Culture in Crisis: The English Novel in the Late

Twentieth Century

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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*

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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. Edgeware.

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

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

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* 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

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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

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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

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* 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.

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"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
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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."

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