown pastry," "cheap furniture," and "shoddy clothes" that Priestley beheld in this Birmingham neighbourhood are eerily echoed by a middle-class academic's perception of a district of Rummidge — "an imaginary city . . . which occupies, for the purposes of fiction, the space where Birmingham is to be found on maps of the so-called real world" — in David Lodge's novel *Nice Work*: "The shops are either flashy or dingy. The windows of the former are piled with cheap mass-produced goods, banks of conjunctival TVs twitching and blinking in unison, blinding white fridges and washing-machines, ugly shoes, ugly clothes, and unbelievably ugly furniture, all plastic veneers and synthetic fabrics. The windows of the dingy shops are like cemeteries for unloved and unwanted goods — limp floral print dresses, yellowing underwear, flyblown chocolate boxes and dusty plastic toys. The people slipping and sliding on the pavements, spattered with slush by the passing traffic, look stoically wretched, as if they expect no better from life." Lodge's character is appropriately reminded of a line from D. H. Lawrence — "She felt in a wave of terror the grey, gritty hopelessness of it all." *Nice Work* (1988; rpt. New York: Viking Penguin, 1990), "author's note" and 64.

essentials, like him. For example, he felt able to pronounce that industrial England's dreariness was a betrayal of the people who were forced to live in its midst because "I am too near them myself, not being one of the sensitive plants of contemporary authorship, to believe that it does represent their level" (70). What makes Beryl Bainbridge's book so different — and so unsatisfactory to Raban — is her utter inability to speak for — or even, in some cases, to speak *to* — the people she encountered in her travels. Far from assuming that other people were fundamentally like her in their values, interests and needs, Bainbridge assumed that they were impenetrable, unknowable, and she treated them with the wariness one might adopt if one thought oneself to be dealing with escapees from a lunatic asylum.

The first encounter that Bainbridge chose to represent in any detail was with "a sunburnt tramp" who claims that his parents had been hanged for sheep-stealing:

He looked fifty and was possibly thirty-eight. Spotting the television camera he left off rifling the litter bins and came over to tell me he was eighty-three. Hard to understand a word he said. . . . We had a confused conversation about Liverpool, Tulsa and Southampton. He had often dossed down at Dr. Kelly's in Liverpool. Did I know it? In Tulsa he had joined the Seventh Day Adventists. Last night he had slept in the old West Gate and pissed eight times before dawn. . . . It was strange how memory and language had become jumbled up in his mind. . . . He told me his mother and father had died on the gallows for sheep-stealing. It was all an unfortunate mistake. He said, 'My mother and father, or should I say the Parents,

were innocent of the deed, or should I say the crime.’ He had stood one step below and watched them swing. I murmured inadequately that it must have been awful.

‘It were,’ he said.

‘How old were you? I asked.

‘Five hours,’ he said. ‘I have never gotten over it, or should I say through.’ (16-17)

What, if anything, Bainbridge inferred from the existence of this unfortunate in Southampton in 1983 is left obscure. As the book continues, however, the reader comes to see that this is merely one of the brightest fragments in a mosaic of the grotesque and the bizarre that expressed, for Bainbridge, the state of the nation. On meeting a saintly parson, she was immediately reminded by his “sweet grey eyes” of Dickens’ description of Calcraft the hangman. When the parson told her a story about the apparently saintly Bishop Joe, Bainbridge eagerly anticipated a *dénouement* that would reveal the bishop’s true deviousness, swallowing her eventual disappointment philosophically: “obviously I was wrong and Joe wasn’t devious at all” (29). It is hardly surprising that Bainbridge had so little sense of community when she suspected deviousness and treachery to be lurking behind the sweetest of smiles and the mildest of glances; indeed, she frankly confessed that both Bishop Joe and the parson, men of genuine goodness and humility, “were outside my experience” (29).

Bainbridge’s experience seems to have been replete with the unusual, the uncanny. Examples crop up at regular intervals, e.g. “The obligatory madman was standing outside McDonald’s, using a cider bottle as a telescope and shouting, ‘The niggers are coming’.” (59); “She took me outside and showed me the grave of a Portuguese widow-woman

whose coffin had been no bigger than thirty-three inches in length” (60); “An eighteen-year-old girl arrived who lived down the road in a hostel. Her arms were scarred from self-mutilation and only last week she had slashed her face repeatedly with scissors” (72). Bainbridge’s England in 1982 was a freak show in which the freaks signified nothing beyond themselves, beyond a world gone inexplicably mad. Bainbridge made little effort to distinguish between those whose grotesqueness might have been the result of socio-political causes and hence *remediable*, in theory at least, and those whose bizarre behavior or condition sprang from some hidden and irreducible source.

Unlike Priestley, Bainbridge thought it rude to inquire too deeply into these, or any other, matters: “‘You must remember so much about the past,’ I said. ‘That’s my business,’ she said tartly, and turned her cake over and over with a little nickel-plated fork. I realised I was spoiling her morning, so I thanked her and left. It’s quite ridiculous the way television tries to butt into people’s private lives. Nobody behaves naturally in front of a camera, not unless you’re the inmate of a loony-bin” (96). Bainbridge’s unwillingness to intrude, however commendable personally, was disabling professionally,* and her conviction that people must be seriously deranged in order

* See in particular her account of an excruciating interview with the Honourable Robin Walpole: “His shyness was so extreme that I became at first tongue-tied and then light-headed. I laughed a lot. He must have wondered what on earth he was doing wandering round the Rosa Mundi beds with an hysterical stranger, another stranger stalking him with a camera. . . . It was so difficult extracting any information that I was reduced to prowling

willingly to provide good television “chat” (as she calls it) helps to explain the outlandishness of so many of the characters who cross her pages.

Priestley, on the other hand, was in search of the typical, of the fragment illustrative of a larger whole, and the only place in his book in which he troubled to describe unfortunates whose misfortunes proceeded from what appeared to be irreducibly private and peculiar circumstances was when he went to Nottingham’s fabled Goose Fair and visited a real freak show: “As I stared, and was ashamed of myself for staring, at this sad wild caricature of a woman, I reflected grimly that this was what can happen to you, not when you have sold your soul to the devil and God is angry, but when some tiny ductless gland, the pineal or the pituitary, has decided that it has worked properly for you long enough and then turns rebellious. . . . I still wonder what was going on inside that monstrously carved head of hers, what she thought of her travels (for she had been shown all over the world), of her place in the social scheme, of her gaping audiences. And I shall never know” (113-4).

Although the freak-show was instructive in that it told Priestley something about the “catch-penny process” that the famous Goose Fair had become, this sport of nature, just because it was a sport of *Nature*, could have no moral or social significance. Human beings had not made it, and human beings could neither comprehend nor remedy it, whereas human beings had made and could both understand and remedy the Depression

around Mr. Walpole in a circle, oohing and aaahing at the pictures and the curtains and generally behaving like an idiot” (151).

and its consequences. One function of the freak-show in Priestley's text is to exhibit, once and for all, the shape of natural disaster, so that we may recognize it and not confuse its lineaments with those typical of the man-made disaster that occupies the rest of the book, which must excite our indignation and not just our pity.

For Bainbridge, on the other hand, the typical could hardly be said to exist, and the grotesque became, paradoxically, the norm for a nation that had no other thread of unity.

I have suggested that this depiction of England as a gallery of grotesque portraits is at least partly the effect of Bainbridge's reluctance to intrude, and one might be tempted to applaud Bainbridge's reticence. After all, Priestley's readiness to assume that others are essentially like himself and that he can adequately represent them is an attitude that we have rightly come to distrust in its imperial/colonial and paternalistic/patriarchal manifestations, to see as marked by a presumption and (literally) an arrogance: Priestley arrogates to himself the right of others to represent themselves, easily deciding, for instance, that his own tastes and preferences are the right ones and that those who beg to differ "are doing not what they like but what they have been told they would like" by "astute financial gentlemen, backed by the Press and their publicity services" (302).

Bainbridge's unwillingness to assume that she can speak for "others" may seem admirable in contrast, because the problems and dangers of representing the "Other" are indeed very real ones, but the problems can never be entirely avoided and the dangers must be risked. For to function in the world necessarily involves us all willy-nilly in a kind of authorship, in an imaginative creation of that world. We necessarily imagine inner lives for others, attributing to them motives, passions and interests in order to explain and predict their behaviour in the routine intercourse of daily life. Insofar as the

continuous construction of the social, of a sense of community, depends on our sympathy with our fellow-citizens, we must imaginatively construct them as being in important ways like ourselves, desiring what we perceive as goods and avoiding what we believe to be evils. We can avoid neither this responsibility nor the attendant risks that feminist and post-colonial criticism have alerted us to, because to refuse, as Bainbridge tries to refuse, to interpret the other, is not to leave the other *un-interpreted* but simply to produce a different kind of interpretation — the other as irreducibly unknowable and therefore as irreducibly *different*. This interpretation is not necessarily one we should feel particularly comfortable with: Bainbridge's England of grotesques is not something we are inspired to do very much about, since it is not clear what can be done.

Bainbridge's England is just as much an interpretation, a fiction, as Priestley's, however much she might decry that fact. Indeed, Bainbridge was so accustomed to experiencing the world in terms of the grotesque that she saw it where another observer would not. On the way from Lincoln to Norwich, for example, she met a man who was "a fund of strange information. Pointing at some sea-gulls in a potato field he said they'd come from Skegness, which is surely in Scotland. As we left he observed mysteriously, 'Some people don't like the skies round here'" (149-50). But the information the man imparts is strange and mysterious only to someone who expects the strange and mysterious. Another person (and certainly a Priestley), even if he or she were so ignorant as to confuse Skegness (a Lincolnshire seaside resort, presumably only a few miles from where Bainbridge encountered her informant) with Scotland's Loch Ness, might engage the man in further conversation, expressing surprise and asking for clarification, which would surely ensue. And as for the comment that "some people don't like the skies

round here,” which Bainbridge thought so mysterious, Priestley not only *would not* but demonstrably *did not* find anything puzzling about an impatience with the vastness and monotony of the sky that sits on top of the flat Lincolnshire landscape:

The train curved round and then I saw, for the first time, that astonishing church tower known as the ‘Boston Stump’. This tower is not quite three hundred feet high; but nevertheless, situated as it is, it looked to me more impressive . . . than the Empire State Building It is all a matter of contrast. Here the country is flat; you have seen nothing raised more than twenty or thirty feet from the ground, for miles and miles; and then suddenly this tower shoots up to nearly three hundred feet. The result is that at first it looks as high as a mountain. Your heart goes out to those old Bostonians who, weary of the Lincolnshire levels and the flat ocean, made up their minds to build and build into the blue. (278)

What was doomed to remain a mystery to Bainbridge was crystal clear to Priestley, who felt himself as well able to empathize with Bostonians long dead as with his contemporaries throughout England.

What Bainbridge found on her tour of England was — perhaps not surprisingly — the world of her novels; what Priestley discovered was — equally unsurprisingly — the world of *his*. Bainbridge offered her readers an England that could be understood only as mad, irrational: “. . .this time I actually caught them in the act of digging up a graveyard. . . . I asked the workmen what they were doing. What I said was, ‘What the hell is going on?’ ‘It’s improvements,’ they said. ‘Why?’ I said. ‘Why bloody not,’ they replied” (59). Bainbridge saw only the inexplicable depredations of an alien and

unfathomable “Them” where Priestley assumed and hence created in his book a knowable community of “Us.”

It is by now a truism that a “nation” is always an “imagined community”, something made in ideology rather than given in nature. Priestley and Bainbridge, in their *English Journeys* as in their novels, each gave their readers an “England,” and these Englands were fictions, things they created in and through language, despite the trappings of non-fiction designed to persuade us that we are reading nothing but a documentary record. The significance of such fictions lies not in whether they are “true” in the sense of being an accurate reflection of an external reality but whether they are persuasive — whether they can persuade us to make them true by behaving as if they were.

Priestley’s “England” seems so distant from Thatcher’s “England” in its invocation of nation-as-community that it might be thought irrelevant to any consideration of contemporary fiction’s attempt to imagine “the way we live now.” Yet Priestley’s concept of the nation was revived in the ‘Nineties: his play *An Inspector Calls*, which was first produced in 1946, was taken out of mothballs and given a stunning production by Stephen Daldry at the National Theatre, where it garnered a number of awards and moved into the West End for an extended run. Anyone who saw the production could have no doubt that Daldry’s revival was intended as a clarion call to Britons to unite in opposition to Thatcherite values of aggressive individualism. Although the play is constructed as a thriller, it makes little effort to mute the didacticism of its claim that the lives of all the other members of our society, “their hopes and fears, their suffering and chance of happiness, [are] all intertwined with our lives, with what we think and say and

do. We don't live alone. We are members of one body. We are responsible for each other. And I tell you that the time will soon come when, if men will not learn that lesson, then they will be taught it in fire and blood and anguish."⁸² That there might indeed be no doubt about the contemporary relevance of this homily, which is the play's climax, Daldry had the Inspector deliver it directly to the audience instead of to the characters to whom it is ostensibly addressed. Written at the end of World War II, *An Inspector Calls* is a dramatic argument for the values that inform *English Journey* — values that the post-war electorate found persuasive enough to install as the foundation of the consensus politics that prevailed for the next thirty years. It is therefore hardly surprising that Priestley's work should be revived in an age when the consensus appeared to have been at least temporarily set aside.

Before unreservedly championing Priestley's "England" in opposition to Thatcher's, however, it is worth taking a closer look at *English Journey* in order to understand the parameters within which Priestley constructed his "Us" as a unified and knowable community so much more appealing than Beryl Bainbridge's England-as-Bedlam. For Priestley's "England" was fundamentally unified by an "Englishness" rather vaguely defined in terms of "race" and "culture," and his confidence that the ravages of the Depression could and would be repaired by a concerted national effort depended on his belief that *race* and *culture* were bonds strong enough, in the final analysis, to resist the divisive pull of *class*. In Thatcher's England, however, "Englishness" was much more clearly a site of contestation. After thirty years of sustained Commonwealth immigration, the population of England itself was manifestly less culturally-homogeneous than Priestley had taken it to be, and any attempt to invoke "Englishness"

in Priestley's terms, far from healing social divisions, merely exacerbated them. For Priestley's concept of "Englishness," like any concept whatsoever, is necessarily structured by *difference*, by *exclusion*, and the following chapter attempts to take the measure of what Priestley felt he had to exclude in order for it to do the job he had in mind.

Five: Seagulls at Paddington Station, Spades at Waterloo

When the new world shall the old invade,

Nor count them their Lords, butt their fellowes in trade...

Then thinck strange things are come to Light

Whereof fewe eyes have had a foresight.

Sir Thomas Browne⁸³

Birds Astray

In 1979, the year that widespread social unrest and discontent in Britain brought Margaret Thatcher to power, a new novel by John Le Carré found George Smiley meditating on a flock of seagulls scavenging in the vicinity of London's Paddington station: "If sea-gulls are taking to the cities, he thought, will pigeons take to the sea?"⁸⁴ The appropriation by seagulls of both the territory and the livelihoods of London's pigeons emblemized a feeling that pervaded not only Le Carré's novel but most of the public likely to read it — a sense that everything in England had unaccountably gone wrong, that not only the time but Nature herself was out-of-joint, the world turned upside down. The same *topos* had occurred a couple of years earlier in Alan

Bennett's play *The Old Country*, where Hilary toys with the idea of writing an indignant letter to *The Times*: "Sir, Am I right or merely sentimental in thinking that in the old days one saw seagulls exclusively by the sea? Here we are, miles from any shore and there is a seagull . . . Seagulls on the land, starlings by the shore"⁸⁵ And in Margaret Drabble's *The Ice Age*, also published in 1977, "Rooks and seagulls rose, cawing, from a brown expanse" of field in Oxfordshire; "'Why do seagulls get so far from the sea ?' asked Anthony."⁸⁶ By 1984 seagulls appeared to be turning up in the oddest places, and not just in fiction: we have already encountered Beryl Bainbridge in *English Journey* expressing amazement at finding Scottish seagulls in Lincolnshire. Bainbridge was mistaken about the provenance of her seagulls, but her mistake is instructive insofar as it may testify to the strength and perhaps the willfulness of the inclination (everywhere present in her book) to see contemporary England as the Land of Topsy-Turvy.

In both Le Carré's novel and Bennett's play, the seagulls have specific resonances; they resonate in each work with the theme of an England gone awry because the wrong kinds of people are in positions of power and responsibility. Neither work explicitly deals with racism in contemporary Britain, or "coloured" immigration from Britain's former colonies as a perceived social problem. Yet insofar as the issue of colonial immigration has been a significant factor in the social and political ferment going on in England for at least the last quarter-century, it has also been a factor in that general sense of the uncanny that the seagull *topos* adumbrates. If this seems unduly fanciful, consider the extent to which "birds in the wrong places" were being linked to notions of "racial purity" in a 1995 debate about immigrant species. According to a story in the *Manchester Guardian Weekly* headlined "Ducking the issue of racial purity," British nature conservation groups were bitterly disagreeing over

...plans to keep alien bird species from breeding by shooting them as they sit on their nests or graze in parks. Already on the Government's death list are the ruddy duck and Canada goose, but purists want others added, including the snow goose, bar-headed goose, mandarin ducks and parakeets.

Some delegates at the British Ornithological Union's meeting in March called for the shooting of all species imported into Britain. The proposals were defeated but the debate continues. One opponent, Dr Richard Ryder, said last week: "If you shot everything that arrived in Britain in the last 5,000 years, there'd be nothing left."

Another opponent, "Paul Evans, chairman of the British Association of Nature Conservationists, said: "This slaughter is obscene in the name of racial purity." The story went on to explain that Canada geese, "another alien, introduced to Britain by Charles II," had been targeted for elimination because they were the cause of "some nuisance problems." Although they had been "encouraged to breed in the 1950s so they could be shot by sportsmen," the venture was a failure: the geese refused to take off when the beaters approached, the "sportsmen felt unable to shoot a sitting target, so the geese survived to breed in large numbers and moved into the nation's parks" where "they eat and excrete more than any other bird..."⁸⁷

The debate, of course, was about birds, not people, but the structure of feeling that informed the move to slaughter "alien" species seems eerily congruent with the public mood that clamoured for increasingly stringent immigration laws, supported the (often violent) arrest and deportation of "aliens" (usually nationals of former British colonies) whose papers were not entirely "in order", and fuelled concerns about British "national sovereignty" being eroded by continued membership of the European Union. If nature conservation efforts in 1990s England were

focussing on the “nuisance problems” caused by “aliens” and considering the ornithological equivalent of “ethnic cleansing” as a solution, then it may not be too farfetched to see the immigration issue as one point on the arc of meanings subtended by the chord of the seagull’s landward flight.

A closer examination of the contexts in which Bennett’s and Le Carré’s seagulls appear provides some support for this conjecture. Hilary, in *The Old Country*, certainly gestures towards the issue of human migration across political and economic borders in an apparently offhand and whimsical comment on his glimpse of the seagull “miles from any shore”: “Seagulls on the land, starlings by the shore. Perhaps Nature herself is becoming more liberal, embargoes are lifted, borders dissolved and birds as free to roam as we are” (11). Le Carré’s George Smiley provides no such gloss, but the setting in which he sees the gulls does. The area of London around Paddington Station — not far from Bayswater, Notting Hill Gate and the Portobello Road — was one where many West Indian immigrants lived, and it is introduced in terms of some rather stark and sinister black/white imagery: “There are Victorian terraces in the region of Paddington Station that are painted as white as luxury liners on the outside, and inside are as dark as tombs” (77). There are many signs of poverty, as well as hints of what the 1995 ornithological conservationists were calling ‘nuisance problems’ involving eating and excreting: “a heap of rotting mattresses” block the service road leading to the house, thirty doorbells indicate the number of flimsy partition-walls dividing the spacious Victorian rooms into cramped lodgings, Smiley hears “the flushing of a communal lavatory,” and one of the pervasive odours is an unambiguous culinary sign of the immigrant “other.” “There was a smell of curry and cheap fat

frying, and disinfectant. There was a smell of too many people with not much money jammed into too little air” (78).*

* The concept of "curry" as unambiguous sign of the exotic "other" is beautifully burlesqued by Samuel Selvon in one of his London novels. Sylvester, like Selvon a Trinidadian of Indian origin living in London, believes that no English woman can resist the enticement of a curry:

Hear Syl line, when he approach a bird as she window-shopping in Oxford Street:

'Would you like a cur-rey? Have you ever had a good Indian cur-rey?'

It have men who have some set ideas, and nothing could change them. Syl pick up this idea that white girls like to eat curry, and he always with this opening chord whenever he on the prowl: 'Cur-rey? What about a good Indian cur-rey?' as if he in some Oriental market offering the spices and perfumes of the East.

Part of the joke here is that Sylvester, although he is one of the "true-true Indians" from Trinidad ("Not Carib Indians or Red Indians, but Indians from India, wearing sari and thing"), is also one of those who have become "so westernise that they don't even know where the Ganges is" [*The Housing Lark* (London; MacGibbon & Kee, 1965), 29-30]. The continuing significance of "curry" as cultural marker — and potential flashpoint of cultural ("racial") conflict — is pointed by a 1995 newswire story:

[June 6 1995] LONDON (Reuter) - School cook Manohar Morgan was fired because he refused to tone down his hot spicy curries, a British industrial tribunal was told Wednesday. Children at a school in Stourbridge, England refused to eat the fiery offerings. Morgan, who is of Indian origin, claimed racial discrimination and unfair

London's coloured immigrants aren't prominently featured in very many contemporary English novels by whites, but they haunt the margins of a number of them, their presence obliquely suggested by something as slight and apparently inconsequential as an allegedly aberrant seagull. I say "allegedly aberrant" because those same seagulls turned up in London in 1956 in *The Lonely Londoners*, a "dialect" novel written by a Trinidadian of East Indian origin who was one of those immigrants, and Samuel Selvon took care to let his readers know that the seagull that Galahad comes across in Kensington Gardens is not out of place at all, whatever Galahad may think: "Which part these seagulls come from? he wonder, for he always think that seagulls belong to the sea."⁸⁸ The seagulls come to London for some of the same reasons that prompt Selvon's "spades" to leave the sea-girt isles of the West Indies, and they turn up in much the same places: "These seagulls that come up from the old Thames when things too hard for them by the sea, you could never tell where you will see them. Sometimes they join the pigeons in Trafalgar Square, and it have some of them does hang out by the Odeon in Marble Arch. Anyway, nobody surprise to see seagulls sitting up there on the roof . . ." (134).

Selvon's spades are similarly ubiquitous: "this was a time when any corner you turn, is ten to one you bound to bounce up a spade. In fact the boys all over London, it ain't have a place where you wouldn't find them, and big discussion going on in Parliament about the situation"

dismissal for cooking curries which he said were good enough for his own family. But his boss, Betty Coleman, said: "The curries were too hot for the kids who gradually stopped eating them. We would find samosas (Indian turnovers) hidden behind radiators and under mats around the school because they couldn't eat them." The case continues.

(24). As with the seagulls, a favorite gathering-place in the summer is Hyde Park Corner, by Marble Arch and Orator's Corner — "... all the boys coasting lime by the Arch . . . From east and west, north and south, the boys congregate by the Arch" (98). White English people may consider the spades as egregious as the seagulls, but in both cases they are wrong: the spades have not only a legal right to be where they are but also, like the seagulls, a natural right. In the case of the spades, this natural right is of the kind that the inhabitants of a polity founded on John Locke's doctrine of property ought to acknowledge — England is *properly* the home of the immigrants because they have mixed their labour with it: "... we is British subjects . . . we have more right than any people from the damn continent to live and work in this country, and enjoy what the country have, because is we who bleed to make this country prosperous" (40). Their labour-power is the reason that the immigrants were enticed to Britain in the first place:

After the war successive [British] governments began looking outside England for new workers to help the steadily improving economy of the 1950s which could no longer be serviced by the indigenous population. They began recruiting in the Commonwealth, notably in the islands of the West Indies The flow of West Indians was still restricted until 1953, but thereafter it increased dramatically, governed directly by Britain's labour needs, reaching its first peak in 1956, slowing slightly for the next three years, then taking off again from 1959. Some 10,000 people arrived in 1954, 24,000 a year later, and 26,000 in 1956. By 1959, 36000 more had arrived. In 1961, a second peak, some 75,000 made the trip. Concentrated in London, they began carving out their own centres: north of the river around Notting Hill, Paddington and North Kensington, south in Brixton and Stockwell."⁸⁹

No study of the contemporary English novel's attempts to understand and represent contemporary England can afford to ignore the experiences and perspectives of these "seagulls," for the immigrant writer, simultaneously insider and outsider, is likely to view the culture of the mother-country with both the familiarity and the critical distance enforced by the fact of colonization. Familiarity of a certain kind will come from having been, like Samuel Selvon, "indoctrinated, of course, colonized completely in English literature as a child in school. I knew English history, I knew more about England than any English person I met during my entire [1950-1978] experience in England knew about the Caribbean."⁹⁰ Distance and alienation, on the other hand, are the result not only of having grown up in the midst of a different landscape, a different climate, and a different "english," but also of the irreducible social fact of colour, which overshadows and at least partially cancels out any sense of kinship founded on culture: "... in my experience, all the people of the Third World are considered black. This question of being black, white or brown never really made any impression on me until I went abroad to live, when I went to England . . . here, in England, you are a black man as opposed to a white man and a white society." Colour cancels culture: an American and an Englishman "*feel* a kinship because of their colour, although their cultures may be vastly different!" (93)

The Lonely Londoners And The Old Diplomacy

Published in 1956, *The Lonely Londoners* is noteworthy as one of the first West Indian novels to use dialect (or a literary rendition of dialect) not only for dialogue but for the narrative. Dialect has traditionally been used for the purposes of broad comedy, and there is a great deal of that in the novel, which recalls the Broadway tales of Damon Runyon in its use of tricksters and other "characters" involved in comically outrageous low-life exploits. But the laughter here has a dark

underside: “As if, on the surface, things don’t look so bad, but when you go down a little, you bounce up a kind of misery and pathos and a frightening — what? . . . As if the boys laughing, but they only laughing because they afraid to cry, they only laughing because to think so much about everything would be a big calamity — like how he here now, the thoughts so heavy like he unable to move his body” (142). The structure of the novel seems, deceptively, to be loose, episodic, with little in the way of a conventional plot; instead, continuity between a series of often-comic anecdotes or “ballads” is provided by the character Moses Aloetta, whose Bayswater room functions as an informal social centre for the small group of characters — mostly single males — whose picaresque adventures the book relates:

Nearly every Sunday morning, like if they going to church, the boys liming [i.e. “hanging out”] in Moses room, coming together for oldtalk, to find out the latest gen, what happening, when is the next fete [i.e. party], Bart asking if anybody see his girl anywhere, Cap recounting a episode he had with a woman by the tube station the night before, Big City want to know why the arse he can’t win a pool, Galahad recounting a clash with the colour problem in a restaurant in Piccadilly, Harris saying he hope the weather turns, Five saying he have to drive a truck to Glasgow tomorrow.

Always every Sunday morning they coming to Moses, like if is confession, sitting down on the bed, on the floor, on the chairs, everybody asking what happening but nobody like they know what happening, laughing kiff-kiff at a joke, waiting to see who would start to smoke first, asking Moses if he have anything to eat, the gas going low, why don’t you put another shilling in, anybody have change? (138)

The paratactic structure of these typical sentences is like the structure of the novel as a whole, and this is entirely fitting: these Londoners are lonely precisely because their situation denies them more fully-structured, more meaningful, lives: “Ten years, papa, ten years the old man in Brit’n, and what to show for it? What happen during all that time? From winter to winter, summer to summer, work after work. Sleep, eat, hustle pussy, work” (129).

Selvon’s novel is not without significant structure, however — it is just that it is not articulated through changes occurring to the characters. The traditional novel has a narrative structure in which the protagonist, as a result of the moral choices he or she makes, arrives at a state which is different from where he or she started, but Selvon’s point in *The Lonely Londoners* is precisely that this kind of narrative, closely linked to its origins in middle-class conceptions of individualism and self-help, is inappropriate for lives seemingly devoid of meaningful choice and significant change, for people who never in the course of the novel escape repetition and routine. The structure of this novel is of a very different kind, because it manifests itself in the development not of the narrative but of the terms in which the reader — and it would be easy to show that Selvon is writing primarily for the white English reader — understands its subject-matter. At the beginning Selvon seems eager to cater to our probable assumptions and prejudices about the relative degrees of “civilization” obtaining in England and The West Indies, but these comfortable beliefs are first undermined and then progressively challenged, until finally all grounds for complacency have disappeared. The progression in the novel’s structure is that of the reader’s experiences, not the characters’.⁹¹

For example, when Henry Oliver, nicknamed Sir Galahad, arrives in London from Trinidad, Selvon seems to be inviting us to patronize his naïve astonishment at common English manners

and courtesies. “He see a test come and take a newspaper and put down the money on a box — nobody there to watch the fellar and yet he put the money down. What sort of thing is that? Galahad wonder, they not afraid somebody thief the money?” (42). A few minutes later, he tries to push his way to the front of an orderly bus queue, “and the conductor say, ‘’Ere, you can’t break the queue like that, mate.’ And Galahad had to stand up and watch all the people who was there before him get on the bus, and a old lady look at him with a loud tone in her eye, and a girl told a fellar she was with: ‘They’ll have to do better, you know’” (44). Although one critic has asserted that these incidents are the stimulus to the growth of “social conscience” in a “rootless rogue” whose life in Trinidad has no such normative values⁹², their function is quite different: it is to set a trap for the complacent English reader who is only too ready to believe that a black man’s ignorance or apparent disregard of a particular English social convention like the queue indicates that he lacks any developed social consciousness at all — that he is a relative “savage” or “primitive.” The reader should already have been put on guard against smugness about the superiority of English manners by many hints, such as this conversation between Galahad and Moses only two pages earlier:

‘Things as bad over here as in America?’ Galahad ask.

‘That is a point the boys always debating,’ Moses say. ‘Some say yes and some say no. The thing is, in America they don’t like you, and they tell you so straight, so that you know how you stand. Over here is the old English diplomacy: “thank you sir,” and “how do you do” and that sort of thing’ (39-40).

The reader who has not taken the hint and who smiles condescendingly at Galahad’s early blunders will soon be disabused; English civility, at least in London, rarely goes further than “the

old diplomacy.” *Civility* has come to mean superficial good manners rather than the rich mutuality involved in the rights and duties of citizenship, just as *polity*, the complex networks of interdependence constituting civil organization, has degenerated into a matter of surface politeness. One of Selvon’s purposes is to show that “the old diplomacy” (shades of “perfidious Albion”) conceals an absence of more fully humane values, making all inhabitants of London — not just the immigrants — the “lonely Londoners” of the book’s title.

This analysis of English civil society emerges from the unfolding depiction of the immigrant’s experience. Living apart from his own extended family in the West Indies, the spade is typically forced to pay a high rent for “a cramp-up room where you have to do everything — sleep, eat, dress, wash, cook, live” (137). The “cramp-up room” will perhaps have to be shared, and the rent will be extortionate because most landlords refuse to rent to coloureds, although they will rarely come right out and say so: “I went to look at that room that Ram tell me about in the Gate, and as soon as the landlady see you [Galahad’s black skin] she say the room let already. She ain’t even give me a chance to say good morning” (88-9). Landlords who accept spades do so because they can charge what the market will consequently bear (27-8). Work provides no relief from “the old basement room” and its “whiff of stale food and old clothes and dampness and dirt” (92). Whatever the immigrant’s qualifications, he will be hired only for low-paid, uninteresting, menial jobs, as Cap discovers when the employment exchange sends him to apply for a storekeeping job at the railway for seven pounds a week and he is offered instead manual labour at six pounds ten: “They send you for a storekeeper work and they want to put you in the yard to lift heavy iron. They think this is all we good for, and this time they keeping all the soft clerical jobs for them white fellars” (52). This kind of incident has become so common that now officials at the employment exchange “will find out if the firm want coloured fellows before they

send you In the beginning it cause a lot of trouble when fellars went saying that they come from the labour office and the people send them away saying it ain't have no vacancy. They don't tell you outright that they don't want coloured fellows, they just say sorry the vacancy get filled" (46). Moses lost one job because "all the people in the place say they go strike unless the boss fire Moses A few days after that the boss call Moses and tell him that he sorry, but as they cutting down the staff and he was new, he would have to go" (29). Once you get a job you must painfully learn that fellow-workers, however pleasantly they may behave, will never become real friends: "the night before he was in the lavatory and two white fellars come and say how these black bastards have the lavatory dirty, and they didn't know that he was there, and when he come out they say hello mate have a cigarette" (88). The ugliness of racism is almost everywhere papered over by the dishonesty, the hypocrisy, of civility.

Even on the street, white English xenophobia and colour prejudice form a barrier to the most innocent social encounter:

'Mummy, look at that black man!' A little child, holding on to the mother hand, look up at Sir Galahad.

'You mustn't say that, dear!' The mother chide the child.

But Galahad skin like rubber at this stage, he bend down and pat the child cheek, and the child cower and shrink and begin to cry.

'What a sweet child!' Galahad say, putting on the old English accent. 'What's your name?'

But the child mother uneasy as they stand up there on the pavement with so many white people around: if they was alone, she might have talked a little, and ask Galahad what part

of the world he come from, but instead she pull the child along and she look at Galahad and give a sickly sort of smile, and the old Galahad, knowing how it is, smile back and walk on.
(87-8)

Social transactions of a more pleasant sort can indeed be had, but at a price, for they usually have a mercenary basis: the local grocer rushes to “stock up with a lot of things like blackeye peas and red beans and pepper sauce, and tinned breadfruit and ochro and smoke herring, and as long as the spades spending money he don’t care, in fact is big encouragement, ‘Good morning, sir,’ and ‘What can I do for you today, sir,’ and “Do come again’.” An East End tailor, “a cockney Jew fellar,” gives out free cigars, plasters his walls with “photo of all the black boxers in the world,” and “by the time you ready to leave the shop the fellar have you feeling like a lord even if you ain’t give an order for a suit and you have him down one cigar” (77-8).

Racism is endemic in Selvon’s London in the 1950s, but his critique goes deeper than this: the society the spades find themselves in is one in which traditional forms of neighbour-hood, of social relationship, have broken down, to be replaced by more businesslike social transactions. The mercenary principle permeates a social life in which dating, for instance, becomes a kind of prostitution in which sex is granted by the woman in exchange for a night out at cinema or restaurant, and many of the spades prefer outright prostitution in which “you could ... negotiate ten shillings or a pound with the sports in the park” (101). They are not the only ones — prostitution attracts all sorts and conditions of men: “you does meet all sorts of fellars from all walks of life don’t ever be surprised at who you meet up cruising and reclining in the park it might be your boss or it might be some big professional fellar because it ain’t have no discrimination when it come to that in the park in the summer” (104). Literal prostitution,

involving men from all classes and occupations, becomes a synecdoche for the essentially commercial ethos to which social relationships in England have been reduced. Prostitutes are businesspeople just like the grocer and the tailor referred to above, and although their business principles preclude overt racial discrimination, they entail no humanity, no relationship of reciprocity beyond a cash/commodity transaction, as the customer quickly discovers if his tender is too low: “see them girls in little groups here and there talking and how they could curse you never hear curse until one of them sports curse you if you approach one and she don’t like your terms she tell you to — off right away and if you linger she tell you to double — off but business is brisk in the park in the summer” (104).

In Selvon’s London there is no real charity; people may throw coins to beggars, but “What impulse does prompt people to give no one knows. Is never generosity — you could see some of them regret it as soon as they give. But is a kind of feeling of shame. One fellar give, and the others feel shame if they don’t put a penny in the old man hat” (76). A rich woman lying in bed in her luxury flat may toss a sixpence from her window to a beggar in the street, but she does not really care about the recipient, in whom she takes no personal interest: “But if she have a thought at all, it never go further than to cause the window to open and the tanner to fall down. In fact when the woman throw the tanner from the window she didn’t even look down: if a man was a mile away and he was controlling a loudspeaker in the street moving up and down, the tanner would have come the same way” (75-6).

The sixpenny-piece tossed from a window to an invisible beggar, a bodiless voice, is a nice emblem of the “cash nexus” to which social life in post-war England has dwindled. Selvon’s narrator remarks that “It have a kind of communal feeling with the Working Class and the

spades, because when you poor things does level out” (75), but we see little of this in the novel; what we do see are elderly working-class Englishwomen who remember a more traditional community life than is to be found in the years of burgeoning post-war prosperity: “. . . it have bags of these old geezers [widows whose husbands were killed in the war] who does be pottering about the Harrow Road like if they lost, a look in their eye as if the war happen unexpected and they still can’t realise what happen to the old Brit’n On Friday or Saturday night, they go in the pub and buy a big glass of mild and bitter, and sit down by a table near the fire and stay here coasting lime till the pub close” (75). Dying in this society is as lonely as living: “And another thing, look how people does dead and nobody don’t know nothing until the milk bottles start to pile up in front of the door That is a hell of a thing to think about, you know. One time a test dead in this house — right there down the hall, in the second room. You know what? I miss the test — was one of them old geezers, every morning she see me she say. ‘Cold today, isn’t it? I bet you wish you were back home now’ Well I miss the test: when I ask the landlord for her, he say she dead about a month ago” (131). The fact that Moses can sorely miss an old woman with whom his social interaction was both minimal and superficial says a great deal about the quality and the texture of the rest of his social life.

Outside the gatherings in Moses’ room, there is no sustaining community for the spades in London:

‘Sometimes I look back on all the years I spend in Brit’n,’ Moses say, ‘and I surprise that so many years gone by. Looking at things in general life really hard for the boys in London. This is a lonely miserable city, if it was that we didn’t get together now and then to talk about things back home, we would suffer like hell. Here is not like home where you have

friends all about. In the beginning you would think that is a good thing, that nobody minding your business, but after a while you want to get in company, you want to go to somebody house and eat a meal, you want to go on excursion to the sea, you want to go and play football and cricket. Nobody in London does really accept you. They tolerate you, yes, but you can't go in their house and eat or sit down and talk. It ain't have no sort of family life for us here. Look at Joseph. He married to a English girl and they have four children, and they living in two rooms in Paddington. He apply to the LCC for a flat, but it look like he would never get one. Now the children big enough to go to school, and what you think? Is big fight every day because the other children calling them darkie Boy, when I see thing like that happening to other people I decide I would never married.' (130-1).

But the spades' experience is simply a special case of a general malaise, because there doesn't seem to be a community in the traditional sense at all: "It have people living in London who don't know what happening in the room next to them, far more the street, or how other people living. London is a place like that. It divide up in little worlds, and you stay in the world you belong to and you don't know anything about what happening in the other ones except what you read in the papers" (74). In Trinidad things were different, as is evident from this exchange between Moses and Galahad in Moses' Bayswater room when they first meet: "'Where you used to live?' 'Down south, San Fernando, in Mucurapo Street.' 'Eh-heh! You know Mahal?'. . . 'But how you mean? Everybody know Mahal!'" (37) Or from this, between the same men in the same room three or four years later: "'Aye Galahad,' he say, 'you used to know a fellow name Brackley in Charlotte Street?' 'Brackley? Charlotte Street? But how you mean? You think I

would be living in Port of Spain and don't know Brackley?" (127) By the end of the novel the reader understands in a new light what he has been told at the beginning:

It have some fellars who in Brit'n long, and yet they can't get away from the habit of going to Waterloo whenever a boat-train coming in with passengers from the West Indies. They like to see the familiar faces, they like to watch their countrymen coming off the train, and sometimes they might spot somebody they know: 'Aye Watson! What the hell you doing in Brit'n boy? Why didn't you write me you was coming?' And they would start big oldtalk with the travellers, finding out what happening in Trinidad, in Grenada, in Barbados, in Jamaica and Antigua, what is the latest calypso number, if anybody dead, and so on . . . (26)

Most of the spades, lonely as they are, have a greater sense of fellowship than the English, and at its best it is a fellowship constituted not only by gossip and "oldtalk" but by obligation and duty: Moses "had was to get up from a nice warm bed and dress and come out in this nasty weather to go and meet a fellar he didn't even know. That was the hurtful part of it — is not as if this fellar is his brother or his cousin or even friend; he don't know the man from Adam. But he got a letter from a friend in Trinidad who say that this fellar is coming by the ss *Hildebrand*, and if he could please meet him at the station in London, and help him until he get settled" (23). Moses resents having to go, but the point is that *he goes*, and he does help Galahad get settled, as he has helped so many more: "So what Moses could do when these fellars land up hopeless on the doorstep with one set of luggage, no place to sleep, no place to go?" (24). This passage, which occurs on the second page of the novel, appears to be a rhetorical question, but by the end of the novel the reader should realize that it isn't: Moses could — in theory, at least — do what the native English do — the "old diplomacy."

But of course he can't, because he's not in this respect "English" and because a different social practice has constructed his sense of what citizenship involves in the way of duty to fellow-citizens. Despite Galahad's astonishment at the degree of trust inscribed in the system of newspaper vending — "nobody there to watch the fellar and yet he put the money down" — it turns out that West Indians can teach the English something on this score. In the novel the most effective teacher is the most solid representative of West Indian values in Selvon's London — Tolroy's Tanty [Aunt] Bessy, who accompanies the rest of Tolroy's relatives from Kingston, Jamaica, to England "to look after the family" and because "is a shame to leave she alone to dead in Kingston with nobody to look after she" (30-31). Tanty shops regularly at the grocery that has gone to such lengths to attract the immigrants' business:

It had a big picture hang up on the wall of the shop, with two fellars in it. One is Mr. Credit, and he surrounded with unpaid bills and he thin and worried, with his hand propping up his head. The other is Mr. Cash, and he have on waistcoat with gold chain and he have a big belly and he laughing and looking prosperous. Tanty used to look at the picture and suck she teeth. One day she ask the shopkeeper if he don't know about trust.

'Trust?' the shopkeeper say.

'Yes,' Tanty say. 'Where I come from you take what you want and you pay every Friday.'

'Oh, credit,' the shopkeeper say, as if he please that he understand Tanty. 'We don't do business like that in this shop.' And he point to the picture on the wall.

'But you should,' Tanty say. 'We is poor people and we don't always have money to buy.'

Tanty keep behind the shopkeeper to trust, but he only smile when she tell him. Then one day Tanty buy a set of message and put it in she bag and tell him: ‘You see that exercise books you have in the glasscase? Take one out and put my name in it and keep it under the counter with how much I owe you. Mark the things I take and I will pay you on Friday please God.’

And Tanty walk out the white people shop brazen as ever. When the Friday come, she pay what she owe.

‘I will only give you credit,’ the shopkeeper say, to humour Tanty, but before long she spread the ballad all about that anybody could trust if they want, and the fellar get a list of creditors on his hands. However, every Friday evening religiously they all paying up, and as business going on all right he decide to give in. He take down the picture and put up one of the coronation of the Queen. (78-9)

This “ballad” of Tanty and the shopkeeper epitomizes what Selvon sees as the difference between London on the one hand and a traditional West Indian sociality on the other: Tanty wants “Trust,” and the shopkeeper equates this with “Credit,” as if they are simply two names for the same thing. But of course they are not; as the structuralists long ago told us, language is a system of differences without positive terms, and a term’s meaning is constituted by its network of relationships to other terms in a language-system. “Credit” as the shopkeeper uses it is a term belonging to the mercantile-language-system of modern capitalism, and what it means to him is constituted by its binary opposite in this system — not “discredit” but “cash,” as the grocer’s picture of Mr. Cash and Mr. Credit so graphically declares. Tanty, however, inhabits a different language-system in which the opposite of the “trust” that she insists upon is not “cash” but

“mistrust,” “distrust,” or “doubt.” This language-system (which is also a social system) still conceives of shopping as a relationship of mutuality between people who never cease to regard each other *as moral agents* rather than as “consumers” whose “creditworthiness” is determined by an accountant’s calculus; Tanty refuses the economic abstractions of the modern world that London here represents. Her refusal has political ramifications, for there is good reason to suppose that “trust” between its members is an essential precondition of a polity in which the role of government goes beyond securing the minimal “negative liberty” of individuals:

“...if trust and understanding have developed between the members of a state, this makes it more possible to carry out policies that have universalistic criteria and have the result of helping certain regions or groups more than others, because there is some expectation that other policies another time will have the effect of benefitting other groups. Trust might be defined as the willingness to wait: hence the impossibility, according to Hobbes, of covenants in a state of nature. In all kinds of different cultures, paying back gifts or services too quickly is regarded as a refusal of social relations, and in traditional Irish peasant society, where loans among neighbours were common, the first thing one did upon falling out with somebody was to pay off any outstanding loan.”⁹³

Not everyone is like Tanty and the other customers who “religiously” pay their debts; the immigrant community has plenty of rogues and tricksters who, isolated from a sustaining community, embrace purely mercenary principles and become cheats and deadbeats: “a lot of parasites muddy the water for the boys, and these days when one spade do something wrong, they crying down the lot” (41). One of these is Cap, a Nigerian who comes to London to study law but drops out when his father stops his allowance because “he start to spend money wild on

woman and cigarette” (48). Cap survives by conning money out of his fellow-exiles and preying on women, usually immigrants and au-pairs from continental Europe, and Selvon reverts to the *topos* of the seagull to emblemize the “intra-species” nature of this predation. Once when Cap is reduced to desperation by hunger, he sets elaborate traps for the seagulls who frequent the ledge outside his upper-storey room in Dawson Place: “In the two weeks that Cap stay in that top room, he lessen the seagull population in London evening after evening The menu had him looking well, he eat seagull in all manner and fashion.” But Selvon makes it very clear that predation is no satisfactory substitute for a sustaining community based on mutual obligation; though it may seem to work in the short term it is self-defeating, for the seagulls will get wise in the end: “The next place that he went to live, he get a top room again when he ask for it, but seagulls never come on that ledge, though Cap used to put bread out every day” (137). And the moral of this story, as should by now be clear, applies not only to the immigrant population but to all the lonely Londoners.

Although Cap is perhaps the most outrageous hustler and trickster in the novel’s immigrant population, he is by no means the only one, and Selvon is certainly not suggesting that the behaviour of each and every West Indian immigrant *ipso facto* embodies a concept of community superior to that which is to be found in 1950s London. Indeed, Trinidadian author Earl Lovelace, in his 1982 novel *The Wine of Astonishment*, suggests that in post-war Trinidad the traditional attitudes and behaviors that Selvon’s Jamaican Tanty represents survive chiefly as residual elements of a pre-industrial culture being transformed by “the sickness for money that

was the disease taking over everybody.”^{94*} Furthermore, Selvon is not uncritical of some aspects of the traditional culture of his spades, especially their behavior towards women, who are viewed almost exclusively as sex objects and/or as sources of ready cash. This is one area in which English culture is represented as being superior: when Lewis beats his wife Agnes because he suspects her (causelessly) of adultery, Moses warns him that “women in this country not like Jamaica, you know. They have rights over here . . . “ (69). And Agnes finally asserts her rights, suing Lewis for assault after a particularly savage beating and then leaving him for

* Lovelace's novel pinpoints as the beginning of this transformation the establishment of American military bases on the island in World War II, which instantly creates a new breed of hustler more sinister than — but clearly related to — Selvon's worst rogues: "Since the Americans come money start to flow, fellows spring up from nowhere with clean fingernails and pointy-tip shoes; lean fellows in zoot suits with long silver chains looping from the fob of their trousers to their side pocket, who, to see their eyes, you have to lift up their hat brims" (22). A typical example "is money-lender and Contact Man, dealing in blackmarket goods and selling GI boots and other things that he thief from the American Base. Now he about Bonasse, with a gold ring on every finger, his belt slacken at the waist, his eyes looking at everything like it have a price he could afford to pay. . . . Get so fresh and outa place, he want to pinch every woman he meet, and when she open her mouth to disagree, he wave a five dollar bill in her face" (19). None of Selvon's characters is as ugly as this, but the immigrants of *The Lonely Londoners* are not complete innocents: "to tell truth most of the fellars who coming now are real hustlers, desperate" (24).

good. Nor is this an isolated incident: the theme of the West Indians' exploitation of women echoes throughout all three of Selvon's London novels, and should prevent us from interpreting his critique of English society as a simple-minded, nostalgic endorsement of "traditional" West Indian *mores*.*

It is also important to remember that the West Indies hardly constitutes a pre-mercantile Eden: Selvon's blacks, the descendants either of slaves or of East Indians imported to the West Indies as cheap labour, are no strangers to some of the harsher operations of commerce, for they are themselves indelibly inscribed as commodities in global circuits of commodity-exchange. Yet what I am here calling "traditional culture" is the structures of relationship that develop among an oppressed population as part of a general survival strategy, and it remains true that the spades' indigenous culture, which once functioned as a site of resistance to the de-humanizing pressures of English colonialism, can play a similar role in resisting the not-unrelated pressures of modernity that the immigrants encounter in London. As the figure of Tanty serves to remind us, Selvon's Caribbean characters were all born and at least partly raised in a society in which money was not the only, or even the strongest, social bond. The fact that their earlier socialization in their West Indian communities *can* prevent them from assimilating some of the least attractive patterns of English behaviour doesn't mean that it always *does*, for in London the

* The position of women in the immigrant community, where traditional gender roles and behaviours become increasingly dysfunctional in a changed setting, is an important issue, and one explored in painful depth in Buchi Emecheta's London novels of a slightly later period, *In The Ditch* and *Second-Class Citizen*.

spades find themselves being pulled in two different directions: some (like Moses) continue to yield to the claims of community and fellowship, while others embrace the role of *homo oeconomicus*, ruthlessly maximizing their narrowly-conceived self-interest:

It had a Jamaican fellow who living in Brixton, that come to the station to see what tenants he could pick up for the houses that he have in Brixton. This test when he did first come open up a club, and by and by he save up money and buy a house. The next thing you know, he buy out a whole street of houses in Brixton, and let out rooms to the boys, hitting them anything like three or four guineas for a double. When it come to making money, it ain't have anything like 'ease me up' or 'both of we is countrymen together' in the old London. Sometimes he put bed and chair in two or three big room and tell the fellars they could live in there together, but each would have to pay a pound. So you could imagine — five-six fellars in one room and the test coining money for so. And whenever a boat-train come in, he hustling down to Waterloo to pick up them fellars who new to London and ain't have place to stay. . . . (28)

The conflict between the traditional West Indian social imperative of cooperation and the anti-social imperative of predation is the fulcrum of Selvon's next two London novels.

A Skylark, A Fete And A Bacchanal: The Housing Lark

In *The Housing Lark* (1965), these two attitudes are embodied in a Jamaican, Harry Banjo, and a Trinidadian, Battersby ("Bat"), who share a dilapidated basement room in Brixton. Bat is a predator, but not in the western mode of calculated exploitation in the service of ruthless, driving

ambition: Selvon's target here is rather the kind of impromptu rascality of "scalliwags and scoundrels" to whom "everything is a skylark and a fete and a bacchanal," who have "no ambition, no push. Just full your belly with rum and food, and you all belge and fart around and look for lime to pass the time, walk about, catch women, stand up by the market place talking a set of shit day in and day out"*⁹⁵. So Bat is a predator by default; a chronically impoverished and improvident dreamer who fantasizes about Aladdin's genie bringing him money, "a nice woman, a house to live in, food, cigarettes, rum," he exploits his roommate and friends in order to obtain the small luxuries he's too lazy to secure by more orthodox means (7-9).

Harry is also a dreamer, but one with a more practical and constructive bent, and it is he who suggests that a group of spades — all of them dreamers and no-hopers apart from himself — club together and start a savings fund in order to raise a down payment on a house of their own and be rid of avaricious landlords and wretched lodgings. The scheme, which entails communal action and purpose, energizes other members of the group, jolting them out of the anomie that has previously characterized their isolated existences; Gallows, for instance, walks away from the inaugural meeting "as if he drifting on a cloud. As if the plan to buy a house make a new man of him. In all his life, Gallows never had a plan, never had ideas about the future" (47). But although Bat agrees enthusiastically, admonishing the others to give up smoking, drinking,

* Selvon's narrator is careful to warn the English reader of the dangers of stereotyping West Indians in these terms: "Still, you don't have to get any bloody airs about OUR PEOPLE, *because* in this world today they have plenty company. Procrastinators and high dreamers like stupidity all over the place" (128-9).

and “spending money on women,” and exhorting them “to trust one another . . . We have to treat this thing serious, else it won’t work at all” (33-4), part of the reason for his enthusiasm is that he manoeuvres himself into the position of club treasurer and behaves as if Aladdin’s genie has really materialized:

Bat get big kick from the idea of the house, and he already collect twenty-nine quid.

Twenty-nine quid! Who would of dream that just by talking about a idea men would give you money? Bat begin to get delirious from the time the money start to come in. He can’t even remember who give how much, all he know is that he is the man in possession of the money, and he begin to spend wild. Thinking about it now, he wonder how much remain? He lift himself up and feel under the mattress. . . . His fingers scramble about on the springs, and he feel a note and pull it out. It was ten shillings.

Bat jump off the bed and pull the mattress right off. No more money, the ten shillings was all that remain.

Which part all that money gone? Bat wondered. Somebody thief it? I hide it somewhere else?

And then as he cool down, he realise he must of spent it. No use bothering about it, he would have to make another collection. Was about time the boys come up with some more if they really intend to get a house. What would happen on the day of reckoning when the fellars find out that he spend all their money was something that Bat wasn’t worried about. He would have to think of some scheme. If things come to the worst he could always say that somebody thief the money. Bat imagine himself telling them: “Oh God! You know

what happen? Somebody break open the room and thief my money!” On top of that he would have to say they thief clothes and wristwatch too, to make it sound real. (64-5)

Since this novel, like its predecessor, is a comedy, notwithstanding its sombre undertones, things turn out all right in the end despite a whole string of misadventures. The wives and girlfriends of some of the men in the group, tired of all the “farting around that’s been going around,” decide to assert themselves by calling a meeting and taking command of the enterprise (132). Teena, with the support of Bat’s sister and his girlfriend, takes charge of what money Bat has managed to come up with to replace the missing banknotes, and, by contributing the ten pounds she and her husband Fitz have scrimped and saved to buy winter clothes for the children, shames the men into coming up with the rest (143-4). Bat, however, remains irresponsible, unrepentant and unreformed: when Teena finally relinquishes the bottle of rum that she confiscated from Bat as she took charge of the meeting, “Bat snatch it up like a seagull swooping on a fish” (139). At the end of the novel, undaunted, he’s still hustling.

The single honourable exception to the male norm of carefree, lazy irresponsibility in the novel is Harry Banjo, who not only inaugurates the housing club but also, by the novel’s end, seems to have realized his ambition to become a successful “calypsonian” in show business. But Harry is in prison for much of the novel — one of his drug-dealing “friends”, fleeing the police, leaves him innocently holding a package that turns out to contain “weed” — so it is left to the women to assert and enforce the ties and duties of community. They have the will and the strength to do so because they, as mothers or prospective mothers, have responsibilities to others that they cannot easily ignore; so as the unnamed narrator points out, while “the house might be a lark” to the single men in the group, it means a lot to Teena, Jean, and Matilda: “It all well and good for

the boys who free single to make do with what they have, but what about when people start having family? Them English people don't want to rent from the time they see you, and as for when you have a family!" (137).

Yet the "rootless rogues", despite their devil-may-care attitude to most of life's problems, are still implicated in a mode of community that Selvon portrays as more fulfilling than the English norm. This emerges when Bat, in a desperate attempt to replace the money he has spent, latches on to a chance suggestion of Matilda's and organizes a community charabanc excursion to Hampton Court at a pound a head. Although his intentions are ignoble, the outing is a real community event: "It look as if the whole of Brixton was going on this excursion to Hamdon [sic] Court. Friend invite friend, cousin invite aunt, uncle invite nephew, niece invite godfather" (104). Even the ruthless rent collector, Charlie Victor — "so Anglicised that he even eating a currant bun and drinking a cup of tea for lunch!" (110) — deigns to "patronise" the excursion, and although he endeavours to hold himself aloof (partly to impress his English girlfriend), he eventually breaks down and grabs a plate of peas and rice, "throwing decorum to the winds" (121). Significantly, the only one excluded — ostracized, in fact — is the man who not only refused to join the housing club but also transgressed against a deeply-felt social norm by thrusting a packet of marijuana on the innocent Harry Banjo and leaving him to go to jail for dealing, since Harry refuses to inform on him.

At Hampton Court the men relax after a Rabelaisian picnic and settle down to a conversation that is a truly social event, as Selvon's narrator emphasizes by eschewing individualities and refusing to distinguish between speakers:

If you ever want to hear old-talk no other time better than one like this when men belly full, four crates of beer and eight bottle of rum finish, and a summer sun blazing in the sky. Out of the blue, old-talk does start up. You couldn't, or shouldn't, differentiate between the voices, because men only talking, throwing in a few words here, butting in there, making a comment, arguing a point, stating a view. Nobody care who listen or who talk. Is as if a fire going, and everybody throwing in a piece of fuel now and then to keep it going. It don't matter what you throw in, as long as the fire keep going — wood, coal, peat, horse-shit, kerosene, gasoline, the lot. (123)

Judged by the criterion of historical accuracy, the ensuing conversation about Henry VIII, Cardinal Wolsey and the “nights of the round table” contains quite a lot of horse-shit, but it doesn't matter. The point of it all is not the conversation *per se* but the community it is instrumental in creating, and the image of the fire is so felicitous because this is a living culture, in stark contrast to English culture: “It don't matter what the topic is, as long as words floating about, verbs, adjectives, nouns, interjections, paraphrase and paradise, the boys don't care. It like a game, all of them throwing words in the air like a ball, now and then some scandalous laugh making sedate Englishers wonder what the arse them black people talking about . . . “ (126).^{*} The sedate Englishers are inscribed in a different kind of culture — museum culture —

^{*} "The lime is the chief West Indian social form.... For the West Indian lime is really the genius of the place giving voice, as a wind gives voice to a mountainside; and in its exercise lies not only 'resistance' — resistance by the poor, the unemployed, or simply the contented, to the attenuated, workaholic world of our time — but many a moment when the stillness created resembles the stillness of art: of a finished, self-sufficient thing.... West Indian voices in the

as they “catch up on some more historical data” at Hampton Court: “. . . them Englishers, from the time they get in a palace or a tower or a art gallery or any kind of exhibition, they behave as if they on holy ground, and you can’t even raise a cough” (120).

The Bird’s-Eye View: Moses Ascending

Ten years later, in *Moses Ascending* (1975),⁹⁶ Selvon is still concerned with the issues of community and mutuality, but in this novel the species of predation he is concerned to critique is that of England’s burgeoning “enterprise culture.” Moses Aloetta, the mainstay of the fragile society of spades in *The Lonely Londoners*, has wearied of that role and decides to become a capitalist. With his meagre savings he buys a dilapidated but large house, due for demolition in three years, and sets out to become a gentleman of leisure living off the rents of the less provident. Moses in fact becomes a parody of the leisured landowner, occupying his time writing his memoirs in a comic mixture of the mandarin and the demotic, employing various bits and pieces of an eighteenth-century English prose style peppered with colloquialisms: “I cannot tell you what joy and satisfaction I had the day I move into these new quarters. Whereas I did have a worm’s eye view of life, I now had a bird’s eye view. I was Master of the house. I insert my key into the front door lock, I enter, I ascend the stairs, and when the tenants hear my heavy

night, unascribed, [constitutes a literary mode] that is a truer reflection of the felt social reality of these islands, of the West Indian sensibility and mode of intercourse, than the 'he inquired' and 'she replied' and 'he said' construct of the traditional novel....” Wayne Brown, "Caribbean Booktalk: *Far Tortuga: A Fable Of The Contemporary Caribbean*," *Caribbean Affairs* Vol 1, No. 2 (April-June 1988),199.

tread they cower and shrink in their rooms, in case I snap my fingers and say OUT to any of them “ (4). Moses’ ascension — a literal one, in that he exchanges his rented basement room for the “penthouse” suite of his new property — involves repudiating all his former social ties: “The only thing I didn’t want was to have any of the old brigade living in my house, and the rumour went around town that I was a different man, that I had forsaken my friends, and that there was to be no more pigfoot and peas and rice, nor even a cuppa, to be obtained, even if they came with gifts of myrrh and frankincense” (4). Significantly, Moses does not say that he would refuse the gift of gold, and he doesn’t, accepting any prospective tenant “first come, first served . . . as long as every Friday-please-God they shell over their respective rents, and didn’t grumble too much about leaks and cracks and other symptoms of dilapidation which infested the house” (4).

Although he himself doesn’t intend to do anything like work, Moses imitates that icon of eighteenth-century enterprise, Robinson Crusoe, in taking on as “my Man Friday a white immigrant name Bob from somewhere in the Midlands He was a willing worker, eager to learn the ways of the Black man. In no time at all he learn how to cook peas and rice. . . . By and by, as he was so useful to me, I allowed him the freedom of the house, and left everything in his hands so I could enjoy my retirement” (4-5). But even though he has become the Master waited upon by a Servant, Moses never gets to enjoy the life of leisure he has contemplated. Yielding to the temptation to make some easy money, he allows his house to be used as a temporary holding place for illegal immigrants being smuggled into Britain from Asia, and the farcical complications of this madcap scheme leave him little time for writing. When a “consignment” of illegals overflows the allotted space, he is forced to vacate his “penthouse” for

a while and, ironically, has to seek refuge with the member of the “old brigade” who still lives in the basement room Moses thought he had once and for all escaped from.

This temporary reversal prefigures the end of the novel, which finds Moses living in the basement of his house while “Man Friday” Bob takes over Moses’ spacious apartment: “I was reduced to living as a tenant in my own house, with Robert holding the reins and cracking the whip” (134). Moses warns the reader against inferring from his story the moral that “it is the white man who ends up Upstairs and the black man who ends up Downstairs” (139-40), and although at least one commentator has asserted that Moses is blind to the significance of his own tale and that this is indeed the moral of *Selvon’s* book, I think we should heed Moses’ caution. Moses’ eventual fate is the consequence of two things; on the one hand, his greed and predatory behaviour, and on the other his conscience, which prompts him to regret and atone for his misdeeds. He loses his penthouse because, when Bob catches him “in *flegante delicto* or whatever it is lords and ladies call it” (133) with Jeannie, Bob’s wife, Moses offers to exchange apartments in a desperate attempt to prevent Bob moving out entirely; for the fact is that Moses, having repudiated all his friends from “the old brigade” at the beginning of the novel, has discovered that he does need friendship, and servant Bob has become a friend. As usual in *Selvon*, sexual predation is both the concomitant of and the figure for economic predation; Moses’ cuckolding of Bob is an extension of the behaviour which he has espoused at the outset, while his subsequent guilt and atonement are signs that his espousal of exploitation is never ruthless enough to be completely successful.

Throughout the novel Moses is torn between individualistic self-advancement and the conflicting claims of friendship and solidarity, and his demotion to the basement, however unwelcome,

represents the triumph of the latter over the former. Several incidents in the novel lead up to this triumph: the climactic one comes when Moses, although disapproving of the Black Power movement in which several of his acquaintances are involved, feels such moral outrage at the behaviour of the police at a Black Power meeting that he voluntarily and unexpectedly sacrifices all his ill-gotten gains to a defence fund for police victims:

‘These are My People,’ I say grimly, ‘No Englishman with black blood in his veins can stand aside and see innocent victims hang. We were party to that meeting, Bob. We seen what happen with our own eyes.’

‘Aye,’ he say, and give a little shudder. ‘I saw an Alsatian leap upon a helpless woman and maul her. And Brenda was roughly handled in spite of her womanhood. Two pigs literally hoisted her out of the hall.’

‘What are we waiting for?’ I cried. ‘We should have enough cash in the house. Get it all together and let’s make haste.’

It was thus that I became involved in spite of my misgivings and philosophy of neutrality. One would not be worth one’s salt to turn a blind eye and a deaf ear to the injustice of that night. I know all the failings and shortcomings of My People, their foibles and chicanery, their apathy and disunity, but I were less than a Pharisee to leave them by the wayside. Such was my righteous indignation that I did not even consider the recoverability of the three hundred pounds, plus twenty-five new pee [pence] for stamp duty, that I had to fork out for the brothers and sister. I told Galahad, after their release, that the money could be used for their defence when they bust a case in the police arse for wrongful arrests. (96-7).

This scene, in which Moses expresses his solidarity not merely with fellow-blacks *qua* blacks but with fellow-Englishmen (albeit with “black blood in their veins”) who are victims of injustice, marks an important turning point in the novel. Previously Moses, a mere (and sceptical) spectator at a Black Power rally in Trafalgar Square, has himself suffered wrongful arrest, and has registered some of the racial/historical resonances of the experience: “I do not know about you, but it is a shuddering thought for a black man to be lock up by the police. Once you are in, it is a foregone conclusion that they will throw away the key. There was no protests from any of the passengers [in the police wagon] saying that they was innocent and shouldn’t be here, nobody struggling to get out like me, nobody saying anything at all. Like we was in the hold of a slave ship” (36). But he has refused to draw the conclusion that his individualism is misguided, that he and his fellow-spades, whether they like it or not, share a common identity in the eyes of English policemen and a common fate at their hands. Although he “cannot remember all the welter of emotions that I feel at the time of my stretch,” he subsequently chooses to ignore this potentially regenerative confusion and to interpret his experience narrowly as confirmation of the rightness of his resolve to remain apart and aloof: “To tell you the truth, I wasn’t so much vex with the police as I was vex with myself for going to that fucking rally. I remember lying on my bunk in the cell the night and thinking that if I did keep my arse quiet and stay at home, having a cold beer and looking at the church service on TV, I would not of got myself in this shit. It just goes to show how right I was all the time to have nothing to do with the black brotherhood” (38-9).

Nevertheless, Moses’ imprisonment, despite his attempts to blind himself to its meaning, is the beginning of what we might call his sentimental re-education. The seed of doubt has been sown;

later, when he watches the illegal immigrants (whom he has been paid twenty pounds a head to shelter) departing to another safe house, he is able to acknowledge a genuine if comic and uneasy ambivalence: “I stood by the window of the penthouse, observing the exodus, a lump in my throat. Those of you who take up your cudgels against these poor unfortunates, who lobby the House of Commons and write letters to Members of Parliament, who march in protest waving banners and shouting imprecations on their heads, cannot understand my mixed emotions. I stood there counting them as they entered the van. Twenty pounds, forty, sixty — and when I turned away, there was a tear in my eye” (89). The comedy and the pathos of this ambivalence matches Shylock’s when he discovers that his daughter Jessica has eloped, taking his money with her: “My daughter! O my ducats! O my daughter!” It is tempting to see Moses’ concern for money — “Twenty pounds, forty, sixty” — as totally undermining and discrediting his ostensible concern for people, but it would be a mistake (as it is in Shylock’s case) to think that bathos entirely abolishes pathos. Moses’ ambivalence is genuine, and the contradictory impulses that fuel it are the very stuff of the conflict that gives the novel its purpose and meaning. The wrongful arrests that Moses later witnesses tip the scales and resolve the ambivalence, pushing him despite himself firmly in the direction of fellow-feeling, of compassion. Moses is not just a comic butt whose absurdities exemplify the perils of assimilation, but a significant moral agent whose failure to assimilate to a culture of selfishness, despite his best efforts, represents the triumph of the claims of community and sociality — of truly civilized *mores* — over atomistic individualism. *Moses Ascending* is not an entirely ironic title by any means: although the novel’s plot sees him descend from penthouse to basement, by the novel’s end he has climbed back up to a moral plane far higher than the one he vowed to dwell upon at the beginning.

Prime Minister Thatcher declared, notoriously, that there was no such thing as society, merely individuals. More than twenty years before she came to power, Sam Selvon identified this attitude as endemic in London, and all three of his London novels are deceptively comic assaults upon this proposition, employing as the means of critique a motley assortment of characters whose recent-immigrant status means that they are “imperfectly-socialized,” not only in comically and trivially pejorative senses, but in the honorific sense of not being fully inscribed within a non-society of selfish individualism.

Getting A Few Tips: Escape To An Autumn Pavement

Selvon’s reading of English society is not an idiosyncratic one among West Indian immigrant writers. It is shared by Andrew Salkey, whose *Escape to an Autumn Pavement* (1960)⁹⁷ presents a Jamaican protagonist who is even more torn and more angry and bitter than any of Selvon’s spades but whose analysis of his new London “home” is quite similar to the one that emerges from between the lines of Selvon’s novels.

Almost on the eve of the country’s independence, Johnnie Sobert has fled from Jamaica and from his parents’ middle-class aspirations for him because they do not offer a sustaining identity: he despises the rising Jamaican “middle-class” as a crude mockery of its European model, and he cannot bring himself to believe that Federation and Independence can forge a civil society on any terms other than a grotesque imitation of Europe:*

* Jamaica, a British possession since the Treaty of Madrid (1670), was granted increasing measures of self-government between 1944 and 1962, when full independence was achieved.

. . . you mustn't get Jamaica's middle class wrong. There are a few families who're aspiring to a sort of middle-class position. In some weird way, they are ready for it. They have the necessary trappings, the deceitfulness, the narrowness, the smugness, the holier-than-thou attitudes — all this plus a deep-rooted working-class mentality. As far as I can see, working-class and slave-class skeletons-in-the-cupboard add up to the most ridiculous situation in the Caribbean area. (47)

But if a Jamaican identity is not satisfactory, what alternative is there? As another character — white, English — puts it, the “West Indian problem” is “not being anything totally identifiable? I mean, you're not Continental African and you're not anywhere near the other thing [English]”, and Johnnie agrees: “. . . Africa doesn't belong to me! There's no feeling there. No bond. We've been fed on the Mother Country myth. Its language. Its history. Its literature. Its Civics. We feel chunks of it rubbing off on us. We believe in it. We trust it. Openly, we admit we're a part of it. But are we? Where's the real link?” (48).

The England that Johnnie flees to is not a mother but an orgy of commercial exploitation, and he has no greater love for the “real” English bourgeoisie than he has for the “false” Jamaican one. But one of the dubious pleasures of his exile is that he can more freely indulge his contempt: the things he hates in London are English and therefore less painful to him than things Jamaican in which he feels personally implicated.

The West Indies Federation was established in 1958, but foundered in 1962 when Jamaica and Trinidad withdrew from it.

Once in London Johnnie takes what appears to be a perverse and savage delight in immersing himself in the seamier side of life in a commercial society, working as a waiter in a disreputable club that caters to lonely black GIs in search of booze and sex and to English voyeurs in search of black studs for private “parties.” Although the novel includes ominous signs of the racism that was to issue in the Notting Hill riots, Johnnie’s choice of a job is not the result of limited opportunities for spades; it is a paradoxical attempt to remain free and uncommitted, for he thinks he can both make money and indulge his contempt for money-making while satisfying himself that he is defying his parents and his “people” by refusing to fulfill their middle-class hopes and plans for him: “. . . I had believed implicitly that London’s that big cinema of a city where trees are banks and money plus freedom is as easy to come by as leaves on an autumn pavement” (206)

Money turns out to be easier to come by than freedom: his “freedom” is not really freedom at all, but a willed aloofness that entails a huge psychological cost. He is as full of anger and self-contempt as John Osborne’s Jimmy Porter and Bill Maitland or any of the other “angry young men” who were attracting such attention at the time:

Getting a few tips; giving a few laughs. . . . Things are great. I’m a very happy man! What more could I really want? Total independence for my little archipelago of a territory? More loans for the regional governments? More enthusiasm for the publication and sale of regional books within the region? More adult education? More exchange among islands of island-problems and debates? Of course not. I’m basically selfish. Couldn’t-care-less hunter of rent money and bus fares I am, really. Not interested in the land, in agricultural improvement and development. Not conscious of nationalism and growth and pride and

independence and wealth and the rest. Used to be interested in the Yankee dollar earned on farms in the South; interested now only in the punctured pound acquired by magic in industrial England. (32).

Johnnie is deceiving himself here, of course, for his well-educated and politically-sophisticated mind is constantly being invaded by all the things he claims not to be interested in or conscious of. He is also constantly and bitterly aware of the all-embracing power of money and greed in London, even in the small hours of the morning when the Oxford Street shops are closed: “Can feel the presence of cash registers along the street. . . . Hundreds of presences on both sides of the street. Yet it’s always a joy to know that they’re out of action and are unable at the moment *to make it off you*; to suck you in and spit you out minus your bus fare. Doesn’t really matter, does it? They’ll catch you early Monday morning, just the same. . . . And who doesn’t really want to be caught at some time or the other?” (34).

A life of hustling can appear to be freedom only because it involves Johnnie in no relationships that transcend the “cash nexus” he so despises, but his choice involves self-hatred, and it cuts him off from the potential fulfillment of the fuller human relationships he really craves. Larry, the Jamaican barber he goes to for advice, tells him straight:

You’re a self-seeking man. A real old-time selfish, ever-grasping individual. Take me and Ringo and the other West Indians in this country; you don’t even think of us as being important to your life. You only use us, you know, for your convenience. You come down here to my barber shop to get a break from your new life, your new sophistication, your new sophisticated worthless sort of existence. We don’t matter to you in no way at all. . . .

You’re looking for a sort of mirror which will make you out to be somebody worth while.

You want an identity like. You want to feel that you have a nation behind you, a nation that you can call your own, a national feeling is what you looking for. You would like to walk proud like how the German or the Frenchman or the Englishman can walk proud knowing that they have tradition and a long history behind them to give them a real identity. You feel lacking in all that because you're a colonial boy with only slavery behind you. So you bound to be confused. You bound to want to escape. (199)

Larry later tells Johnnie to disregard these accusations because he was talking not about Johnnie but about himself (202), but the cap fits both of them.

Johnnie's confusion and the perversity of his chosen way of life become apparent when his dilemma is recapitulated on the level of personal relationships. For most of the novel Johnnie is torn between continuing an affair with the predatory Fiona and opting instead for a sustaining and monogamous relationship with Dick, a fellow-lodger in his Hampstead rooming-house; and although the prefatory "blurb" to the novel claims that "It is stimulating to find a West Indian fiction hero wrestling with a problem like his own sexuality instead of being buried exclusively in the problems of his colour and his exile," I find it impossible to read Johnnie's confusion over his sexual identity as anything but an allegory of his wider cultural and political confusion.*

* In a sexual interlude with Fiona, Johnnie imagines how his acquaintance Ringo, an expatriate Barbadian intellectual, would deal with her: "He'd read colour, class, background, blood, master-servant relationship, Imperialism, little Englandism, the Empire, pink politics, blue politics, red politics, emerging black politics, anything and the kitchen sink into it" (127). The novel makes it clear that Ringo would be right.

Refreshingly, it's not the possibility of a homosexual relationship with Dick that is perverse here, but the decision not to extricate himself from the clutches of Fiona, for whom he has no feelings but loathing and contempt, and whose feeling for him amounts to nothing more than pure sexual greed: "Spotchy spasm of a kiss. Nervous. Then a grasping splash of two more. All resounding kisses of a greedy claimant who knows her strength, and her victim's. . . She grunts easily and begins to show her sizzling inside. Her inferno of greed and remorseless passion" (125-6). Salkey points up the correspondence between Fiona's sexual predation and London's economic predation in two consecutive paragraphs on p.160:

Tips. Tips. Tips. I could see nothing else. And that was as it should be: Christmas or no Christmas, tips should flow, I persuaded myself. A lovely greedy sensation ran wild over everything I touched; everything I did; everything I hoped for; everything I collided with. Tips for the rental of the flat; tips for spending money; tips for the hell of it. Yet I never thought of tips for the passage back home. Why? Had I decided to face things? Had I made the grade at last? Why? And the answer came: I'm happy enough if the tips are! Then I knew that the future was a myth. I was certain that greed was the message of the age; I knew this and I gloated over the fact in my own inimitable pompous way, smiling and feeling as secure as ever in my filth, in my self-embrace, in my autumn pavement.

Then I thought of Fiona's greed. Another kingdom-come kind of tips greed. Similar greed. Must-get-it-at-all-cost kind of greed. Hurt everybody. Cheat everybody. Use everybody. Nobody's a friend. Nobody's in love. Love doesn't matter. Just greed! Greed's the total ambition. We escape from love to fling ourselves into the waiting arms of greed. There's nothing else to escape to. If one's truly greedy, one's on the way to the top. If one wants to

be mediocre, one must learn to avoid greed, avoid ambition, avoid selfishness, avoid gluttony, avoid tips, avoid Fiona's sexuality, avoid Sandra's commercial earnestness, avoid hustling, avoid hustlers, avoid . . . (*ellipsis in original*)

Johnnie is repelled by Fiona's sexuality even as he continues to service it, just as he's repelled by the traffic in booze and human flesh in the bar where he continues faithfully to hustle. Like Dick, Fiona believes that Johnnie is a "latent" homosexual, but she doesn't care as long as he goes on allowing himself to be used. Dick, on the other hand, offers Johnnie a love to which he feels himself powerfully attracted, and it's a love which, unlike Fiona's, is unselfish. The one demand Dick makes of Johnnie, however, is commitment, and that is what Johnnie is afraid of; he perversely prefers a sexual liaison with Fiona just because his loathing for it and for her allows him that distance and disengagement that he falsely thinks of as freedom. In the same way he perversely prefers hustling in London to committing himself to the idea and the reality of Jamaica, but Larry warns him that this is a dead end: "Your duty is to feel sorry for your own people, not to try to compromise. . . . You look like you sell out to the other side. You look like you settle down to a real old-time Sunday dinner of compromise and blind-eye philosophy. It won't work, I can tell you right now" (176).

England — insofar as London represents it — emerges from *Escape to an Autumn Pavement* as a major battleground of the internecine war of all-against-all, and although Selvon's tone is deceptively lighter and more humorous than Salkey's, the two novelists appear to concur in this vision. It is important to note that the first of these novels was published in 1956, during the period that the English themselves will later come to identify as the years of Consensus, the years *before* the English social fabric is perceived as beginning to decay. In 1955 Geoffrey

Gorer's *Exploring English Character* had asserted that the English were "among the most peaceful, gentle, courteous and orderly populations that the civilized world has ever seen," but Selvon was at the same time claiming that these apparent qualities ("the old diplomacy") were little more than window-dressing and that the rich sociality they were supposed to represent had already decayed.⁹⁸ His work similarly undermines the thesis that informs many contemporary English novels, of which John Mortimer's *Paradise Postponed* is typical — the thesis that an organic society persisted into the 1970s and was broken up only when a new ethos of selfishness, ambition, and ruthlessness becomes hegemonic across class lines with the rise of a new generation (lower-middle-class Leslie Titmuss but also middle-class Christopher Kempfenflatt and upper-class Magnus Strove).

When had this organic society begun to decay? *The Lonely Londoners* provides no answer to this question; it represents English society in London as Selvon presumably found it, and the nearest it comes to suggesting when and how a richer sociality might have disappeared is in its evocation of the lonely old widows "pottering about the Harrow Road like if they lost, a look in their eye as if the war happen unexpected and they still can't realise what happen to the old Brit'n" (75). But if we look back to J. B. Priestley's *English Journey*, we can see many indications that England in the 1930s was by no means the harmonious whole that it is often supposed to have been.

"Weary Negroid Ditties:" Priestley's *English Journey* Revisited

Priestley's journey, in fact, was undertaken precisely *because* England had become two nations; his quest for the "truth" about life on the dole was an attempt to give the lie to affluent southerners, to "a few million people in London. . . still enjoying fanciful mental pictures of

miners' wives dropping empty champagne bottles into the works of their beautiful pianos" (261). That is why he thought it necessary repeatedly to insist that there were not two Englands — north and south, rich and poor — but one: "Since when did Lancashire cease to be a part of England? . . . we have marched so far, not unassisted in the past by Lancashire's money and muck, and we have a long long way to go yet, perhaps carrying Lancashire on our backs for a spell; and the hour for complacency, if it ever arrives at all, will strike long after most of us are dead" (217).

To persist in believing that England really was more of a community, a *gemeinschaft*, in the 1930s than it was in the 1950s or the 1980s, is to ignore all the evidence in Priestley's rhetoric that pointed the other way: with heavy irony, he pretended incredulity at the idea that the benighted denizens of Shotton, "smothered with ashes and fumes, are as good as anybody else, and have votes. Votes! You would think that they were not supposed to have even noses and lungs. You would imagine that they were held to be members of a special race, born tip-dwellers" (260). In the same vein he imagined that "a stranger from a distant civilization, observing the condition of the place and its people, would have arrived at once at the conclusion that Jarrow had deeply offended some celestial emperor of the island and was now being punished. He would never believe us if we told him that in theory this town was as good as any other and that its inhabitants were not criminals but citizens with votes" (238). A real community would never have permitted *any* of its members to live as Priestley saw them living: "Was Jarrow still in England or not? Had we exiled Lancashire and the North-east coast? Were we no longer on speaking terms with cotton weavers and miners and platers and riveters? Why had nothing been done about these decaying towns and their workless people?" (307). That

Priestley should have had to make these strenuous rhetorical appeals is an indication of one of the key problems he is grappling with — the disintegration of his unitary England-of-the-mind into *de facto* apartheid whereby the poor are hidden from the view (and therefore the consciousness) of the affluent. Far from suggesting that the economic problems of the country are minor and of limited impact, the absence of widespread public outrage and concern pointed to the fundamental wrong, which was the decay of the true sense of the social, the failure of the general acknowledgment of kinship and mutual responsibility essential to Priestley's conception of nation.

Yet paradoxically, any impression we may have that England was, at bottom, an organic whole in the 1930s is partly due to the efforts of Priestley himself and others like him: he *created* England as a community again and again in the texture of his prose. His book is peppered by little phrases like “the rest of us” or “those of us who. . . ,” which quietly but continually insist on a nation at bottom united enough to warrant the use of the first person plural, which is omnipresent in the book. This is reinforced by a use of the second person plural that is particularly skillful, as it modulates insidiously from an apparently neutral equivalent of “one” (e.g. “You do not see abandoned shops . . .” [212]) to a direct challenge to the reader (e.g. “Such men as these . . . stand on their own feet, do their jobs with a will, stoutly resist stupid opposition but give way to affection, and, like him, are grand lumps of character. What — in the name of everything but supermen — could you want?” [151]). Priestley's confident assumption of the first person plural and his equally confident presumption that he could address his reader as confidant and familiar were founded on a faith that “we” were fundamentally alike in the values “we” subscribed to, and that we would all unite in working to remedy the evils Priestley was bringing to “our” attention. This faith, this fundamental belief in England as a community

unified by a common culture embodying common decency, allowed Priestley, an atheist,* to mount the pulpit and assume the authority of Scripture, as in his invocation of Joel 2:25 (“And who shall restore to them the years that the locust hath eaten?”) to express his indignation at the peacetime treatment of the soldiers returned from the Great War. He did not feel it necessary to identify the text to which he alluded: the language, the tone and the sentiment, he assumed, would be familiar and acceptable to his readers.**

One way in which Priestley created England in *English Journey* was to create himself as a character embodying appropriately John-Bull-like traits — an honest, reasonable, no-nonsense, bluff, middlebrow, good companion who shunned the extremes of philistine narrowness and pre-Raphaelite fastidiousness: “I like life and art to be neither Birmingham nor Burne-Jones, but to travel on the honest roads that march between the deacons in counting-houses, on the one side, and the drooping maidens in hot-houses on the other” (67). Then he used all the grappling-hooks of his art to persuade his readers to identify themselves with honest Jack Priestley, to

* “. . . the essence of [the Christian account of this life], the self-sacrifice of a god for men, seems to me too good to be true, and the rest of it, the theological jugglery lit by hell-fire, not worth having . . . ” (140-1).

** He may also have assumed that some, at least, of his readers, would recall the context :

And the floors shall be full of wheat, and the vats shall overflow with wine and oil.

And I will restore to you the years that the locust hath eaten, the cankerworm, and the caterpillar, and the palmerworm, my great army which I sent among you.

And ye shall eat in plenty, and be satisfied. . . . (Joel 2:24-26, KJV).

remake themselves morally and sentimentally in his image and to respond as he had responded to the sights and sounds he described. This appeal is everywhere implicit in his prose; he constantly elbowed his readers in the ribs, as it were, with rhetorical questions, and on one occasion broadly hinted that “people of independent and private means” should respond to the Depression as promptly and eagerly as to a Declaration of War, becoming volunteers in the forces “of decency and knowledge and justice and civilization” fighting against “poverty, idleness, ignorance, hopelessness and misery” (246).

England as a harmonious, organic whole was not what Priestley *saw* in his *Journey*; it was something that he tried to *create* by first personifying it in the character of bluff, commonsense Jack Priestley — “a new William Cobbett [expressing] the attitude of the sturdy, average Englishman”^{*} — and then, through his art and his rhetoric, persuading his readers to identify with that personification. In World War II, when national unity was imperative, Priestley’s personification and the ideological work it did were found useful enough by the government for him to broadcast regularly over BBC Radio.

Priestley’s attempt to include his readers in a single England comes with a certain cost, however — one worth considering for the light it throws on the predicament of Selvon and his spades. For insofar as national personification is one of Priestley’s chief artistic and ideological devices, it specializes “Englishness” to a particular constellation of qualities and excludes those whom

* This characterisation of Priestley is from Robert Graves and Alan Hodge, *The Long Week-End: A Social History of Great Britain 1918-1939* (1940; rpt. New York; Norton, 1963), 352; they coin it, however, to describe his rhetorical stance in criticising Surrealism.

Priestley cannot imaginatively identify with it. The effect of English xenophobia and racism is precisely to deny Selvon's spades this identification: when Moses Aloetta declares that "no Englishman with black blood in his veins can stand aside and see innocent victims hang" (*Moses Ascending* 96) the effect is almost certainly comic — *but it ought not to be*. As a native of Trinidad, which had been part of the British Empire since the end of the eighteenth century, and by birth the holder of a British passport, Moses has every right to speak "as an Englishman" asserting the rights and liberties that he holds in common with every other British subject,* and a reader who finds his declaration "funny" in either sense of the word should pause for reflection.

* The rights of someone like Moses changed drastically between *The Lonely Londoners* and *Moses Ascending*. When Moses arrived in England, his passport guaranteed him automatic right of entry under the British Nationality Acts of 1914 and 1948. The Commonwealth Immigrants Act of 1968 took away that right from any Commonwealth citizen without a parent or grandparent born in the UK. The Immigration Act of 1971 consolidated this change, replacing the old distinction between Commonwealth citizens (who had right of entry and settlement) and aliens (who didn't) with a new division between "patrials" (those born, adopted, naturalised or registered in the UK, and those who had a UK citizen as parent or grandparent), and "non-patrials" (none of the above). Non-patrials do not have a right to enter and settle but may apply for permission to do so. Since *Moses Ascending* was written, procedures have been tightened even further: the 1981 Nationality Act removed the right of those born in Britain to automatic British nationality; the Immigration Act of 1988 "streamlined" the formerly lengthy process required to deport an immigrant for breach of conditions of stay, and denied the right of appeal

Priestley himself was speaking for an “England” much more homogeneous than it is today, and he was loud in his condemnation of those who opposed immigration:

These exchanges are good for everybody. Just lately, when we offered hospitality to some distinguished German-Jews who had been exiled by the Nazis, the leader-writers in the cheap Press began yelping again about Keeping the Foreigner Out. Apart from the miserable meanness of the attitude itself — for the great England, the England admired throughout the world, is the England that keeps open house, the refuge of Mazzini, Marx, Lenin — history shows us that the countries that have opened their doors have gained, just as the countries that have driven out large numbers of their citizens, for racial, religious, or political reasons, have always paid dearly for their intolerance. (125)

Yet while Priestley welcomed “distinguished German-Jews” and admired the “curious leaven of intelligent aliens, chiefly German-Jews and mostly affluent” who raised the tone of his native Bradford with their *Schillerverein* (124), he deplored the effect upon native English culture of “gramophones. . . scratching out those tunes concocted by Polish Jews fifteen storeys above Broadway” (21). A proud “Little Englander” — “I wish I had been born early enough to have been called a Little Englander. It was a term of sneering abuse, but I should be delighted to accept it as a description of myself” (310) — he deplored the effect of American popular culture on the patterns of English working-class life, and was nostalgic for a generation that had “rapturously enjoyed” a seaside holiday in Blackpool

through the courts against a deportation order in the case of those with less than seven years' stay. See Jonathon Green, *Them*, 7, 408-9

... and had never once insulted its breezy majesty by singing about their 'blues'. In those days you did not sing the woes of distant negroes, probably reduced to such misery by too much gin or cocaine. You sang about dear old Charlie Brown and his pals, and the girls, those with the curly curls. These songs were nonsense too, but they were our own silly innocent nonsense and not another country's jaded weary nonsense; they had a fresh lilting quality, and expressed high spirits not low spirits. The Blackpool that sang about Charlie Brown and the girls with their curly curls was the Mecca of a vulgar but alert and virile democracy. I am not so sure about the new Blackpool of the weary negroid ditties. It would not be difficult, I feel, to impose an autocracy upon young people who sound as tired as that. (203).

The casual crack about the "blues" being an art form engendered by "too much gin or cocaine" is not only nasty but gratuitous; Priestley's feelings about negroes seem basically to have been his feelings about Polish Jews on Broadway — they were at the root of an American influence that was corrupting native English culture. In a similar vein, while he was quite prepared to accept into his England German Jews who, with their *Schillerverein*, represented high European culture, he found the foreignness of the middle-east Jews of the Old Testament an inappropriate element in English Nonconformist religion:

... how odd it was that these mild Midland folk, spectacled ironmongers, little dressmakers, clerks, young women from stationers' shops, should come every Sunday morning through the quiet grey streets and assemble here to wallow in wild oriental imagery. . . . They sat with bent heads listening to accounts of ancient and terribly savage tribal warfare, of the lust and pride of hook-nosed and raven-bearded chieftains, of sacrifice and butchery on the glaring

deserts of the Near East. They chanted in unison their hope of an immortality to be spent in cities built of blazing jewels, with fountains of milk and cascades of honey, where kings played harps while maidens clashed the cymbals; and one could not help wondering what these people would do if they really did find themselves billeted for ever in this world of the Eastern religious poets. What, in short, had these sober Northern islanders to do with all this Oriental stuff? What did it, what could it, really mean to them? Could anything be less aptly shaped and coloured to match their own lives?⁹⁹

Priestley objected to “this far-away fantastic world of goats and vines and deserts and smoking sacrifices and tribal kings” (1934 edition: 109) because it was so faraway, so un-English, like the weariness of “negroes” so “distant” that their blues could only be understood by an Englishman as the result of intoxication. But in one instance he objected also to an influence that comes from much nearer home, from another group of “Northern islanders:”

A great many speeches have been made and books written on the subject of what England has done to Ireland. I should be interested to hear a speech and read a book or two on the subject of what Ireland has done to England. If we do have an Irish Republic as our neighbour, and it is found possible to return her exiled citizens, what a grand clearance there will be in all the Western ports, from the Clyde to Cardiff, what a fine exit of ignorance and dirt and drunkenness and disease. The Irishman in Ireland may, as we are so often assured he is, be the best fellow in the world, only waiting to say good-bye to the hateful Empire so that, free and independent at last, he can astonish the world. But the Irishman in England too often cuts a very miserable figure. . . . The English of this class [navvies and dock hands and casual labourers] generally make some attempt to live as decently as they can under these

conditions From such glimpses as I have had, however, the Irish appear in general never even to have tried; they have settled in the nearest poor quarter and turned it into a slum, or, finding a slum, have promptly settled down to out-slum it. And this, in spite of the fact that nowadays being an Irish Roman Catholic is more likely to find a man a job than to keep him out of one. . . . I imagine Liverpool would be very glad to be rid of them now. After the briefest exploration of its Irish slums, I began to think that Hercules himself will have to be brought back and appointed Minister of Health before they will be properly cleaned up, though a seductive call or two from de Valera, across the Irish Sea, might help. But he will never whistle back these bedraggled wild geese. He believes in *Sinn Fein* for Ireland not England. (1934 edition: 248-9)

It is hardly necessary to comment in detail on this passage, with its thinly-veiled call for what we have come to term “ethnic cleansing,” except to say that practically all items on the bill of particulars — ignorance, dirt, drunkenness, disease — would be familiar to Selvon, for they have all since been levelled against the spades. It is important to note, however, that Priestley’s apparently uncharacteristic lapses in the generosity of spirit elsewhere typical of his book are not accidental but structural — these exclusions are entailed by his attempt to construct Englishness and English virtues. Central elements of this construction are an “alert and virile” democratic spirit and a robust national determination that — once roused to action — will redress the inequities that the Depression has wrought and triumphantly haul a united nation out of the Slump. This in turn entails the repudiation as alien, as un-English, of anything potentially inimical to that spirit and determination — whether it be the apparent defeatism of the Irish who “appear never even to have tried” to better their lot, or the similar defeatism Priestley detected in

the “jaded weary nonsense” of “weary negroid ditties,” or the discord of the Old Testament’s “savage tribal warfare” on the one hand and the lassitude of its vision of heaven as an orgy of “Oriental” hedonism on the other.

It is this construction of Englishness (which has a currency far beyond Priestley and his book) that turns Selvon and his characters, stereotyped as lotos-eaters from faraway islands in the sun, into unassimilable outsiders, unable to speak as “Englishers” despite their technical and moral right to do so. Selvon’s exclusion, however, is part of the strength of *The Lonely Londoners* and its sequels. Prevented from membership in the group that subscribes to this self-congratulatory story of Englishness, Selvon is thereby positioned to live and to write a very different story. He also had to develop a different form for *The Lonely Londoners* because, as discussed above, the traditionally plotted bourgeois novel in which a protagonist earns a particular fate through moral choice is inappropriate for the immigrant experience he wishes to represent. It’s not that Selvon’s characters, unlike the protagonists of the bourgeois novel, don’t make moral choices; they do, as when Galahad resolves to find a job as soon as he arrives in London because “I don’t want to start antsing on the state unless I have to” (41). But their choices are not permitted to determine the quality of their lives, for the limits they immediately come up against are not the limitations of their human potential but of their circumstances. The ideological limitations of English society construct a social practice which denies significant structure to the lives of the spades in *The Lonely Londoners*, and the absence of traditional plot in the novel represents that denial. But the apparently unrelated episodes and characters are only “unrelated” in the sense that they do not achieve a coherent meaning in the rich interiority of a traditional protagonist; their real relatedness is constituted in the mind of the reader, for together they articulate a coherent and trenchant representation of an England that is very different from the one Priestley

wanted to write into existence, even if it is uncomfortably congruent with the England that Priestley's writing, at disturbing moments, implies.

The Housing Lark also eschews a strong plot: the most prominent character, Bat, doesn't change at all, and although something does happen in the novel — the housing club appears to be about to reach its goal at the end — this is the achievement of a group, and it is not presented as the outward and visible sign of any individual character's moral development. *Moses Ascending* seems, at first glance, to be more like a conventional novel, but appearances are deceptive, and it is perhaps the most radical of the three novels. It is superficially more like the traditional novel only because Selvon is inverting and parodying it, just as the relationship of Moses and Bob inverts and parodies the relationship of Robinson Crusoe and Friday. The action of the novel, far from representing Moses' moral "development," articulates his failure to turn himself into a self-seeking capitalist; his moral triumph is that he is fundamentally unable to change, despite his resolve to do so. Here Selvon is not dispensing with the traditional novel form on the grounds that it is an inaccurate *reflection* of his characters' experience, but actively critiquing that form because of the ideological baggage it carries. The ultimate targets of his critique are the very concepts of "progress," "self-improvement" and *individual* autonomy that inform not only the traditional single-protagonist novel but a society for which this novel form has become the hegemonic story. And the critique is carried down into details far below the level of plot, for the texture of Selvon's language enacts a Bakhtinian dialogism between eighteenth-century expressions and modern colloquialisms. Selvon uses the vitality of Moses' colorful idioms to undermine the high-minded pretensions of the mandarin dialect that he tries to affect; that

dialect, it is worth reminding ourselves, was the clothing in which the traditional English novel was dressed when it was born.

Samuel Selvon received a great deal of praise for *The Lonely Londoners*, but some critics subsequently expressed their sense that the loose episodic structure that Selvon espoused was a sign of a limitation of Selvon's talent, an indication that his gift is for the short story rather than the longer form. Francis Wyndham, writing in *The Spectator* of February 28 1958, declared that "His talent is not ideally suited to the novel" and that his "new collection of stories, *Ways of Sunlight*, shows him, I think, at his best" (reprinted in Nasta 122). V.S. Naipaul, reviewing *Turn Again Tiger* in *The New Statesman* of December 6 1958, said the new novel was "nearer in structure to *The Lonely Londoners*, although a good deal less chaotic. Mr. Selvon is without the stamina for the full-length novel, and he has here found the undemanding form which suits his talent best; the flimsiest of frames which can, without apparent disorder, contain unrelated episodes and characters" (Nasta 123). On my reading it is both ungracious and myopic to account for *The Lonely Londoners* in these terms; the danger of inventing a new form or of significantly stretching an old one is the danger of being misunderstood, of being perceived as failing to achieve the very form one had to jettison or adapt, and this is precisely what happened to Selvon.

Six: The Universal Cover

If the world's meaning is not *given* but *made*, then it is hardly surprising that “strong” realism should find itself in difficulties in a period of social upheaval and turmoil. For if the world is a text to be interpreted by stories, then the realist programme of apparently eschewing interpretation must be predicated on ideological consensus. It will appear to succeed only when writers and readers already share values and norms which lead them to read the world in much the same way, when the world is “always already interpreted” along the same broad lines for all parties. Meaning will appear to be a property of the world because the power and stability of the social and moral codes by which the world is generally interpreted make them “second nature,” and the realist novelist can appear to “show” and not “tell” because the world “shown” is already a well-established and comparatively stable system of seemingly transparent signs.

Powell's realist project, as we have seen, ran aground because the system of signs that would have enabled it became radically unstable in the 1960s and 70s. Pattern refused to emerge from a “realistic” depiction of events, and therefore had to be conjured up in the form of mythic structures under which events were forcibly subsumed. In the 1980s, the documentary realism of Beryl Bainbridge's *English Journey* ran into a similar kind of trouble. It was not that the events Bainbridge witnessed were all “meaningless” — the crowds of people clutching banknotes and credit cards at the shopping mall clearly “meant” that they were sufficiently affluent to have considerable discretionary income — but that the meaning apparently announced by this slice of

“reality” was not obviously congruent with the “realistic” story about the north of England that the newspapers and the government statistics were all telling — that the region was in the grip of the worst Depression since the 1930s. “Reality” presented Bainbridge with two different faces, and the conventions of documentary realism to which she was confined by her television contract were powerless to resolve the two faces into one. It was as if reality had developed a multiple personality disorder, and under its pressure Bainbridge’s “realism” modulated into a highly figurative representation. The world that refused to “make sense” was fragmented in her text into a multiplicity of “representative” characters displaying the inscrutability of the eccentric, the disturbed, the insane.

Faced with a society in which the breakdown of stable codes renders appearances either illegible or misleading, the traditional novelist has a choice. Instead of struggling vainly against this predicament, as Powell and Bainbridge did, or evading it at the cost of creating something close to allegory, as John Mortimer did, the novelist can choose to foreground the problem and, without embracing a radical postmodernism, nevertheless make interpretation a central theme. This is part of the explanation for the growing popularity of the spy novel in the last twenty-five years, for in the world of espionage and counter-espionage all appearances are potentially deceptive. Every aspect of a seemingly solid bourgeois reality may turn out to be part of that fiction known as the “cover story,” the cloak that conceals the dagger. In Graham Greene’s *The Human Factor*, nothing can be taken at face value, not even a minor detail such as the military title of Secret Service officer Brigadier Tomlinson: “Nobody knew to what regiment he had formerly belonged, if such a regiment indeed existed, for all military titles in this building were a little suspect. Ranks might just be part of the universal cover.”¹⁰⁰

The spy novel in this respect is rather like the detective novel writ large. In the traditional English mystery novel, a yet-to-be-solved crime — usually murder — serves for a brief time to cast suspicion on everyone and everything in the community in which the crime has been committed. Every “fact” must be regarded as a potential “fiction,” a lie told by the murderer to escape detection; equally, every fact is charged with potential hidden meaning, for even the most ostensibly insignificant detail must be regarded as a possible clue to the murderer’s identity. To solve the mystery, the detective must be an expert reader, teasing out the hidden significance of the apparently trivial clues and using this knowledge to distinguish truth from falsehood. The function of the detective novel is ultimately to assure its readers that the phenomenal world does indeed make sense: the murder creates the fictional space in which the reader’s subliminal doubts about the intelligibility and trustworthiness of appearances are licensed to walk the earth awhile, and the act of detection that brings the hidden truth to light serves to exorcise those doubts. The fact that the detective story developed in the nineteenth century, in what is regarded as the very heyday of what I have been calling “strong” realism, is perhaps an indication that anxieties concerning realism’s implicit ideology are much older than postmodernism.¹⁰¹

The spy novel, as it emerges from the hands of John Le Carré, Len Deighton and Graham Greene, develops and amplifies the detective story’s problematic. Treason rather than simple murder is the crime that calls into question the legibility of the world of appearances. A matter of national security, it threatens a much larger community than the village in which so many classic English detective stories unfold.

Anthony Burgess. *Homage to Quert Yuiop*. London: Hutchinson, 1986.

Of Greene: “Let me say at once that *The Human Factor* is as fine a novel as he has ever written — concise, ironic, acutely observant of contemporary life, funny, shocking, above all compassionate” (26). “I shall be unhappy if *The Human Factor* is mentioned in the same breath as Mr. Le Carré’s best-selling deadweights” (27)

Of Deighton: SSGB is “one of Len Deighton’s best (506), and Burgess is impressed by Deighton’s realism: “his passion for researching his backgrounds gives his work a remarkable factual authority” (504).

Part Two: Killing Time

Killing Time. One spends more and more time doing it, I find.

A. N. Wilson. *A Bottle in the Smoke*¹⁰²

Seven: Clinging To The Yesterdays

On the streets the women click — they are ticking through their time... It happened, but now this is happening. Like the vanished Vera the past is dead and gone. The future could go this way, that way. The future's futures have never looked so rocky. Don't put money on it. Take my advice and stick to the present. It's the real stuff, the only stuff, it's all there is, the present, the panting present.

Martin Amis. Money, 194

He had been reborn into the knowledge of death; and the inescapability of change, of things-never-the-same, of no-way-back, made him afraid. When you lose the past you're naked in front of contemptuous Azrael, the death-angel. Hold on if you can, he told himself. Cling to the yesterdays. Leave your nail-marks in the grey slope as you slide.

Salman Rushdie. The Satanic Verses¹⁰³

In Penelope Lively's *Moon Tiger*, Claudia Hampton remembers herself at fourteen asking her teacher “‘Why is it a good thing to learn about history?’” and receiving the standard answer: “‘Because that is how you can understand why England became a great nation.’” The teacher, Miss Lavenham, had probably “never heard of the Whig interpretation of

history, and wouldn't have known what it meant, but breeding will out," Claudia reflects many years later.¹⁰⁴ "Breeding" is exactly right, for the Whig theory of history — or, more vaguely, the idea that history from Magna Carta onwards is simply the triumphal march of Progress with England firmly in the vanguard, and that things will continue this way — is not so much a specific and arguable theory as something bred in the bone, not an "interpretation" of "history" but rather the nature of Time itself. In the depths of the English Civil War, it was abundantly clear to John Milton that God had chosen the English nation "before any other, that out of her, as out of Sion, should be proclaimed and sounded forth the first tidings and trumpet of reformation to all Europe;"¹⁰⁵ In the darkest hours of World War II it was equally evident to G.M Trevelyan that just as, in the Renaissance, it was "Britain alone of the great national states [that] successfully held out [and] turned back the tide of despotism," so now "she faces danger, even alone, with her old courage: whether she stands or falls, the world's hope of peace and freedom rests on her."¹⁰⁶

One of the most striking features of life in England in the last quarter-century has been Time's strange failure to behave in its accustomed manner. It is not, of course, the first time in this century that Progress has seemed to halt and Time itself to do strange things. One has only to think of Joyce's *Ulysses*, Eliot's *The Waste Land*, Pound's *Cantos* or Virginia Woolf's novels to realise that Modernism, whatever else it may have been, was a profound interrogation of Time's Arrow — a questioning that had begun before the Great War (Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* was published in 1899) but that became

increasingly cogent as a result of it. Yet for the generation that endured the Great Depression and survived the Second World War, it seemed axiomatic that things would go on getting better and better: as one of Graham Swift's characters muses, "It's only right that she should look better than her mother ever did when she was eighteen, because the world gets better, yes it does, it's meant to get better, it's no one's fault they're born too soon."¹⁰⁷ In the 1970's, however, the forward march of Progress was widely perceived to have been halted by economic decline and political and cultural upheaval, and by 1995 — fifty years after victory over Nazi Germany — Britain saw herself cheated of the just rewards of her defiance of the "tides of despotism."

By Lyndsay Griffiths, LONDON, May 8 [1995] (Reuter) — As the victorious Allies on Monday marked the war they fought so hard to win, Britain reflected on the peace it lost in the decades following World War Two. Fifty years ago, Britain lost its famous reserve for one day and became a nation where stranger kissed stranger in a mammoth street party to celebrate victory over Nazi Germany. The young dived headlong into fountains and jumped on top of double-decker buses; the old toasted a "bulldog" nation that had achieved its second world war victory in less than 30 years.

Little did the bouncing Britain of 50 years ago suspect that despite all the sacrifice, lives lost and buildings bombed, the end of the war marked a turning point where the country began to slip into decades of national and international decline. For once the

party ended, Britain came down with a horrible hangover as the country began to lose faith in itself, in its institutions and its place on the world stage....

The country that had once ruled an empire envied the world over was exhausted by the war. Many believe the nation sat back after 1945, failing to continue the wartime spirit in peacetime. Overseas, Britain shrank into the small island it had always been, its clout finally cut down closer to its actual size. The far-flung empire shrank rapidly.... To this day, many Britons resent the Germans' peacetime success and long for a lost England—an England that existed before the war but imbued with the wartime spirit.

As a summary of a crucial aspect of the national mood — or of what Raymond Williams has called a “structure of feeling” — this wire story would have been widely accepted. Yet although the Whig theory of history, the unquestioning and unquestioned assumption of Progress, clearly seemed no longer tenable, over a wide spectrum of political opinion it covertly persisted as the very ground and horizon of historical thinking. For a common response to Britain's perceived problems was to continue to believe that the locomotive of English history had indeed been headed along the lines of Progress, but that at some point up the line, unseen by anyone at the time, a switch had been thrown and the national train had been diverted down a branch line and eventually into a dusty, unused siding. But just who had thrown the switch, and where? Was it the trade unions, whose blind and stupid greed had made train tickets too expensive and forced the train to be withdrawn from service for lack of buyers? Was it the owners and their shareholders,

who had rendered the train uncompetitively slow for express service by frittering away ticket revenues instead of reinvesting them in a modern, efficient engine? Was it the immigrants, who had overcrowded the train and placed such a burden on the locomotive power that it had to be shunted aside to make way for the Bullet Train and the Orient Express? Had it really happened after World War II, or was the country only now waking up to something that took place a century ago, when the company's owners switched the train to the soon-to-be-closed branch-line of the Empire as a lazy alternative to the effort and expense of competing with the rapidly accelerating expresses of Europe and North America? Or had it happened not once but many times, as something deep within class-ridden British culture prompted successive generations of industrial and commercial pioneers to divert the train from the main line of rugged entrepreneurship so that it could transport them to the country houses and the green pastures of the leisured aristocrats they could now afford to emulate?

Historical explanation is the province of the novel no less than of other and more narrowly "historical" kinds of writing. As Malcolm Bradbury has remarked, "Certainly exploring past and recent history, at a time when its progress seemed either ambiguous or disastrous, and many of the progressive dreams of the earlier part of the century had plainly died, [became] a central theme of Eighties fiction. Indeed by the beginning of the Nineties, it came to seem that no novel would do unless it somehow went back to wartime, the end of Empire, or the age of the Edwardian wonderland before the twentieth century went so wrong."¹⁰⁸ Many of these novelistic time-travellings, like the different

versions of what happened to the locomotive of historical progress, were attempts to pinpoint some moment in the past, some emblematic event, which would account for the present state of things. There is a whole genre which would map England's historical decline in terms of the rise to power of a "new man," a Kenneth Widmerpool (Anthony Powell's *Dance to the Music of Time*) or a Leslie Titmuss (John Mortimer's *Paradise Postponed*), and the moment of the emergence of this rough beast is variously specified as anywhere from "the autumn before the outbreak of what used to be called the Great War" (Isabel Colegate's *The Shooting Party*¹⁰⁹) to the eruption into national prominence of "Thatcherite Man" in the late 1970s.¹¹⁰

But these novels are more persuasive as representations or emblems of the "spirit of the age" than as plausible explanations of how it came to be that way. As we have seen in the case of Powell's Widmerpool, an individual character in a realistic novel — however representative he may seem to be — is unlikely to be able to bear the full burden of historical explanation. A representative figure functions as a locus in which economic and socio-political forces are manifested, and we may understand such a figure as a synecdoche, as one instance of a larger agglomeration of individuals whose actions, passions and beliefs all combine to make our society what it is. Yet however deeply we may believe in methodological individualism — in the proposition that "all institutions, behavioral patterns and social processes can in principle be explained in terms of individuals only: their actions, properties, and relations"¹¹¹ — we must always remember that the results of collective action cannot *simply* be explained in terms of the

motives, beliefs and even the actions of any single member of that collectivity, for the actual result of a large number of individuals' actions, like a traffic jam, may well be quite different from what any individual agent intended or anticipated. Mrs. Thatcher, in other words, may well have been right in holding that there is no such thing as society, only individuals, but historical explanation that restricts itself to that vocabulary will — depending on its political colouring — either become an old-fashioned chronicle of the deeds of the “great,” or will risk plummeting into some variety of conspiracy-theory. The traditional, realistic novel faces the same quandary, the situation that one of Salman Rushdie's characters is describing when she advises her daughter to: “Study history.... In this century history stopped paying attention to the old psychological orientation of reality. I mean, these days character isn't destiny any more. Economics is destiny. Ideology is destiny. Bombs are destiny. What does a famine, a gas chamber, a grenade care how you lived your life? Crisis comes, death comes, and your pathetic individual self doesn't have a thing to do with it, only to suffer the effects” (*The Satanic Verses* 432).

But in a time in which Progress itself is no longer a credible fiction, the problem the traditional novel faces in its attempt to write history is not simply that it is restricted to the province of individual experience, but also that it is wedded to the idea of time as linear, to the concept of “plot” as cause-and-effect sequence by which the protagonist progresses to that closure which is both the resolution and the transcendence of initial (and initiating) problems and enigmas. As has often been pointed out, it is no accident

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that the novel arises as a genre in the eighteenth century, for its form encapsulates an Enlightenment faith in temporal progression as evolutionary and teleological, the corollary of which is a concept of historiography as literally a *rationalization* of the present — as the step-by-step deduction of the present from the past that it has irreversibly transcended. When the idea of Progress no longer seems self-evident, the traditional novel's inherent theory of history will come to seem irrelevant at best and, at worst, just plain wrong.

At the very beginning of the novelistic enterprise, before the idea of Progress had become enshrined as “common sense,” doubting voices were to be heard: Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* mocks the attempt to deduce the present from the past by purely rational means, insisting that the indiscriminate rehearsal of antecedent circumstances, unless it is governed by some principle of selection not supplied by those circumstances themselves, will inevitably dissolve coherent and significant narration in a welter of digression. This is why Powell's *Dance To The Music Of Time*, predicated as it initially is on “getting it right” merely at the level of micro-event, resolves not into significant history but into “gossip,” which even a desperate resort to myth cannot rescue from the truly despairing bonfire of the vanities that provides the only appropriate culmination. Yet another doubting voice present from the very inception of the bourgeois novel spoke in the tongue of the Gothic romance which, at its most powerful, articulated for its hungry readers their suspicions that the past had not really been transcended but could erupt into the present in the form of ghosts and other supernatural emanations from another time.

It is true that the gothic novel frequently provided a *dénouement* in which the supernatural was finally explained away as mere illusion but, like the rakehell's death-bed repentance which cannot abolish the deeds for which it purportedly atones, such "rational" resolutions could not fully negate the imaginative experience of the uncanny they ostensibly re- (or dis-) solved. Leslie Fiedler has pointed out that

Implicit in the gothic novel from the beginning is a final way of redeeming it that is precisely opposite in its implications to the device of the explained supernatural [the pretence "that there were at last no ghosts, only wax images behind translucent black curtains"], a way of proving not that its terror is less true than it seems but more true. There *is* a place in men's lives where pictures do in fact bleed, ghosts gibber and shriek, maidens run forever through mysterious landscapes from nameless foes; that place is, of course, the world of dreams and of the repressed guilts and fears that motivate them. This world the dogmatic optimism and shallow psychology of the Age of Reason had denied; and yet this world it is the final, perhaps the essential, purpose of the gothic romance to assert.¹¹²

If the function of the gothic novel is to undermine the optimism that is founded on a belief in Reason, it is hardly surprising that the form should experience a remarkable resurgence in the 1980's, at a moment when the concept of Progress underwritten and guaranteed by Reason seemed belied by all that was happening in England.

As Enlightenment rationality came to constitute the horizon of respectable thought in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, gothic novels persisted principally as a less-than-respectable sub-genre. Although there are some signal exceptions, such as Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, the gothic was by-and-large denied admission into the hallowed halls of English Literature and exiled to its outer courts, not far from the penny dreadful and the low-budget film studio which churned out a steady stream of adaptations of *Frankenstein*, *Dracula*, and the tales of Edgar Allan Poe. In the 1980's, however, it moved decisively into the mainstream, as Peter Ackroyd's *Hawksmoor* captured the Guardian Fiction Award and became the Whitbread Novel of the Year, while novels such as Lindsay Clarke's *The Chymical Wedding* won both critical and popular acclaim. Such works explicitly position themselves as critiques of Enlightenment Reason and Progress, and their critiques involve the very nature of Time itself. "But now the Work of Time unravells,"¹¹³ says *Hawksmoor*'s eighteenth-century architect, Nicholas Dyer, whose dark vision of a wholly other mode of temporality is opposed to the Enlightenment empiricism of Sir Christopher Wren:

He [Wren] liked to destroy Antient things: sad and wretched Stuff, he called it, and he us'd to say that Men are weary of the Reliques of Antiquity. He spoke in their stead of Sensible Knowledge, of the Experimentall Learning and of real Truths: but I took these for nothing but Fopperies. This is our Time, *said he*, and we must lay its Foundacions with our own Hands; but when he used such words I was seiz'd with this Reflection: and how do we conclude what Time is our own? (55)

Ackroyd's answer is that all times are our own, because there is no Progress. "Yes, I have returned to the past," declares the narrator of one of his later novels, *English Music*: "I have made that journey. 'You can't go back,' you said when I told you of my intention. 'Those days are long gone.' But, as I explained at the time, that is not necessarily true. One day is changed into another, yet nothing is lost."¹⁴ Another character in the same novel declares that "we live in time. But in the fallen world time simply recurs. The same events or situations happen again and again. The same people are born from generation to generation. The years and the centuries are part of a cycle. No wonder when you understand the pattern, you begin to feel a sense of futility and despair." (224) Ackroyd's narrator disagrees, not because he believes in Progress but because he has intuited eternity in and behind the phenomena disclosed by Time: "What was it Edward Campion told me once — that in the prospect of the unchanging hills and streams there is some inkling of eternity? Yet I feel the same about the old buildings and streets of Hackney; if I stared at them long enough, no doubt I would see eternity there.... Edward was wrong when he described the recurring cycles of history: they disappear as soon as you recognise them for what they are" (399).

In novels by Ackroyd and others, recognizing the recurring cycles of history for what they are involves making an end-run around the Enlightenment *philosophes* and imaginatively exploring the visions of their predecessors, Renaissance alchemists. The alchemists' Hermetic philosophy, anathematized by orthodox Christianity (despite its neo-Platonist borrowings) and banished as ignorant superstition by Enlightenment Science (despite

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Newton's long-running fascination with alchemy) is the informing principle of Nicholas Dyer's churches, which are designed on numerological principles drawn from "*Clavis Salomonis*, Niceron's *Thaumaturgis Opticus* where he speaks of Line and Distance, Cornelius Agrippa his *De Occultia philosophia* and Giordano Bruno his *De magia* and *De vinculis in genere* where he speaks of Hieroglyphs and the Raising of the Devilles" (45). In Clarke's *The Chymical Wedding* the alchemical adept is celebrated as having transcended Time: "*Time was, Time is, and Time shall be, but here the Adept stands outside of time within the penetralium of mystery.*"¹¹⁵ In Ackroyd's *The House of Doctor Dee* a twentieth-century devotee of the mysteries practised by that Elizabethan mage declares that the homunculus, the little man created by magic in a glass tube, "knows that contemporary science will develop so far that it will return to its origins, purified, and then expound the mysteries of the past. The doctrines of the alchemists and the astrologers. . . will then be revived within the great vision of quantum theory."¹¹⁶ But the homunculus "has one great fear. If the cycle of the ages is not mastered by great scientists, then the end of time (which it prophesies for the year 2365) will be reversed. It knows then that the centuries will roll back and that humankind will return in stages to its beginning. The Victorian and Elizabethan periods will recur, and Rome will rise again before crumbling into the darkness of what we now call pre-history."

In 1980's England, one might have been forgiven for thinking not only that Time had stopped but that it had already begun its backward flow. Mrs. Thatcher had repeatedly called for a return to Victorian values, to rugged individualism and self-reliance as the

cornerstone of a society in which market forces should reign supreme, and her staunchest opponents would have maintained that the appearance of significant numbers of beggars in the streets, of the homeless huddled over improvised fires of rubbish under London's railway arches or sleeping in cardboard boxes in Lincoln's Inn Fields, were harbingers of the return of the dark days of nineteenth-century Manchester Liberalism. In Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*, which is as much about England and Englishness as it is about India or Arabia and Islam, a character says of his father, "I accuse him of inverting Time,"¹¹⁷ but the novel in which the idea of time flowing in reverse reached its fullest expression is Martin Amis' *Time's Arrow* (1992), in which a man's life is lived backwards in all its grotesque details. Amis' novel is neither set in England nor about England, and it has left more than one reader with the suspicion that its real mainspring is the opportunity for the display of technical virtuosity rather than any pressing social concerns, although its subject is a doctor who helped perform the infamous medical experiments at Auschwitz* ; but I doubt if such a book would have been written by an

* Malcolm Bradbury comments: "The moral passion is plain, and the desire to reverse guilt and restore innocence is evident; in this the book has the power of a moral satire. But it does remain an exercise, a virtuoso enterprise in postmodern technical skills, and in it the Holocaust becomes a trope, as indeed it has in a good deal of modern writing." (*The Modern British Novel*, 429). This seems to me to be exactly right.

English author except at a historical juncture in which Time itself appeared to be behaving strangely.

If *Time's Arrow* is something of a stunt, there are many other authors besides Ackroyd who felt liberated by poststructuralist critiques of rationality to play games — albeit serious games — with the past. For the English experience of Time's duplicity received its intellectual warrant from the postmodern revolution in thought. Jacques Derrida had argued that there is no such thing as perception, only interpretation; that all interpretations are as inescapably unstable as the linguistic structure that underpins them; and that *arche* and *telos* — the “beginning” and the “end” that frame and found all narratives, all concepts of history — are unstable metaphysical concepts rather than empirically-verifiable facts. Jean-François Lyotard had applied this critique to all the “master narratives” of Time spawned by the Enlightenment, declaring that any interpretation of history — Whig, Marxist, liberal-democratic or Scientific — in which Enlightenment Rationality guaranteed Progress and Emancipation had been discredited, along with any notion of transcendent Truth. Michel Foucault had also persuasively claimed that Progress is an illusion: cultures, past and present, are simply different discursive formations, different constructions of the world, and none of them is more “real” or “true” than another in any absolute sense. They succeed each other according to no teleology whatsoever, and not even according to any rational cause-and-effect continuity but by means of sudden ruptures or breaks. And In *Metahistory*, a study with direct implications for the novel, Hayden White examined influential nineteenth-century

histories and argued that the shapes they conferred on Time were themselves derived from the forms and figures of fiction.

Understandably, these poststructuralist/postmodernist arguments were more eagerly embraced by novelists than by historians, but by 1994 even some historians were willing to concede ground to the postmodernists:

The idea that the past is a plaything of the present, or, as postmodernist theory would have it, a 'metafiction', is only now beginning to impinge on the consciousness and disturb the tranquillity of professional historians. But it has been for some twenty years or more a commonplace of epistemological criticism, and a very mainspring of experimental work in literature and the arts.... The idea of playing with the past... is deeply offensive to the historian, while the attempt to suspend or abolish temporality seems to put the historian's vocation into question. Our practice presupposes the existence of an objectively verifiable body of knowledge, while a commonsense realism — showing the past 'as it was' — is not the least of our inheritances from the nineteenth-century revolution in historical scholarship.... Despite these cautions, we are in fact constantly reinterpreting the past in the light of the present, and indeed, like conservationists and restorationists in other spheres, reinventing it. The angle of vision is inescapably contemporary, however remote the object in view.... History is an argument about the past, as well as the record of it, and its terms are forever changing, sometimes under the influence of developments in adjacent fields of thought, sometimes — as with the sea-change in attitudes which followed the First

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World War — as a result of politics. Historical research, in the hands (quite often) of self-proclaimed revisionists, is continually putting old and established markers into question. Explanations, greeted at the time as ‘authoritative’, now appear as contrived or beside the point. The plot thickens with fresh characters and previously undeveloped motifs. Forgotten episodes are exhumed. Old stories are given a new twist.... Even when we are immersed in the minutiae of empirical research, we are continually having to abandon the world of hard, verifiable fact for the more pliable one of interpretation and conjecture....¹¹⁸

Paradoxically, it was just at the moment that History — in the sense of a true and accurate account of how it really was — had been declared impossible that the task of historiography seemed most urgent in a society that felt betrayed by the Whig version of Time to which it had unquestioningly subscribed. But if postmodernism had shown the door to History in the positivist conception of the historians, by the same gesture it had opened the door to imaginative constructions of the past made avowedly in the service of a present that needed a new cognitive map, a different sense of its location in time, now that the old one was proving so unreliable. The gothic was dusted off and placed into service; “magic realism,” in which Time is warped and natural laws suspended, was imported from the Americas; there was a resurgence of the “Romance” — “the attempt to connect a bygone time with the very present that is flitting away from us”, and one which eschews “a very minute fidelity... to the probable and ordinary course of man’s experience” in the definition by Nathaniel Hawthorne chosen as epigraph to A.S. Byatt’s

Possession; and even more stolidly traditional novelists sought imaginative links between the present and a variety of putative pasts.

Eight: Margaret Drabble and the State of the Nation

No, not a political novel. More a pathological novel. A psychotic novel. Sorry about that.

It won't happen again. Sorry. A Natural Curiosity (194)

As it is a rural route, avoiding the great industrial conurbations that straddle the middle of upper England, she is not here provoked into much political thought about the nature of the north and How Britain Votes, and you may be spared her occasional reflections on these themes, for this is not a political novel, and anyway her reflections are repetitive and do not seem to be getting her anywhere very fast. A Natural Curiosity (193)

From the middle 'seventies onwards, Margaret Drabble became increasingly occupied as a novelist with representing and explaining the state of an increasingly-troubled nation. The novels that resulted are "pathological" in the sense that they might be said to belong to "the science or study of disease; that department of medical science, or of physiology, which treats of the causes and nature of diseases, or abnormal bodily affections or conditions" (*OED*). In this case the body is the body politic, and the novels are attempts to understand the pathology ("the sum of pathological processes or conditions" – *OED*) that afflicts late twentieth-century Britain. They also constitute a rigorous test of the traditional novel's adequacy to the task of portraying and understanding the state of the nation. Beginning with *The Ice Age* in 1977, Drabble questioned the ability of the past (i.e. *history* conceived of as a linear chain of cause-and-effect) to explain the present, and she therefore went on in subsequent novels to reject a traditionally linear, *plotted* narrative as a satisfactory means of representation. The failure of plot in *The Ice Age*

demanded the creation of non-linear forms, the quest for which led Drabble to appropriate at least some aspects of structuralism and poststructuralism as materials out of which a more adequate fiction might be forged.

Fish in a frozen River: The ice Age

Drabble was by no means the first contemporary novelist to thematize frustration at the traditional novel's embrace of linear time. To take but one example, Annabel in Angela Carter's *Love* (1971) one day "roused herself sufficiently to go downstairs and put [her husband's] alarm clock in the dustbin. She said that the tick irritated her."¹¹⁹ And Carter's 1969 *Heroes and Villains*, which is set in what remains of an England devastated by a nuclear blast, opens with a scene in which a young woman — ironically, the daughter of a Professor of History — "watched dispassionately as the hands of [her father's] clock went round but she never felt that time was passing for time was frozen around her in this secluded place where a pastoral quiet possessed everything and the busy clock carved the hours into sculptures of ice."¹²⁰ After her father's death, "She took his clock out to a piece of swamp and drowned it. It vanished under the yielding earth, still emitting a faint tick" (15).

Only a few years later, however, the image of Time as frozen into stasis had migrated from Carter's futuristic fantasy to the realism of Drabble's *The Ice Age*, where it functioned as a perfectly plausible metaphor for social paralysis:

"A huge icy fist, with large cold fingers, was squeezing and chilling the people of Britain, that great and puissant nation, slowing down their blood, locking them into immobility, fixing them in a solid stasis, like fish in a frozen river: there they all were in their large

houses and their small houses, with their first mortgages and second mortgages, in their rented flats and council flats and basement bed-sits and their caravans: stuck, congealed, among possessions, in attitudes, in achievements they had hoped next month to shed, and with which they were now condemned to live. The flow had ceased to flow; the ball had stopped rolling; the game of musical chairs was over. *Rien ne va plus*, the croupier had shouted.¹²¹

The apocalyptic event that precipitates Drabble's "ice age" is not an explosion but an implosion, not the sudden "boom" of the economy of the early 1970's but its equally sudden contraction when the grossly-inflated and highly-speculative property market collapses, taking the country with it: "England, sliding, sinking, shabby, dirty, lazy, inefficient, dangerous, in its death-throes, worn out, clapped out, occasionally lashing out" (106).

For the public at large, the pressing problem is to explain the collapse, and the usual suspects are duly rounded up — "the trades unions, the present government, the miners, the car workers, the seamen, the Arabs, the Irish, their own husbands, their own wives, their own idle good-for-nothing offspring, comprehensive education" (71) — but the challenge that Drabble sets herself is a different one: to explain the boom, or more specifically the property-speculation bubble that lay at the heart of it. For it is the premise of *The Ice Age* that "traditional" English values, both middle-class and working-class, have suffered a sea-change, and that the values that have since come to be associated with Mrs. Thatcher were already abroad in the land before she became Prime Minister or even leader of the Conservative Party. Drabble examines this shift in values through a range of representative figures, principally Anthony Keating, Oxbridge-Arts-graduate-

turned-television-producer-turned-property-developer-turned-near-bankrupt, and Len Wincobank, working-class-rent-collector-turned-property-whiz-kid-turned-convicted-criminal.

Neither of these characters is simple: Len, for example is not just “a new man, the new businessman of the sixties” (65) but a visionary who passionately believes in his transformations of the built environment — “he loved what he was doing, loved his buildings, believed in them, thought them beautiful” (38) — and the fact that he is in prison owes more to the public’s desire for scapegoats in the aftermath of the crash than to the fraud he committed in a last-ditch attempt to save his company — “There had been too many scandals, too much corruption, and Len had served as an easy symbol” (49). Furthermore Drabble (appropriately enough for someone who admires and has written a book on Arnold Bennett) can even sympathize with Len’s desire for “the good life” in consumerist terms — “de luxe washing machine, dishwasher, six-ring automatically timed cooker, deep freeze, lights that dimmed on a knob rather than blinked crudely on and off with a switch, under-floor central heating, two bathrooms, shower, remote control color television” (67). After all, what could be more understandable than that a man who had never tasted cream until he was an adult (and who even then surreptitiously preferred the tinned condensed milk that had been the treat of his deprived childhood) should think of paradise as a night in a thick-carpeted, huge-bedded room at the Palmer House hotel in Chicago, watching television while munching on many-layered room-service turkey sandwiches oozing mayonnaise? (97-99).

The focus of the novel, however, is Anthony Keating — “child of the professional middle classes, reared in an anachronism as an anachronism” (25). Anthony is the son of a clergyman who teaches in a cathedral school, and he grows up in an elegant eighteenth-century house in the

cathedral close. His life follows the set pattern of his class — a good public school followed by Oxbridge — until it is time for him to choose a career. Having rejected Christianity long ago, he can hardly follow his father into the Church; his degree (significantly, a degree in history) is nowhere good enough for him to think about becoming an academic, and the tradition of public service that might once have led a young man of his background into the Civil Service is no longer a vital one (he rejects the Civil Service because it seems boring and stuffy). Not everything in his class-inheritance, however, is rejected: having throughout his childhood “listened to his father and mother speaking slightingly of the lack of culture of businessmen, of the philistinism and ignorance of their sons, of commercial greed, expense accounts, business lunches” (23), Anthony remains true to his class in that he never once thinks about a job in industry:

...so deeply conditioned are some sections of the British nation that some thoughts are deeply inaccessible to them. Despite the fact that major companies were at that time appealing urgently for graduates in any field, despite the fact that the national press was full of seductive offers, Anthony Keating... did not even see the offers: he walked past them daily, turned over pages daily, with as much indifference as if they had been written in Turkish or Hungarian. He thought himself superior to that kind of thing: that kind of advertisement was aimed at bores and sloggers, not at men of vision like Anthony Keating (25).

So Anthony drifts into television — first the BBC, then one of the commercial companies — and although he is quite successful as a producer, after some years he finds himself increasingly plagued by a restlessness of spirit:

He would wake up in the middle of the night and think: Is this it? Is what what? In short, he was underemployed, bored, and not at all happy in his relation to his work, his country, or the society he lived in: ripe for conversion, to some new creed. A political creed, but there wasn't one; a religious creed, but he had had [i.e. had had enough of] God, along with his father and life in the cathedral close. So what would happen to the vacant space in Anthony Keating? What would occupy it? (30-31)

The answer is “entrepreneurship,” specifically property development. Watching the unedited film of an interview with Len Wincobank that he has commissioned for the current affairs programme he produces, he is seduced by Len's sharpness and vitality, and it comes upon him with the thunderclap of revelation that the attitude to business he has unthinkingly inherited from his parents — “the premise that he and the viewers lived in a society which disapproved of the profit motive and which condemned private enterprise”— was “utterly false” (31).

Anthony's problem is that he has no sustaining faith, no creed to which he can harness his considerable energies and his capacity for vision, and it is entrepreneurship that moves into this vacuum and offers him the opportunity to employ his talents: “He had never in his life been so fully committed, so deeply engaged, so deeply *interested* in what he was doing” (36). If Anthony's choice is one we disapprove of, the fault must be seen not merely as some character flaw but as the fault of the culture which produced him — a culture whose traditional imperatives for one of his class (the Church, a career in public service) are no longer compelling. Anthony is right to reject his class background, with its smugness and snobbery: “Under the massive yellow sandy shadow of the cathedral wall, the Keatings sat safely in their extremely attractive, well-maintained eighteenth-century house (it went with the job) and listened to good

music, and laughed over funny mistakes in Latin proses, and bitched about the clergyman's wife who had a pronounced Lancashire accent and economized in small ways, for they were not well off, and had to appear better off than they were" (24). But although Anthony is perceptive enough to see through the hypocrisies of his father, "a worldly man, who despised the more obvious ways of making money" (23), the vaguely leftish anti-Establishment political views he himself espouses do not appear to offer him a social and political practice that can adequately substitute for the obsolete faith that the cathedral close symbolizes: "He worried about his fellow men, but, like many of his fellow worriers, could find no means of expressing his care" (26). Anthony represents a generation born into the cultural void left by the break-up of traditional norms and not yet filled by any new ones other than the pursuit of power and profit. Although he is very far from being "Thatcherite Man," Anthony finds the only adequate outlet for his energies in the kind of aggressive private enterprise that has come to be associated with the new Conservative Party creed.

The Ice Age is cast very much in the form of the traditional novel, omniscient third-person narrator included, and it constitutes a nuanced and profound meditation on the state of the nation as Drabble perceived it in the middle 1970's. Her use of the representative-figure strategy is a subtle one, avoiding the pitfalls of both conspiracy-theory and scapegoating; for in this analysis Britain's predicament is the result of the convergence of a number of individual ambitions and designs, and these are represented in the novel by characters who are like Anthony Keating in that they do not directly aim to produce the consequences that in fact ensue. The metaphor of the "ice age" connotes not only stasis but also the idea of a period suspended between the death of the old sustaining faiths and the birth of some new beliefs that would make England once again — in the words of Milton's *Areopagitica* that Drabble employs as one of the novel's

epigraphs — “a noble and puissant Nation rousing herself like a strong man after sleep, and shaking her invincible locks.” Drabble in 1977 clearly shared Milton’s optimism, his belief that England in the midst of civil strife was truly “an eagle muing her mighty youth” and “purging and unscaling her long abused sight at the fountain itself of heavenly radiance,” even though doubters “in their envious gabble would prognosticate a year of sects and schisms.” What Drabble can hardly be blamed for failing to foresee is that the “year of sects and schisms” would lengthen into decades; that the kind of aggressive entrepreneurship that produced the crash of the middle 1970’s, far from being discredited by the state of affairs it created, would itself become the “new faith” of Mrs. Thatcher’s “Enterprise Britain;” and that an increasingly-unfettered market economy would constitute the new English eagle unscaling its long abused sight at the fountain itself of radiant neo-liberalism.*

Yet *The Ice Age* also exhibits the limitations of the representative-figure strategy, even when it is as well-executed as it is here. A relatively minor but telling problem is a distinct clumsiness, a marked sense of strain, in Drabble’s attempts to connect public and private spheres: “The country was growing old. Like herself. The scars on the hillsides [of the Northern English

* Drabble may not have foreseen all this, but there is a hint of prescience in a scene in which Anthony “opened his daily paper and read about North Sea Oil, the black miracle, the Deus Ex Machina. It seemed that Britain might be saved at the last hour” (226). It has been argued that without the temporary relief provided by the income from the oil, Britain’s economy would have foundered hopelessly. Consequently Mrs. Thatcher’s economic policies would have been seen clearly not to have “worked,” even on their own socially-impooverished terms, and the Thatcherite rhetoric of the free market would never have become plausible, let alone hegemonic.

industrial landscape] were the wrinkles around her own eyes: irremovable. How could one learn to grow old? Neither a country nor a person can stay young forever” (188). These, of course, are not Drabble’s thoughts but those of one of her characters, yet the fact that the novel needs this kind of connective tissue is a sure sign that its form is one which is having difficulty forging more cogent links between the state of the individual and the state of the nation.

This strain is indicative of the fundamental limitation, which involves the representation of history in the novel. Many of *The Ice Age*’s characters find it difficult to discern any meaningful pattern in the events that have determined their lives, and insist on believing that history is a matter of pure accident. “The whole thing had been a ghastly, arbitrary accident,” thinks Anthony of an IRA bomb that killed one of his friends and seriously injured another: “The bomb simply happened to have blown up Max and Kitty, a random target. This past year had been so full of accidents that they had begun to seem almost normal” (14). At the other extreme is the sheer paranoia of Callandar, a former city architect imprisoned for accepting bribes, who believes that “Something has gone wrong with the laws of chance” and “thought it might be something to do with nuclear waste, though he was not sure” (183-5). Between these two extremes stands Anthony’s lover, Alison Murray, who oscillates between history-as-chance and history-as-choice:

“Choice. Bad luck. For years, for ten years, Alison had striven to believe in accidents, in the possibility of bad luck, for that would exonerate herself, her husband, Jane [her daughter], Rosemary [her sister], her parents — they would all be exonerated by such a belief.... But if it were not so? She glimpsed for a moment, in the dark night, a primitive causality so shocking, so uncanny, that she shivered and froze. A world where will was potent, not

impotent: where it made, indeed, bad choices and killed others by them, killed them, deformed them, destroyed them” (110).

The Ice Age flirts with each of these alternatives, which together indicate the problems of the traditional novel in dealing with history. For while the bourgeois novel’s very form, as I have noted earlier, is built around the concept of the protagonist’s fate as being determined by his or her moral choices, the idea that the fate of England in the 1970’s has somehow been willed by individual citizens is indeed “so shocking, so uncanny” that it beggars belief. Yet the very idea that everything is the result of chance, of mere accident, is not only equally repugnant to the mind seeking meaning and coherence, it is altogether subversive of the novel form. “Chance,” in other words, precludes “plot,” and therefore makes a satisfactory state-of-the-nation *novel* impossible. So “plot” there must be. But if we must reject as unthinkable a “plot” in which the miserable state of the nation is the result of a deliberate conspiracy of malevolence — a conclusion that seems unacceptably paranoid — then the alternative would seem to be a plot in which it is the unforeseen, unintended result of a myriad acts of individual choice, each of which was made for different, individual reasons. And if *that* is the case, one might well have to agree with the mad Callandar that something has gone wrong with the laws of chance, for otherwise, surely, the millions of individual choices would tend to negate (or at least significantly modify) one another rather than cooperate to produce an apparently monolithic result.

The way out of this apparently intractable problem — a way not available within the terms Drabble has established in *The Ice Age* — is to refuse both “chance” and “paranoia” as the only available alternatives and to embrace a concept of the “systemic:” to believe that the set of cultural practices and institutions which circumscribe our lives constitute not a random

heterogeneity but a fundamentally coherent system which, on the one hand, limits the apparently free choices we can make and, on the other, structures those choices in such a way that they contribute to a certain overall result. To think in this way is to risk paranoia (certain so-called marxisms come very close) but not necessarily to succumb to it. Nor does it mean abandoning the principle of methodological individualism outlined earlier: as Jon Elster emphasizes, the claim of methodological individualism with regard to the social sciences, for example, “is not that there already exists a social psychology or psychological sociology that has effectuated a complete reduction [of complex social phenomena to the individual choices that are their component parts]. Rather, it is that there is no objection in principle to such a reduction being carried out, even though it may remain impracticable for the foreseeable future” (23). In the meantime, just as the social sciences continue to need the abstract concepts — those “isms” which, in vulgar conceptions, sometimes masquerade as the true agents of history — so the novel that deals with history will need a form capable of representing systemic forces which transcend the microscopic examination of individual experience. As one of Salman Rushdie’s characters in *The Satanic Verses* says: “Economics is destiny. Ideology is destiny.”

Drabble comes to understand this in the course of writing *The Ice Age*, but such are the constraints of the form to which she is committed that she can represent this conception of history only at the level of the individual fate. When Anthony Keating is persuaded by a Foreign Office official to smuggle some papers out of an Iron Curtain country to which he is travelling on personal business, he agrees because, as he recognizes, the imperatives of his class training impel him to do so:

He and his clever friends had been reared as surely, conditioned as firmly, as those like Humphrey Clegg [of the Foreign Office], who had entered the old progression, learned the old rules, played the old games. Oh yes, they had dabbled and trifled and cracked irreverent jokes; they had thrown out the mahogany and bought cheap stripped pine, they had slept with one another's wives, and divorced their own... they had tried to learn new tricks. But where were the new tricks? They had produced no new images, no new style, merely a cheap strained exhausted imitation of the old one. Nothing had changed....

Well, I give in, thought Anthony. There is no point in struggling against the tide of one's time. I will go where Humphrey Clegg pushes me. I might as well accept that I belong to a world that has gone, reared in the shelter of a cathedral built to a faith that I have sometimes wished I could share, educated in ideals of public service which I have sometimes wished I could fulfill, a child of a lost empire, disinherited, gambler, drinker, hypocrite: and who am I to resist an appeal to a chivalric spirit that was condemned as archaic by Cervantes? I will let myself be pushed. I am nothing but weed on the tide of history. (282-283).

The Ice Age can achieve a formal resolution only at the level of the individual life, because it is only at this level that traditional realism can apprehend and represent historical forces. So in its third and final section, it leaves the question of the state of the nation to concentrate on Anthony's individual destiny and what brings it about, because a novel — a plot — demands to be resolved, and no resolution of the larger socio-historical question is available within the constraints of the form.

It is this failure to forge an adequate equation of public and private that led Tom Paulin to call the novel a specimen of "a priggish and dithering liberalism," "a smugly puritanical tract for the

times,”¹²² but Paulin is being rather unfair. The limitations he castigates are the limitations of the traditional novel of individual character, even if it was Drabble’s own (and by-no-means contemptible) liberalism that guided her choice of form. The one reason that they appear as starkly as they do is that Drabble pushed this kind of novel to its limits to see how far it is capable of representing a cogent explanation of social phenomena. And it is clear that Drabble herself found it unsatisfactory, for *The Ice Age* contains several subtle indications that its author is coming to view linear time, the necessary time of a plot, as incapable of furnishing an adequate explanation of the events its unfolding discloses. Alison Murray finds the present “all too complicated for her” and thinks it “unkind of history to force a light-weight person like herself... to think of these weighty matters” (189). Eventually she was to evolve a theory of time as bizarre as Tom Callandar’s views on the laws of averages: “Time, she came to think, was not consequential: it occurs simultaneously, and distributed through it in meaningless chronology are spots of sorrow, spots of joy” (269). And Time in *The Ice Age* certainly does not obey the moral law that endows a traditional novel’s plot with its significance: when an unexpected offer for one of his company’s developments bails Anthony out of his financial difficulties, he thinks that “The denouement seemed so uncanny, so undeserved. Such a bad plot.... Defeat would have been more artistic” (235). The plot of the past that has produced the present is as opaque to Anthony as the plot of a John Le Carré novel he is trying to read — “he had made little progress with it, and could not follow the obscure plot” (294), is “still not quite sure what had happened in the course of its plot” when he has finished it (306). When he finds himself behind the Iron Curtain at the end of the novel, he, the history graduate, is forced to confess his haplessness in the face of history itself: “I am an ignorant fool, thought Anthony; here is history, and I can’t understand a word anyone is saying, and my only aim is to get out of it as quickly as possible”

(287). Anthony does, symbolically at least, get out of it: imprisoned in Wallacia after being caught up in an abortive coup, he turns to religion as the only way of making sense of his experience: “If God did not appoint this trial for me, then how could it be that I should be asked to endure it, he asks. He cannot bring himself to believe in the random justice of the fates, those three gray sisters” (319).

But there can be no such resolution for England. “Britain will recover,” asserts the third-person narrator in the book’s final paragraph, but this is a assertion of Miltonic faith; no plot has emerged from the history explored in the novel that justifies such an assertion, or even suggests the terms on which such a recovery might take place. Once the Whig theory of history, the idea of progress, has been tried in the balance and found wanting, there is nothing to replace it but the image of Time frozen and an unspecified, unspecifiable hope for the future. Time, for Drabble, manifests no purposeful design, only the randomness of chance, which leads her in her next novel to search for meaningful patterns under the aegis not of history but of anthropology; and this in turn means dispensing with “plot” and substituting another kind of structure. There is a slight but significant foreshadowing of this move in *The Ice Age*, when Anthony despairingly puts down the Le Carré novel with the incomprehensible plot and picks up the Theban plays of Sophocles, only to find that the introduction, written by his old friend Linton Hancox, “inevitably made some interesting anthropological kinship commentary... in terms of endogamy and exogamy; even Linton, old world as he was, had become a reluctant structuralist” (308). By the time she came to write *The Middle Ground*, so had Drabble.

A Reluctant Structuralism: *The Middle Ground*

The author of *The Middle Ground* (1980), however, was by no means as reluctant a structuralist as the novel's protagonist, Kate Armstrong: "When Kate was discussing with Hugo the question of why insects were all right out of doors but not so good indoors, he told her she ought to read Mary Douglas' *Purity and Danger*, but she never got round to it."¹²³ Drabble clearly did get round to it, and many incidental details of *The Middle Ground* — from St. Catherine swallowing "a gob of spit, as a humiliation of the flesh" (136-7) to Jean-Paul Sartre's essay on treacle (230) — are to be found in Douglas' book, whence they were presumably quarried.¹²⁴ Her debt, however, goes far beyond details, for the very form of this realistic but far-from-traditional novel is an attempt at a fictional implementation of Douglas' conceptual framework in particular and of the structuralist enterprise in general.

Structuralism, which had its roots in the early-twentieth-century linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure, emerged in the 1950's in France to become an enormously influential method of intellectual inquiry in the humanities and what the French call the human sciences. Its most celebrated pioneer was perhaps the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, whose work taught a whole generation to regard culture as being structured like a language. In this structuralist view particular cultural practices — for example, the cooking of food and the disposition of different culinary ingredients in the various courses that make up a meal — were to be seen as meaningful utterances in the complex language of a specific system or code — here, what might be termed the food-system. The system itself, like a natural language such as French or English, consisted not only of the elements to be combined into "statements" but the grammar or set of rules which determined what would count as a well-formed or meaningful utterance (e.g. roast beef with Yorkshire pudding) or an ill-formed, nonsensical one (roast beef with chocolate pudding). All

competent members of the culture, the structuralists claimed, knew what the rules were, even though they might be unable to formulate them and, indeed, might be (and usually were) altogether unconscious of their very existence. Furthermore, the individual rules themselves were held to be more than a haphazard collection of individual injunctions and prohibitions; together they comprised a true system or structure, in that they were related to each other as corollaries of higher-level rules which could be expressed as binary oppositions (in the case of the food-system, the governing opposition might be “raw” and “cooked”).

The task of the structuralist was not merely to “decode” cultural utterances (e.g. to “read” a particular meal as an statement through which its preparers and partakers subconsciously “think” their own relation as human beings to nature and culture, to the “raw” and the “cooked”), but to write the grammar of a cultural system — to discover the rules and the governing binary oppositions. What was crucial in structuralism was its insistence that “relations are more real than the things they relate” — the meaning of a component of an “utterance” derived not from any positive qualities it possessed (there’s nothing wrong with chocolate pudding) but from its position in the structure to which it belonged. So the thought of roast beef with chocolate pudding is repugnant not because, in some irreducible and fundamental way, it tastes bad, but because the two components come from categories which, according to the rules, cannot be combined on the same plate — although they can be eaten off different plates, providing that the chocolate pudding comes after the roast beef. How we respond to something depends on the category to which we have provisionally — literally *prejudicially* — assigned it: “Once I had a bite of a ham sandwich,” says Susanna Mainwaring in *The Middle Ground*, “and it was all slimy, and I spat it out, I thought it was a piece of nasty slimy jelly fat, you know the kind you get on

plastic ham, but it wasn't. It was only cucumber. It tasted fine once I knew it was cucumber. It's all in the mind. Like Sartre's essay on treacle" (230).

In her attempt to make some *systematic* sense of England in the 1970's Drabble turned from history –from the unfolding of events in time that the structuralists called the *diachronic* -- to the portrayal of a cross-section of the country at one point in time – a counterpart of the *synchronic* study that the structuralists espoused. In the manner of structuralism, it is the manifest ambition of *The Middle Ground* to find the “grammatical” rules, the governing set of binary oppositions, that would account for the apparent Babel of “utterances” that comprised English culture at that particular historical moment. Drabble located them in the oppositional categories “pure” and “impure,” and portrayed a society which felt its identity threatened desperately trying to reject as “rubbish” or “shit” — in short, as *impure* — anything it perceived as polluting or changing that identity. Drabble's focus was on the symbolic terms in which people think and construct their world, and in *The Middle Ground* the language of many of her characters, like the language of the myriad graffiti adorning walls, billboards, buses and trains, is peppered with terms of abuse referring to despised groups as waste matter of one kind or another. It is language, not character, that is representative in this novel; she abandoned the attempt to create “representative” characters, as does her protagonist: “How had she managed to acquire the deadly notion that everything she did or thought had to be *exemplary*, had to *mean something*, not only for herself, but also for that vast quaking seething tenuous mass of otherness, for other people?” (229).

She also came close to dispensing with “plot” altogether in order to present a cross-section of English (and specifically *London*) society at one point in time. There is no real progress in the novel, which begins one day in October and ends before the New Year, and nothing much

happens in these few weeks beyond the vicissitudes of the daily lives of journalist Kate Armstrong and her children, friends and acquaintances. There is, to be sure, one dramatic event — social worker Evelyn Stennett, Kate’s close friend and the wife of one of her ex-lovers, is injured in a violent scene involving one of her “cases” — but the “event” is just that: it happens, and it is literally inconsequential. It changes nothing, like the “one true act of bravery” in the life of another of Kate’s friends, Hugo Mainwaring. Because it had indeed been an *act*, Hugo’s bravery “had not been random, pointless, purposeless at all,” and it did have consequences in that he lost his arm as a result of it, but “What had it all proved? Nothing much, it is too much to hope that one act will ever resolve us, we have to go on acting till the end” (254). Because there can be no resolution, there can be no plot.

History is not entirely absent from the novel, in that we learn of the biographies, and share the memories, of each of the major characters, but *as history* — as sequences interrogated in terms of cause-and-effect — they yield no meaning: “the past stretches back too densely, it is too thickly populated,” thinks Hugo Mainwaring (and the narrator appears to endorse his thought) — “No wonder a pattern is slow to emerge from such a thick clutter of cross-references, from such trivia, from such serious but hidden connections. Everything has too much history...” (185). Kate, quite separately, has come to the same conclusion: “The truth is, [Kate] thought, I no longer trust any of my memories. I’ve lost faith in them. I thought they all made sense, that there was a nice bright straight pattern, a nice conscious clear pattern.... But maybe I’ve got it all wrong. Maybe there’s some other darker pattern, something utterly different. And if so, why can’t I see it? (131).

The answer, which should be clear to the reader if not to Kate, is that the “darker pattern” is dictated by the imperatives of culture. “How extraordinary people are, that they get themselves into such situations where they go on doing what they dislike doing, and have no need or obligation to do, simply because it seems to be expected.... But expected *by whom, of whom?* Ah, if I had the answer to that, thinks Kate, I should really know myself” (86). Not having followed up Hugo’s suggestions that she read Mary Douglas or Lévi-Strauss, Kate discerns no pattern whatsoever: “Enough of patterns, she’d spent enough time looking for patterns and trends. Hugo was right, she’d get nowhere if she spent the rest of her life forcing things into articles and programmes when they didn’t want to be forced. Shapeless diversity, what was wrong with that?” (229-30). Quite a lot was wrong with it, to judge by the way the novel was initially received, for many reviewers thought that the paradox of an apparently traditional novel that eschewed plot and disdained representative characters produced shapeless diversity and nothing more. Perhaps Drabble’s hints concerning structuralism should have been less casual. Although an understanding of the novel does not depend on a close acquaintance with the structuralists and their theories, Drabble frequently drops clues to the book’s intellectual underpinnings. Some are very slight, like the academic who is “adept at placing things and people with quick dismissive phrases” such as “a little Lévi-Strauss” (74), or the protagonist’s reflection that, in the case of a couple having problems with child-rearing, relations are indeed more significant than the things they relate: “it was the conflict between the two, rather than the policy of either, that proved so ill-fated” (56). Other hints are more substantial: when Kate Armstrong complains to her friend Hugo about the agony of eating a meal at her parents’ house, he “suggested that Kate should try to divert her mind during such ordeals by trying to work out the anthropological or sociological significance of the meal structure,” and his response to her

confession that “her loathing for stewed fruit verged on the pathological” is to advise her to “reflect on the Cooked and the Raw” (124). But finally Lévi-Strauss, whose *The Raw and The Cooked* had been in print in English for more than a decade by the time *The Middle Ground* was published, is a less substantial absent presence in the novel than Mary Douglas and her analysis of cultural notions of hygiene in terms of the opposition between the “pure and the “impure.”

Douglas’ premise is that the distinction between what counts as “clean” and what counts as “unclean” in a given culture is, on a fundamental level, arbitrary (for there is no reason in nature that insects out of doors are fine while insects indoors are pests to be expunged — insects are insects, after all, indoors or out). Douglas postulates that at the social (as opposed to fundamental or natural) level, however, the distinction is not arbitrary at all but meaningful: “as we examine pollution beliefs we find that the kind of contacts which are thought dangerous also carry a symbolic load” because “pollution ideas relate to social life, and some pollutions are used as analogies for expressing a general view of the social order” (3).

As an anthropologist, Douglas was chiefly interested in “primitive” societies, but she warned that “we shall not expect to understand other people’s ideas of contagion, sacred or secular, until we have confronted our own” (28). The basis of her study was the claim that “dirt is essentially disorder. There is no such thing as absolute dirt: it exists in the eye of the beholder.... In chasing dirt, in papering, decorating, tidying we are not governed by anxiety to escape disease, but are positively re-ordering our environment, making it conform to an idea” (2). Primitive society in particular “is subject to external pressures: that which is not with it, part of it and subject to its laws, is potentially against it.... I believe that ideas about separating, purifying, demarcating and punishing transgressions have as their main function to impose system on an

inherently untidy experience. It is only by exaggerating the difference between within and without, above and below, male and female, with and against, that a semblance of order is created” (4).

Drabble’s examination of the state of the nation in *The Ice Age* had certainly uncovered “an inherently untidy experience,” and in *The Middle Ground* she set about looking at it in Mary Douglas’ terms. By that yardstick Britain in 1980 measured up as a primitive patriarchal society, “subject to external pressures” and to internal ones, and it was a society that had reacted to what it perceived as disorder by rigidly adhering to the fundamental binary opposition of “us” and “them” — “them” in *The Middle Ground* including “Jewish communists”(28), “niggers,” “muslim dogs,” “the black cunts who are ruining our country” (105), “gays” (118), “Ay-rabs” (191), the old (79), “punks, kids, the Irish, the unions” (228) and, of course, women. These various categories of the marginal and the abject all find themselves treated as — and associated with — waste matter of one kind or another: “sewage,” “dirt,” “muck” and “mess.” Kate’s television documentary on the lives of contemporary women, “Women at the Crossroads,” is abbreviated by the camera crew to “W.C. [*the crew’s little joke*]” (200); the children of Arblay Street, where Kate grows up, taunt her outcast brother with “nasty little ditties” including one that represents him as eating “A nice thick sandwich / Buttered with shit” (21); and Ted Stennett, whose speech is liberally sprinkled with obscenities, frequently characterizes views other than his own as “rubbish” (180, 211, 236). Language such as this signifies exclusion: “Uncleanness or dirt is that which must not be included if a pattern is to be maintained,” claims Mary Douglas, adding that this principle “involves no special distinction between primitives and moderns: we are all subject to the same rules” (40).

The insistence on human waste matter in *The Middle Ground*, in which it pops up in practically every other sentence in one form or another, is partly to be explained by Douglas' contention that "The body is a model which can stand for any bounded system.... We cannot possibly interpret rituals concerning excreta, breast milk, saliva and the rest unless we are prepared to see in the body a symbol of society, and to see the powers and dangers credited to social structure reproduced in small on the human body" (115). More particularly, the body provides ways of thinking — and reacting to — marginality:

...all margins are dangerous. If they are pulled this way or that the shape of fundamental experience is altered. Any structure of ideas is vulnerable at its margins. We should expect the orifices of the body to symbolize its specially vulnerable points. Matter issuing from them is marginal stuff of the most obvious kind. Spittle, blood, milk, urine, faeces or tears by simply issuing forth have traversed the boundary of the body. So also have bodily parings, skin, nail, hair clippings and sweat. The mistake is to treat bodily margins in isolation from all other kinds of margins. (121).

So Douglas argues that

...when rituals express anxiety about the body's orifices the sociological counterpart of this anxiety is a care to protect the political and cultural unity of a minority group. The Israelites were always in their history a hard-pressed minority. In their beliefs all the bodily issues were polluting, blood, pus, excreta, semen etc. The threatened boundaries of their body politic would be well mirrored in their care for the integrity, unity and purity of the physical body. (124)

What Douglas alleges of the Israelites Drabble applies in *The Middle Ground* to people like Evelyn, who “came from a good solid hard-working middle-class family, and had been reared on notions of thrift, prudence, propriety” (141). Always a numerical minority in England, this class is now threatened by all the anomalous and marginal people — punks, Rastafarians, New Age travellers, gays and lesbians — whose manners, dress and values not only threaten in the streets and subways but have insinuated themselves into the heart of the bourgeois family through its rebellious children. So it comes as no surprise to discover that Evelyn, despite her vocation and her belief that “All we can do is to care for one another, in the society we have” (241), finds it impossible to control her own deeply-ingrained fears of the marginal, fears encoded in her principles of hygiene. She cannot finish eating a sandwich which contains a hair from the “gross, greasy” woman who prepared it (150), and although she is a dedicated social worker and “the mildest of women,” she is revolted by the old and frail whom she serves: “Ever since childhood, while talking to the very old, she has been frightened by visions of herself attacking them, hitting them, assaulting them, knocking off their glasses” (61). And what is true of the middle class is true of the white working class, whose sense of integrity threatened by immigrants is expressed in the “National Front stickers and scribbles” that greet Kate on trains, in “the faint red buzzing of hatred from the writing on every wall” (107).

Evelyn’s exhortation to “care” seems powerless against the fact that what counts as anomalous is a matter of cultural, not individual, definition:

Culture, in the sense of the public, standardized values of a community, mediates the experience of individuals. It provides in advance some basic categories, a positive pattern in which ideas and values are tidily ordered. And above all, it has authority, since each is

induced to assent because of the assent of others. But its public character makes its categories more rigid. A private person may revise his pattern of assumptions or not. It is a private matter. But cultural categories are public matters. They cannot so easily be subject to revision. (Douglas 38-39).

Douglas explains that “any culture worthy of the name” has developed ways of dealing with anomalous events, but there is little comfort for the liberal here, since most of these procedures boil down to avoiding, expelling or killing the anomaly (39). But in the final chapter of *Purity and Danger*, Douglas does suggest a way of transcending the problem that clearly impressed

Drabble:

In the course of any imposing of order, whether in the mind or in the external world, the attitude to rejected bits and pieces goes through two stages. First they are recognizably out of place, a threat to good order, and so are regarded as objectionable and vigorously brushed away. At this stage they have some identity: they can be seen to be unwanted bits of whatever it was they came from, hair or food or wrappings. This is the stage at which they are dangerous; their half-identity still clings to them and the clarity of the scene in which they obtrude is impaired by their presence. But a long process of pulverizing, dissolving and rotting awaits any physical things that have been recognized as dirt. In the end, all identity is gone. The origin of the various bits and pieces is lost and they have entered into the mass of common rubbish.... So long as identity is absent, rubbish is not dangerous.... Where there is no differentiation there is no defilement.... Formlessness is therefore an apt symbol of beginning and growth as it is of decay.... dirt shows itself as an apt symbol of creative formlessness. (160-161)

“Creative formlessness” is a good description of Kate Armstrong’s life — as it is of the surface texture of Drabble’s novel about her. Like her vast array of friends and acquaintances, Kate’s experiences are so disordered, so miscellaneous that nothing in them can be said to be out of place. Since dirt, as Douglas defines it, is “matter out of place” (40), Kate perceives few things in her life as dirty; there are no anomalies, and she can flourish amidst the “shapeless diversity” that others perceive as a “mess.”

This tolerance of the marginal is not the result of an act of will on Kate’s part, but it is hard to know how to account for it. If we are tempted to attribute it to her unusual upbringing as the daughter of a sewer worker, to her “past history, some if not all of which must have led her to wherever she now is” (13), we are cautioned by the fact that the same family background, the same enforced early acquaintance with a world of shit and tampons and contraceptives, produced the very opposite results in the case of her brother — a disturbed man who sends her anonymous letters bearing judgments such as “WOMEN LIKE YOU WALK AROUND LOOKING FOR TROUBLE. RAPE IS TOO GOOD FOR YOU” (257). And if we choose to believe that such tolerance is to be expected from women who, as mothers, are used to dealing with various leaks and effusions from their offspring, we have Kate to remind us that “women only have to deal with nice clean yellow milky baby shit, which is perfectly inoffensive, in fact in its own way rather nice” (58). This judgment itself, of course, is an example of Kate’s easy acceptance of marginal products, but that such acceptance is not the natural and inevitable consequence of motherhood and nurturing is demonstrated by the case of Evelyn, who remains fastidious. Kate herself ruefully accepts messiness as her nature and contrasts her “corner-shop life” in her converted-fish-and-chip-shop house — “at certain seasons, she claims, it still smells of chips” (88) — with Evelyn’s “proper” existence:

She thought of Evelyn. Evelyn worked amongst the very poor, as Kate did not, and never had. Evelyn cared, Evelyn gave herself, Evelyn tried to understand and help the dull, the hopeless, the inadequate, the vicious. Evelyn was a good woman, a woman with a conscience. She went out of her own way, and worked long hours. Whereas I, thought Kate, I merely at random scatter my notions abroad like birdseed, and accept the visitations of people like Mujid and Hunt and all those silly men I get mixed up with, and the children's awful friends, because I haven't the strength to say no, haven't the strength to kick people out, haven't the guts to defend myself. Evelyn goes home to her white house and shuts the door. Then she gives proper dinner parties with proper food. And she has Ted [her husband], after a fashion. She draws lines, she makes demarcations. She is a proper woman. (114-115).

But Kate is wrong to envy Evelyn, and it is a very good thing indeed that she cannot, by an act of will, become "a proper woman." For her inability to draw lines, to make demarcations, is not her weakness but her strength and her grace. She is a human maelstrom who is destined to draw into her giddy circle all the flotsam and jetsam that obscure but powerful currents sweep in her direction. Instead of being imprisoned within the binary oppositions that structure her society, categorizing all that she does not understand as "shit," she transcends them in a tolerance of ambiguity, ambivalence, inconsistency and plain old "mess" that leaves her solidly occupying "the middle ground."

As a child, Kate loved to walk along the top of the grass-covered sewage bank, that twenty-foot-high "secret thoroughfare" that divided her own neighbourhood of South Romley — with its smelly fish-and-chip shops, its pubs, its tiny front yards "into which passers-by would chuck

newspapers full of fish skin and old chips” (17) — from “the thoroughly suburban district of 1930’s semi-detacheds” (19). On the sewage bank, straddling not only a subterranean river of excrement and condoms and tampons but also the symbolic boundary that marks the imposition of social difference, the young Kate drew strength from the “vegetable, organic smell” of “drains and rosewater,” of human waste now become undifferentiated sewage (116). As a child she recognized that there was “something magical” and “powerful” to be derived from her secret sniffing, her “dangerous” transgression (116), and this magic power is associated with the power of art. For Kate the schoolgirl also learned an art of storytelling that made her popular and admired among the schoolfellows who at first despised her; it “was like a kind of magic, turning shit into gold” (23). As an adult she is still the bearer of magical powers derived from her transgression of boundaries — a magic which can dissolve antinomies. At Kate’s party, with which the novel closes, Marylou Scott — she who was so shocked by the influx of “Ay-rabs” into her hitherto exclusive neighbourhood (191) — happily dances with a Rastaman.

Kate speaks more truth than she knows when she tells Hugo, “saying yes is my special technique for preserving myself. I know it doesn’t sound very logical, but it works” (10), and her party is the living evidence of the wide range of cultural variety she can say yes to:

Kate, issuing her own invitations, felt herself running a little wild, tried to check her exuberance, but failed. She invited at random — Stuart [her ex-husband], and all her ex-in-laws: the Morton girls...: far too many of her idle strike-struck colleagues, Joker James [member of a gay rock group] and his mates, Sam Goldman, Gabriel Denham and his second wife Jessica and his first wife Phillipa and half the crew of *Women at the Crossroads*: Hugo of course, Ted of course, and even some of the ex-suitors. She invited Marylou and an

American woman she met at a bus stop. She invited Hugo's mother, and the Irish teacher with whom Mujid had become so friendly. She did not invite Hugo's wife Judith, for benevolence cannot conquer everyone, and she feared a rude refusal. Mujid invited some of his fellow language students, who over the weeks had proved less dull than he had at first feared, and Evelyn suggested Ayesha and her husband, Joan Kingsley and her husband, and her colleague the sad and widowed Mr. Campbell, who was having such trouble with the rehousing of boat people. "*Too many people,*" groaned Kate three nights before the event.... (251-2).

Kate's party resembles Drabble's novel, which would ideally include anybody and everybody in its social embrace. At one point the narrator, updating the reader on events in the lives of her various characters, interrupts herself with the frustrated yet strangely triumphant cry "but one could go on endlessly, and why not, for there seems little point in allowing space to one set of characters rather than another" (185). Having rejected plot, the novel also does its best to resist the closure or resolution of traditional narrative, and indeed the word "termination" is used at least twice — and pointedly — as a doctor's euphemism for abortion. "Closure" and "termination," in their cognate senses of "limit," "bound," "confine," "closed condition," "cutting short" and "closing off discussion," are at the heart of the racism, sexism and class prejudice that plague the England of *The Middle Ground*, and they constitute the moral, social and political problem that Kate Armstrong transcends as if by an act of grace. In terms of literary technique, they also constitute the formal problem that Drabble had to transcend in order to remain true to her conception of her subject.

For even a novel without a “proper” plot has to end somewhere. “Closure” in that sense is inevitable, and Drabble left many of her readers frustrated because the story appears to break off almost arbitrarily (“Let us leave her there,” says the narrator) just as the party is about to begin.¹²⁵ But Drabble also provided her readers with a resolution, not of her non-existent plot but of her theme. Having repudiated the meaningless linearity of time, the ignis fatuus of progress — “Why expect results, progress, success, a better society?” thinks Evelyn (241) — the novel resolves itself into the image of a circle with Kate in the middle of it, where she belongs:

...how good that it should end so well, and even as she was thinking this, looking around her family circle, feeling as she sat there a sense of immense calm, strength, centrality, as though she were indeed the centre of a circle, in the most old-fashioned of ways, a moving circle — oh, there is no language left to describe such things, we have called it all so much in question, but imagine a circle even so, a circle and a moving sphere, for this is her house and there she sits, she has everything and nothing, I give her everything and nothing... (275)

Drabble has given Kate “nothing” in that she has not provided a resolution of any of the doubts, the worries, that troubled her before this magical moment of calm and will trouble her again in a moment. On the other hand, she has given her “everything” in the form of a sustaining circle of family, friends and acquaintances, and an unquenchable thirst for change, for new experiences:

“Anything is possible, it is all undecided. Everything or nothing. It is all in the future.

Excitement fills her, excitement, joy, anticipation, apprehension. Something will happen. The water glints in the distance. It is unplanned, unpredicted. Nothing binds her, nothing holds her.

It is the unknown, and there is no way of stopping it. It waits, unseen, and she will meet it, it

will meet her. There is no way of knowing what it will be. It does not know itself. But it will come into being” (277).

As a loosely structuralist novel embodied in a realistic form, *The Middle Ground* is something of a *tour de force*, and one which offers a new and hopeful way of thinking about the cultural breakdown that was moving into the crucial phase of the “winter of discontent” even as Drabble’s book was being readied for the press. Mary Douglas’ work offered Drabble a way of seeing cultural breakdown as analogous to the breakdown of organic matter, the composting of waste that would produce new life. The transgression of fixed boundaries, the blurring of the fixed lines of demarcation that characterized the inherited culture of the “tight little island,” was perhaps a promise of new and vital growth. At one point in the novel Hugo Mainwaring asks himself whether anyone will “ever again be able to write, with confidence, a book that assumes the significance of one culture only,” and reflects that “Culture dies at the interface, one might reasonably fear” (173). By embodying the interface of cultures in Kate’s chaotic life, her equally chaotic party, and the apparently random eclecticism that marks the lives of her children and their friends, Drabble suggests that it should inspire us with hope rather than fear, should lead us to the faith that the breakdown of a rigid culture is a vital and organic process that creates the soil in which a new humanity will flourish.

“Inadequate warders and innocent lunatics”:* *The Radiant Way and A Natural Curiosity

Things did not turn out that way, however — at least, not in the next decade. The election of 1979 swept into a power a Conservative Party radically different from the party of Disraeli and

his “one-nation” Toryism, and the new prime minister, Margaret Thatcher, aggressively pursued policies that destroyed even the illusion of consensus. Demarcations of class and race hardened into battle-lines, and in Drabble’s next novel, *The Radiant Way* (1987), there are few grounds for optimism: “On a more public level 1980 continues. The steel strike continues, a bitter prelude to the miners’ strike that will follow. Class rhetoric flourishes. Long-cherished notions of progress are inspected, exposed, left to die out in the cold. Survival of the fittest seems to be the new-old doctrine.”¹²⁶ And so it goes on:

“These were the years of inner-city riots, of race riots in Brixton and Toxteth, of rising unemployment and riotless gloom: these were the years of a small war in the Falklands (rather a lot of people dead) and of the Falklands Factor in politics.... A fourth television channel opened, with a powerful and eloquent drama eloquently portraying Britain (at least in the recollection of some) as a mental hospital peopled by malevolent dwarves, ravening pigeons, shit-strewn corpses, geriatric patients, inadequate warders and innocent lunatics.” (227-228).

In the 1980’s it was difficult to regard the rubbish and mess proliferating “in the streets and front gardens and underpasses and hedgerows of Britain” as a fertile breeding ground for anything hopeful: the only new birth that continuing national decay might augur would surely be a monstrous one.

Such a birth, in fact, had been a symbolic possibility in *The Middle Ground*, a novel built upon Mary Douglas’ premise that the human body represents the body politic. A pregnant Kate, learning that her unborn baby has spina bifida, chooses abortion and sterilization only after much anguishing, tormented by the feeling that saying “no” rather than her usual “yes,” even to a

monstrous new life, is the wrong choice: "For two nights she wrestled with fantasies of keeping the baby, however damaged it might be. Others coped in such situations, why should not she?... How could she relinquish those reluctant stirrings of hope that she had so wilfully encouraged? She had been chosen for the burden, she could not lay it down" (70). When, despite all her misgivings, she does lay it down, everything in her life seems to go wrong:

"I couldn't do anything right. Everything I did went wrong, as though some spell were on me, as though some magic had been taken from me.... And the oddest thing was that I went on and on feeling bad not about the bad things I'd done, but about the good thing, which was getting rid of that poor baby. I still have bad dreams.... Would I have been full of the spirit of life and love and joy and hope if I'd had a wretched baby with no bowel control and a spine split like a kipper and a head like a pumpkin? Yes, I probably would. Life is rotten, darling, rotten" (78).

Kate has made what she still believes to have been the rational choice, but the heart has its reasons that reason knows not, and she cannot rid herself of her instinctual conviction that life in any form is to be welcomed and cherished. For in the terms established in *The Middle Ground*, life is rotten, inescapably: it is nourished by rot and decay, and it is itself a process of rot and decay, but this is hardly grounds for despair. Such optimism seems to have been difficult to maintain as the years went by and things went from bad to worse: "So sat Alix Bowen, and many thousands like her, as the year wore on, as she watched the grim images that filled her little screen, and heard the righteous voices of unreason in the terminal struggle of warring factions in her own land. Where was a voice to speak to her, for her, for England? Where was

Cromwell, where Winstanley? Was the country done for, finished off, struggling and twitching in the last artificially prolonged struggles of old age?" (*The Radiant Way* 343).

Kate Armstrong may have been able to transcend the imperatives of history and culture through the mysterious magic powers conferred on her by her trafficking with the "impure," but in *The Radiant Way* those imperatives are even more deeply entrenched. The relentless pressure of history, of what structuralist jargon called "the diachronic," could not be so easily dissolved by the "synchronic" methodology of structuralism itself. One of the novel's minor characters, Claudio, is "an anthropologist of satanic reputation who in the fullness of time turned out to be — indeed, for some time, unrecognized by the British, had been — a structuralist.... His interest in witchcraft was said to be more than scholarly" (100). But this novel does not have the confidence of its predecessor that structuralism can penetrate and dissolve the veil of history, even though it is willing to withhold final judgment on Claudio's claim to have encountered a werewolf in southern Bulgaria, in a place where people lived "in a primitive style little changed by the turning of the great wheel of time" (251-254). The shocked academic audience to which Claudio recounts this experience is at first scandalized by what seems to be madness, and later chooses to interpret his story as a subtle critique of the historical method in scholarship, as a structuralist's "deconstructive attack on diachronic methodology" (254). History, however, refuses to be dismissed without a fight: in the form of an ever-flowing, steadily-worsening present, it writes itself as crudely and insistently as "the words CLASS WAR NOW... in large white letters on low suburban walls or high railway bridges" and "less aggressively, more insidiously, more archaically, in the subtext of the tabloid press, in the subtext of the increasingly right-wing respectable press" (235-236).

Perhaps the most imperative of the demands of history — including the chaotic contemporary history whose images flicker across the television screen — is the demand that we make sense of it, that we identify a meaningful pattern and compose a coherent, significant narrative. Unlike *The Middle Ground*, neither *The Radiant Way* nor the sequel that followed hard on its heels, *A Natural Curiosity*, is committed to one particular kind of explanation — there is no single, overarching doctrine embodied in a single protagonist. Instead Drabble gives us the kind of multiple-focus novel that Henry James called a “baggy monster,” and *The Radiant Way*’s three protagonists take different approaches to the task of making sense of events, of finding significant pattern in apparent randomness. Together they represent the three chief perspectives — psychological, socio-historical, and aesthetic — that Drabble wants to put into play, but there is no cut-and-dried division of labour here, for to a greater or lesser extent all three perspectives are indeed *in play* in each one of them: “But one cannot, really, wholly differentiate these three women,” warns the narrator. “In their mid-forties, after more than half-a-lifetime of association, they share characteristics, impressions, memories, even speech patterns: they have a common stock of knowledge, they have entered, through one another, worlds that they would not otherwise have known” (108).

The three women have maintained close friendships ever since they met at Cambridge, and the narrator — who has been considering Jane Austen’s advice to construct a novel around representative instances, around “three or four families in the Country Village” (84) — comments: “Liz, Alix and Esther... were not beautiful, they were not rich. But they were young, and they had considerable wit. Their fate should, therefore, be in some sense at least exemplary: opportunity was certainly offered to them, they had choices, at eighteen the world opened for them and displayed its riches, the brave new world of Welfare State and County Scholarships, of

equality for women, they were the élite, the chosen, the garlanded of the great social dream” (88). Now, thirty years later, each of them is trying to understand the vicissitudes of her own life as well as the trajectory of a nation that had once seemed committed to “the radiant way,” the shining path to “a forward-looking, forward-moving, dynamic society, full of opportunity, co-operative, classless” (176). Liz Headleand, now a fashionable and affluent psychotherapist, makes a living out of delving into personal histories, helping patients understand their present problems in terms of past traumas. Alix Bowen, who read English literature at Cambridge and now teaches part-time in a women’s prison, is committed to social change and more interested in sociology than in psychology. Esther Breuer, an art historian, disdains all systematic explanations: “I wish to acquire interesting information. That is all” (85) she declared when she was still an aspiring undergraduate, and as an established freelance scholar she still maintains “I am not ambitious, I do not seek answers to large questions.” Perhaps, however, her aspirations to knowledge are the most ambitious of all, for she seeks nothing less than epiphany:

“Sometimes, when accused of eccentricity or indeed perversity of vision, she would claim that all knowledge must always be omnipresent in all things, and that one could startle oneself into seeing the whole by tweaking unexpectedly at a surprised corner of the great mantle” (83).

Drabble’s shift from the single protagonist of *The Middle Ground* to the multiple protagonists of *The Radiant Way* signals a waning confidence in the structuralist reading of English culture informing the earlier novel. By 1987 there were few structuralists left, indeed, for that intellectual movement had been transformed and replaced by *poststructuralism*, which had subjected the structuralist claims to a cogent critique. Poststructuralists such as the philosopher Jacques Derrida had argued that the fixed codes or *structures* that the structuralists claimed to have identified are chimerical — they exist only as projections of the assumptions and methods

employed by the structuralists to invent them. The failure of structuralism to discover “true” structures is a necessary failure, because there are none: since all signifying systems, like language itself, are structurally unstable, there are no *systems* at all, only textures of constantly-shifting signification. The never-ending play of signification can never crystallize into anything as fixed as a coherent system or structure, because the binary oppositions that the structuralists posited as their structures’ governing terms are themselves unstable, each term constantly threatening to collapse into its “opposite.” So structuralism yielded to *deconstruction*, a way of reading which meticulously pursues and interrogates a text’s language in order to reveal its instability and to locate the logical impasse that haunts its argument.

The major consequence of these poststructuralist claims is that transcendent “Truth” (to which not only structuralism but all other intellectual systems aspire) is nothing more — or less — than the dream of western metaphysics. But it is a necessary dream, because we cannot go beyond western metaphysics: its assumptions are inscribed within language itself, and hence within the very structure of our thought. We exist, therefore, in the paradox that although there is no final “Truth” which we can identify, we cannot even think its absence, for the language in which we attempt to think it will always smuggle in all the metaphysical baggage we are trying to reject. So while there is no ultimate truth, we cannot live without “truths”: the best we can do is to acknowledge that all these “truths” — all the patterns we construct out of texts, out of history, out of culture — are not perceptions but interpretations, and as interpretations they are necessarily unstable, incomplete, vulnerable. Since we cannot ever get beyond the dark glass of interpretation into the clear, radiant light of Truth itself, we should do our best to remain open to the play of meanings, the provisional quality of our interpretations. To cling obstinately to the illusion of a monolithic Truth is to embrace a kind of death: the “radiant way” that promises to

lead to that Truth will take us to the murderous monomania of “the secretive Pol Pot, hiding in his lair, at the end of the Shining Path,”¹²⁷ as Drabble subtly reminds us in *A Natural Curiosity*.

By the time she came to write *The Radiant Way*, Drabble had clearly explored poststructuralist thought, and had determined to write a novel that would self-consciously put a variety of points-of-view into play rather than imprison itself within any one of them. Alix Bowen finds herself recalling a line from Shakespeare, “Do not play in wench-like words with that which is most serious,” and asks herself whether Shakespeare was turning against his own art, dismissing “all language, all poetry” (267). Significantly, Alix sees the line as a rejection not just of literary language but of *all* language, for all language is implicated in the play of meaning, as the poststructuralists had argued. Drabble is presumably here reminding us that such play as Shakespeare apparently condemns is anything but un-serious, and perhaps she wishes us to recall Derrida’s witty deconstruction of the binary opposition “serious/non-serious” in an essay on the work of the Oxford philosopher of language, J. L. Austin. In any case, her novel dedicates itself to exploring the play of meanings, ideas and metaphors involved in the various schemes of explanation on offer in contemporary England, and to celebrating a conception of “play” that would emphasize its connotation of “flexibility”. To refuse “play” would be to harden into the inflexibility of fixed opinion: “‘Men are a strange lot,’ said Esther, meditatively: ‘they are so inflexible. So extreme. They have to take sides. Now me, I don’t know what I think, on almost any public issue you may happen to name. But men have to have an opinion’” (246). And Alix, acknowledging that she is “in some kind of representative position of representative confusion” about the polarized political issues of the day, realizes that she refuses to make up her mind because “making up one’s mind involves internalizing lies” (285). To embrace the play of meaning is to embrace life itself, for the only thing that can finally arrest the play and bring

closure is the ultimate inflexibility of Death: “No, there would never be knowledge, there would only be fear, uncertainty, suspicion. Knowledge would be death” (384), as Liz Headleand reflects when, after her mother’s death, she is leafing through papers and newspaper clippings that may be clues to the secret of her own past, her own origins.

In *The Radiant Way* (as in its sequel *A Natural Curiosity*), a multitude of perspectives is brought to bear on a variety of problems, personal and political, and at various times each of the three main characters entertains the kind of explanation initially associated with one of the others. So there is “play” here too: Drabble warns us that “one cannot, really, wholly differentiate these women” because these initial oppositions, like other kinds of oppositions, are never stable. So it is Esther the aesthete who is reading E.H. Carr’s book entitled *What is History?* (188) and who is troubled by the question: “Maybe the facts will never be established. What is history? *What is History?* She is haunted by Ranke’s now apparently scorned ideal, to tell things ‘*wie es eigentlich gewesen*’. To tell things as they really are” (195). And it is Alix who, in her attempt to understand the motivation of an unlikely serial murderer whose victims are strewn strategically throughout *The Radiant Way*, finally settles (in *A Natural Curiosity*) on a psychological explanation, while psychotherapist Liz is privately sceptical of it:

Alix believes that she has unknotted and unravelled the strands of her murderer, that she has seen into him and known him. She presents Liz and Esther with her version of the murderer, and they have, by and large, accepted it. Yes, they concede, Paul Whitmore has clearly been unhinged by maternal neglect, by maternal hatred, by punitive discrimination in his early years. An abused child. Liz does not like to point out that by Alix’s account, Paul’s father is a perfectly normal, indeed quite kind-hearted chap, and that many children grow up normal

without any parental kindness at all. At least they do not grow up into mass murderers. She does not raise this objection as Alix is pleased with her explanation, and anyway, Liz has no better explanation to offer. She does not claim to understand the pathology of Paul Whitmore. (*A Natural Curiosity* 302).

But as the poststructuralists argue, you find what you are looking for, because the terms in which you ask the question dictate a certain kind of answer. Alix, deep down, is uncomfortably aware of this: “She frowned. ‘But it is *odd*, isn’t it?’ she repeats. ‘That Paul should have turned out to fit so neatly the sort of explanation that I might be expected to have for him? Don’t you think it’s odd?’” (303). And Alix *should* be troubled, because as a fifteen-year-old schoolgirl she had both recognized and been “puzzled at the way a system can provide its own answers, *none of which need have any relation at all to any outside system*, none of which could ever be checked” (*A Natural Curiosity* 229). Yet she should not be too troubled, for she is not inflexibly committed to psychology as the ultimate explanatory scheme: she has simply done the best that any of us can do, which is to make the best sense of things that we can with the tools that seem, for whatever reason, best suited to the job. Liz thinks “Alix’s version is as good as any, and it is certainly based on more information than anyone else has yet assembled about the poor Horror” (302).

There is, however, another explanation, and perhaps it is a better one because it is based upon slightly more information than Alix has assembled. For the reader of *A Natural Curiosity* is a fourth major player in the serious game that Drabble is playing: to read the novel is not only to consider all the kinds of explanation hazarded by the characters, but to look for significant patterns in the welter of information provided by the text. And the reader knows everything that

Alix knows, and also something she does not. Just a few pages earlier, the novel has shown us Paul Whitmore — the Horror of Harrow Road who sliced the heads off his victims with a power saw — sitting in his solitary prison cell, where he is drawing a cross-section of a plant: “Paul had always been fascinated by cross-sections. To slice through the meeting-place, the joining-point, the node itself, through the conductor, the connector, the conveyor of current. Through the many coloured wiring of life. If one slices neatly across the current, with Occam’s razor, one will catch the mystery as it flows. This is a pure activity, clean, clinical, inquiring. Thus he will find the source of power” (296-297). The clear implication is that the secret of Paul Whitmore’s murders lies not in some childhood trauma but in his *natural curiosity*, in the spirit of scientific inquiry inherent in human nature. Instead of being a monster whose abnormal psychology requires scientific explanation, Whitmore would thus appear to personify scientific method and its tendency to destroy the mysteries it probes: the power saw he used on his victims is merely Occam’s razor and all the other tools of logic writ large. “We murder to dissect,” said Wordsworth; “Knowledge would be death,” says Drabble’s Liz Headleand.

Both *The Radiant Way* and *A Natural Curiosity* take as one of their themes the distrust of Reason that became a hallmark of so many novels of the 1980’s and 1990’s. Despairing of making sense of things in terms of any of the master narratives — Whig, Marxist, Freudian, Darwinian, Positivist, whatever — that the nineteenth century built on Enlightenment foundations, and emboldened by poststructuralism’s critique of those narratives and the logic they obey, novelists dramatized the limitations of rational explanation while self-consciously exploring avowedly imaginative ways of comprehending experience. Significantly, the visionary poet Blake is a frequent visitor in these novels — he is an important presence in A. N. Wilson’s *Daughters of Albion*, for instance, and is repeatedly invoked in Clarke’s *The Chymical Wedding*

and in Ackroyd's *English Music* — so in *The Radiant Way* it is not surprising to find Alix devoting one of her classes at the prison to two of the *Songs of Experience* because “she had found Blake, on many previous occasions, a useful poet for generating exchange of ideas...” (211).

Poetry, with its insistence on the power of the imagination, is crucial to both *The Radiant Way* and *A Natural Curiosity* in a way that goes far beyond the significance of any particular allusion. In the later novel there is an exchange between Alix and the ageing poet Howard Beaver which begs to be read as a clue to Drabble's own purposes and methods:

‘A magpie mind, that's what you need to make poems. A bit here, a bit there. Little nests, little pickings. You don't want a world view. Just scraps.’

Alix and Beaver smile at each other. They enjoy such discussions. ‘Of course,’ pursues Beaver, provocatively, ‘it's different if you're a novelist. Like your [husband] Brian. You need structure if you're a novelist. Narrative sequence. Solid chronology. All that kind of thing.’ (191)

“Narrative sequence” and “solid chronology,” conventionally thought to be structurally central to the traditional novel, have been a problem for Drabble ever since *The Ice Age* precisely because the linear conception of time inscribed in that structure cannot make sense of the state of affairs she wants to write about. It is not surprising, therefore, to find her here trying to craft novels which aspire to the condition of poetry, articulating her purposes less in plot and sequence than in the multiplicity of kaleidoscopic patterns that the reader is invited to construct out of little scraps and pickings.

Neither novel dispenses with plot and chronology as radically as *The Middle Ground*, but Drabble includes them almost derisively. Chronology is simply public time, the time in which the meaningless violence and absurdity and babble of the so-called “real world” endlessly repeat themselves, and Drabble points up its insignificance in a scene in which Charles Headleand uses the capabilities of a high-tech television to superimpose videotext of “Global News” over a nature programme about wildlife on the River Barle on Exmoor:

Over the flowing river appear newly calculated statistics of crime and violence in the inner cities, and predictable telespeak protestations of imminent action from the Home Secretary. Charles watches this combination with satisfaction. It is artistic. He has made it. It occurs to Charles that we do not really need a Home Secretary any more: we could just programme a machine to issue statements, and another machine to issue equally predictable Opposition statements.

The river is subtle, supple, infinitely varied. No two days in time, no two minutes in time of its long, long history have ever been, will ever be repeated. Its patterns flicker, alter, flow, and each moment is unique. (*A Natural Curiosity* 175).

Meaning does not inhere in the deadening repetition which constitutes the chronological sequence of public events, or in the rational statistical analyses which increasingly shape them. It is rather to be found in art, in the juxtaposition of news and river which is both random and “artistic” and in which Charles’ imagination apprehends a significant pattern. Drabble challenges her reader to emulate Charles, to create his or her own juxtapositions and so make meaningful shapes out of the novels’ accumulation of “little pickings” and “scraps.”

One of her major techniques is a dense *intertextuality*, an important poststructuralist term that Drabble introduces with deceptive casualness in *The Radiant Way*: on “his return flight from Boston, [Stephen found himself] sitting next to a young American academic who was attending a conference in Monte Carlo on intertextuality in the works of James Joyce” (157). Drabble practises intertextuality on many levels. The most obvious one is the many links between *The Radiant Way* and its sequel *A Natural Curiosity*, links which make it impossible — or at least, unproductive — to keep the two novels entirely separate; for in the case of a novel in which chronological sequence is devalued, its successor is not so much a *sequel* as an amplification, a gloss which importantly revises and extends our reading of its predecessor. Drabble herself, in a prefatory “author’s note,” says that she wrote *A Natural Curiosity* because “the earlier novel was in some way unfinished,” and in the second novel the enigma of Liz’s mother — the “mystery in the front room” (60) that provides much of the “plot” interest of *The Radiant Way* — is resolved quite differently from the way it appeared to have been resolved in the first. It is also the sequel that revises our understanding of the meaning of “the radiant way:” although there are several references to Pol Pot in the first novel, it is only in the second that Drabble explicitly connects him with “the Shining Path” and hence the “radiant way” itself to something much darker than had at first appeared.* A second level of intertextuality consists of the glancing references to characters from other Drabble novels — Anthony Keating and Gabriel Denham are mentioned in *The Radiant Way* (202), and in *A Natural Curiosity* Len Wincobank is a guest at Fanny Kettle’s party — and to those novels themselves: Otto Werner’s involvement with the new Social-

* “Shining Path” also translates *Sendero Luminoso*, the name of the murderous maoist guerrilla movement that flourished in Peru in the 1980’s.

Democratic Party is his “discovery of the Middle Ground” (*The Radiant Way* 231), while Shirley in *A Natural Curiosity* notes the “glacial” colours of an insecticide-poisoned landscape and reflects “The Ice Age, the last of England” (127).

The phrase “the last of England” is an example of the third and most important level of intertextuality, the sometimes explicit but often oblique allusion to a work beyond the Drabble *oeuvre*: since Shirley is driving to Dover, presumably we are invited to connect “the last of England” with Ford Madox Brown’s painting of that title showing an emigrant couple as they look back from the boat on which they are departing. Are we also being invited to think of Peter Porter’s poem with the same title, and of Derek Jarman’s savage, angry film? It hardly matters what Drabble’s intentions were, for as the poststructuralists have pointed out, intertextuality is the very condition of writing: no writer can invent a wholly new language (if he or she attempted to do so, the result would not be *language* because it would not be intelligible), and so cannot help echoing the previously-written. In both novels, however, the web of intertextuality appears so dense, the text so interwoven with familiar threads, that the reader’s mind, once nudged in this direction, will hardly be able to stop. So Alix sitting “alone, in a rented house” near the end of the inconclusive *The Radiant Way* (374), may well conjure up T. S. Eliot’s “Gerontion,” whose speaker admonishes “We have not reached conclusion, when I / Stiffen in a rented house.” Given that making sense of Time is one of the novel’s concerns, we may especially call to mind the passage earlier in the poem beginning “History has many cunning passages, contrived corridors / And issues, deceives with whispering ambitions, / Guides us by vanities.”¹²⁸ And prompted by several scenes of almost mystical apprehension that occur in both novels but especially in *A Natural Curiosity*, we may even, on a re-reading, let our minds wander to Eliot’s

Four Quartets, to their exploration of the intersection of Time and Eternity, and in particular to *Burnt Norton*'s claim that "Only through time time is conquered."

Similarly, when Charles Headland in *A Natural Curiosity* remarks that "There's no point in looking into these things too closely" (171), it is difficult for the reader who has also read Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent* not to connect this with the character of Winnie Verloc (for this was her deeply-held and oft-repeated belief) and, by extension, to that novel's treatment of domestic and political violence as well as to one of its key incidents — a symbolic attempt to destroy Time by detonating a bomb at Greenwich. Furthermore, in the context of some of the speculations in *A Natural Curiosity* and of the symbolic importance of severed heads, an allusion to Conrad can hardly fail to suggest not only *The Secret Agent* but also *Heart of Darkness*, with its vivid glimpse of human heads on stakes, its modernist repudiation of the Enlightenment idea of Progress, and its insistence that "primitive savagery" is not transcended in time but remains latent in all human nature, only waiting to be summoned forth by propitious circumstances. The shuttle of intertextuality flies back and forth across the two novels and across a wide range of other texts, weaving a thematic web that constitutes a very different kind of ordering from the "solid chronology" of the traditional novel's sequential plot.

As well as these teasing allusions that summon up the ghosts of other texts, there are several references to structuralism and poststructuralism, both overt (Foucault and Lacan in *A Natural Curiosity* [62]) and covert (in the same book a character's address in Paris is given as "62 bis, rue de Saussure, 15è" [219]). Both novels embrace and cultivate what the poststructuralists term *polysemy*, the irreducible and potentially infinite richness of meaning characteristic of all sign-systems. In both cases plot functions as a device to produce symbols, and these symbols are

themselves polysemous: the severed heads of Whitmore's victims are associated with heads of John the Baptist in Renaissance paintings, with Judith and Holofernes, Perseus and Medusa, with psychoanalytic interpretations of the Gorgon's head, with King Charles' Head and Mr. Dick's obsession in Dickens' *David Copperfield*, with "keeping one's head screwed on" and "losing one's head." At every level of her text Drabble seems to want to suggest a multiplicity of possible patternings and meanings without committing her novel to any one of them. The impossible ideal, it seems, would be an apocalyptic pattern that connected them and incorporated them all, an ideal that Charles Headleand imagines as a new master narrative and one he pursues with the aid of several glasses of whisky:

Charles can no longer pay attention to one source of information at a time. He is Modern Man, programmed to take in several story lines, several plots at once. He cannot quite unravel them, but he cannot do without the conflicting impulses, the disparate stimuli.

Perhaps he hopes that the alcohol will simplify them, will stick them together and fuse them all into one consecutive narrative. The narrative of his own life, of his own place in the history and geography of the world. (*A Natural Curiosity* 176).

In their insistent intertextuality and polysemy, however, *The Radiant Way* and *A Natural Curiosity* attempt to create an analogue not of Charles' "one consecutive narrative" but of Alix Bowen's "more comprehensive vision". Alix is haunted by the attraction of "the thing itself," a trans-individual Real transcending such novelistic entities as "character" and "event:"

She aspired to make connections. She and Liz, over supper together, often spoke of such things. Their own stories had strangely interlocked, and sometimes she had a sense that such interlockings were part of a vaster network, that there was a pattern, if only one could discern

it, a pattern that linked these semi-detached houses of Wanley with those in Leeds and Northam, a pattern that linked Liz's vast house in Harley Street with the Garfield Centre towards which she now drove. The social structure greatly interested Alix. She had once thought of herself as unique, had been encouraged (in theory at least) by her education and by her reading to believe in the individual self, the individual soul, but as she grew older she increasingly questioned these concepts: seeing people perhaps more as flickering impermanent points of light irradiating stretches, intersections, threads, of a vast web, a vast network, which was humanity itself... the thing itself. We are all but a part of a whole which has its own, its distinct, its other meaning: we are not ourselves, we are crossroads, meeting places, points on a curve, we cannot exist independently for we are nothing but signs, conjunctions, aggregations. *The Radiant Way* (72-3).

For Alix, individualism led to an interest in the social structure, and sociology in its turn yielded to the prospect of a kind of mysticism which would abolish time, a vision of the web of humanity "peopled by the dark, the unlit, the dim spirits, as yet unknown, the past and the future, the dead, the unborn" as well as by the living. Somewhat analogously, the limitations of the traditional novel's inherent individualism gradually led Drabble to the analysis of the social structure that was *The Middle Ground*, and then to the question of whether there is such a thing as "humanity itself" transcending the limits of realism and the "solid chronology" that grounds it.

Where does this leave History? At first it seems that history as it is conventionally understood is simply abandoned in favour of a private vision, a tentative mysticism that, with hindsight, one may see foreshadowed by Anthony Keating's fate in *The Ice Age*. In *The Radiant Way* one of

Alix's pupils at the prison, Jilly Fox, has taken to crime "for a sense of being alive, for a momentary freedom from the tyranny of time. 'All my childhood,' Jilly had told Alix, 'I sat with my eyes on the clock, waiting for things to be over. Waiting for time to pass.'" Alix's response is "One has to learn to parcel out one's time. To make shapes of it for oneself..." (278). In its specific context, this is merely a pious platitude, but in the context of the two novels as one whole it assumes a deeper meaning. Jilly eventually shapes Time for herself by embracing a form of the occult in which "The cry of the cockatrice is transformed into the music of the spheres" and "The winter solstice is now and for ever, and never, for the light shines for ever, in eternal glory, and we are consumed and not consumed in everlasting fire" (275): time ceases to be a problem for her when she meets a gruesome death as a complicit victim of the Harrow Road murderer, who leaves her severed head of the seat of Alix's car.

Other characters, momentarily at least, are able to make more cheerful shapes of time; or it might be more accurate to say that they are granted an experience of wholeness that seems outside Time altogether. In a flat in a condemned building in Stockwell, Alix's son Nicholas and his girlfriend create a "paradise," "a Bohemian fairy story," transforming junk into beauty, into "an ark... floating above the rubble" (238, 241). They have achieved it by art — "we do it all ourselves, we make these things ourselves. By magic, in the dark, dark night" (239) — but their art is "this grace, this gift" (241). An apparently comparable grace is vouchsafed to the three protagonists at the end of the novel, when they picnic in a landscape on "the perfect day" where "an extraordinary primal timeless brightness shimmers in the hot afternoon air" and there is talk of "the sliding fountain that appears, mysteriously, welling up in the green field" only to disappear just as mysteriously, "regardless of rainfall. A secret spring, a hidden source, a sacred fount" (394-395).

In *A Natural Curiosity* Liz's sister Shirley finds herself in Paris in "a little French courtyard, ancient, rustic... a corner out of time" (158) closeted with a lover who is "a miracle, an intervention, a salvation" (178) in an erotic dream which "is all magic" (182). But the most sublime transcendence in the novel seems to be Alix's, and it happens near the end of *A Natural Curiosity*. After escaping from a violent confrontation with Paul Whitmore's mother ("a mad woman, a fury, a harpy, a Gorgon" [287]), Alix seeks a secluded spot in which to change out of her soiled clothes — "she is covered in dog shit and lumps of Chum [dog food] and decomposing slime" (286) — and to bathe herself in the river:

She struggles out of her soiled garments, and stands there, naked, gazing upstream, her feet sinking into the mud. She sees a vivid flash of blue. A kingfisher. Her heart leaps with delight. She knows she is peculiarly blessed. The bank is spangled with wind flowers, their seven-petalled faces like mystic day-stars. Alder and oak in tiny bud lean over the water.

The water is cold, but she braves it. She splashes, immerses herself limb by limb, cleanses herself. Weeds tumble past her, she thinks she sees a fish. She rises, dripping, newly baptized.... The sacred grove, the sacred pool. It is an old friendly place....

Somebody is waiting for her. An old man leans on the gate, as he has leant for centuries. His face is gnarled and wrinkled. He is dark and small of stature, as his people were and are....

.....
.....

Their eyes meet. Her heart overflows. It is one of the most satisfactory, one of the most benign encounters of her life. (288-289).

The scene enacts a reconciliation, a harmony, of opposed elements: Christianity (baptism, the kingfisher and the fish as types of Christ) fuses with paganism (the sacred grove), the remote past engages with the 1980's (ancient Briton's gaze meets the gaze of modern Englishwoman), one race (the Celt, "dark and small of stature") ceremoniously greets another (Alix, descendant of the Celts' usurpers, with "her foreign tongue" and her healthy pink cheeks and freckles). Is this the End of History?

If it is, rejoicing may be premature, for there is a disturbing subtext. The "sacred grove" of Alix's baptism recalls the sacred grove of Celtic ritual, the place in which, according to the poet Lucan, "gods were worshipped... with savage rites, the altars were heaped with hideous offerings and every tree was sprinkled with human gore" (*A Natural Curiosity* 69). Murderer Paul Whitmore, who takes a keen interest in ancient British history, knows that "One does not worship at close quarters. It is not safe to go too near the sacred grove" (70). An archaeology exhibition at the British Museum displays one result of pagan worship, "the miraculously preserved, multiply wounded, overslaughtered sacrificial corpse" of Lindow Man, "the corpse of a victim who had been bashed on the head, stabbed in the chest and garrotted, whose throat had been cut, and who had been left to lie for two millennia in a boggy pool (58). Nor is it simply paganism that is steeped in blood. As we are frequently reminded in both novels, the iconography of Christian art is replete with severed heads and other limbs and body parts, and Alix herself is startled to learn earlier in the novel that "As the cross is to Christianity, so is the severed head to the Celtic religion" (165). The mystic transcendence of religious ecstasy seems to have its roots in violence: as the contemporary English poet Geoffrey Hill puts it, "By blood we live, the hot, the cold, / To ravage and redeem the world: / There is no bloodless myth will hold."¹²⁹

In fact Alix's own experience of harmony, "one of the most benign encounters of her life," has been won by violence, for she has escaped the wrath of Paul Whitmore's Gorgon mother by hurling a tin of dog-food at her and striking out with her son's Swiss Army knife (284-5), and her moment of pure peace in the sacred grove is succeeded by an "insistence upon revenge," by "the new vindictive note in Alix's voice, the new glitter in her eye" (289-90). It is perhaps not an insignificant detail that Alix sees the "vivid flash of blue" that is the Kingfisher just as "her feet [are] sinking into the mud." Unless, like Nicholas and his girlfriend's ark floating above the rubble, transcendence is earned by the white magic of Art, it seems to be inextricably bound to pain and violence: Shirley's sexual idyll leaves her "numbly sore, within, from the two nights and one evening of sexual intercourse" (179); "physically she was coming to pieces. Her stomach was upset, she had a strange stinging bloody vaginal discharge, and a painful boil on her left buttock" (219); but "Her physical discomforts are delightful. Her body swims in a bloody flux..." (220-221). The transports of another pair of lovers — transports in which "they are mad for one another, they are possessed, they writhe and moan and cry out" — leave Blake (Blake!) Leith with "his arm around Susie [Enderby's] bruised and savaged shoulders" (294).

There is a great deal of ancient history in *A Natural Curiosity*, which is full of references to "the Brigantes and the Iceni and the Silures" who "burned people alive in Wicker cages" and "consulted the gods by inspecting the twisting human entrails of their tortured and sacrificed victims" (3). But the novel suggests that if one constructs a theory of history simply by drawing a straight line between these atrocities and the atrocities of the twentieth century, between Lindow Man and the Horror of Harrow Road, then the result will be not history but a despairing conception of a timeless human nature, the "human condition" so often mentioned by so many of the characters. History will be nothing more than a nightmare of repetition: "The force of

repetition is terrible, terrible,” thinks Liz Headleand — “There is no escape.... And is that all there is to it? *All?* (249) But as we have seen, the attempt to escape history, to transcend Time by surrendering to the unreason of violence, of sexual passion, or of the debased occultism of a Jilly Fox, is to traffic with dangerous forces. One may get off lightly, as Alix seems to have done, but in other cases the paradoxical result is likely to be not benign transcendence but another iteration of the very nightmare one was trying to escape.

The exercise of Reason, of scientific method, can produce results that kill, as it perhaps does in Paul Whitmore’s case and in other instances (advanced weaponry, ecological disaster) so familiar to us from the news headlines. But what is behind most of the killing is the forces of Unreason, whether it be the unthinking racism that blights contemporary Britain, the class hatred that erupts into picket-line violence in the miners’ strike, or the bloodthirsty nationalism that produced “a small war in the Falklands (rather a lot of people dead).” To kill Time with the weapons of the occult, to force it into heroic shapes through revolutionary or patriotic violence, to substitute Tradition for History and ecstatic Irrationalism for Reason — to do any or all of these things is to take one or more dangerous steps on the road to what may broadly be called fascism, and Drabble suggests that this is an entirely feasible prospect if the nightmare of repetition is not dispelled by some more creative means than either public life or private idyll can presently supply. Near the end of *A Natural Curiosity* Alix Bowen in the north of England is troubled by “red marks on the front gate” which have been almost but not quite “washed away by a light rain. Red hieroglyphs, written in some red greasy substance — lipstick perhaps? They had been faintly menacing” (250). Some forty pages later Carla Davis, “an animated, hard-drinking, loquacious, vitriolic, dangerous creature” (29) who bears a grudge against Charles Headleand, “takes a lipstick from her bag and draws a swastika on Liz’s gate” (299). Since Liz’s

gate is in London and Carla, as far as we know, has not set foot in Northam, where Alix lives, the “faint” menace represented by the lipsticked swastika is not just a local spite but a more general and widely-diffused threat. It is the signal distinction of *The Radiant Way* and *A Natural Curiosity* that they set forth in numbing detail the case against a linear conception of history while at the same time gesturing at the appalling consequences that may result from our ceasing to have faith in it. “Only through time time is conquered.” And that is presumably why Drabble has insisted on retaining at least some important vestiges of the traditional novel form that embodies that hope, while indicating in the form’s attenuation both the faintness of the faith that is still plausible and the need for it to be renewed and enriched with non-traditional resources.

It is therefore appropriate that *A Natural Curiosity* should end with a scene in which that faith is still alive. Alix’s husband Brian has written a novel which is “a celebration of tradition and change,” of “hope arising out of disaster” (305). Esther Breuer had supposed “that at our age things would be *clearer*. That life, if you like, would be even *more* circular than it is. That options would have diminished to nothingness. Instead of opening up. As they do. Odd, isn’t it, the way new prospects continue to offer themselves? One turns the corner, one climbs a little hill, and there is a whole new vista. Or a vista that seems to be new. How can this be?” (306). And when Liz ventures “England’s not a bad country,” Alix responds: ““No, England’s not a bad country. It’s just a mean, cold, ugly, divided, tired, clapped-out post-imperial post-industrial slag-heap covered in polystyrene hamburger cartons. It’s not a bad country at all. I love it.’ And they laugh — what else can they do?” (308).

But if they laugh, it can only be because they are too old to cry. The novel ends on a note of hope, but that hope is itself irrational: it is not earned by any “new prospect” offering itself as

an alternative to the “clapped-out post-imperial post-industrial slag-heap” that is the final image of England. Drabble may not want to believe that we have come to the end of history, but it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that she has exhausted the resources of the sturdy liberalism with which she has attempted to make sense of it. In *The Radiant Way* “Alix sometimes accuses Liz of believing in universal human nature” (107), and *A Natural Curiosity* is the work of a novelist who is at least prepared to explore that notion. History emerges from it as little more than the record of humanity’s recurrent violence and cruelty, and time is a series of costume changes which cannot disguise an essential barbarity manifested in the nightmare repetition of severed heads. The only escape that offers itself is the profoundly personal and fleeting transcendence that takes the form of mystical experience, and — as we have seen — this is so deeply bound up with violence and suffering that it is not so much an escape from “human nature” as a sublime instance of it. It is not that we have come to the end of history, to the final station on the line of Progress — it is rather that history as meaningful change is revealed as nothing more than an Enlightenment fiction. “Maybe, Stephen had said, there is no history. Nobody but God can record how many died. And as there is no God, there is no history” (172). If there is no history, can there still be novels?

The most disjunctive, the most disruptive, the most uneasy and incompetent of forms: The Gates of Ivory

Insofar as *A Natural Curiosity* announces the death of Drabble’s liberalism, the waning of her belief in the significance of time and of individual character, it would suggest that for her kind of novelist at least, the novel too is dead. But when she published *A Natural Curiosity* as a sequel to

The Radiant Way, Drabble announced that she also intended to write “a third but very different volume” involving some of the same characters. And indeed *The Gates of Ivory* duly appeared in 1991, but in some ways it seems like a wake for the traditional novel rather than a “new prospect.” Although Liz and Alix and Esther all appear in it, Drabble’s subject is no longer England and the state of the nation but human nature, human suffering, and the death of the dream of progress — the egalitarian, socialist dream that might be said to have perished in Cambodia some years before the Berlin Wall was toppled and the End of History was jubilantly announced by a triumphant Right. As in *A Natural Curiosity*, the focus is human cruelty — in this case the atrocities and mass exterminations that litter history from the Egypt of the Pharaohs to the killing fields of Pol Pot, and in a striking authorial intervention Drabble shows herself painfully aware of the tension between her subject-matter and the form in which she has always worked:

This story could have been... a moving, human-interest story, with a happy ending, a reunion ending, with music. Or it could have been the story of the search for and discovery of Stephen Cox [who has disappeared in Cambodia]. This too could perhaps have had a happy ending: perhaps, even, a wedding? You might well think that either of these two stories, or the two of them interwoven with a conventional plot sequence, would have made a much more satisfactory narrative than this. And you would have been right. Such a narrative would have required a certain amount of trickiness, a certain deployment of not-quite-acceptable coincidences, a certain ruthless tidying-up of the random movements of people and peoples. But it should not be beyond the competence of a certain kind of reasonably experienced novelist. One may force, one may impose one’s will.

But such a narrative will not do. The mismatch between narrative and subject is too great. Why impose the story line of individual fate upon a story which is at least in part to do with numbers? A queasiness, a moral scruple overcomes the writer at the prospect of selecting individuals from the mass of history, from the human soup. Why this one, why not another? Why pause here? Why discriminate? Why seek the comfort of the particular, the anguish of the particular?

Perhaps, for this subject matter, one should seek the most disjunctive, the most disruptive, the most uneasy and incompetent of forms, a form that offers not a grain of comfort or repose.¹³⁰

Drabble is in fact practising “a certain amount of trickiness” herself here: her novel *does* end (or almost end) in a reunion to the accompaniment of music, but the reunion is of two relatively minor characters (one of them rarely glimpsed in Drabble’s novels since she appeared as the protagonist of *The Needle’s Eye* in 1972), and the musical accompaniment is that of a memorial service for protagonist Stephen Cox, who has died (like his egalitarian ideals) in Cambodia. So Drabble does provide some crumbs of comfort for readers who hunger and thirst after human-interest, but *The Gates of Ivory* is primarily a novel of ideas, not character, and it offers no solutions and little repose. The narrative frequently functions as a pretext for ruminations about the human condition (André Malraux and *La Condition Humaine* are often mentioned), while the relatively playful intertextuality of the earlier novels in the sequence gives way to the rather grimmer and straightforwardly-didactic citation of a welter of secondary sources.

The mood of this novel is often elegiac, and sometimes it seems that the twentieth century has finally succeeded in destroying all grounds for hope: “Does life thin out now until death, is

one's best hope now to cease to feel? Must one now give up, at this late stage in the game?... We got over Copernicus, we got over Galileo, we got over Darwin, we have survived Einstein and the Death of God and the Death of the Family and the Death of the Novel, and what can we now do but laugh? Can the joke save us? Or has it too gone off?" (440-441). But Alix, who is plunged into these dismal thoughts by a boring eulogy at the memorial service, feels her "genial spirits" lift when the oration ceases and is replaced by music, by a human voice which "drifts with pure and unholy and unearthly yearning into the arched empyrean." Art, it seems, may provide relief if not escape from History, although the fact that the voice in question is that of a counter-tenor — an imitation of the *castrato* of earlier times — may give us pause: it may remind us that turning aside from the irresolvable complexities of life to embrace the comparative simplicity and order of Art is a kind of self-castration, an exercise of "force" and "will" that ultimately solves nothing.

So *The Gates of Ivory* commits itself to history, even though it is a history that is leading us to an unknown and perhaps not-very-comfortable place. "But you can't wind back the clock, can you?" says Charles Headleand, "You can't make water flow uphill. No, I'm afraid we buggered that one up. Shame, really" (456). Charles is speaking of his marriage to Liz, but what he says is true of the larger historical process whereby consumer capitalism is saturating and transforming the whole world. Stephen in Cambodia seeks "a land where the water flows uphill. I seek simplicity," but his Thai friend — a village girl who blossomed first into a beauty queen and then into a capitalist entrepreneur — knows that history is not leading us there: "Is no simplicity. Is only way onwards. Is no way back to village. No way back to childhood. Is finished, all finished. All over world, village is finished. English village, Thai village, African village. Is burned, is chopped, is washed away. Is no way backwards. Water find level. Is no

way back” (105). And Stephen himself knows this — knew already in 1951 when he was still a schoolboy that we cannot go back, because the place we really yearn to return to is not somewhere “back there” in history but in what poststructuralism has identified as the impossible dream of metaphysics:

The illusion that simplicity once existed is analogous to the myth of Paradise: it fosters the sense of exclusion and exile. But as for man there is no paradise, so there is no simplicity of emotion; we imagine that we once experienced it, that we once felt directly and received simply the impact of the senses, but we are thereby excluding ourselves from a realm which never existed and which cannot exist. We were not there, for there is no such place; and not by a retrogression to simplicity will we achieve our freedom. For any simplicity is a superimposed blindness, an exclusion of truth, as any Paradise is an exclusion of our one reality of pain. Tempting though it may be to claim that we once possessed innocence, and that all we need to do to be free is to repent and recant, we cannot do it; for if innocence never existed, we cannot reach a state of grace by returning to it, and in the vain attempt we lose courage on what is inevitably the path of corruption and complexity, error and gracelessness” (421).

The dream of simplicity can quickly become the nightmare that haunts the sleep of reason. Pol Pot, dreaming of simplicity, attempted to simplify Cambodia by implementing quite literally the classic marxist injunction to eliminate the bourgeoisie. Stephen goes to Cambodia “to see if he could find out what had happened to the dreams of Pol Pot” (14), to “the greatest reconstruction project of the twentieth century. He [Pol Pot] was going to take Cambodia out of history...” (13).

But no one can stray from the path of history, and Pol Pot's dream of a communist paradise led him down history's path of corruption and error to the nightmare of the killing fields.

"Is this the grand finale? Is this the End of History? Or is it all a Godawful mistake?"(445) asks the narrator who, unlike her characters, has witnessed the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Soviet Union, and has read Francis Fukuyama's claim that history — having reached its goal in the worldwide triumph of capitalism and liberal democracy — has now ended. She clearly does not believe that the millions of gallons of Coca-Cola flooding global markets are sufficient to drown the ticking of history's clock, although there is little comfort or repose to be derived from her conviction. "Progress" may be a chimera but time is not, and the novel suggests that, even as we read, some rough beast is slouching toward Bethlehem to be born. In the final paragraph one possible future approaching us down history's path is figured in the image of the guerrilla fighter who "will march on, armed, blooded, bloodied, a rusty Chinese rifle at his back.... He grows and grows, he multiplies. Terribly, he smiles. He is legion. He has not been told that he is living at the end of history. He does not care whether his mother lives or dies. He marches on. He is multitudes" (462).

And he is History. If *The Gates of Ivory* marks Drabble's turning-aside from the state-of-the-nation novel with which her trilogy began, it is because the "clapped-out post-imperial post-industrial slag-heap" of England is no longer History's staging ground, as it seemed to have been for so many centuries. But we should not confuse "The Last of England" with "The End of History:" perhaps one cannot make sense of history in a novel about England because, as one of Salman Rushdie's characters stammers, "The trouble with the Engenglish is that their hiss hiss history happened overseas, so they dodo don't know what it means" (*The Satanic Verses* 343).

“History is now and England,” declared T.S. Eliot in *The Four Quartets*, written during the Second World War,¹³¹ but even if that were once true, it is no longer possible to believe it. History, says Drabble in *The Gates of Ivory* in 1991, is now and Elsewhere.

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- ¹ *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid*. London: Faber & Faber, 1988. 69. Hereafter cited as *Sammy*.
- ² Alan Ayckbourn. *Henceforward*. London: Faber & Faber, 1988. 13,15.
- ³ Jonathan Raban, *For Love & Money: A Writing Life*. New York: Harper and Row, 1989. 263. Hereafter cited as *Love*.
- ⁴ Brian Barry. "The Continuing Relevance of Socialism" (1988). Reprinted in *Democracy, Power and Justice: Essays in Political Theory*. Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1989. 526.
- ⁵ *The British Experience 1945-1975*. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1979. 246. Hereafter cited as *Experience*.
- 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.
- ⁷ Brian Barry. "Is Democracy Special?" (1979). Reprinted in *Democracy, Power and Justice: Essays in Political Theory*. Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1989. 58.

⁸ Quoted by Arthur Marwick, *Culture in Britain Since 1945*. Oxford and Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1991. 68. Hereafter cited as *Culture*.

⁹ *British Society Since 1945*. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1982. 271, 277. Hereafter cited as *Society*.

¹⁰ *Resources of Hope*. London: Verso, 1989. 161-2. Hereafter cited as *Resources*.

¹¹ 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

Taylor's book in its analysis of the broader socio-historical conjuncture, but its emphasis is on the earlier postwar decades. Interesting and useful studies of novels from this earlier period include Neil McEwan's *The Survival of the Novel: British Fiction in the Later Twentieth Century* (Totowa, New Jersey: Barnes and Noble, 1981); David Leon Higdon's *Shadows of the Past in Contemporary British Fiction* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1984); and Patrick Swinden's *The English Novel of History and Society, 1940-80* (New York: St. Martin's, 1984). More recent studies of the treatment of history in contemporary British novels are McEwan's *Perspective in British Historical Fiction Today* (Wolfeboro, New Hampshire: Longwood, 1987), and Margaret Scanlan's *Traces of Another Time: History and Politics in Postwar British Fiction* (Princeton: Princeton U.P., 1990).

¹² D. J. Taylor. *After the War: The Novel and English Society Since 1945*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1993. xiv.

¹³ Martin Amis. *Money: A Suicide Note*. 1984; rpt. New York: Viking Penguin. 220-221.

¹⁴ Harold Pinter. *No Man's Land*. New York: Grove Press, 1975. 20.

¹⁵ Julian Rathbone, *Watching The Detectives*. 1983; rpt. London; Pluto Press, 1985. 89.

¹⁶ A. N. Wilson, *Gentlemen in England*. New York: Viking Penguin, 1986. 239.

¹⁷ Alan Sinfield. *Literature, Politics, and Culture in Postwar Britain*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989. 2, 23-25. Hereafter cited as *Postwar*.

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

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).

¹⁸ Frank Kermode, *The Sense of An Ending: Studies In The Theory of Fiction*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1967. 140.

¹⁹ Bernard Levin, *Run It Down The Flagpole*. New York: Atheneum, 1971. 9. This book was published in England in 1970 under the title *The Pendulum Years*.

²⁰ Robin Blackburn, "The Rise of the Blimp Pundit". *The New Review* IV, 38: March 1978. 42.

²¹ Richard Critchfield, *An American Looks at Britain*. New York: Doubleday, 1990. 25.

²² See, for example, Fiske and Hartley, *Reading Television*. London: Methuen, 1978.

²³ Stuart Hood. *On Television* 3rd ed. London: Pluto Press, 1987. 37. Hereafter cited as *Television*.

²⁴ See *The New Review*, III, 26.

²⁵ Raymond Williams. *Writing and Society*. 1983; rpt. London: Verso, 1991. 12-13.

²⁶ Malcolm Bradbury. *Cuts*. London: Arena, 1988. 91.

²⁷ Malcolm Bradbury. *No, Not Bloomsbury*. London; Deutsch, 1987. 369-70.

²⁸ Raymond Williams. *Marxism and Literature*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1976. 133. Hereafter cited as *Marxism*.

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 naïve. 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.

³⁰ Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981.

See especially the essay entitled "Discourse in the Novel."

³¹ Jonathan Culler. *Structuralist Poetics*. Ithaca NY: Cornell UP, 1975. 189.

³² Roland Barthes. *S/Z*. Translated by Richard Howard. New York: Hill and Wang, 1974.

³³ Quoted (and translated?) from her *L'Ere du Soupçon* by Allan Massie in *The Novel Today*. London and New York: Longman, 1990. 6. Hereafter cited as *Novel*.

³⁴ Allan Massie. *The Novel Today*. London and New York: Longman, 1990. 6. Hereafter cited as Massie.

³⁵ Giles Gordon, quoted by Massie, 3.

³⁶ Fredric Jameson. "Cognitive Mapping," in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Nelson and Grossberg. Urbana and Chicago; University of Illinois Press, 1988. 353, 349.

³⁷ Bernard Bergonzi. *The Situation of The Novel*. 1970; 2nd ed. London: Macmillan, 1979. 26. Hereafter cited as *Situation*. Bergonzi is citing Robbe-Grillet's *Snapshots and Towards a New Novel*, published in England by Calder and Boyars in 1965. Robbe-Grillet's claims would receive greater elaboration — and influence — through the works of Roland Barthes (e.g. *S/Z*).

³⁸ William H. Gass. *Fiction and the Figures of Life*. 1971; rpt New York: Vintage, 1972. 23.

³⁹ Peter Ackroyd. *Notes For A New Culture: An Essay on Modernism*. New York: Barnes and Noble, 1976. 146-147.

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.

⁴¹ Edmund J. Smyth, ed. *Postmodernism and Contemporary Fiction*. London: Batsford, 1991. 9.

⁴² A. S. Byatt. "People in Paper Houses." 1979; rpt in *Passions of the Mind: Selected Writings*. London: Vintage, 1993. 167.

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

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

⁴⁴ 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).

⁴⁵ 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, naïvely, only to be told what to believe) through a fair-ground of illusions and deceptions, distorting mirrors and trap-doors 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).

⁴⁸ Linda Hutcheon. *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox*. Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier UP, 1980. 5, 140.

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).

⁵⁰ David Watkin. *English Architecture: A Concise History*. New York and Toronto: OUP, 1979. 117-8.

⁵¹ Emil Kaufmann. *Architecture in the Age of Reason: Baroque and Post-Baroque in England, Italy, and France*. 1955; rpt. New York: Dover, 1968. 19.

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

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).

⁵⁵ Iris Murdoch. *The New Review*. Vol 3 No 32: November 1976. 56.

⁵⁶ Iris Murdoch. *The Philosopher's Pupil*. New York: Viking, 1983. 187.

⁵⁷ Malcolm Bradbury. *The New Review*. Vol 3 No 33 December 1976. 40.

⁵⁸ Martin Amis. *London Fields*. New York: Vintage International, 1991. 367.

⁵⁹ D. J. Taylor. *After the War: The Novel and England since 1945*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1993. 166-7.

⁶⁰ John Mortimer. "Author's Note." *Paradise Postponed*. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1986. 9.

⁶¹ Martin Amis. *The Moronic Inferno*. New York: Penguin, 1987. 3.

⁶² Francis Bacon. *The Essays*. Ed. John Pitcher. London and New York: Penguin, 1985. 61.

⁶³ Anthony Powell. *The Strangers All Are Gone: The Memoirs of Anthony Powell, Volume IV*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1982. 4.

⁶⁴ The relevance of Aubrey, and the aptness or otherwise of the comparison with Proust, is discussed by Bergonzi (*Situation* 120, 126ff.), and Neil Brennan (*Anthony Powell* [New York: Twayne, 1974], 124ff.). See also Randall Stevenson, *The British Novel Since The Thirties: An Introduction* (Athens, Ga: University of Georgia Press, 1986), 141.

⁶⁵ Raban, *Love* 127; Amis, *Memoirs* (New York, Summit Books, 1991), 127.

⁶⁶ A.N. Wilson, *Penfriends From Porlock: Essays and Reviews 1977-1986*. New York: Norton, 1989. 112.

⁶⁷ Randall Stevenson, *The British Novel Since the Thirties: An Introduction*. Athens, Ga: University of Georgia Press, 1986. 141.

⁶⁸ Allan Massie. *The Novel Today: A Critical Guide to the British Novel 1970-1989*. London and New York: Longman in association with the British Council, 1990. 10.

⁶⁹ *The Government of the Tongue: Selected Prose 1978-1987*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1989. 116.

⁷⁰ Clive James noted how the last three novels of *The Music of Time* move away from naturalism. *The New Review* III, 29: DATE?, 53.

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*.

⁷³ D. J. Taylor. *After The War: The Novel and England Since 1945*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1993. 42, 47

⁷⁴ Wayne Brown. "Caribbean Booktalk: Vidia Naipaul and the Genesis of a Book." *Caribbean Affairs* Vol. 1 No. 4 (October-December 1988), 181.

⁷⁵ Patrick Swinden. *The English Novel of History And Society, 1940-80*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1984. 108.

⁷⁶ Antonio Benítez-Rojo. *The Repeating Island*, trans. James Maraniss. Durham N.C and London: Duke University Press, 1992. 92, 94.

⁷⁷ Dennis Potter. *The Singing Detective*. London: Faber and Faber, 1986. 140.

⁷⁸ Hanif Kureishi. *Some Time With Stephen: A Diary*. London: Faber & Faber, 1988. 65-66.

- ⁷⁹ Beryl Bainbridge. *English Journey: Or, The Road To Milton Keynes*. London: Duckworth/BBC, 1984.
- ⁸⁰ J. B. Priestley. *English Journey*. 1934; Jubilee edition: Chicago; University of Chicago Press. 1984.
- ⁸¹ Jonathan Raban. *Coasting*. 1986; rpt London; Picador, 1987. 274
- ⁸² J. B. Priestley. *An Inspector Calls*. (acting edition) London: Samuel French, 1948. 42.
- ⁸³ Sir Thomas Browne. "A Prophecy." Norman J. Endicott, ed. *The Prose of Sir Thomas Browne*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor, 1967. 448.
- ⁸⁴ John Le Carré. *Smiley's People*. New York: Knopf, 1980. 78.
- 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.
- ⁸⁶ Margaret Drabble. *The Ice Age*. 1977; reprinted New York: Popular Library, n.d.. 82.
- ⁸⁷ Paul Brown. "Ducking the issue of racial purity." *Manchester Guardian Weekly*. Vol 153 No. 3 (July 16 1995). 25.

⁸⁸ Selvon, Samuel. *The Lonely Londoners*. 1956; rpt. Harlow, Essex: Longman Caribbean Writers Series, 1985. 123.

⁸⁹ Jonathon Green, *Them: Voices from the Immigrant Community in Contemporary Britain* (London; Secker and Warburg, 1990), 3-4.

⁹⁰ Nazareth, Peter. "Interview with Samuel Selvon." *World Literature Written in English*, 18, 2, (1979), 424; reprinted in Susheila Nasta ed., *Critical Perspectives on Sam Selvon* (Washington DC: Three Continents, 1988), 81.

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 antsing on the state unless I have to. Me, I am a born hustler" (41).

⁹³ Brian Barry. "Self-Government Revisited." 1983. Reprinted in *Democracy, Power, and Justice: Essays in Political Theory*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989. 175.

⁹⁴ Reprinted London: Heinemann, Caribbean Writers Series, 1986. 23.

⁹⁵ Samuel Selvon. *The Housing Lark*. London: McGibbon & Kee, 1965; rpt. Washington; Three Continents Press, 1990. 145. Pagination is the same in the reprint as in the original.

⁹⁶ Selvon, Samuel. *Moses Ascending*. 1975; rpt. London: Heinemann Caribbean Writers Series, 1984.

⁹⁷ Andrew Salkey. *Escape to an Autumn Pavement*. London: Hutchinson, 1960.

⁹⁸ Quoted by Asa Briggs, "The English: How the Nation Sees Itself" in *Literature and the Modern World*, ed. Dennis Walder (Oxford: OUP, 1990), 191-2. Briggs' essay in this work is an abridgement of his "The English: Custom and Character," which appeared in *The English World*, ed. R. Blake, Thames and Hudson, 1982.

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).

¹⁰⁰ Graham Greene. *The Human Factor*. 1978; rpt London: Heinemann and The Bodley Head (Collected Edition), 1982. 12.

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).

¹⁰² A. N. Wilson. *A Bottle in the Smoke*. 1990; rpt. London: Penguin, 1992. 1.

¹⁰³ Salman Rushdie. *The Satanic Verses*. New York: Viking, 1989. 260.

¹⁰⁴ Penelope Lively. *Moon Tiger*. 1987; rpt. London: Penguin, 1988. 22.

¹⁰⁵ From *Areopagitica* (1644). Douglas Bush ed. *The Portable Milton*. 1949; rpt. Harmondsworth, Middlesex, & New York: Penguin, 1985. 192.

¹⁰⁶ G. M. Trevelyan. *A Shortened History of England*. 1942; rpt. London & New York: Penguin, 1970. 14, 559.

¹⁰⁷ Graham Swift. *Last Orders*. London: Picador, 1996. 56.

¹⁰⁸ Malcolm Bradbury. *The Modern British Novel*. London: Secker and Warburg, 1993. 432.

¹⁰⁹ Isabel Colegate. *The Shooting Party*. New York: Viking, 1980.

¹¹⁰ 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.)

¹¹¹ Jon Elster. *An Introduction to Karl Marx*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986. 22. Elster discusses the question of methodological individualism versus methodological holism here and, at greater length, in *Making Sense of Marx* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

¹¹² Leslie Fiedler. *Love and Death in the American Novel*. revised edition: New York: Stein and Day, 1966. 140.

¹¹³ Peter Ackroyd. *Hawksmoor*. 1985; rpt. London: Abacus (Sphere Books), 1987. 17.

¹¹⁴ Peter Ackroyd. *English Music*. London: Hamish Hamilton, 1992. 1.

¹¹⁵ Lyndsay Clarke. *The Chymical Wedding: A Romance*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1989. 221.

¹¹⁶ Peter Ackroyd. *The House of Doctor Dee*. London: Hamish Hamilton, 1993. 125.

¹¹⁷ Salman Rushdie. *The Satanic Verses*. New York: Viking, 1989. 41.

¹¹⁸ Raphael Samuel. *Theatres of Memory*. London and New York: Verso, 1994. 429-431.

¹¹⁹ Angela Carter. *Love*. 1971; reprinted London and New York: Penguin, 1988. 72.

¹²⁰ Angela Carter. *Heroes and Villains*. 1969; reprinted London and New York: Penguin, 1981. 1.

¹²¹ Margaret Drabble. *The Ice Age*. 1977; reprinted New York: Popular Library, n.d. 72.

¹²² Tom Paulin. "Ice Sage." *The New Review* 4, 43 (October 1977). 58-59.

¹²³ Margaret Drabble. *The Middle Ground*. New York: Knopf, 1980. 130.

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.

¹²⁶ Margaret Drabble. *The Radiant Way*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1987. 172.

¹²⁷ Margaret Drabble. *A Natural Curiosity*. 1989; reprinted New York: Viking Penguin, 1990. 52.

¹²⁸ T. S. Eliot. *Collected Poems*. ?

¹²⁹ Geoffrey Hill. "Genesis." *Collected Poems*. Oxford: OUP, 1986.

¹³⁰ Margaret Drabble. *The Gates of Ivory*. London and New York: Viking, 1991. 137-
138.

¹³¹ Give citation, check quote.