

# The Survival of the Novel

British Fiction in the Later Twentieth Century Neil McEwan



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### Preface

I have aimed to put a case about the nature of the novel's survival in England and to provide an introduction to a limited number of novelists and novels. The book takes an optimistic view. It is not an apology for English novelists on the grounds that they are catching up late in the day with American or French innovations. Nor is it a defence of a conventional—static—type of fiction, as opposed to 'intellectual puzzles'. My argument is that, well within the literary world of fabulation and nouveau roman, writers in Britain have achieved a creative relationship with the traditional novel. As a result, they have managed to keep their work close enough to common experience to make their experiments meaningful and to ensure the novel's continuing life.

So much good fiction has been produced in the last thirty years that any selection must be a personal choice. Some major authors—including Greene and Waugh—have been left out because they flourished in an earlier period.

Part 1 deals with five novelists whose experimental attitude to tradition seems to me characteristic of modern English fiction. In Part 2, I consider the problem of assessing and accounting for fiction in the present state of criticism and look at two very successful novels in the context of interpretation they have received.

Because I am also concerned with criticism, I have throughout referred to, quoted from and sometimes disagreed with the relatively few critics who clearly are the best in the field. Malcolm Bradbury and David Lodge are critics who are also novelists. Bernard Bergonzi's *The Situation of the Novel*, which takes in a wider view than I do, cannot be ignored.

I am grateful to Professor A. N. Jeffares and to Mr Stephen Wall for encouraging me to write, and to my colleagues M. Michel Dupont, Dr Roger Boase and Mr Nick Bell for help and advice. My sister-in-law Mrs Pauline McEwan was a patient typist.

> J. N. McE. July 1980

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# Part 1

#### 1 Introduction

In Lawrence Durrell's Clea (Faber, 1960), Pursewarden reminds 'Brother Ass' of how London used to appear to young writers arriving from the provinces, full of promise and laden with manuscripts:

The metropolis seemed to quiver with the portent of our talent, our skill, our discernment. Walking along the Mall, we wondered who all those men were — tall hawk-featured men perched on balconies and high places, scanning the city with heavy binoculars. What were they seeking so earnestly? Who were they — so composed and steely-eyed? Timidly we stopped a policeman to ask him. 'They are publishers,' he said mildly. Publishers! Our hearts stopped beating. 'They are on the look-out for new talent.' Great God! It was for us they were waiting and watching! Then the kindly policeman lowered his voice confidentially and said in hollow and reverent tones: 'They are waiting for the new Trollope to be born!' Do you remember, at these words, how heavy our suitcases suddenly felt . . . A million muffin-eating moralists were waiting, not for us, Brother Ass, but for the plucky and tedious Trollope! [Chapter 3]

This sense of exasperation with the state of the modern English novel has often been expressed by observers overseas. But attitudes are beginning to change and a new interest in our fiction can be detected abroad—even in France. The nouveau roman is no longer new; Roland Barthes, who did so much to publicise the anti-novel, came to modify his views, admitting that story-telling may be worthwhile.¹ English writers are no longer automatically assumed to be clinging to exhausted traditions, cut off from the important work going on in France and America. It is coming to seem likely that the English novel, technically adaptable even though stubbornly realist, will be an influential form of writing, in an increasingly anglophone world, at the end of the century.

Trollope's own reputation has increased since Durrell wrote. Pursewarden's 'plucky and tedious' looks a very crude judgement after the recent critical studies by Juliet McMaster, R. C. Terry and Robert Tracy.<sup>2</sup> The degree of artistry and imaginative control that can go with popular story-telling has been shown in other Victorian novelists, especially Dickens, as critical and scholarly work on nineteenth-century fiction has advanced over the last thirty years. We can see now that polemicists in the 1940s and 1950s were declaring 'conventional narrative' to be exhausted before they could properly appreciate what it had achieved. Trollope is still read, moreover; and although television has made much of him, serialisations appear to create a readership rather than supplant one. Prophecies about how the novel would be 'replaced' as a form of entertainment have not come true. In critical prestige and potential readership, his sort of novel is flourishing.

But we understand the conditions in which Trollope and the other great Victorians wrote too well to suppose that a modern writer can carry on as if, as Bernard Bergonzi puts it, 'the nineteenth century were still a going concern'.<sup>3</sup> British novelists have not attempted any such thing, and several of them, and most notably Iris Murdoch, have explained why it is pointless to try. Many recent critics have been concerned to refute (a task not complete) the view put forward by Rubin Rabinovitz in *The Reaction against Experiment in the English Novel*, 1950–1960 (1967), and by B. S. Johnson in his introduction to Aren't You Rather Young to Be Writing Your Memoirs? (1973),<sup>4</sup> that British novelists are 'neo-Dickensian' and unaware of Joyce's Ulysses. My intention is to dispel any remaining doubt, and to show how un Victorian even the most Victorian-seeming modern English novelists are.

My object is to examine the originality of a number of writers in relation to the Victorian novel. Bernard Bergonzi has emphasised in The Situation of the Novel the unavoidable knowledge which author and reader share of what has been done before. This consciousness has indeed influenced novelists; but it seems nonetheless that they have been able to take advantage of their readers' awareness of the gap between Trollope and a modern mind and have used the resources of nineteenth-century fiction with a creative—not archaeological—sense of the past.

Bernard Bergonzi draws attention also to the survival in English life of much that has vanished elsewhere. England can seem, he says, 'a living fragment of the nineteenth century' and it often appears to Introduction

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Americans and Europeans that 'as a cultural phenomenon the country has all the pathos and unreality of an Indian reservation . . . ' (p. 62). Totalitarian pressures, he fears, are likely to overwhelm our 'quaintly preserved' values. Most Englishmen who have worked abroad must have returned with similar thoughts. Yet if this comparison, made with America and Europe in mind, is just, a different impression can be formed by looking at other parts of the world. The transition brought about in most developed countries (apart from Britain) by economic forces and by war is far from complete elsewhere and ways of life belonging to separate epochs commonly coexist. Modern Britain offers contrasts of the same kind, if less extreme; this helps to explain the (usually disregarded) interest in English fiction in Third World countries. English novelists cannot simply copy Victorian novels but nor can they ignore them. The same is true of Victorian ways of life which continue in close proximity to the very different conditions of post-industrial Britain.

Daniel Martin in John Fowles's most recent novel Daniel Martin (1977) remarks on this situation. He has, he tells us, had to escape (to California) from his 'Victorian' childhood in the 1930s: 'My contemporaries were all brought up in some degree of the nineteenth century, since the twentieth did not begin until 1945. That is why we are on the rack, forced into one of the longest and most abrupt cultural stretches in the history of mankind' (Chapter 8). Daniel's 1930s, in a West Country vicarage with an eccentric (Trollopian) father presiding calmly over a rural parish, were not like the official decade in the history books. His twentieth century began in 1945; the nineteenth century still persists, elsewhere, as he finds when he comes back from California. Furthermore, according to Daniel at least, the English differ from the Americans in 'allowing hypotheses about ourselves, and our pasts and futures, almost as much reality as the true events and destinies . . . We paint an ideal, or a dream-self on the glass and then wallow in the discrepancy'. In making a novel out of his own life he has to confront real experiences and fantasies which he feels belong to the nineteenth century, and their 'discrepancy', given all he knows about the twentieth.

Daniel Martin is conceived as an important novel, a sevenhundred-page opus, which re-creates traditional procedures: international situation; detailed background; prolonged discussion of themes among the characters. It brings Victorian methods to bear on ways of life—at Oxford, on a farm, on a great estate—which are still partly Victorian. Fowles's earlier novel *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) tells a Victorian story from a contemporary point of view; and the disparity between content and method which is so startling there is present to some degree in most British novels.

In the case of *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, the result is a modern classic, discussed at length in the next chapter. The interest it has aroused is connected with what Malcolm Bradbury calls, in a recent essay, 'an essential evolution of consciousness and society, from the nineteenth to the twentieth century, which has taken us across some essential divide in the matter of reality'. Such a divide explains the strong views of critics like B. S. Johnson, who complained about 'nineteenth-century readers' who ignore the chaotic nature of modern reality, or like Susan Sontag and John Hawkes in America. In Britain, most of us seem to be nineteenth-century readers in part when we come to contemporary fiction, because we still read the Victorians, and because our society is in many respects anachronistic. (We may also feel that what Johnson calls 'nineteenth-century reading' corresponds to a basic human need for stories and characters.)

While an intellectual avant-garde, including readers of John Hawkes, has developed in the way Bradbury suggests, many readers remain confused about 'the essential divide in the matter of reality' between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, where the novel is concerned, and hence the hostility to 'postmodernist' fiction here.

Perhaps the best-known statement of the divide is Graham Greene's:

... with the death of James the religious sense was lost to the English novel, and with the religious sense went the sense of the importance of the human act. It was as if the world of fiction had lost a dimension: the characters of such distinguished writers as Mrs Virginia Woolf and Mr E. M. Forster wandered like cardboard symbols through a world that was paper thin ... 6

Trollope's clergymen, he goes on to say, stumbling through muddy lanes and fumbling with umbrellas, possess an importance in another world which makes them exist as characters 'in a way that Mrs. Woolf's Mrs. Ramsay never does'.

Virginia Woolf and E. M. Forster, like Joyce and Proust, the first 'modernist' generation after the Victorians, can be called 'classical

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modernists' to distinguish them from Greene's generation. Modernist writing is about seventy years old, and the analysis of its stages is a delicate task. David Lodge's chapter called 'Postmodernist Fiction' in *The Modes of Modern Writing* (1977) provides a clear brief account. He calls Beckett and writers who broke away from Joyce and Proust in the 1940s and 1950s 'postmodernist', and a subsequent phase of innovators in the 1960s and 1970s he calls 'new postmodernists': they include John Barth, Thomas Pynchon and John Hawkes in America, and John Fowles and Muriel Spark in Britain. These are commonly used distinctions. Some would say that fictional worlds have become increasingly paper-thin with each generation of new methodologists.

It has until recently been usual to say that British fiction has reacted against these experimenters, first against stream-of-consciousness techniques and complex time-schemes, both opposed by Waugh, then against Beckett's uncertain worlds, and the nouveau roman, opposed by social satirists like Kingsley Amis and Angus Wilson. Obviously the history of fiction since James and Hardy is not one of steady departure from their sort of novel, or from what Lawrence called, when writing The Rainbow, 'the old stable ego of character'. But Greene's distinction between the characters of Trollope and those of Virginia Woolf holds for the broad difference between Victorian and modern novels. Iris Murdoch has discussed this long-distance contrast in a famous essay, 'Against Dryness' (1961): 'We no longer see man against a background of values, of realities which transcend him. We picture man as a brave naked will surrounded by an easily comprehended empirical world. For the hard idea of truth we have substituted a facile idea of sincerity.'7 The nineteenth-century novelist, Iris Murdoch explains, lived in a world transcended by God or, for George Eliot, by an absolute Duty. The human condition was taken for granted by novelists (on the whole, though not by poets) and they dealt with individuals 'struggling in society'. The modern novelist sees man making his own world, and, in Britain, hoping for a working compromise to deal with society. There are two types of modern novel, she says, the journalistic and the crystalline. The journalistic is a looser, weaker version of the social novel of the Victorians; the crystalline is symbolist, not to do with social life or 'characters' but with the human condition. Iris Murdoch does not give examples. Presumably C. P. Snow would be journalistic, Virginia Woolf crystalline. Neither sort is really satisfactory, she contends, and the

nineteenth-century sense of real people is what the modern writer should aim to recover. Elsewhere, Iris Murdoch has written of 'the vanishing of the philosophical self together with the filling in of the scientific self' in the present century, which has weakened moral thinking (and the novel), and in her philosophical writings she argues the need to discover a new moral philosophy. While she sees how we have lost touch with the traditional purposes of the novel, she wants to recover and renew them. This is the position of many English writers. Malcolm Bradbury's satirical novel, *The History Man* (1975), shows how conscious he is of the case against Iris Murdoch's, and that he remains on her side. In America, in France, and in parts of the world subject to American or French influence, confidence in moral philosophy and in the novel is much feebler.

Lecturing at Harvard in 1970, Lionel Trilling remarked on the sad state of narrative. In the book, Sincerity and Authenticity (1972), based on the Charles Eliot Norton lectures for 1969-70, he writes about the 'reduced status of narration, of telling stories':

It is the exceptional novelist today who would say of himself, as Henry James did, that he 'loved the story as story', by which James meant the story apart from any overt ideational intention it might have, simply as, like any primitive tale, it brings into play what he called 'the blessed faculty of wonder'. [p. 134]

He cites the modern view (expressed by Walter Benjamin) that story-telling and teaching through stories have become 'inauthentic for our time'. The significance of Aristotle's beginning, middle and end is considered spurious; it is unacceptable, Trilling notes, to modern historians like G. R. Elton and J. H. Plumb who have tried to free their work from such narrative oversimplifications. As for the novel, although T. S. Eliot's view that Flaubert and James had put an end to it has not quite come true, the best that can be said is that 'the novel does seem to persist in some sort of life' (p. 134).

Lionel Trilling is perhaps the greatest of American liberal critics; Sincerity and Authenticity is both a study of 'the attenuation of self' in the last two centuries and a defence of humanism against most currents in American postmodernist culture. At one point he refers to Susan Sontag's objections to 'interpretation' and to 'pleasure' in relation to art, seeing her as the outcome of an ultimate romanticism, removing 'the artist' altogether from the audience, whose wishes no longer have to be taken into account at all. If one

believes that, one must consider the novel to be out of date. Some critics in America think it ought to be. Leslie Fiedler connects the rationalism of Western art with the imperialism of the West and sees both as corrupt. Others share something like this attitude, and attack modernism for its élitist preoccupation with artistic truths, meanings, and tastes of a minority. Ideas in origin Marxist (though detached from Marx) are combined with popular versions of 'phenomenology' which declare that reality does not exist or that meaning is dead. The significance of all this for the novel is summed up in a well-known statement by John Hawkes: 'I began to write fiction on the assumption that the true enemies of the novel were plot, character, setting and theme.'9

Another much-quoted slogan is Richard Poirier's 'Literature is now in the process of telling us how little it means'. Reviewing the 'New American Writing' Spring issue of *Granta* for 1979, in the *Guardian* on 16 August, David Lodge writes that 'even when they seem to be speaking directly of their own experience, these writers complicate the simple pleasures of recognition by stylistic device, foregrounding the textuality of their texts. This, however, is not always an unqualified blessing.' David Lodge, an expert on postmodernism who still believes in and writes entertaining fiction, is introducing John Hawkes, Joyce Carol Oakes, Susan Sontag and James Purdy to *Guardian* readers whom he presumes to be used to more conventional reading. 'Foregrounding the textuality of their texts' is a technical summary of a method which some British novelists as well as these Americans have adopted as a means of emphasising the limitations of literature.

For those unfamiliar with modern American writing, Laurence Sterne's Tristram Shandy, published between 1759 and 1767, provides a good example of this process: at one point the narrator rebukes a lady-reader for inattention and sends her back to reread more carefully. Most of the characteristic postmodernist 'disruptions' of the traditional novel—discontinuity, randomness, excess, permutation—can be found in Tristram Shandy which has become an honorary modern classic. Dr Johnson called it odd, disapprovingly ('Nothing odd will do long'), and although it has always been enjoyed, it has been seen as outside the main tradition of psychological and social realism in the English novel. If its modern successors are to be found in America, this may be because the American novel was always more inclined to the fantastic and absurd possibilities of fiction. Lionel Trilling, in Sincerity and

Authenticity, quotes Henry James's view that nineteenth-century American society was 'thinly composed', lacking 'the stuff out of which novels were made'—novels in the British sense at least.<sup>10</sup> Fowles's Daniel Martin can be seen as an assertion that there is still, today, more novelistic 'stuff' in Britain than in America. Certainly the most brilliant (and entertaining) of emphatically fictive works from the United States, John Barth's Chimera or Nabokov's Pale Fire, tend to be remote from ordinary American life.

'Ordinary life' is a conventional concept and belongs to what the French critic, Roland Barthes, called the essential enemy, the bourgeois norm'. 11 Barthes was the champion, over the last twentyfive years, of the cause of freeing literature from common sense and of separating modern fiction from all past traditions. The nineteenth century, in Barthes's belief, is shrouded in bourgeois myths which frequently persist into modern life and need to be dispelled: the worst of these for the novelist is the myth of realism. Barthes campaigned against it steadfastly, despite the contradictions and inconsistencies of his intellectual career. The idea that fiction has a real content is the main object of attack in his best-known work, S/Z(1970), his critical commentary on Sarrasine (1830), a story by the master-realist Balzac. An infinitely explorable universe, he declares, is revealed in the combinations of meaning Balzac's words evoke though he explores it by means of a modest five 'codes' or semantic classes. S/Z does reveal the extent to which literary language is richly suggestive and exposes the fallacy that fictional creations have a life of their own. The more a writer encourages his readers to create meanings for themselves, as Barthes defines it, the more 'modern' he is, rather than 'classical', the more 'open' his text, rather than 'closed'. Joyce is modern and open, and more so in Finnegans Wake than in Dubliners. Balzac comes between the classical and the modern. Ideally, according to Barthes, readers are free to 'rewrite' for themselves. Modern novelists should abandon altogether the conventions of nineteenth-century fiction: Alain Robbe-Grillet and Michel Butor, authors of the French New Novel. have produced the 'correct' fiction for today, where the reader must reconstruct everything in his own imagination. It was under the influence of such ideas that B. S. Johnson attacked 'nineteenthcentury readers', and issued his novel The Unfortunates (Panther, 1969) with the gatherings unbound, in a box, to force his readers to participate. 'I live in the age of . . . Roland Barthes,' the narrator tells us in The French Lieutenant's Woman (Chapter 13); he cannot, therefore, condone any surrender on our part to the story's illusion.

The great effectiveness of Barthes's work was in forcing issues into the open, and although he ignored prewar English critics who had already expressed many of his ideas, English readers—if not English novelists—had often disregarded them too. Barthes's impact in England in the 1960s and 1970s, directly and indirectly, added to the challenge of American experiments in making us aware of the two issues of central relevance to English fiction: its relations with tradition and its relations with 'mimesis' (or realism). Should a modern novel aim to be judged as if it were by George Eliot or Trollope? Should it pretend to mirror the world in the same sort of way?

Literary-minded Frenchmen, told that Roland Barthes is not well known in England, tend to reply that F. R. Leavis is not well known in France. Leavis was responsible, through the influence of Scrutiny, the journal which ran from 1932 to 1953, his book on the novel The Great Tradition, and the writings of 'Leavisite' followers. for a theory of the novel quite unlike Barthes's: moral, liberal and English. This insisted on the contemporary significance of a particular 'line' of novelists: Jane Austen, Dickens, George Eliot, James, Conrad and Lawrence. Little subsequent fiction, it was implied, lived up to their standard or merited serious 'adult' reading. Leavis's dictatorship of opinion was mocked and resisted, of course, although his outlook and the quality of his criticism of approved texts have always been respected; with Q, D. Leavis he produced, in Dickens the Novelist, by far the best book on the subject for the centennial year, 1970. The critical passion of Leavis's work, which would condemn Balzac and Flaubert (let alone Alain Robbe-Grillet) as superficial, is accompanied by a more flexible and tolerant commitment among writers in England who support 'decency' and a common-sense view of reality. In the 1950s Leavis provoked English critics into an attempt to re-establish reputations (Hardy's, Thackeray's, Trollope's) he had swept aside; by the 1960s, French influence made it seem necessary to defend the basic

Leavis principle of literature as a force for good.

Bernard Bergonzi published The Situation of the Novel in 1970. The notes in the Preface to the revised second edition (1976) that 'a baffled liberal haunts this book' and suggests that the shaken liberal nerve of the late sixties has steadied during the last wade. The view he develops in a chapter called 'The Ideology of Berng English that English literary culture is untheoretical, that where American

critics cry 'exciting' English critics cry 'rubbish', that fear of experiment and political innocence limit what can be achieved here - seems unduly defensive. Such a book as Philip Thody's 1977 study of Roland Barthes illustrates the ability of an English academic writer to assess theory, and sometimes put it through the wringer;12 our sense of the difference between rubbish and originality is preserved by the variety of approach, and by the most astringent, satirical wing of literary journalism. The capacity of English novelists to experiment and the extent to which they have been doing so throughout the last thirty years have become increasingly clear in the 1970s. Nineteenth-century novelists are mentioned and quoted with reference to the current state of fiction throughout Bernard Bergonzi's book. Yet when he quotes Margaret Drabble, as a novelist influenced by Victorian models, saying, 'I'd rather be at the end of a dying tradition which I admire than at the beginning of a tradition which I deplore,'13 the alternatives imply an unnecessarily negative attitude to the uses a novelist today might make of George Eliot or Anthony Trollope.

A critic who has done much over the last ten years to revive confidence in British fiction is Malcolm Bradbury, himself an English novelist as well as a professor of American Studies. His Eating People is Wrong (1959), the first of three university novels, is an entertaining, somewhat whimsical account of a liberal-minded and bemused provincial university professor. The third, The History Man (1975), is a portrait of a sociologist at a new university (who would have the professor for breakfast): this is a new type of don, an antiliberal, anti-bourgeois cliché-spinner, versed in structuralism, who tells his pupils that reality does not exist yet, and drives the one student who disagrees with him out of the university. Bradbury knows the History Man from inside, but retains his own sense of proportion; and the same ability to absorb theory without losing sight of what Christopher Ricks calls 'the Unignorable Real' pervades his criticism of fiction in the 1970s: Possibilities: Essays on the State of the Novel (1973) and the Introductions to two recent collections he has edited. Possibilities is, true to its title, a stimulating book, positive in its liberal, Jamesian belief in the novel and influential in its sense of imaginative options. Introducing The Novel Today in 1977, he writes 'it now seems . . . important to stress that many of the best English writers of the 1950s were not intrinsically anti-experimental; more often they were simply defined as such by the critics who read them' (p. 17). In the Preface to The Contemporary