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

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* 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.

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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:

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* 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

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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.

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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

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* 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

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[*] 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 Maragaret 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.

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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 *it*self, 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

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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 tellyscreens 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.

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'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.[*]

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[*] 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

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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.

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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]

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* 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

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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

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[*] 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.