

# The Novel Today

1967-  
1975

Ronald Hayman

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RONALD HAYMAN

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# 1

## Realism and experiment are not antithetical

B. S. JOHNSON ANN QUIN DAVID PLANTE

CHRISTINE BROOKE-ROSE BRIGID BROPHY

GABRIEL JOSIPOVICI

When Ivy Compton-Burnett died in 1969, the Literary Editor of a leading weekly invited Anthony Powell to write a tribute to her. At first he demurred. A great English novelist had just died, he was told; he was the only great novelist among her survivors. How could he refuse?

Some critics maintain that none of our novelists deserves the word 'great'. Even on the question of who comes nearest to qualifying for it, there has never been more room for disagreement. Anthony Powell, Graham Greene, Angus Wilson, Iris Murdoch and William Golding could all find champions, while other critics could plausibly back Muriel Spark, Doris Lessing, John Fowles, V. S. Naipaul or Kingsley Amis, with the argument that no one is writing better. Other critics would argue that all these are too traditionalist, that none of them is taking enough risks.

According to Alain Robbe-Grillet, realistic story-telling has falsified the world of objects by humanizing them. 'It has become impossible to narrate', he insists in *Towards a New Novel* (1962). 'The exigencies of the anecdote were less compelling for Proust than for Flaubert, for Faulkner than for Proust, for Beckett than for Faulkner. It is a question of something else from now on. . . . In the modern narrative one might say that time was cut off from its temporality. It doesn't flow any more. It isn't the agent for anything any more.' According to Nathalie Sarraute, the new novel should preserve and promote 'that element of indetermination, opacity and mystery that one's own actions always have'. The psychological element could stay on condition that it must not be converted back into character or plot. But the theory of the *nouveau roman* is more interesting than the actual fiction. In his essay 'The Novel as Research' Michel Butor defines the traditional novel as 'the novel which raises no questions'. In a world which is changing so rapidly 'new forms will reveal new things in reality, new connexions', while 'traditional narrative techniques are incapable of integrating all the new relations thus created'. Far from being antithetical

to realism in the novel, formal invention is indispensable to it. If the novelist carries his realism far enough, he finds that the formal relationship he has set up between the component parts of his fiction is making a statement about external reality. (The complexity of the reality he experiences will be reflected in the complexity of his structure, 'certain portions playing in relation to the whole the same part that the whole plays in relation to reality'.)

But this, as Butor says, can happen only when the novelist is willing to make demands on his reader, forcing him to question his habitual ways of organizing his responses to experience. In England today the novelist is under pressure to give his reader an easy time. While television is both discouraging the reading habit and providing an alternative form of easily digestible stories for mass consumption, inflation is increasing the price of books and reducing the number of novels that publishers can afford to bring out. The 'difficult' novelist is liable to be squeezed out of the market altogether, while many are writing as if nothing mattered except to keep the reader constantly entertained.

Before the war, *avant-gardisme* went hand in hand with obscurity, but today the most obviously 'experimental' writer is not necessarily the most difficult. B. S. Johnson's concern to make his work available to a wide reading public became increasingly evident in the last novels he wrote before he killed himself in 1973. When he started to write, he was, as he said himself, 'besotted by Irish writers like Sam Beckett, James Joyce and Flann O'Brien'.<sup>1</sup> (Beckett thought highly of Johnson's work.) But he was only superficially affected by the *nouveau roman*. According to Roland Barthes, writing becomes real writing when it prevents the reader from answering the question 'Who is speaking?' In B. S. Johnson's work the answer is always obvious.

If Günter Grass was the first contemporary novelist to imitate the techniques of Laurence Sterne, B. S. Johnson was the first in England. Grass's *The Tin Drum* was published in 1959; the English translation was available two years later in the States and the following year in England. Johnson had studied the eighteenth-century novel when he read English at London University during the late fifties, and in 1963 he published his first novel, *Travelling People*, which was amusingly full of Sterne-like typographical tricks and Sterne-like digressions.

<sup>1</sup> 'Fat Man on a Beach' in *Beyond the Words*, edited by Giles Gordon, London, 1975.



B. S. Johnson

His second book, *Albert Angelo* (1964), is about a young architect who has to work as a supply teacher.<sup>1</sup> Not content with such devices as printing dialogue and inner monologue in separate columns and having holes cut into the pages for the reader to see what is coming, Johnson interrupts himself three quarters of the way through his narrative with the explosive explication that he is really talking about himself and about writing. The fiction is a lying stratagem. He had abandoned the girl who, in the story, abandons his hero.

The third novel, *Trawl* (1966) is more Beckettian in manner, but the syntax is simpler, the descriptions of sexual encounters more entertaining, and the strategy of the relationship between the narrative 'I' and the autobiographical 'I' less sophisticated. Again Johnson is focusing on his own experience, as if it would be dishonest to attempt anything else. As he said in 1967 in an interview on the radio:<sup>2</sup>

I'm certainly not interested in the slightest in writing fiction. Where the difficulty comes in is that 'novel' and 'fiction' are not synonymous. Certainly I write autobiographical, and I write it in the form of a novel. What I don't write is fiction.

To read a newspaper or to switch from one television programme to another is to form a multiple impression of disconnected narratives. *The*

<sup>1</sup> A teacher employed on a short notice basis to meet special demands created by absence of regular staff.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Bernard Bergonzi, *The Situation of the Novel*, London, 1970.



*Unfortunates* (1969) was presented in twenty-seven unbound sections. The reader is told which is the first and which is the last, but he can read the rest in any order, sharing something of the writer's uncertainty about how to organize material which is necessarily autobiographical. The voice and the experience are both B. S. Johnson's. *The Unfortunates* was followed in 1971 by *House Mother Normal*, which he described as 'a geriatric comedy'. It consists of nine interior monologues each of which occupies nine pages. Blank pages represent moments of blank-mindedness. The inmates of an old people's home are playing games. Certain events come clearly into focus, as when 'Pass the parcel' culminates in unwrapping a piece of dog-shit, but it is sometimes hard to construe the first eight monologues until their meaning is clinched by the ninth, which comes from the House Mother, a divorced woman of forty-two. Her motive for coupling with the dog is apparently that she wants the inmates to feel disgusted with something other than their own bodies.

The next novel, *Christie Malry's Own Double-Entry* (1973) is about an intractable bank clerk, who not only acts on the assumption that society is in his debt, but opens a double-entry account to keep records. He decides on the cash value of each aggravation and each pleasure, but the debit entries always exceed the credits, and the only way he finds of working towards balancing the ledger is by taking increasingly drastic action against society. The chapter headings and the chatty asides to the reader are reminiscent of Fielding and Sterne, while the matter-of-factness in the account of poisoning a reservoir with cyanide and causing the death of 20,479 innocent West Londoners recalls Robbe-Grillet's deadpan prose in his outline for the perfect crime in *Project for a Revolution in New York* (1970).

Johnson's last novel before his suicide reverts to veracity. *See the Old Lady Decently* (1975) is the first part of a trilogy—*The Matrix Trilogy*—centred on his mother, who died of cancer in 1971. 'The debt one owes to one's parents, which I had thought one paid by having children oneself, I now see is more nearly paid by having to watch the mother die.' Her cancer becomes symbolical of the mother country's decay over the last forty years. Not knowing the facts in detail, he had to invent episodes for the restaurant kitchen where she worked, but he tried to compensate for the fiction by interpolating factual descriptions of himself concocting it, glad to be interrupted by his children. The narrative is also interrupted

with photographic reproductions of documents, letters and concrete poems, including two in the shape of a female breast. The novel ends with a punning Joycean celebration of his own pre-natal life, an embryo inside Emily.

Ann Quin was another experimentalist whose career ended in suicide. Her first novel, *Berg* (1964) was disturbingly vivid and outstandingly well written, despite the borrowings from Beckett and Sarraute, who infected Ann Quin with her idiosyncratic disdain for inverted commas. Dialogue rubs shoulders with unspoken thoughts in this compulsive impersonation of a forty-year-old man compulsively spying on his father's squalid affair in a seaside hotel.

Ann Quin's obsessive theme was triangular relationships involving a couple and an outsider. Berg steals his father's mistress, intending to kill the old man. In *Three* (1966) Ann Quin prefigured her own death by drowning. It is a story about a girl who goes off in a rowing-boat, leaving behind a suicide note, diaries and tape-recordings. She has been obsessed by the intimacy between Leonard and Ruth; the idea of death is a weapon to make them obsessed with her. What fails is the attempt to translate free-association into very loose blank verse.

In *Passages* (1969) the couple feels incomplete without the third partner. Against an unparticularized Greek background, a girl is searching for her brother, who is either dead or perhaps just displaced, like other displaced persons; her lover is less clearly focused. The blurb says he is a masculine reflection of her, in search of himself. As in *Three*, some of the best and most economical writing takes the form of extracts from the girl's diaries, but Ann Quin resembled B. S. Johnson in wanting to include herself in the story, and some of the marginal notes in small print reveal too much of the personal fantasies behind the diary entries.

The last novel she completed, *Tripticks* (1972) satirizes the American way of life—bitterly, but not very successfully. She also fails to adapt stylistically to the cartoon-strip illustrations provided by Carol Annand. The novel Ann Quin failed to complete, *The Unmapped Country*, might have been very good indeed.<sup>1</sup> It is reminiscent of Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* not only in subject-matter but in intensity, while the interpolation of diary entries and conversations suggests that this method might have been developed very interestingly.

<sup>1</sup> Twenty-two pages of it are published in Giles Gordon's *Beyond the Words*, 1975.

With *The Ghost of Henry James* (1970) the thirty-year-old David Plante made one of the most promising novelistic débuts so far seen in the seventies. A good deal of the book's resonance depends on its title, which is, however, vindicated. The narrative poses the question of whether a Jamesian novel can still be written and answers it with delicate ambiguity. These young people might be grandchildren of Henry James's characters. Rich enough to devote their time wholly to personal relationships, articulate, sophisticated, well connected, highly bred, they move with an innate capacity for irony between New England, London, Rome and Tuscany, sometimes staying at the same kind of decaying nineteenth-century hotels as their fictional ancestors, poised with the same elegant, listless, wordy uncertainty between past and future.

Four brothers and a sister, they are un-Jamesian both in the casual speed at which they become homosexually or heterosexually entangled with other people and then disentangled. Nothing lasts except their involvement with each other, and even this changes in quality when Henry dies. Their existence seems to belong to his ghost, as to that of the other Henry. It is as if their self-consciously literary language is mocking them for being unable to escape onto a lower level.

David Plante's next three novels, *Slides* (1971), *Relatives* (1972) and *The Darkness of the Body* (1974) do not fulfil the promise of his first. Taking *The Marble Faun* as its point of departure, *Slides* failed to establish the same kind of richly suggestive relationship with Nathaniel Hawthorne as its predecessor had with Henry James. The similarities with *The Ghost of Henry James* are deliberate, almost ostentatious: it is another story about five rich adolescents who depend emotionally on each other's short-circuitings as they weave their leisurely love-lives between Boston and Rome. Though they are not related this time, their coupling seems scarcely less incestuous. And the narrative is fragmented into the same number of brief chapters—sixty-seven.

*Relatives* has only three characters at the centre of it, but instead of bringing them into clearer focus, the narrowing of the pattern makes it more worrying that so much is left unexplained. The abstentions—from judging, from developing character or situation—now appear to derive from self-indulgence rather than from self-discipline. *The Darkness of the Body* is intermittently reminiscent of Ann Quin. A homosexual turns heterosexual to displace the male half of a couple; and part of the action is set against an indefinitely Greek background.

Christine Brooke-Rose is the novelist who has been most directly influenced by the *nouveau roman*. Her first book *Languages of Love* (1957) was a fairly straightforward story of London University students, espresso bars and a love affair between a married lecturer and a woman on the brink of conversion to Catholicism. *The Dear Deceit* (1960) told its story backwards, starting from the death of a reprehensible pornographer, and pushing progressively and analytically towards childhood. *The Middlemen* (1961) is about an affair between a public relations officer and a psychotherapist whose lives are surrounded by the go-betweens of the communications industry.

The watershed in Christine Brooke-Rose's development came in 1964 with *Out*, which presents the aftermath of a nuclear holocaust. The configuration of the earth has been altered, and current racial roles have been reversed: the colourless man is subservient to the coloured. But the novel's style is even more striking than its substance—the narrative is weighed down with slow-moving quasi-scientific descriptions of physical realities. The debt to Robbe-Grillet is obvious, as it is in *Such* (1966) which is like *The Dear Deceit* in making death into a starting-point. After undergoing an operation, the central character has been dead for three days before the deliberately confused and confusing narrative—it moves like a jazz improvisation—plots the resurrection of his intellect, laboriously re-assembling its scattered components.

*Between* (1968) is livelier. A girl who does simultaneous translations, the heroine is constantly between two languages. She is also between youth and middle-age and between two jobs. As she flies from one international conference to another, phrases and languages interrupt each other in her consciousness, forming word-clusters which are often funny, sometimes beautiful. There's not much action, but the jostling of remembered dialogues and situations is quite dramatic.

Seven years elapsed before the publication of the next novel, *Thru* (1975). Christine Brooke-Rose had been lecturing in Vincennes, and questions raised by French Structuralists about the nature of a text are reflected and refracted in the highly-wrought text of *Thru*, which teases the reader with a series of typographical truth-games. Arguments about linguistic analysis, verbal and visual variations on the theme of mirror images, concrete poems, fragments of a love story, lists, diagrams and facsimiles of hand-written texts compete for space on the page, but the reader has to work very hard to form his own patterns out of the author's.

One of the few novelists who can rival her intellectual agility is Brigid Brophy, whose *In Transit* (1969) has more than polyglot word-play in common with *Between*. Brigid Brophy's narrator is liable first to forget his (or her) sex and later to alternate between the two, sometimes splitting the text into columns so as to separate the male and female alternatives. With its multi-language announcements over loudspeakers, an airport provides a paradigm of depersonalized internationalism. There is also a television parlour game in which the panel guesses at the guest's perversion, and the games Brigid Brophy plays with the reader include the fabrication of an opera to the title *Alitalia*.

The plays of Harold Pinter have had less influence on fiction than might have been expected. Many novelists have abdicated in the same way from godlike knowingness, but few have profited from his technique of discovering dramatic potentialities in the fallibility of memory and the impossibility of making any accurate statement about past events. Gabriel Josipovici, who is also a playwright, has written the fiction which most invites comparison with Pinter's drama. The starting point for *Inventory* (1968) was the word that became its title. The idea of listing random objects and the idea of inventing combined to generate a fiction about Joe, who is inventorying the contents of a flat once occupied by two men, one of whom killed himself. A girl named Susan seems to have been partly responsible for the suicide. But the events cannot be reconstructed objectively from the clues provided by objects in the flat and by her words.

*Words* (1971) also has a Pinteresque atmosphere, though the usual Pinter triangle has been elaborated into a pentagon. A mysterious battle for power is fought within five points formed by two couples, both liable to break up, and one of the husbands' ex-girlfriend, who is liable to elope with him. The narrative of *The Present* (1975) oscillates between three viewpoints, which provide contradictory versions of the same triangular relationship between a couple and a lodger, but it is not even certain who is the husband and who is the lodger, whether they are living in a London flat or in the country or whether there are children. Again the title is significant. We are puzzled about whether we are in the present tense, the past or a fantasy about the future. Most of the novel is written in dialogue which, unlike David Plante's, is flat, down-to-earth, naturalistic. This increases the deadliness of the implicit threat to the novel's traditional criteria. Can truth to individual experience possibly be enough when three versions of a story can be presented in such a way that each invalidates the other two?



## Not landlocked in insularity

IRIS MURDOCH JOHN FOWLES DORIS LESSING

Deprived of novelty, the novel ceases to be itself, but the most important innovations are not necessarily the formal inventions which disrupt either the syntax or the arrangement of print on the page. To categorize novelists as either experimental or traditional is as simplistic as to treat realism and experiment as mutually exclusive, and it is hardly less misleading to discuss contemporary fiction as if there are three main types: American, French and English. American novelists are usually characterized as energetic and uninhibited romantic mythologists, free-ranging in fantasy, free-wheeling in form; the French are assumed to be obsessed with the formal problems which are ignored by the English novelists, who carry on in their insular way as if the nineteenth century weren't quite over yet. Admittedly, some of our novelists have been trying so hard to please a middle-brow public and reacting so hard against the *avant-gardisme* of James Joyce and Virginia Woolf that they have reverted to the narrative methods of Arnold Bennett and H. G. Wells. Still, between the extremes of retrogression and the extremes of experimentalism, there is a great variety of possibilities.

The fiction which has probably been most influential of all in the post-war period has been produced outside the three main national camps: by Borges, Beckett and Nabokov. None of these is committed to the idea of the novel. 'Why take five hundred pages,' asks Borges, 'to develop an idea whose oral demonstration fits into a few minutes?' His fastidious short stories are like exquisite crystals precipitated out of the *mélange* in his consciousness of literature, images and ideas. Since 1960 when Beckett published *How It Is*, his fictions have all been brief, fragmentary, un-novelistic, while Nabokov's two best novels, *Lolita* (1955) and *Pale Fire* (1962) are both disguised as non-fiction, the first perfunctorily, the second elaborately. In all three writers, realistic landscape disappears as words tend increasingly to become objects in their own right and the author's power to form patterns with them becomes symbolical of the relationship between the individual and the environment. Solipsism may be a danger, but abstraction seems to offer the best refuge from the chaos of contingency.

Looser and more empirical than the French novel, more ambitious and less personal than the English, the American novel was quick to respond to these tendencies. Naturalism had never got a grip on it. Melville and Hawthorne wrote fables. Dreiser and Steinbeck, heavyweight champions of naturalism, fought on a lower literary level. If Lukacs was right to identify the drift towards allegory as the main current in European modernism from Kafka to Beckett, the American novel was floating with the tide. The English novel seemed to be moving much more slowly, but I want to argue that far from being disadvantageous, its ballast of naturalism has helped it towards the kind of realism that Butor desiderated.

The scene is still cluttered with enough old-fashioned novels to give some plausibility to the view that we are landlocked in insularity, separated from the mainstream of post-symbolist myth-making. It is certainly true that we have no counterparts to the Americans Thomas Pynchon and John Barth, but the best work of Iris Murdoch, John Fowles and Doris Lessing is strongly anti-traditional, though it also has deep roots in the nineteenth-century novel.

Iris Murdoch's *Under the Net* (1954) was written under the influence of Sartre, Beckett and Raymond Queneau. In 1968, the year in which she published *The Nice and the Good*, she was saying that the writer to whom she owed most was Shakespeare. 'It's his extraordinary ability to combine a marvellous pattern or myth with the expansion of the characters as absolutely free persons, independent of each other.' At this time she was not conscious of any desire to experiment. In the same interview<sup>1</sup> she said 'I feel myself that the *élan* of the great nineteenth-century novel isn't spent, that there's plenty of room for people to go on trying to write like Tolstoy or Dickens or Jane Austen, just doing it in the modern idiom, without any question of modernity coming in at all.' But she seems to have been influenced less by the narrative style of the great nineteenth-century novelists than by the Shakespearean elements in their work, the power of structuring, the cumulatively suggestive effect of rhythms, the grouping of characters into patterns in accordance with an invisible grid of moral criteria, the clusters of images that take on increasing symbolic significance as they grow inextricably into the tangle of plot.

Trained as a philosopher, Iris Murdoch went on teaching philosophy throughout the sixties. Born in 1919, she began writing at the beginning

<sup>1</sup> With Ronald Bryden, *The Listener*, 4 April 1968.



Iris Murdoch

of the war and she had completed five novels before she started on *Under the Net*, the first she published. Her fiction seems to have been motivated partly by a fear that words, concepts, theories increase one's distance from physical things and experiences. There may even have been an element of wanting to compensate or do penance for her philosophizing. The hero of *Under the Net* is a word man, a translator, who argues against the view (represented by a man of action) that 'all theorizing is flight. We must be ruled by the situation itself and this is unutterably particular. Indeed it is something to which we can never get close enough, however hard we may try, as it were, to crawl under the net.'

Iris Murdoch's fiction distils and dramatizes her own ambivalence on this question, and in a philosophical essay published in 1959, 'The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited',<sup>1</sup> she argued 'Contingency must be defended, for it is the essence of personality. And here is where it becomes important to remember that a novel is written in words, to remember that "eloquence of suggestion and rhythm" of which James spoke. A novel must be a house fit for free characters to live in; and to combine form with respect for reality with all its contingent ways is the highest art of prose.' But has she allowed her own characters enough autonomy to become realistic? The uncertainty has plagued her. Without resorting to mimicry, for which she

<sup>1</sup> *Yale Review*, XLIX, 1959.



has only a limited talent, she has tried, as she told Frank Kermode,<sup>1</sup> to create 'a lot of people who are not me . . . Yet often it turns out in the end that something about the structure of the work itself, the myth as it were of the work, has drawn all these people into a sort of spiral, or into a kind of form which ultimately is the form of one's own mind.' This happens in her most Beckettian novel, *Bruno's Dream* (1969), which centres on the contracting consciousness of a very old man, very slowly dying, surrounded by possessions. But the Indian deities, Shiva and Parvati, polarize the other characters strongly, and the sexual differentiation is the only one to survive clearly.

The theme of manipulation had occurred in earlier novels: in *A Fairly Honourable Defeat* (1970), by focusing on a man who regards other people as puppets, she makes a fresh attempt to master her own tendency to abuse her power of manipulation.

One of her weaknesses as a novelist is her inclination to assume that a problem can be solved by incorporating a disguised reference to it. The very accident-proneness of the central character in *An Accidental Man* (1971) looks like a hopeful gesture in the direction of contingency, and it is not enough to make someone tell someone else 'You don't know what real people smell like'; she needs to demonstrate that she does.

*The Black Prince*, published in 1973, is the best novel she has yet written. It is also the most ingeniously structured and the most experimental. The thriller-like action, which involves murder, is ironically set in a complex series of frames—a method comparable to Nabokov's. There are two Forewords, one by the imaginary editor, the other by the imaginary author, and there are six Postscripts, one by the author, four by characters, one by the editor. By offering multiple interpretations of the main events, Iris Murdoch hardens the core of apparent actuality at the same time as puncturing the authority of any narrator, including herself. The version of the 'truth' that emerges from the proceedings of the law-court is very different from the resultant 'truth' that emerges from the novel, but Miss Murdoch makes its incompleteness into a virtue.

*The Sacred and Profane Love Machine* (1974) is unusual in equipping the characters with a self-awareness which is a distinctive element in their personalities. ('We live in dream worlds,' says Montague Small, a high-brow thriller-writer.) Like the *nouveau roman* authors, Iris Murdoch is

<sup>1</sup> Interview in *Partisan Review*, Spring 1963.