

THE BRITISH NOVEL SINCE THE THIRTIES

An Introduction



RANDALL STEVENSON

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*The British Novel
since the Thirties*
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RANDALL STEVENSON



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For William and Rosamund Christie

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Contents

Preface	7
1 The Novel, 1900-1930	11
2 In the Thirties	
Between the Acts: Politics and Literature in the Nineteen Thirties	30
New Realism and the 'Mild Left'	34
<i>Christopher Isherwood, George Orwell, Graham Greene</i>	
Fantasy, Marxism and Class	44
<i>Rex Warner, Edward Upward, Walter Greenwood, Lewis Grassie Gibbon</i>	
Satire and the Right Wing	51
<i>Wyndham Lewis and Evelyn Waugh</i>	
Politics and Beyond	56
<i>Compton Mackenzie, L H Myers, Ivy Compton-Burnett, John Cowper Powys, Malcolm Lowry, Rosamond Lehmann, William Gerhardie</i>	
Conclusion: The Literary Budget	63
3 War and Post-war, 1940-1956	
The Wartime Scene	68
<i>George Orwell, Arthur Koestler, C S. Forester, J.B. Priestley, Alexander Baron, Evelyn Waugh</i>	
No Directions	76
<i>James Hanley and Henry Green</i>	
Innocence and Experience	81
<i>Henry Green, Rosamond Lehmann, Elizabeth Bowen, L P Hartley, P.H. Newby</i>	
Good and Evil	93
<i>P.H. Newby, Graham Greene, Somerset Maugham, Joyce Cary, Philip Toynbee, C S Lewis</i>	
Dream Worlds	105
<i>C S Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, Mervyn Peake, Wyndham Lewis</i>	
Self-condemned	109
<i>Wyndham Lewis, Malcolm Lowry, William Sansom</i>	
Conclusion: The Death of the Heart	115

4 Recent and Contemporary: the Novel since the Nineteen Fifties	
'The Angry Decade'	123
<i>William Cooper, Kingsley Amis, John Wain, John Braine, Stan Barstow, Alan Sillitoe</i>	
Beyond Fifties Realism	131
<i>David Storey and Angus Wilson</i>	
Chronicles	136
<i>C P Snow, Anthony Powell, Henry Williamson</i>	
Lost Empire	143
<i>Ian Fleming, Paul Scott, J G Farrell, Julian Mitchell</i>	
New Women	149
<i>Jean Rhys, Eva Figes, Anita Brookner, Edna O'Brien, Margaret Drabble, Doris Lessing, Emma Tennant, Fay Weldon</i>	
The Ineluctable Shadow	161
<i>Susan Hill, Paul Bailey, Olivia Manning, Richard Hughes, Gabriel Fielding, D M Thomas</i>	
Old Conflicts and New Syntheses	168
<i>William Golding, Iris Murdoch, Anthony Burgess, Muriel Spark</i>	
Contemporary Gothic	184
<i>Muriel Spark, Beryl Bainbridge, Ian McEwan, William Trevor, Martin Amis</i>	
Conclusion	189
<i>Martin Amis, David Lodge, Malcolm Bradbury</i>	
5 Modernism and Post-modernism: the Experimental Novel since 1930	
The Autonomy of Language	194
<i>James Joyce and Samuel Beckett</i>	
Literary Reflections	200
<i>Flann O'Brien and B S. Johnson</i>	
The Game of Mirrors	203
<i>Lawrence Durrell and John Fowles</i>	
The French Connection	209
<i>John Fowles, Samuel Beckett, Nigel Dennis, Christine Brooke-Rose, Rayner Heppenstall, Giles Gordon</i>	
Free Narrative	214
<i>Andrew Sinclair, Julian Mitchell, David Caute, John Berger, Alasdair Gray</i>	
Conclusion	219
Postscript: 'English' Fiction in the Twentieth Century	225
References	231
Select Bibliography	244
Index	247

Preface

Despite the funeral sermons that have been constantly pronounced over its death, the novel has probably never been more various, more interesting, more inventive, or more international in its sources and its scopes than today.

Malcolm Bradbury adds to his general assessment of contemporary fiction a particular qualification:

...if there is evidence of great creative vitality and invention in the novel now, then where in it does the contemporary British novel stand? Certainly it does not seem to stand very high in terms of critical attention.

Bradbury goes on to suggest that critics have concentrated on 'the period of Modernism', and that 'the period since its decline or disappearance has been a vague one' partly as a result.¹ The present study is directed towards dispelling this vagueness by showing how the novel has developed in Britain in the past half-century or so. The nineteen-eighties are as distant from *Ulysses* (1922) as *Ulysses* itself was from the novels of mid-Victorian times: as the twentieth century advances towards its end, there seems more and more need for a general assessment of what has happened in fiction since Joyce wrote. As Bradbury and other critics sometimes suggest, the period is a more worthwhile one than is often supposed: it can also be seen to possess a certain coherence, particular patterns of evolution arising from the situation of the novel established in 'the period of Modernism' in the first three decades of the century.

This situation is outlined in Chapter One. Other chapters divide the developments which have followed into three main periods, while a last chapter considers separately the progress of 'experimental' fiction since the nineteen-thirties. General historical divisions of this sort provide a framework for analysis perhaps more appropriate for fiction than for either poetry or drama: as E.M. Forster suggests, 'prose, because it is a medium for daily life as well as for literature, is particularly sensitive to what is going on'.² Several other commentators have also remarked that a characteristic of twentieth-century writing is the insistence with which it has been shaped by what has gone on in the violent and changeful history of the times.

As Malcolm Bradbury's comments suggest, fiction in the twentieth century has also become increasingly international in outlook. Any study of the novel needs to take account of the international aspect of fiction in English, and of the implications of contacts with other languages and cultures. Some of these are considered throughout, and are further assessed in conclusion. Even general restriction to the British context, however, leaves problems of scope and choice: there are obviously limits to the number of authors who can be discussed in a single volume, and to the extent of attention to each. A completely comprehensive survey of the period can only be undertaken in a directory: several of these are already available, and are listed in the Bibliography. In the present volume, major authors' careers are considered in detail: others, however, are approached through concentration on one or a few representative examples of their work. This is particularly the method in Chapter Four: there is little point in attempting a complete account of writers whose reputations are likely to alter substantially as their careers advance beyond their present state. Throughout, the central concern is in any case not only with surveying the work of individual novelists, but with indicating general patterns to which their fiction contributes; developments in the vision of the novel in the later twentieth century as a whole. Any readers disappointed by omission of a cherished novel, or even novelist, should find in this way some scheme into which they may fit their favourite item for themselves. Such a possibility is after all in accord with the tactics of some recent fiction, one of whose practitioners remarks

...the contemporary author proclaims his absolute need of... co-operation, an active, conscious, *creative* co-operation. What he [the reader] is being asked to do is no longer to accept a ready-made, completed world... but on the contrary to participate in an act of creation, in the invention of the work.³

No critical writing about fiction can fail to be influenced by the evolution of theories of narrative in the past twenty years some of those outlined in Gérard Genette's *Narrative Discourse* (1980) have been especially useful to the present study. Since, however, it is intended for non-specialist readers—for any interested novel-readers, in fact—as well as for students of literature, conventional terminology is mostly retained throughout. Ease of access has also been a priority in the choice of editions from which quotations are taken. Wherever possible, references are to currently-available paperback editions of the novels. Publishing details of these are given in footnotes which, as they rarely contain other information, need not distract readers from the text.

More than half a century of fiction provides an enjoyable but challenging range of material, and I am very grateful for help I have

received in writing about it. The idea for the study originated in various ways with William Christie and Cairns Craig, and with Tony Seward, who has been a patient and very encouraging editor throughout the project. I'm also indebted to Cairns Craig, Peter Keating, Oddvar Holmesland, Jon Curt and many others, including several generations of students in Edinburgh University's Department of English Literature, for their advice or ideas. The comments of John Cartmell, Brian McHale, Roger Savage and Colin Nicholson have improved individual chapters: I am especially grateful to Ron Butlin and Gavin Wallace, who helped me with the whole study.

Sandra Kemp's meticulous concentration on the typescript, along with her wide and wonderful reading of contemporary fiction, greatly improved and made a pleasure several stages of writing and revision. For further help with the work involved, and very much else besides, my major debt is to Sarah Carpenter, one of much more than only gratitude.

1

The Novel, 1900-1930

'I find your novel unreal just as you find mine to be so... All that *your* school of novelists has to say about the novel seems to us nonsense', remarked Hugh Walpole in his open *Letter to a Modern Novelist* published in 1932.

Walpole's own novels are now often forgotten, but they were popular during the twenties and thirties, and the comments in his *Letter* are a useful introduction to the situation of the novel around 1930, and to some of the questions which confronted its authors. One perplexity for the novelist in the nineteen thirties, as Walpole's remarks indicate, was the existence of a divergence in opinion about the proper nature of fiction. This was very differently envisaged by authors whose views could be seen as dividing them into the sort of opposing 'schools' Walpole mentions. His particular use of the word 'modern' in his *Letter* helps to suggest the nature and origin of such divisions in contemporary opinion. Walpole's own career as a novelist stretches back to 1910, and continues long after 1932, and yet it is emphatically the puzzling young writer to whom his open letter is ostensibly addressed whom Walpole considers modern, and not himself. Clearly, 'modern' in his view refers to a style of writing practised only by some novelists in the modern period, and certainly not by all his contemporaries. His *Letter* describes the appearance of such a specifically modern style, which seemed to Walpole 'nonsense' because, among other shortcomings, it disdained the traditional strengths of fiction—character; storytelling which leads the reader from page to page; and what Walpole calls 'that *arrangement* of the older novelists, the placing of things in order... the crisis at its proper time, the ending neatly rounded off'.¹

Walpole's recognition of a 'modern' school of writing which discards or re-shapes earlier conventions has been strongly confirmed by later critics. Stephen Spender, for example, whose own poetry began to appear around 1930, later remarked 'I see the "moderns"... as deliberately setting out to invent a new literature as a result of their feeling that our age is in many respects unprecedented, and outside all the conventions of past literature and art'.² Walpole's *Letter* names Marcel Proust, James Joyce, and

D.H. Lawrence as part of the 'modern' school: later critics have often added the names of Virginia Woolf, Ford Madox Ford, and Dorothy Richardson; and sometimes also included Henry James and Joseph Conrad. Though such 'moderns'—modernists as they are now usually called—did not really see themselves as a school, all can be considered as sharing in the attempt (also visible in the poetry of the period) to 'invent a new literature' different in style and technique from the work of their predecessors. This urge sharply distinguishes them from contemporaries, Walpole among them, who, whether or not they regarded their age as unprecedented, did not feel the need to alter 'the conventions of past literature and art' in recreating it in their novels. Since it is the modernists who are generally considered as among the greatest and potentially most influential of twentieth-century authors, overshadowing the work of the past fifty years, their fiction demands careful consideration as a preliminary to any account of the progress of the novel since 1930.

How then did the modernists seek to alter the conventions of novel writing? What new styles and techniques had their work made available by 1930? Walpole's *Letter* is not the only expression of hostility between moderns and contemporaries: the modernists themselves produced several such statements, often usefully illustrative of their own stylistic preferences. Indeed, Walpole's *Letter to a Modern Novelist* might almost have been a reply to one such statement, Virginia Woolf's essay 'Modern Fiction' (1919) which, along with a later essay, 'Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown' (1924), firmly delineates her own priorities as a writer. These are strongly contrasted to those of her immediate predecessors, whom she identifies as 'the most prominent and successful novelists in the year 1910... Mr. Wells, Mr. Bennett, and Mr. Galsworthy'. Woolf's quarrel with these Edwardian novelists centres upon their realist method, which she thought to entail faithfulness to the perceived, objective world, at the expense of interest in the perceiver—the human subject with all his or her complex thought-processes and emotions. In 'Modern Fiction' she complains that 'the enormous labour of proving the solidity, the likeness to life, of the story is not merely labour thrown away but labour misplaced'. She adds in 'Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown' that Bennett, Galsworthy, and Wells 'have laid an enormous stress upon the fabric of things... they have looked very powerfully, searchingly, and sympathetically... but... never at life, never at human nature'.

Her belief that such novelists concentrate too exclusively on 'the fabric of things' led Woolf to accuse them in 'Modern Fiction' of being 'materialists', and she extends this criticism in 'Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown' by showing in detail the incapacity of the technique, specifically of Arnold Bennett, to represent effectively a hypothetical character, Mrs. Brown. Through over-exclusive attention to

observable, objective aspects—the facts about Mrs. Brown's appearance, dress, background, material circumstances, and so on—the soul or inner nature of her character is ignored, and she fails to come to life.³ Significantly, Woolf's low opinion of the Edwardians was later supported, in very similar terms, by D.H. Lawrence's criticisms of John Galsworthy's novel sequence *The Forsyte Saga* (1906-28). Lawrence also protested that Galsworthy's methods were incommensurate to the task of creating vital characters: he finds in the case of the Forsytes that 'not one of them seems to be a really vivid human being'. This failing Lawrence attributes to 'the collapse from the psychology of the free human individual into the psychology of the social being'. Such beings suffered, in Lawrence's view, from being 'too much aware of objective reality', and being too close to the 'materialist' spirit of their time.⁴

Such criticism probably reveals as much about the convictions of Woolf and Lawrence as it does about Bennett or Galsworthy. Bennett does not ignore the psychology of his characters, whom he occasionally presents with some of the subtlety, and even through some of the methods, which Woolf was later to employ herself. Galsworthy is quite explicitly critical of his Forsyte characters, whom he uses to exemplify and satirise the materialist tendencies he disliked in his age. Nevertheless, he does admit that, as Lawrence suggests, it is not the individual psychology of characters which interests him, so much as their existence as types, through whom he can satirise a whole society. And for all the occasional inwardness of his characterisation, Bennett does at times import into his fiction a distracting volume of fact and documentation, as Woolf suggests. In *Anna of the Five Towns* (1902), for example, he interrupts a dramatic scene between the heroine and her future husband with a two-page description of the room in which their conversation takes place.

H.G. Wells seems a still clearer example of a novelist committed to objective documentation at the possible expense of development of 'the psychology of the free human individual'. He suggests in *Kipps* (1905) that 'the business of the novelist is not ethical principle, but facts', and later remarked 'I had rather be called a journalist than an artist'.⁵ This apparent distaste for art in the novel was the centre of a dispute with Henry James: supplementing the quarrels of Woolf and Lawrence with the Edwardians, this further reveals the stylistic preferences which inform the work of the modernists and separate it from the fiction of their contemporaries. Wells was irritated by some of the criticisms James made in his 1914 review of contemporary novelists—'The Younger Generation', as he called them in the title of his essay. James protested about the style of Bennett in *The Old Wives' Tale* (1908) in terms similar to those used by Woolf and Lawrence:

... the canvas is covered, ever so closely and vividly covered, by the exhibition of innumerable small facts and aspects... a monument exactly

not to an idea, a pursued and captured meaning, or, in short to anything whatever but just simply of the quarried and gathered material it happens to contain.⁶

James was similarly critical of other contemporary novelists, Wells and Walpole among them. Like Bennett, these writers seemed to him to place in their novels a 'slice of life' simply transcribed from reality without being 'wrought and shaped' by a technique highlighting or giving significant form to their material. As an alternative to this 'slice of life', James praised Joseph Conrad's method of telling his story not directly but through the interpolation between author and subject matter of a narrator through whose consciousness the events of the novel are perceived, and in whose words and narrative arrangement its story unfolds.

Conrad's narrator Marlow—'a reciter, a definite responsible intervening first person singular' as James calls him—appears in such novels as *Lord Jim* (1900), *Heart of Darkness* (1902) and *Chance* (1913). In *Lord Jim*, for example, the reader learns the story of Jim supposedly through overhearing Marlow's presentation of it to a group of friends in the course of an immense after-dinner monologue. The presence of Marlow allows Conrad to avoid the direct, extended denotation of objective reality for which James, Woolf and Lawrence blamed the Edwardians. He concentrates instead partly upon the means by which reality is perceived; upon its reflection in the individual mind; and upon the effect this has upon a narrator whose responses to his world, his re-telling of his experience, form the substance of the novel. Conrad's work thus comes to concern the 'intervening first person singular' as well as the story which the narrator mediates for the reader: part of the interest of *Lord Jim*, for example, is in Marlow himself, as well as in Jim, the ostensible subject of the novel. The interpolation of a narrator also offers a focus for the novel's attention, a centre around which its characters and episodes can be structured. This allows its material, as James wished, to be 'wrought and shaped' into a satisfactory artistic form—a significant ordering of life rather than the raw, shapeless 'slice' which, rather unfairly, he considered the work of Bennett and Wells to be.

The aesthetic preferences which disposed him to admire Conrad's style also shape James's own fiction. In discussing his own work James speaks of an 'instinctive disposition...which consists in placing advantageously, placing right in the middle of the light, the most polished of possible mirrors of the subject'. He illustrates the operation of this 'disposition' with

...such unmistakeable examples as...that of Lambert Strether in *The Ambassadors*... I should note the extent to which these persons are, so far as their other passions permit, intense *perceivers*, all, of their respective predicaments.⁷

James does not employ Conrad's device of a narrator, telling the story of *The Ambassadors* (1903) in his own voice, yet he effects a rather similar restriction of point of view on the events narrated by confining himself exclusively to the perspective of a single character, Strether. His thoughts, reflections and perceptions provide, as James claims, a 'polished mirror' for the complicated developments in the Parisian society through which he moves. Because Strether is such an 'intense perceiver' he offers a precise, flexible perspective from which to examine his predicament. James's concentration on him and his thoughts also allows an unusually intimate, detailed examination of the way a character's experiences modify his consciousness and outlook. Wells, in fact, replied to James's criticisms by suggesting that the latter's interest in individual consciousness, throughout his work, was far too finely detailed; absurdly fussy in its sensitivity; and consequently bewilderingly over-elaborate in language and organisation.⁸

In subject matter, Conrad and James differ radically. The former spent some of his early years as a merchant seaman, and is one of the first of many novelists in the twentieth century who have examined the encounter of British life and values with distant foreign places and peoples, sometimes under colonial rule. Many of Conrad's characters are involved in lonely struggles with alien circumstances or hostile elements, far from the support of a familiar society—a considerable contrast to James's complex anatomies of social manners and relationships. Nevertheless, their decisions to concentrate upon an individual character as a perceiving centre through whom the world of the novel is focused for the reader bear some comparison. Their employment of 'an intervening first person singular' can also be seen as an early instance of what developed into one of the dominant features of modernist fiction: its desertion of the perspective of the omniscient narrator—objectively reporting on the world of the fiction in the manner of Bennett, Galsworthy, Wells, and their Victorian predecessors—in favour of a more subjective point of view. It is this focus on the 'psychology of the free human individual', rather than the 'psychology of the social being', or 'objective reality', which Lawrence favours in criticising Galsworthy. It is also a development which Virginia Woolf advocates in distinguishing 'Modern Fiction' from the work of her immediate predecessors. Instead of their 'enormous labour of proving the solidity, the likeness to life, of the story' Woolf goes on to suggest that the novelist should 'look within' and

Examine... an ordinary mind on an ordinary day. The mind receives a myriad impressions, trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel. From all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms; and as they fall, as they shape themselves into the life of Monday or Tuesday, the accent falls differently from of old... Life is

not a series of gig-lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end. Is it not the task of the novelist to convey this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit...? We are not pleading merely for courage and sincerity; we are suggesting that the proper stuff of fiction is a little other than custom would have us believe it.⁹

Woolf's distinction of 'the proper stuff of fiction' from the custom of her predecessors is one of the most significant expressions of the priorities which separate the modernists from their contemporaries. Novelists have always 'looked within' and 'examined the mind'. Woolf and the modernists, however, sought a new intensity and exclusiveness of concentration within the envelope of individual consciousness. This involved a break with the conventions of earlier fiction, and the development of new techniques able to record the atoms of impressions as they fall. Such technical developments can be seen to begin with Conrad and James, and to reach a final stage in the novels of Joyce and Woolf in the twenties. In the years between, significant innovations also appeared in the work of Dorothy Richardson, Ford Madox Ford, and D.H. Lawrence.

Rather like Virginia Woolf, Dorothy Richardson sought an alternative to 'current masculine realism' and attempted to create a 'feminine prose...moving from point to point without formal obstructions'. In her novel-sequence *Pilgrimage* (1915-38), she uses brief, half-formulated phrases, linked by ellipses, to imitate the random succession of thoughts, memories and 'myriad impressions' in the mind of her heroine. This is often considered to be the earliest example, in the English novel at least, of the method of transcribing characters' thoughts 'without formal obstructions' which came to be known as 'stream of consciousness'. (The phrase originates in the writings of Henry James's brother William.) Richardson's invention, however, has not secured her reputation. A contemporary reviewer unkindly remarked 'the bleak truth is that Miss Richardson perfected a way of saying things without having anything to say...an excellent manner execrably applied'.¹⁰ A fairer criticism might be that Richardson's use of this 'excellent manner'—which the reviewer saw as belonging to 'modern fiction...the subjective novel'—is restricted in *Pilgrimage* by its application to a less than wholly modern subject matter. Following throughout its thirteen volumes the experience of a semi-autobiographical heroine, *Pilgrimage* really belongs with a group of chronicle novels written in the early years of the twentieth century. These include Compton Mackenzie's *Sinister Street* (1913-14); Somerset Maugham's *Of Human Bondage* (1915); and Arnold Bennett's *Clayhanger* series (1910-18). These novels all trace at great length the development of a single individual, usually one whose experiences closely resemble those of his author. Rather than 'modern...subjective novels' they are late examples of the