MACMILLAN STUDIES IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY LITERATURE

THE ENGLISH NOVEL OF HISTORY & SOCIETY, 1940-80

·PATRICK SWINDEN·

KINGSLEY AMIS

HENRY GREEN

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For Martin and Anne Bygate

Preface and Acknowledgements

This book is neither a general history of the novel in England since the Second World War, nor a compendium of essays on six novelists of the period, arbitrarily selected at the whim of the critic. Each of the novelists I have written about at length has been selected on the basis of his ability to satisfy three requirements.

The first of these was that his reputation was made, or substantially added to, in the years following 1940. Obviously this applies to the writers included in the last three chapters, because their first novels were not written until after that date. I think it applies to the other three because, although they had produced interesting work before the war, the novels on which their reputations now rest were written later. (Or, in the case of Hughes, his reputation would have been a very different one – based on the single novel *A High Wind in Jamaica*. Perhaps the same applies to Henry Green and *Living*.)

The second requirement was that there should be no argument about the fact of the reputation itself: i.e. it might be possible to argue that the reputations of any or all of these writers have been inflated, but it is not possible to argue that they do not have a reputation. Therefore what they have written is important in a literary historical sense, even if not in a more strictly literary critical one.

The third requirement was that they should not be, generally speaking, bad writers. As a matter of fact I think three out of the six have written what I would consider downright bad novels. Most novelists, even the best, do – from time to time. But what seems to me good in their writing is good enough to warrant their being taken seriously as novelists of society. It is for this reason that I have not included essays on such writers as Evelyn Waugh and Ivy Compton-Burnett, whose best novels it seems to me were

written before or during the War. Paul Scott and Iris Murdoch I have written on elsewhere. Other contemporary novelists with high reputations I have ignored not only because of pressure of space, but because those reputations seem to me to have been built on insecure foundations. I should add that this doesn't necessarily apply to novelists younger than V. S. Naipaul, since I have seldom felt able to provide a sound judgement on them – not having had enough material to work on, or not having lived with it for a sufficient length of time to feel that I really know it.

As a result, this book does not seek to advance any particular argument about directions in which English fiction has travelled since the war. Nothing, that is to say, beyond what I have written below and in my Introduction about the persistence of a certain kind of fiction – innovatory in some of its detail, but deeply traditional in its basic aims and approaches to character in society – from the nineteenth, into the (late) twentieth century.

In all other respects there is only the shadowiest of polemical purposes here, and that is more evident in the introductory survey than in the chapters given over to the study of individual novelists. Instead, I have tried to make of each of these chapters as penetrating a study as I can of the work of the writer in question, paying close attention to what I take to be representative examples of his work from different phases of his career post-1940. Each chapter therefore should read like a short book on the novelist concerned, attempting a comprehensive evaluation of his work in the light of a survey of all that he has written during the period, and a detailed analysis of some of his novels.

This is a history of what seem to me to be the most interesting developments in the novel of history and society since 1940. No doubt part of the reason for this is that I think it is into novels of this kind that most of the imaginative life of our literature has gone during the pasty forty years. In my Introduction I seek to give reasons for this. But it does mean I have not been able to examine some of the more strikingly experimental fiction of recent years, even where, as in Muriel Spark for example, it has a basis of sorts in social comedy. I hope my comments on Beckett and Golding will go some way towards justifying this principle of exclusion, which has little to do with intrinsic value, much more with a sense of relevance and proportion.

Readers may be puzzled by my references to each of the three parts of Richard Hughes's *The Fox in the Attic* and *The Wooden*

Shepherdess as 'novels'. There is ample evidence, however, in Hughes's own comments on *The Human Predicament*, that he thought of them as 'units' within the whole (unfinished) sequence that might be better described as 'novels' than as anything else. I have found it convenient to describe these sub-units as novels both for relative ease of reference, and as an indication of the density of events and relationships which are described within them.

I should like to make the following acknowledgements: to my colleagues in the Department of English at the University of Manchester, where early versions of some of this work were read at staff and student seminars; to the *Critical Quarterly* for permission to reproduce essays on Anthony Powell and D. M. Thomas, which now appear as parts of chapters in this book; to the New Fiction Society for affording me the opportunity to discuss some of my views on modern fiction at their offices in Book House, Wandsworth; and to Macmillan Press for permission to reproduce the paragraphs on V. S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr Biswas* which, in an abbreviated form, first appeared in my book *Unofficial Selves: Character in the Novel from Dickens to the Present Day* (1972).

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Contents

1 Introduction

To have written this Introduction fifteen, even ten, years ago would have required much more of a defensive strategy than is needed in present circumstances. In 1965, it was felt, the English novel was dwarfed by literary events outside these islands. Arguably the greatest 'English' novelist of the period was Samuel Beckett, an Irishman living in Paris and writing in French; possessed of a vision of what T. S. Eliot had earlier described as 'the horror, the boredom and the glory', such as no other contemporary English or even Anglo-Irish novelist would have or could have aspired to. Eliot died that year, but Pound, Auden and MacDiarmid lived on, carrying into the 1970s the vitality of the poetic *avant garde* of the twenties and thirties. By contrast the great experimentalists of the modern novel had all died years ago: James in 1916, Conrad in 1924, Ford in 1939 and Joyce and Virginia Woolf in 1941. Lawrence had returned from New Mexico only to die at Vence in the south of France in 1930. In the fifties and sixties there was no living testimony to the creative energies released in the novel in the first half of the century – only Beckett translating the Joyce inheritance into French; and Forster, the most approachable and least evidently revolutionary of the moderns, who had not published a new novel since *A Passage to India* in 1924. Meanwhile Saul Bellow in Chicago, Alain Robbe-Grillet in Paris, Patrick White in Australia and Günter Grass in West Germany were demonstrating how the novel form might be adapted to confront the realities of the mid twentieth century, in ways that seemed to be untranslatable into English literary practice.

A tradition, pulled loose from its early twentieth-century moorings and seeking to re-anchor itself in the Victorian and Edwardian experience, seemed doomed to extinction. Too many English novels betrayed a sort of imaginative anaemia and provincialism that was much commented on by foreign writers

and readers. The matter is crystallised in a few words from one of the characters in Barbara Pym's novel *Excellent Women* (1952):

> I wondered that she should waste so much energy fighting over a little matter like wearing hats in chapel, but then I told myself that, after all, life was like that for most of us – the small unpleasantnesses rather than the great tragedies; the little useless longings rather than the great renunciations and dramatic love affairs of history or fiction.

One wonders who 'most of us' are in this passage. People like Mildred (who is speaking) and Dora (who is spoken about), or people like their readers too, who are presumed to be wisely and realistically nodding agreement with the sentiments expressed? In her most widely acclaimed novel, *Quartet in Autumn* (1977), Pym makes the whole story revolve around the efforts of one elderly lady to return a used milk bottle to another elderly lady. Is this another of those 'little useless longings' that make up most of our lives, and to which we are therefore expected to pay the kind of attention not willingly spent on Grass's neo-Nazis or Solzhenitsyn's labour camps?

Elizabeth Bowen writes that 'when one remembers habit it seems to have been happiness', and one sees what she means in the context of a view of life that fails to relate private feelings that are conversable about the public catastrophes that seem not to be. It remains a fact, though, that Solzhenitsyn is perfectly well able to remember habits acquired in the labour camps and cancer wards of Gulag without thinking for one moment that 'it seems to have been happiness'. Not that even the most extreme experiences don't on occasion promote scenes of happiness and personal satisfaction, but the sort of wise aphorism enunciated by Miss Bowen's character, based on a deplorably limited view of life, points to much that was unsatisfactory about the English novel during the immediate pre- and post-War years.

Elizabeth Taylor, another genteel but rather tougher minded writer in the provincial tradition, saw what was wrong. One of the characters in *A Wreath of Roses* (1949), a painter called Frances Rutherford, broods on the inadequacy of her art, its inability to come directly to terms with what is most demanding, most serious, and most true about life:

> She closed her eyes and bunches of roses were printed for an instant, startlingly white upon the darkness, then faded, as the darkness itself paled, the sun from the window coming brilliantly through her lids. Trying to check life itself, she thought, to make some of the hurrying everyday things immortal, to paint the everyday things with tenderness and intimacy – the dirty café with its pock-marked mirrors as if they had been shot at, its curly hat-stands, its stained marble under the yellow light; wet pavements; an old woman yawning. With tenderness and intimacy. With sentimentality too, she wondered. For was I not guilty of making ugliness charming? An English sadness like a veil over all I painted until it became ladylike and nostalgic, governessy, utterly lacking in ferocity, brutality, violence. Whereas in the centre of the earth, in the heart of life, in the core of everyday things is there not violence, with flames wheeling, turmoil, panic, chaos?

It is a Woolfian perception that neither Frances nor any other of Elizabeth Taylor's heroines can resolve in Woolfian aesthetic terms. The evidence not in the paintings erupts in the novel in the person of Richard Elton, a psychopath who almost kills the heroine and does kill himself at the end of the tale. Of course, we don't believe in him. He is not a vitally credible character. But his presence in the story shows us that Mrs Taylor is, like Frances, aware of disturbing and violent forces that fail to penetrate the immaculately even surface of her prose. In the end both Frances's speculations and Elton's physical presence are aberrations from the civilised if somewhat eccentric behaviour that is the norm of Elizabeth Taylor's fiction.

I do not think we should be in too much of a hurry to underrate the achievements of Bowen and Taylor, or of their male equivalents, such as L. P. Hartley and, latterly, Francis King. All of these novelists have performed a service by placing English fiction in a sort of quarantine – depriving it of the wider and deeper perceptions displayed in some of the competition from Europe and America; but protecting it from a great deal of inferior writing that looked as if it contained such perceptions but in fact possessed nothing of the kind. Perhaps the best way of putting this is to say that for every Saul Bellow one could count a hundred Kurt Vonneguts or John Barths; for every Alain Robbe-Grillet, a hundred inferior practitioners of the *nouveau roman*. At least one

can say that what Bowen, Taylor and King professed to understand, by and large they understood – and, although a far cry from the whole truth of whatever matter they were dealing with, it was worth understanding. Bad linguistics and worse philosophy aren't worth understanding at all, even when they do call themselves *Giles Goat Boy* and *Slaughterhouse-5*.

However, the gravest threat to the survival of the English novel as a serious literary form came from closer to home than either France or America. Beckett was the lone survivor from the great days of the twenties and thirties. During the early fifties he had written, in France, his important sequence of novels, *Molloy, Malone Meurt* and *L'Innommable*. In the same year that he published *Malone Meurt, En Attendant Godot* was performed in Paris. Translated in 1954, and performed in London at a time when the English theatre was taking on a new and vigorous lease of life, the play became a *cause célèbre*. And this in turn awakened interest in Beckett's novels. Consequently *Molloy* and *Malone Dies* were published by Calder and Boyars in 1956, and *The Unnamable* followed in 1960. These novels were all translated by Beckett himself, and word got around that the translations were the final realisation of Beckett's intentions. A condition of their appearing in pure, unmetaphorical, un-Romantic English was that they should have been written in French first – just as Conrad had had to think in French and then translate the sentences into English when he committed them to paper (with very different stylistic results). So we had a great experimental English (well, Irish) novelist among us again. The link with Joyce had been reforged. The impulse to experiment with literary forms, under the guise of writing novels, was renewed.

In fact, though Beckett was a junior associate of Joyce in Paris back in the thirties, and though there is a sense in which his novels represent an extension of the stream-of-consciousness techniques deployed in certain sections of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and *Ulysses*, in significant respects Beckett's work is profoundly opposed to Joyce's. In the final analysis it is on *Ulysses* that Joyce's claim to have written something of considerable and permanent literary value rests. And the greatness of *Ulysses* does not, in the end, have much to do with myths, matrices and street-maps of Dublin. It has to do with Joyce's supreme ability in many parts of this novel to produce the illusion of life. John Fowles has written that only one ambition is shared by all novelists, and that is the

'wish to create worlds as real as, but other than the world that is'. He might have gone on to say that the more a novelist can make the 'realness' of what is 'other' convince us, paradoxically, of the familiarity of the world we are invited to contemplate, the more satisfactory it will appear to be. That is what Joyce has done. Through the reality of his portrayal of Dublin on that June day in 1904 he has habituated us to what is 'other', making strange things familiar and familiar things strange. But they are things – or people, places, times of day. That is what is felt to be real, other, and familiar in Joyce. Can the same be said of Beckett?

Turning to the second of Beckett's novels, *Watt* – written in English in 1944 – we would be hard pressed to give an affirmative answer. Concluding the first part of this novel, Watt speculates in the following terms on something that has recently (?) happened to him:

> To conclude . . . that the incident was internal would, I think, be rash. For my – how shall I say? – my personal system was so distended at the period of which I speak that the distinction between what was inside it and what was outside it was not at all easy to draw. Everything that happened happened inside it, and at the same time everything that happened happened outside it. I trust I make myself plain.

What Beckett, or Watt, is confessing here is the extreme solipsism of his philosophical position. I am reminded not so much of a novelist of external details and surfaces – the kind of novelist Joyce was in the best parts of *Ulysses* – as of a discursive poet in the high Romantic tradition. More specifically I am reminded of Hazlitt's review of *The Excursion*, in which he says of Wordsworth that 'The power of his mind preys upon itself. It is as if there were nothing but himself and the universe. He lives in the busy solitude of his own heart; in the deep silence of thought.' Except that in Beckett the universe has also disappeared as an entity separate from his own mind. But it did the same thing, intermittently, for Wordsworth too; for Wordsworth told his friend Bonamy Price that 'There was a time in my life when I had to push against something that resisted, to be sure that there was anything outside me. I was sure of my own mind; everything else fell away and vanished into thought.' Certainly Beckett's heroes live in the busy solitude of their own hearts. Or 'minds' – since the frenzy of Beckett's

characters is an intellectual frenzy, breaking against the bars of a rationalist's prison. Again, Wordsworth speaks (in *The Prelude*) of the 'self-sufficing power of solitude', just as Beckett's Unnamable speaks of solitude as one of the three things in his life he had to make the best of. The others were the inability to speak and the inability to be silent – each of them also a recognisable Wordsworthian trait.

All of Beckett's characters have the same problem. Molloy, for example: 'Not to want to say, not to know what he wants to say, not to be able to say what you think you want to say, and never to stop saying, or hardly ever, that is the thing to keep in mind, even in the heat of composition.' Malone and Murphy say much the same thing, and indeed there are moments in *Molloy, Malone Dies* and *The Unnamable* when the speaker confuses his co-identity with other speakers in the trilogy and previously published works by Beckett. The speakers, let alone the 'characters' they invent to speak about, have no reality separate from their creator. They are simply names on which Beckett confers the responsibility for passing his time – until Godot comes along or the author gets to the end of the number of pages available, or he simply runs out of breath. It is an Irishman's despair: nothing to do but tell stories to pass the time. If they do pass the time. The Unnamable thinks they don't even do that: 'no point in telling yourself stories to pass the time, stories don't pass the time, nothing passes the time, that doesn't matter, that's how it is, you tell yourself stories', etc. Notice, you tell *yourself* stories. There's nobody else to tell them to, so distended is the personal system of even so empty and shrunken a personality as this one. But his voice and his 'person' contain everything there is to talk about – stories, lists, ideas: 'If this noise would stop there'd be nothing more to say.'

Is this remotely what we feel about Joyce's Dublin? If the noise stopped, do we feel that there'd be nothing more to say – about Bloom, about Molly, about Stephen? Literally, of course, there wouldn't be. But literature is a constant battle against literalism. Joyce's language, in spite of its Flaubertian origins, beckons us to a world we are convinced lies beyond it, a world 'as real as, but other than the world that is'. There is nothing beyond the words Beckett's protagonists speak. Only the darkness Malone fears. For, as Winnie says in *Happy Days* (buried up to her neck in sand), 'I do of course hear cries, but they're in my head surely.' The cries

Bloom heard in *Ulysses* were not only in his head or, the book having been written, in his author's head either.

In the middle 1950s, however, it seemed to many *avant-gardistes* in this country that that was where they ought to have been. For Beckett was related, as a sort of taciturn visiting uncle, to a school of French writing, the *anti-romanciers* or *nouveaux romanciers*, who placed great emphasis on the element of private indulgence that went into making fictions. For them, Beckett had blown the gaffe. Ignoring the fitfully disturbing power that issued from Beckett's intellectual despair, they took over what might be called the transparency of his writing – i.e. his unwillingness to hide the fact that writing was what he was doing and that the fact that he was doing it was the most important fact about its being done – and made it into a formal principle of their own fictions. I have written elsewhere* that this is a sterile intention, to be taken seriously at all only in so far as it emphasises a certain purity of motive (being honest about the truth) or issues in the expression of feeling, often obsessional feeling (see Robbe-Grillet's *La Jalousie*), completely at variance with everything it professes to be. Nevertheless the vogue for the *nouveau roman* crossed the Channel during the sixties and created a market for films by Chris Marker, Jean Luc Godard and others which would have kept no one but the most ardent Francophile awake had it not been for the excellent camera work and editing, which made it difficult for anyone to believe that nothing of significance was going on beneath it. The fall-out of this misguided movement *against* the novel remains with us in novels by English writers such as B. S. Johnson, Christine Brooke-Rose and Gabriel Josipovici. So far as I know no one reads them, but their theoretical *raison d'être*, displayed in much-praised critical books such as Josipovici's *The World and the Book*, has a seductive fascination, and might, some day, lead someone to forge a way through such intriguingly-named anti-novels as *Christie Malry's Own Double Entry, Such*, or *The Inventory*. Clearly, however, this was not a direction in which any sensible reader of English fiction would want to go. And there were siren voices calling from elsewhere in the sixties.

Mainly from William Golding, the most widely acclaimed home-grown escapologist from the constricting provincialism of

* See my *Unofficial Selves: Character in the Novel from Dickens to the Present Day* (London, 1972) ch. 3.