

Reading the Novel in English 1950–2000

Brian W. Shaffer

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READING THE NOVEL

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To Rachel,
Hannah, and Ruthie

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Preface

Arthur Marwick opens his book *British Society since 1945* by observing: “Nobody has ever said precisely how many ways there are of skinning a cat. Probably there are about the same number of ways of writing a Social History of Britain since 1945.”¹ The same might be said of the subject of the present volume, the novel in English, exclusive of the US novel, between the end of World War II and the turn of the millennium. This vast, rich, spectacularly heterogeneous field of the British and postcolonial Anglophone novel is only now, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, coming into focus. John Brannigan cautions in his book on literature in England between 1945 and 2000 that “the period since 1945 is too recent to see anything but its diversity and complexity, and is too diverse and complex to enable us to construct one coherent, meaningful narrative of its literary, cultural or historical events.”² While the present volume is not meant to be a comprehensive literary history of the field or an exhaustive survey of the novel in English outside the US over the last half of the twentieth century, *Reading the Novel in English 1950–2000* seeks to map out and explore the variety and breadth of novel writing in English within the relevant period and geographical boundaries.

More significantly, the volume aims to be a practical introduction to the contemporary English-language novel, with an emphasis on important contexts and concepts for interpreting and understanding – for “reading” – this field. In an introductory chapter I address three important contexts within which the novel of the period takes shape: as a response to literary modernism and, later, “antimodernism”; as a response to the “crisis of civilization,” in particular the rise of European fascism, the Second World War, and Hitler’s death camps; and as a response to the end of the British Empire, the rise of formerly subject nations, and the phenomenon of reverse patterns of migration, with peoples from formerly colonized lands moving to the large, industrialized cities of England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. Although few

novels in the field respond to all three phenomena, all of them respond to at least one them.

The chapter closes with a discussion of the novel as a genre that is open-ended, socially engaged, and exploratory, one that challenges and stretches the prevailing canons of knowledge, perception, and literary representation in its bid to picture and probe an evolving contemporary reality. Along the way this introductory chapter also addresses important rubrics and categories – including the “modernist,” “postmodernist,” “postcolonial,” and “black British” novel – under which the fictional texts of the period are commonly grouped and assessed. Each of these terms is a highly contested locus of meaning, a protean concept that shifts in sense over the course of the period under investigation. My goal here is to provide readers with a useful set of rubrics and terms with which to approach the contemporary British and postcolonial Anglophone novel.

This introductory chapter is followed by ten more focused chapters, each of which treats a critically acclaimed and influential, widely read and taught novel from the period. In each case I provide key contexts for interpreting, followed by a detailed reading of, the novel in question. There can be no question of selecting for more thoroughgoing analysis the ten “right” novels from among the hundreds of obvious, and thousands of possible, choices. What can be affirmed is that the ten works selected for fuller treatment here comprise a representative sampling of significant novels from the field, from a variety of decades, from the 1950s to the 1990s, and geographical locales: Canada, England, Ireland, Nigeria, Scotland, South Africa, and the West Indies.

Chapter 1

Introduction: Contexts and Concepts for Reading the Novel in English 1950–2000

The Modernist British Novel and After: “Antimodernist” and “Postmodernist” Reactions

Much of the debate about appropriate form in the English novel since the [Second World] war has been concerned with the acceptance or rejection of appropriate or inappropriate models.

A. S. Byatt, “People in paper houses”¹

The response to literary modernism in the British novel of 1950–2000 took two divergent paths, resulting in the adoption of two conflicting novelistic “models”: antimodernist realism and postmodernist experimentation. Literary modernism – a transatlantic cultural phenomenon that influenced the direction of the twentieth-century novel and that engaged with myriad extra-literary developments of its day – is explored in another volume in this series. It nevertheless deserves brief treatment here as a key context within which the post-1950 British novel took shape and to which it responded. Readily recognizable features of high-modernist novels, which predominated between the turn of the century (Conrad’s 1900 *Lord Jim*) and the late 1940s (Malcolm Lowry’s 1947 *Under the Volcano*), are easily catalogued: radical experiments with point of view and with the representation of time and space; the shattering of the illusion of a unified, omniscient narrator; linguistic pyrotechnics, textual self-referentiality, and literary allusiveness; and narrative fragmentation, replete with disorienting stream-of-consciousness and interior monologue

narration. It remains to explain why such features evolved, if only to provide the context within which the post-1950 novel came about.

The enthusiasm with which literary modernists engaged in such radical narrative experimentation is perhaps best expressed in the American poet Ezra Pound's famous charge to his literary contemporaries to "Make It New." Pound here meant more than that his fellow artists should break with tradition. After all, we may presume that all writers in all periods seek to be innovative in some way, even if it is only to tell a familiar story in a new or modern style. By "Make It New," as Malcolm Bradbury argues, Pound meant that "the modern arts have a special obligation, an advanced or *avant-garde* duty, to go ahead of their own age and transform it" – to break "free from the frozen structures of the past."² Pound also expressed this sentiment in a poem, "Commission," in which he exhorts his readers to "Be against all sorts of mortmain."³ By this, Pound meant that we should wage war against the dead hand ("mort/main," in his French neologism) of the past. In this same vein, the Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen, who would come to exert a great influence on the young James Joyce and other literary modernists, remarked that "The great task of our time is to blow up all existing institutions – to destroy."⁴ As the enlightened millionaire in George Bernard Shaw's 1905 play *Major Barbara* laments, the problem with the world today is that while "It scraps its obsolete steam engines and dynamos," it "won't scrap its old prejudices and its old moralities and its old religions and its old political constitutions."⁵ Collectively, these passages suggest that George Orwell was misguided to associate literary modernism with "art-for-art's sake," with the "worship of the meaningless," with the mere "manipulation of words" for the sake of an art divorced from "the urgent [political] problems of the moment."⁶ Orwell, who penned this accusation in 1940, was probably thinking of James Joyce, who a year earlier published *Finnegans Wake*, a supremely modernist work that parades, indeed fetishizes, its arcane linguistic and narrative dimensions.

Joyce's *sui generis* 1939 text notwithstanding, literary modernism was less about the joys of experimentation and iconoclasm for its own sake – what Orwell calls the "frivolous notion that art is merely technique"⁷ – than it was about overthrowing literary forms and structures, and by extension social forms and structures, that were felt to be repressive, outmoded, or constraining. Novelty and innovation per se were less important than making the new literature faithful to contemporary social, technological, psychological, epistemological, and aesthetic realities. Put another way, modernists such as Conrad, Eliot, Joyce, Lawrence, Woolf, and Yeats were less interested in "art for art's sake" than they were in creating works of literature that comported with their new understanding of the world around them. As Eliot argued in 1921, modern poets (and we might add modern novelists) "must be *difficult*"

because “Our civilization comprehends great variety and complexity, and this variety and complexity, playing upon a refined sensibility [that of the poet], must produce various and complex results.”⁸ In other words, modernist literature was not meant to be an autotelic or narcissistic *retreat* from modern life so much as an attempt to face and depict it unflinchingly.

Perhaps the most important influences on modernism in the novel, influences to which the novels of our period continued to respond, were a series of revolutionary ideas in European thought that contributed to a *Zeitgeist* within which these novelists wrote. The principal idea was a crisis lamented by Matthew Arnold in his mid-nineteenth-century poem, “Dover Beach”: the retreat of the “Sea of Faith” and the seeming disappearance of God,⁹ an anxiety that emerges full-blown in W. B. Yeats’s celebrated 1919 poem “The Second Coming,” with its theologically resonant title (and in which “Things fall apart; the center cannot hold;/ Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world”).¹⁰ Three seminal modern intellectuals – Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Sigmund Freud – all speculated that humans created God out of their need for a protecting father and to explain an otherwise inexplicable, threatening, chaotic world. Marx saw religion as the “sigh of the oppressed,” the “*opium* of the people,”¹¹ as a means for the “haves” of society to keep the “have nots” mystified and downtrodden; Nietzsche famously asserted that “God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him”;¹² and Freud likened our devotion to the “fairy-tale of religion” to a “childhood neurosis,” and, following Marx, likened “the effects of religious consolations” to a “narcotic.”¹³ While some found the prospect of a God-less universe liberating, others found the absence of transcendental meaning and teleological human history to be frightening prospects. Unsurprisingly, this shift in thinking had important implications for the ways in which novels were written, as many novelists now took it for granted that the traditional view of the world – one subject to a single overarching interpretation, corresponding to God’s intention – was obsolete. Objectivity was an illusion; subjectivity reigned. Many legitimate truths and perspectives replaced the notion of a single “Truth”; “Reality” was supplanted by a series of competing *realities*. In short, how one saw things now was determined by one’s unique perspective, put in dialogue with other individuals and their unique perspectives. This notion informed many novels of the modernist period – for example, Conrad’s *Lord Jim*, Joyce’s *Ulysses*, Woolf’s *Mrs Dalloway*, Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying*, and Lowry’s *Under the Volcano* – in which multiple narrators and shifting perspectives force readers to reconstruct events by negotiating among the various possible ways in which those events can be understood. Put another way, the multiple points of view in each of these modernist texts are offered not to impede our grasp of the novel’s meaning but are the very point of it. As Orwell argues, in seeming

contradiction of his indictment of the modernists for their escapist avoidance of politics,

Ulysses could not have been written by someone who was merely dabbling with word-patterns; it is the product of a special vision of life, the vision of a Catholic who has lost his faith. What Joyce is saying is “Here is life without God. Just look at it!” and his technical innovations, important though they are, are there primarily to serve this purpose.¹⁴

Another development that influenced the modernist novel – and that which followed – was the late-nineteenth-century emergence of the discipline of psychology, which further eroded traditional faith in objective norms of perception, knowledge, and certainty. The year 1890 marked the appearance of William James’s *Principles of Psychology*, a work that reoriented our take on “reality.” Rather than being something objectively given, reality was to be understood as something subjectively perceived through the “stream” of human consciousness. If James’s terrain was consciousness and perception, Freud’s, more radically, was the *unconscious*, which he defined as that area of the mind that remains inaccessible to conscious scrutiny, the refuge of repressed wishes too dangerous, subversive, and conflicted for us to acknowledge consciously.¹⁵ Freud’s impact upon the modernist novel was considerable and obvious. One critic even went as far as to attribute the “shift in the basis of characterization in fiction after about 1900” largely to the “revolutionary impact of Freudian concepts of the unconscious.”¹⁶

It is against this background that the British novel of our period took shape. In the 1950s and early 1960s, the novel tended to reject literary modernist innovations, reacting *against* the modernist novel’s conspicuous complexity. Kingsley Amis, Iris Murdoch, Angus Wilson, and many others countered in their novels with an antimodernist, anti-*avant-garde* “neo-realism.” As Bradbury characterizes the mood between 1945 and 1960,

Modernism was over, even tainted; the deaths of Joyce, Woolf, Yeats and Freud had reinforced the feeling. In critical circles, it was already being historicized, defined, monumentalized, given its name and structure; it was no longer *avant . . .* but *arrière*.¹⁷

While realistic novels continued to be written over the next few decades and prevail today (consider, for example, the works of Anita Brookner, Margaret Drabble, John McGahern, Iris Murdoch, and Muriel Spark), a second and divergent response to modernism and its antimodernist wake in the

British novel – the “postmodernist” novel – began to evolve in the early 1970s. Indeed, as divergent in their formal, linguistic, and thematic dimensions as the novels of Martin Amis, Julian Barnes, A. S. Byatt, Angela Carter, John Fowles, Ian McEwan, Salman Rushdie, and Graham Swift may be, it is reasonable to group their fictions under the banner of the postmodern novel. This novel rejects the antimodernist backlash; indeed, it internalizes many of the attitudes and perspectives of modernism, yet also takes further and revises a number of modernism’s tenets. As Gerald Graff argues, “postmodernism should be seen not as breaking with romantic and modernist assumptions but rather as a logical culmination of the premises of these earlier movements.”¹⁸ The American novelist John Barth puts the relationship between modernism and postmodernism similarly: the “ideal postmodernist author” has “the first half of the [twentieth] century under his belt [even if] not on his back.”¹⁹

It is thus fair to say that the response to literary modernism in the British novel of 1950–2000 took two divergent paths. The first reaction was blazed in England in the 1950s by the prickly, antimodernist backlash of traditionalist novelists such as Kingsley Amis, John Braine, Iris Murdoch (early in her career), C. P. Snow, John Wain, and Angus Wilson, who rejected both the narrative and stylistic experiments associated with Joyce and the refined literary aesthetics associated with Virginia Woolf, either on the grounds that these were arcane and mystifying or that they had been worthwhile experiments in a now-exhausted vein. For example, John Wain, writing in 1963, insisted that the “experimental” novel “died with Joyce.” Since *Ulysses*, Wain argued, “there has been very little experimental-writing that strikes one as serious, or motivated by anything more than faddishness or the irritable search for new gimmicks.”²⁰ According to C. P. Snow, “Joyce’s way” was “at best a cul-de-sac,”²¹ and the literary “doctrine” of Virginia Woolf and others culminated in the novel becoming “totally meaningless in a very short time.”²²

If there was an antimodernist *movement* in the English novel of the time it was to be found in the so called “Angry Young Men” – comprised of Wain, Braine, Kingsley Amis, and others – whom Amis deemed “reactionaries rather than rebels” because they sought a return “to the pre-Joycean tradition”²³ of broadly accessible and relevant literary works. Amis was at his most strident and outspoken in this regard in a 1958 piece in the *Spectator*. There, he famously declared:

.....
The idea about experiment being the life-blood of the English novel is one that dies hard. “Experiment,” in this context, boils down pretty regularly to “obtruded oddity,” whether in construction – multiple viewpoints and such – or in style . . . Shift from one scene to the next in midsentence, cut down on

verbs or definite articles, and you are putting yourself right up in the forefront, at any rate in the eyes of those who were reared on Joyce and Virginia Woolf . . .²⁴

However differently Amis's *Lucky Jim*, Murdoch's *Under the Net*, and Wilson's *Hemlock and After* (all from the early 1950s) respond to literary modernism, each of these works represents a desire to return the novel to an earlier, more realistic and linear model.

The antimodernist reaction to modernism in the English novel was followed by another reaction, beginning in the early 1970s. Born of what David Lodge characterized as "the pressure of skepticism on the aesthetic and epistemological premises of literary realism,"²⁵ the postmodern novel of the final three decades of the twentieth century continued and furthered "the modernist critique of traditional realism."²⁶

Just as Amis and other traditionalists of the 1950s and 1960s registered their frustration with the modernist novel's lack of accessibility and relevance, so the early postmodernists, in an anti-antimodernist backlash, registered their frustration with the realistic, linear novel's lack of artistic courage and innovation. The English avant-garde novelist B. S. Johnson, for example, writing ten years after John Wain had said that the experimental novel died with Joyce, lamented that while Joyce was "the Einstein of the novel,"²⁷ very few novelists in Britain now followed his lead. For Johnson,

It is not a question of influence, of writing like Joyce. It is a matter of realizing that the novel is an evolving form, not a static one, of accepting that for practical purposes where Joyce left off should ever since have been regarded as the starting point.²⁸

"Why then," Johnson demanded, "do so many novelists still write as though the revolution that was *Ulysses* had never happened?"²⁹ Johnson concluded by quoting the French author Nathalie Sarraute's description of literature "as a relay race, the baton of innovation passing from one generation to another," and then by accusing the "vast majority of British novelists" today with having "dropped the baton."³⁰ Johnson's reference to Sarraute here is telling, as many avant-garde English novelists of the 1970s gained their inspiration from French writers and intellectuals, specifically from Sarraute, Samuel Beckett (born in Ireland but living in Paris and writing in French and English), and Alain Robbe-Grillet (theorist of *le nouveau roman*) – rather than from British ones. John Fowles, for example, the author of one of the earliest important English postmodernist novels, the 1969 *French Lieutenant's Woman*, admits to finding himself "much more at home in French than in English literature."³¹

Be this “French connection” as it may, British postmodernist novels – among them Fowles’s *French Lieutenant’s Woman* (1969), Golding’s *Darkness Visible* (1979), Gray’s *Lanark* (1981), Swift’s *Waterland* (1983), Barnes’s *Flaubert’s Parrot* (1984), Martin Amis’s *Money* (1984), A. S. Byatt’s *Possession* (1990), McCabe’s *Butcher Boy* (1992), and Angela Carter’s *Nights at the Circus* (1994) – built upon many modernist novelistic innovations. While “postmodernism” as a theoretical construct defies easy definition – Malcolm Bradbury has called the term a “moveable feast,”³² and Hans Bertens has characterized it as “exasperating” for being “several things at once”³³ – it is clear that postmodern novels, in practice, deliberately blur categories that were formerly thought to be antithetical. That is, they blur elite and demotic narrative forms, the author and the reader, fiction and fact, and they attack realistic conventions of representation, notions of generic purity, and the feasibility of a unified subject.

In his exhaustive *The Idea of the Postmodern: A History* Hans Bertens observes that postmodernism

has meant different things to different people at different conceptual levels, rising from humble literary-critical origins in the 1950s to a level of global conceptualization in the 1980s. The result was, and still is, a massive but also exhilarating confusion that has given important new impulses to and opened new territories for intellectual exploration. If there is a common denominator to all these postmodernisms, it is that of a crisis in representation: a deeply felt loss of faith in our ability to represent the real, in the widest sense. No matter whether they are aesthetic, epistemological, moral, or political in nature, the representations that we used to rely on can no longer be taken for granted.³⁴

This “crisis” of representation – that representations create more than they reflect reality – is discernible in the work of the most important French theorists of the postmodern, Jean-François Lyotard and Jean Baudrillard.

To sketch an immensely complex thesis, Lyotard in *The Postmodern Condition* (1979; trans. 1984) argues that the condition of postmodernity is one of “incredulity towards metanarratives”:³⁵ toward those grand, universal, or master narratives upon which modernity stands, but which have now come to be seen as “stories that we tell ourselves to convince ourselves of their truth” rather than as empirically verifiable conceptual foundations that possess the power to “hold things together.”³⁶ In the postmodern world, universal, overarching explanatory systems and ideologies – for example, Enlightenment scientific rationality, capitalist or Marxist economic theory, the Christian or Freudian view of the human psyche/soul – have come to be seen as narratives that lack credibility and adequacy. These all-encompassing systems have been replaced with a plurality of more credible if limited *petit recits*, discrete micronarratives

of only local and particular applicability. In an equally involved argument that I will only sketch here, Baudrillard defines postmodernity as an “age of simulation” and “hyperreality,” in which the “actual” and its “representation” are impossible to distinguish, and in which representations therefore can only be understood to refer to other representations and not to any underlying “reality.” In his *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981; trans. 1994) Baudrillard holds that the postmodern world – unlike the modern one, which is “organized around the production and consumption of commodities” – is “organized around simulation and the play of images and signs,”³⁷ and in it “hyperreality,” constructed in the virtual world of free-floating images and mediatized events, has become the only knowable reality. Baudrillard sees the hyperreal as providing “experiences more intense and involving than the scenes of banal everyday life,”³⁸ what he calls the “desert of the real.”³⁹ Although these French theories of the postmodern had little direct influence on the British novels of the period, they nevertheless contributed to a postmodernist intellectual and artistic climate out of which the novels evolved.

In *The Postmodern Turn*, Steven Best and Douglas Kellner explore postmodernist literature within the context of this wider postmodernist climate forged by Lyotard, Baudrillard, and many others. Although Best and Kellner view postmodernism as less of an outgrowth of modernism than I do here, they nevertheless concede that “some of the stylistic techniques of postmodern literature were defining features of modernism itself,” motivated by its revolt against “realism, mimesis, and linear forms of narrative.”⁴⁰ That said, Best and Kellner make useful distinctions between modernist and postmodernist works of literature.

[W]hile high modernists defended the autonomy of art and excoriated mass culture, postmodernists spurned elitism and combined “high” and “low” cultural forms in an aesthetic pluralism and populism. Against the drive toward militant innovation and originality, postmodernists embraced tradition and techniques of quotation and pastiche. While the modernist artist aspired to create monumental works and a unique style . . . postmodernists were more ironic and playful, eschewing concepts like “genius,” “creativity,” and even “author.” While modernist art works were signification machines that produced a wealth of meanings and interpretations, postmodern art was more surface-oriented, renouncing depth and grand philosophical or moral visions.⁴¹

Indeed, for Best and Kellner, postmodernists “abandon the idea that any language – scientific, political, or aesthetic – has a privileged vantage point on reality; instead, they insist on the intertextual nature and social construction of all meaning.”⁴² The postmodernist novel’s “self-reflexive and nonlinear

writing” counters both “realist theories of mimesis, depth psychology and character development” and notions of “the author as a sovereign subject in full command of the process of creation.”⁴³ Finally, “postmodern writers implode oppositions between high and low art, fantasy and reality, fiction and fact. Spurning ‘originality,’ postmodern writers draw on past forms, which are ironically quoted and eclectically combined.”⁴⁴ As the poet and critic Andrei Codrescu puts this last point, “where the modernist Pound had commanded ‘Make It New,’ the postmodernist imperative is ‘Get It Used’.”⁴⁵

It is also worth emphasizing that postmodernist narrative experimentation in the novel, like that of modernist experimentation before it, was undertaken *not* in the spirit of absurdist *antirealism*, as many assumed, but in the spirit of *hyperrealism*, one which accounts for the new theories of perception, knowledge, and consciousness alluded to above. What Virginia Woolf argued of the modernist Joyce and other novelists of his ilk is also true of the postmodernist Fowles and other authors of his ilk: they all attempt, in their fictions,

to come closer to life, and to preserve more sincerely and exactly what interests and moves them, even if to do so they must discard most of the conventions which are commonly observed by the [realist] novelist. Let us record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall, let us trace the pattern, however disconnected and incoherent in appearance, which each sight or incident scores upon the consciousness.⁴⁶

Woolf’s point is clear: Joyce and other modernists wrote out of a sense of fidelity to things as they are subjectively and fragmentarily experienced and known rather than out of an unfeasible stance of objectivity and omniscience. As Woolf hints here, Joyce’s use of interior monologue narration worked as a means of plumbing the depths and shallows of character as never before, a device allowing for the direct representation of the psyche in action. However, one important difference between the modernism of Joyce and Woolf and the postmodernism of Fowles and Swift is that, as one critic argues, whereas “the Modernist aimed at providing a valid, authentic, though strictly personal view of the world in which he lived, the Postmodernist appears to have abandoned the attempt towards a representation of the world that is justified by the convictions and sensibility”⁴⁷ of any single individual consciousness or historical account. Indeed, such observably “postmodern” novels as Fowles’s *French Lieutenant’s Woman*, Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*, Swift’s *Waterland*, and Byatt’s *Possession* deconstruct traditional notions of subjectivity and history, and problematize the distinction between fact and fiction, in ways that go beyond what Joyce and other modernists envisioned. Another clear difference

is that postmodernist novels tend to be far more demotic and less elitist in orientation than their modernist forerunners. John Carey's observation that the literary intelligentsia in the years leading up to 1939 was distinctly elitist and anti-democratic – hostile to the “large reading public” that came into being after “nineteenth-century educational reforms”⁴⁸ – no longer holds sway in our period, as the postmodernist novel's abundant use of popular cultural discourse suggests. It is difficult, given the postmodern novel's demotic orientation, to imagine its practitioners defining their art in the terms hazarded by D. H. Lawrence: “[B]eing a novelist, I consider myself superior to the saint, the scientist, the philosopher, and the poet . . . The novel is the one bright book of life.”⁴⁹

It *Can* Happen Here: The British Novel as a Response to the Crisis of Civilization

As I write, highly civilized human beings are flying overhead, trying to kill me.
George Orwell, “England your England”⁵⁰

The novel, with its emphasis on the depiction of human societies and social interaction, is an inherently dialogic, richly social literary genre, one which necessarily represents and critiques the social world of its production and initial consumption. The novel of our period is of course no exception to this rule; it too engages with the socioeconomic and political, not only with the artistic, trends of its time. Numerous cataclysmic and revolutionary events were occurring in European as well as in world politics in the years leading up to and away from 1945: the rise of European fascism in Spain, Germany, and Italy; the horrific carnage of World War II and Hitler's genocidal “Final Solution” and death camps; the dropping of two nuclear bombs in Japan; Stalinism and the purges and gulags in the Soviet Union; and the Cold War between America and Russia, which held out the continuing threat of global nuclear obliteration. As Bradbury sums up the importance of World War II as an historical watershed, “There was no doubt that the Second World War was as terrible a fracture in the twentieth-century experience as the First had been,” and that “its impact on world history, human consciousness, and artistic expression was ultimately far greater than that of the conflict of just twenty-five years before.”⁵¹ In a similar vein the novelist Iris Murdoch, as late as 1961, affirmed that “We have not [yet] recovered from two wars and the

experience of Hitler.”⁵² Given the apocalyptic intensity and global reach of the above events, and the ever-present threat of totalitarian regimes and genocides, it is no surprise that sociopolitical trauma would make its way, in one form or another, into the British novel of the period. Specifically, the growing realization that the barbarity of mid-twentieth-century historical events emanated from within “civilized” Europe rather than from outside it, as captured in Orwell’s line above, soon became an unavoidable conclusion.

In his 1967 *Language and Silence*, for example, George Steiner observed that the “political bestiality” of our age was a barbarity of our own making and that we learned that one “can read Goethe or Rilke in the evening[,] can play Bach and Schubert, and [then] go to . . . work at Auschwitz in the morning.”⁵³ Moreover, according to Steiner, the eruption of barbarism in mid-twentieth-century Europe

did not spring up in the Gobi Desert or the rain forests of the Amazon. It rose from within, and from the core of European civilization. The cry of the murdered sounded in earshot of the universities; the sadism went on a street away from the theaters and museums. In the later eighteenth century Voltaire had looked confidently to the end of torture; ideological massacre was to be a banished shadow. In our own day the high places of literacy, of philosophy, of artistic expression, became the setting for Belsen.⁵⁴

This insight concerning our involvement in the darkness that descended over Europe in the twentieth century – more than depicting the battlefields of World War II – became an obsession of the British and Anglophone novel of our period, from Lowry’s *Under the Volcano* (1947) and Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), to Golding’s *Lord of the Flies* (1954) and *The Inheritors* (1955), Robin Jenkins’s *The Cone-Gatherers* (1955), Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), Coetzee’s *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), Graham Swift’s *Waterland* (1983), Kazuo Ishiguro’s *The Remains of the Day* (1989), Pat Barker’s *Regeneration* trilogy (1991, 1993, 1995), Ian McEwan’s *Black Dogs* (1992), and Mark Behr’s *The Smell of Apples* (1995), to name only a few examples. Put simply, the idea that “civilized” persons could abide – indeed, could conspire in and advance – apartheid and murder against dehumanized enemy “Others” became a recurring trope in the novel of the period.

This notion of “civilized barbarity” was not new; indeed, it was anticipated in H. Rider Haggard’s 1887 novel *Allan Quatermain*, in which “Civilization” is said to be “only savagery silver-gilt”,⁵⁵ and in Conrad’s 1899 novella *Heart of Darkness*, in which the Company chief accountant helps make possible the plundering, enslaving, and murdering of the native Congolese yet remains

apparently oblivious to his crimes and contentedly “devoted to his books [the company accounts], which were in apple-pie order.”⁵⁶ The realization that “civilized” Europeans were capable of perpetrating the most atrocious barbarities underwent something of a renaissance in the British novel of our period. In particular, the Holocaust of European Jewry captured the imagination of much British writing after 1945; genocide could no longer be dismissed as the practice solely of “primitive” tribes but rather was to be understood as the deliberate policy of “civilized” European peoples.

In his provocative and penetrating study *Modernity and the Holocaust* (1989), the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman theorizes the relationship between modern civilized society and genocide. In contrast to the naïve belief that the two phenomena are antithetical, Bauman argues that modernity makes possible two parallel processes that enable genocide: the “division of labor” and the “substitution of technical for moral responsibility.”⁵⁷ For Bauman, in the modern corporation “Technical responsibility differs from [and supplants] moral responsibility in that it forgets that the action is a means to something other than itself.”⁵⁸ Morality now “boils down to the commandment to be a good, efficient and diligent expert and worker”⁵⁹ above all else. This leads to the “dehumanization of the objects of bureaucratic operation” because it is now possible “to express these objects in purely technical, ethically neutral terms.”⁶⁰ The result of this moral distancing between the bureaucrat and the object of bureaucratic interest, which is now understood in abstractly “quantitative” terms, is the “dehumanization” of the latter.⁶¹ “Reduced, like all other objects of bureaucratic management, to pure, quality-free measurements, human objects lose their distinctiveness” and become dehumanized.⁶² For Bauman, this line of reasoning explains how “good” Germans could perpetrate genocide against Jews; but its implications are far broader. Whether one considers the relationship between the Coketown boss Mr Bounderby and the exploited, downtrodden industrial “hands” in Dickens’s 1854 novel *Hard Times*, the Belgian Trading Company employees and the enslaved, murdered Congolese in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, the Third Bureau employees and the assaulted “barbarian” Others in Coetzee’s *Waiting for the Barbarians*, or the Commanders and the sexually violated Handmaids in Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*, the victimized “Others” in these novels are persecuted as a result of a dehumanizing shift in the way they are represented and understood by those who define them. In each case “Dehumanization of the objects and positive moral self-evaluation [of the functionaries] reinforce each other. The functionaries may faithfully serve any goal while their moral conscience remains unimpaired.”⁶³ Indeed, fully half of the novels that come in for greater scrutiny in the next section of this study – those by Atwood, Golding, Ishiguro, Coetzee, and Spark – deal in one way or another with the crucible of the

mid-century years, in particular (in the case of *Lord of the Flies*, *The Remains of the Day*, and *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*) with Britain's indirect culpability in some of its most odious dimensions.

Spark's *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, for example, explores the perceived allure of the charismatic, fascistic teacher or leader (consider both Miss Brodie's admiration for Mussolini during the war and the demands she makes on her students blindly to follow her lead ["Mussolini's fascisti," she lectures her students, "are doing splendid things"]).⁶⁴ Ishiguro's Booker Prize-winning *The Remains of the Day* treats emotional fascism, the willingness of individuals to subordinate not only their behavior but their critical faculties to their "betters," while rationalizing such self-enslavement as the price happily paid for serving a higher social order. (Consider both Lord Darlington's appeasement of his German guests in the 1930s and Stevens's subordination of his rational and moral faculties to those of his master, such as when he blindly follows Lord Darlington's orders to fire two Jewish maids "for the good of this house."⁶⁵) Golding's *Lord of the Flies* uses a group of marooned British boys on an island during the Second World War to probe what Erich Fromm calls the "escape from freedom," the individual's desire to relinquish major decision-making capacities to someone outside the self, "in order to acquire the strength which the individual self is lacking."⁶⁶ As Golding puts the lessons of the mid-century, to which his early novels respond,

Before the Second World War I believed in the perfectibility of social man; that a correct structure of society would produce goodwill; and that therefore you could remove all social ills by a reorganization of society . . . [B]ut after the war I did not because I was unable to. I had discovered what one man can do to another . . . There were things done during that period from which I still have to avert my mind lest I should be physically sick. They were not done by the headhunters of New Guinea, or by some primitive tribe in the Amazon. They were done, skillfully, coldly, by educated men, doctors, lawyers, by men with a tradition of civilization behind them, to beings of their own kind.⁶⁷

Lord of the Flies culminates in the "civilized" British boys, now divided into tribes, literally hunting each other down.

This fear that the moral gap between "civilized" Europeans and uncivilized barbarians may not exist at all is explored not only in mid-century British works such as Robin Jenkins's *The Cone-Gatherers* (1955), a novel set during the Second World War that interrogates the enigmatically malign, murderous behavior of a gamekeeper of an aristocratic Scottish estate toward an innocent if physically deformed laborer, but in late-twentieth-century works as well.

Witness, for example, Pat Barker's *Regeneration* trilogy of the early 1990s, an anti-war narrative that provocatively blurs the boundaries between history and fiction. In the first novel, *Regeneration* (1991), Barker problematizes the medical and legal category of "madness" and interrogates the psycho-social mechanisms by which the British government sent thousands of its psychologically traumatized soldiers back to the slaughter of the Great War trenches despite their mental unfitness to fight and the near certainty of their deaths. In the second novel, *The Eye in the Door* (1993), it is victimized pacifists and homosexuals who become pawns in the British government's war machine; while in the third novel, the Booker Prize-winning *The Ghost Road* (1995), the "civilized" British penchant for war is suggestively juxtaposed with a "primitive" Papua New Guinea tribe's cult of death. How "civilized," these works ask, can the warmongering British really claim to be?

The trauma of the mid-century years also accounts for the prevalence of dystopian elements, which are largely vehicles for social criticism, in so many novels of our period, from the late works of Orwell and the early works of Golding, to Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange* (1962), Alasdair Gray's *Lanark* (1981), and Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1986). In Atwood's feminist dystopia a puritanical, patriarchal, theocratic government effectively enslaves, sexually or otherwise, all females in the service of the state, the Republic of Gilead.

Shifting Literary–National Paradigms: From the “English Novel” to the “Novel in English”

Postwar Britain was an austere and insecure place. British people knew that their role in the world was shrinking, and the years between the handing over of India in 1947 and the Suez crisis of 1956 were years in which the reality of Britain's increasingly limited role in world affairs was becoming painfully evident.

Caryl Phillips, *A New World Order*⁶⁸

[F]or a long, long time Britain thought of itself as the center of a huge empire. For a long time writers who wrote English literature felt they did not need to think consciously about whether they were international or not. They could write about the smallest details of English society and it was, by definition, of interest to people in the far corners of the world because English culture itself was . . . internationally important . . . But that finished [sometime after the Second World War]. And then suddenly . . . people came to this realization: We're not the center of the universe. We're just this little

backwater in Europe. If we want to participate in the world, culturally speaking, we've got to find out what's happening in the rest of the world.

Kazuo Ishiguro, in interview⁶⁹

The novel has never been a more international form . . .

Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*⁷⁰

The last half of the twentieth century witnessed a monumental shift in the character of both literary and national identity: the “novel in English” supplanted the “English novel” in significance and cogency. What was at one time on the margins of canonical literature – the English language but non-British (or “Commonwealth”) novel – is at present squarely at its center: the English-language novel is now a genuinely international affair, with postcolonial Anglophone and “black British” works as widely read and critically esteemed as “British” ones. As important as the English novelists of this period have been and continue to be, it is non-English novelists who now arguably dictate the parameters of literary debate and attract the most interest. As the novelist Emma Tennant, as early as 1978, declared, the majority of the important “developments” in English language fiction are as “likely to have come out of Africa, or the West Indies, or India”⁷¹ as out of Britain. Feroza Jussawalla and Reed Way Dasenbrock, in the Introduction to their illuminating volume of interviews with postcolonial writers, amplify this point:

The single most important development in literature written in English over the past century has been its increasingly international – indeed, global – nature. Once the language of a few million people on a small island on the edge of Europe, English is now spoken and written on every continent and is an important language inside at least one-quarter of the world's one hundred sixty countries. As English has become an important international language, it has also become an important international literary language.⁷²

It is no mystery why this shift occurred. World War II helped accelerate the breakup of the British Empire, and Britain's abortive intervention in the Suez Crisis of 1956, obliquely alluded to in Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*, marked the demise of British imperial prestige. If London dominated 25 percent of the earth's surface at the turn of the nineteenth century, with control of nearly 4 million square miles, this dominance, in the thirty years following the Second World War, would shrink to a tiny fraction of that figure. India and Pakistan gained independence from Britain in 1947 (Sri Lanka achieved

independence one year later), with the African nations of Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa, and Uganda following in the years 1960–3, and the vast majority of British-held Caribbean countries – among them the Bahamas, Barbados, Dominica, and Jamaica – gaining independence between 1962 and 1983. Closer to England, the Irish Free State was internationally recognized in 1921 (the 1931 Statute of Westminster formalized the secession of the Irish Free State from the United Kingdom); Scotland, although remaining a part of the United Kingdom, moved in the direction of devolution, re-inaugurating its Parliament in 1999; and Wales inaugurated a Welsh Assembly in this same year. As one observer remarked, Britain’s “major historical experience” in the twentieth century, other than the two world wars, was “the final flourishing, later decline and eventual loss of the Empire.”⁷³

Britain’s political empire may be gone, but its “linguistic empire” is stronger than ever. As Jussawalla and Dasenbrock observe, “The sun may now have set on the British Empire, but that Empire, in establishing English as a language of trade, government, and education in that sizable part of the world ruled by the British, helped create what may be a more enduring ‘empire’ of the English language.”⁷⁴ The Indian novelist Salman Rushdie casts this linguistic dominance in yet more favorable terms. While it is true that English is *the* global language as “a result of the physical colonization of a quarter of the globe by the British,” Rushdie eschews viewing this language as an unwanted imposition on formerly colonized peoples, instead regarding it as “a gift of the British colonizers,” a legacy that in any case “ceased to be the sole possession of the English some time ago.”⁷⁵

At this point a word on the distinction among three terms – “imperial,” “colonial,” and “postcolonial” – will be useful. In his *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, Raymond Williams notes that “imperialism” is variously understood as “a political system in which colonies are governed from an imperial centre, for economic [and] other reasons,” and as an “economic system of external investment and the penetration and control of markets and sources of raw materials.”⁷⁶ Imperialism is thus both a set of practices wrought by an empire and an ideological “justification” of those practices. If imperialism emphasizes the conquering and exploitation of “foreign” territories for the purpose of securing political and economic hegemony, colonialism emphasizes the settling of those territories for the purpose of transforming the indigenous socioeconomic and cultural order. As this description of colonialism would suggest, “postcolonial” defines a political and cultural order following the departure of the colonizing power and the birth of the independent nation: a hybridized culture that mixes elements of the formerly invading power and that of the indigenous population. As Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin put it in their *The Empire Writes Back*, “Post-colonial culture is