

A Crisis of Metanarratives:  
Realism and Innovation in the Contemporary English Novel

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February 1990

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies  
and Research in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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### Abstract

Critics of the English novel, arguing that it is underpinned by liberalism, frequently claim that the crisis of realism disclosed in the work of many contemporary writers derives from a concomitant crisis of liberalism. Liberalism's dissolution is thus seen to prefigure the death of the novel. This dissertation contends that realism cannot be equated with liberalism and that the contemporary crisis of representation signals a broader crisis of metanarratives.

Focussing on selected novels of five post-war English novelists--B. S. Johnson, Doris Lessing, John Berger, Iris Murdoch, and Angus Wilson--I argue that their different responses to the crisis of representation show that it is not a crisis of liberalism alone. Johnson rejects realism for epistemological reasons; Lessing and Berger question it on political grounds; Murdoch and Wilson combine its strengths with a self-reflexive awareness of its weaknesses. I suggest that Murdoch's and Wilson's novels, which argue that fiction does not reflect reality but endows it with meaning and which are at once representational and metafictional, offer the most fruitful ways of acknowledging the crisis of representation while refusing to be paralyzed by it.

## Résumé

Les critiques du roman anglais, qui soutiennent que celui-ci est étayé par le libéralisme, déclarent fréquemment que la crise du réalisme révélée dans l'oeuvre de plusieurs écrivains contemporains provient d'une crise concomitante du libéralisme. La dissolution du libéralisme est donc vue comme la préfiguration de la mort du roman. Ce mémoire soutient que le réalisme ne peut pas être assimilé au libéralisme et que la crise de la représentation contemporaine marque une plus grande crise des métarécits.

En me concentrant sur une sélection de romans par cinq romanciers anglais d'après-guerre, B. S. Johnson, Doris Lessing, John Berger, Iris Murdoch et Angus Wilson, je soutiens que leurs différentes réactions à la crise de la représentation démontrent que ce n'est pas uniquement une crise du libéralisme. Johnson rejette le réalisme pour des raisons épistémologiques; Lessing et Berger le questionnent pour des motifs politiques; Murdoch et Wilson allient ses forces à leur conscience réfléchie sur ses faiblesses. Je propose que les romans de Murdoch et Wilson qui maintiennent que la fiction ne reflète pas la réalité mais la dote de signification, et qui sont à la fois représentatifs et métafictifs, offrent les façons les plus fructueuses de reconnaître la crise de la représentation tout en refusant d'être paralysés par elle.



## Acknowledgements

I should like to thank Professors Kerry McSweeney and Gary Wihl for their helpful criticism and their encouragement and my supervisor, Professor Paul Coates, for his guidance, insight, and support. I should also like to thank France Longtin for translating the abstract and Maged El Komos, Brian Trehearne, Stewart Cooke, and Basia Gąsiorrek, who all read the entire thesis, for their many suggestions, helpful comments, and proof-reading skills. I am grateful to all of them.

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## I

"The idea about experiment being the life-blood of the English novel," claimed Kingsley Amis in the late nineteen fifties, "is one that dies hard" (Rabinovitz 40). Rejecting this view, he described his own novels as "believable stories about understandable characters in a reasonably straightforward style: no tricks, no experimental foolery" (Morrison 299). Several of Amis's contemporaries, writers whom critics quickly tagged either as members of the Movement or as Angry Young Men, shared his suspicion of literary experimentation and his desire for realistic fiction. Perceiving experimental writing as decadent, obscure, elitist, solipsistic, and dull, they urged a return to traditional forms. William Cooper spoke of his wish "to run [experimental writing] out of town" (Rabinovitz 6). Pamela Hansford Johnson, rejecting the modernists' inward turn, argued that "[w]riting is not a private game to be played at a private party" (Rabinovitz 6). C. P. Snow considered the experimental novel to be "as dead as cold potatoes" (Rabinovitz 98); it "died from starvation, because its intake of human stuff was so low" (98). And John Wain, summarizing this reaction against experiment, noted that he and his associates "did not try to continue the work of James, Proust, Joyce, et al. . . . Instead, older models neglected for a century, were reverted to" (Morrison 211).

This rejection of innovation was by no means unanimous. Whereas novelists such as Kingsley Amis and Charles Snow felt

that experimental forms were killing the novel, writers such as Julian Mitchell and Colin Wilson argued that it was being stifled by neo-realism. Several critics concurred with this latter assessment. They expressed misgivings about the adoption of established modes, arguing that the English novel, having turned to the past rather than to the present for inspiration, was ill-equipped to respond meaningfully to the doubts and uncertainties that characterized post-war social life. They claimed that English novelists tended on the whole to be parochial, insular, nostalgic, and lacking in originality. The novel, suggested Bernard Bergonzi, was no longer "novel"; it had "abandoned freedom for genre" (20).

But Bergonzi's assessment was flawed. Even Ruben Rabinovitz, who believed that 'fifties novelists had championed a reaction against experiment, conceded its limitations. Although he maintained that "[t]he overwhelming majority of the novelists of this time . . . did follow the rule" (166), he acknowledged that several important writers did not. Indeed, significant though the Angry Young Men and Movement novelists were, the 'fifties and 'sixties also witnessed the emergence of writers such as Iris Murdoch, John Fowles, Doris Lessing, Angus Wilson, William Golding, John Berger, Alan Burns, B. S. Johnson, Christine Brooke-Rose, and Eva Figs. These writers can loosely be divided into three groups: those who rejected realism altogether, arguing that it not only depended on a flawed epistemology but also limited the novel's scope (Johnson, Brooke-Rose, Burns, Figs); those who abandoned realism

temporarily, exploring alternative fictional modes (Lessing, Berger); those who combined realism with other forms, thereby both utilizing and questioning it (Murdoch, Wilson, Fowles, Golding).

The fiction of the novelists B. S. Johnson, John Berger, Doris Lessing, Iris Murdoch, and Angus Wilson constitutes the subject matter of this thesis. Although I examine three early novels--Berger's A Painter of Our Time (1958), Murdoch's Under the Net (1954), and Wilson's Hemlock and After (1952)--I focus primarily on the fiction produced between the years 1960 and 1975. During this period these writers not only published some of their best novels but also, re-examining their earlier practice, increasingly questioned realist tenets and sought to develop new fictional forms. Johnson--who belongs to the first group of writers identified in the preceding paragraph--influenced by Joyce and Beckett, the **nouveau roman**, and diverse metafictional forms, produced Albert Angelo and Christie Malry's Own Double-Entry. Berger and Lessing--who belong to the second group--gave us respectively G., which appropriated Cubist insights, and The Golden Notebook, which disclosed realism's disintegration. Murdoch and Wilson--who belong to the third group--published respectively The Black Prince, which explored the nature of fiction and the meaning of art, and No Laughing Matter, which paid tribute to the tradition of the burgher novel but also questioned its validity for the present by undermining it through parody and pastiche.

The reasons for which these writers made an "experimen-

tal turn" were dissimilar. Consider, for example, the statements below:

No one can write the same after Ulysses. Ulysses changed everything. But people do write as though Ulysses never happened, let alone Beckett. These people simply imitate the act of being a writer, a deliberately anachronistic act, like writing a five-act verse drama in Shakespearean English. (Burns 93)

It is scarcely any longer possible to tell a straight story sequentially unfolding in time. And this is because we are too aware of what is continually traversing the story line laterally. That is to say, instead of being aware of a point as an infinitely small part of a straight line, we are aware of it as an infinitely small part of an infinite number of lines, as the centre of a star of lines. (1969 46)

What interests me more than anything is how our minds are changing, how our ways of perceiving reality are changing. The substance of life receives shocks all the time, every place, from bombs, from the all pervasive violence. Inevitably the mind changes. (1974 66)

[I]t seems now impossible for us either to live unreflectively or to express a view of what we are in any systematic terms which will satisfy the mind. We can no longer formulate a general truth about ourselves which shall encompass us like a house . . . what we hold in common, whatever our solution, is a sense of a broken totality, a divided being. (1987 113)

The debate on the English novel's decline now runs like clockwork. We are cut off from our traditional roots, says the critic, the soil from which our greatness sprang has been weakened by artificial experiments. Without experiment, comes the reply, there can be no new growth, the soil will be clogged and choked with weeds. Surely, says the inevitable third and sensible critic, we may make use of all that experiment has taught us, may indeed experiment ourselves, without losing contact with our good old English tradition, the true husbandry needs old and new alike. (1983 196)

These statements, made respectively by Johnson, Berger, Lessing, Murdoch, and Wilson hint not only at some of the differences between these writers' reasons for questioning traditional novelistic forms but also at their alternative solutions to what is often called the crisis of representation. This thesis assesses these differences in order to show that the crisis of realism was more than a concomitant crisis of liberalism and to develop a nuanced and detailed analysis of the fault-lines of a major period of creativity in the post-war English novel. I identify three broad attitudes to the realist novel: first, the outright rejection of it as epistemologically untenable by "radical" writers such as Johnson; second, the temporary turn away from realism by socialist writers such as Berger and Lessing, who sought new ways of evoking the fragmentation and alienation of contemporary social life; third, the fusion of realism with forms of fantasy, enchantment, parody, and pastiche by Murdoch and Wilson, who thus signalled their respect for realism and their wish to retain many of its features as well as their grasp of its philosophical and artistic limitations.

These writers' attempts to go beyond realism in the hope of finding bold new ways to render the contemporary world led some critics to fear the death of the novel. Seeing realism as central to the novel as a genre, they argued that a crisis of the realist novel was actually a crisis of the novel as a whole. Furthermore, claiming that liberal ideology underpins the realist novel, they suggested that this crisis reflected

a fundamental crisis of liberalism. Recent history, they declared, had undermined the liberal worldview that lay at the novel's centre. The novel genre, equated first with realism and second (through realism) with liberalism, was fracturing into disparate fictional modes, none of which could, strictly speaking, be regarded as novels.

This thesis argues that the crisis of realism is part of a wider crisis of representation--the constituent features of which are diverse--and cannot be reduced to the issue of liberal doubt alone. Showing that writers question, subvert, or abandon realist forms for a variety of reasons, I contend that the critical view that sees a necessary link between the novel, realism, and liberalism is untenable and should be rejected. This thesis argues against this perspective in three ways: first, that the realist novel does not constitute the genre's exemplar--thus a crisis of realism should not be seen as a crisis of the novel as a whole; second, that there are no fixed relations between aesthetic forms and ideologies (i.e., between realism and liberalism)--thus a crisis of the realist novel does not betoken a corresponding crisis of liberalism; third, that the novel is a heterogeneous and mutable genre, which seeks to outstrip its own avatars in the search for new artistic forms--thus it is misleading to speak of a **general** crisis in the genre when **one** of its dominant forms is superseded. The thesis argues that the turn to experimental forms disclosed by the writers discussed represents the literary manifestation of a wider crisis in the major epistemolo-



gical and ideological explanatory systems of the past, which the French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard has aptly formulated as a general crisis of metanarratives.

Although the present thesis is primarily concerned to discuss the major novels of the five writers selected, these theoretical questions must first be clarified in greater detail. The rest of this introductory chapter is devoted to that task.

## II

An examination of critical discussions of the novel in periodicals, literary journals, and books during this period reveals that it was a time of pessimism and doubt. In 1956, for example, the well-known critic and editor John Lehmann published a symposium on contemporary English writing, entitled The Craft of Letters in England. He requested that symposiasts contribute articles on, among other things, the novel, the short story, the theatre, poetry, criticism, biography, and translation. Most contributions were sombre in tone, lukewarm in their praise of current literary endeavour, and critical when comparing contemporary writers to their modernist predecessors. Lehmann himself, although he concluded his brief introduction on a positive--and slightly chauvinistic--note, claiming that English writers can "congratulate themselves on an abundance and vitality of literary achievement second to no other country" (5), drew attention

to his contributors' reservations. He pointed out that his symposiasts agreed on certain key issues:

That we are living in an age without giants is one of them, that the outstanding figures of 1956 in creative literature have not the same stature as their predecessors of 1926 . . . . [T]hat we have reached a historical moment when it is impossible not to write about the human condition in our time; that all serious writers now are deeply concerned about problems of belief . . . . The fact that in our age most artists, unable entirely to accept the worldviews of dogmatic Marxism on the one hand or dogmatic Christianity on the other, are obliged to adumbrate their own systems of values, makes the problem of belief . . . the central problem of modern criticism. (2)

Lehmann concluded that his contributors concurred that the art of the modernists had yet to be superseded and that the main reason for this was that "the problem of belief," which had become central, remained unresolved. Novelists, he suggested, had failed to replace the worldviews of the past with anything more creditable than their own private creeds, and this had vitiated their creativity.<sup>1</sup>

Lehmann's emphasis on the connection between loss of artistic vision and a more widespread crisis of belief is often encountered in this period in the writings of critics and artists.<sup>2</sup> His contention that the "problem of belief" was central and that writers had been "obliged to adumbrate their own systems of values" (2) was echoed by other commentators. Illustrative of this was "Experiment and the Future of the Novel," Philip Toynbee's contribution to The Craft of Letters.

Toynbee--himself an experimental novelist--assessed the

contemporary novelist's predicament pessimistically, on the whole. Although he argued that there were many kinds of experimentation (61) and that it was erroneous to focus primarily on innovations in "method," he conceded that critics should distinguish between self-conscious and unintended experimentation (62). For Toynbee, the writer's search for new forms was not a goal in itself; rather, it revealed a concern to evoke in fresh ways the changed realities of post-war social life. New novelistic modes would develop, he implied, if novelists attempted to comprehend and confront an altered society.

This was not a call for **engagement**, however. Indeed, Toynbee was scathing in his dismissal of the Sartrean stress on committed literature, arguing that meaningful art could not arise from the expression of rigidly held prior convictions. Thus he contrasted "commitment" with "concern"--precept versus sensibility--and suggested that the contemporary novelist should be inspired by the latter, a more flexible notion. But it is here that Toynbee's pessimism was most apparent. He considered the old forms exhausted: writers could neither imitate the "fine talking" (71) of Max Beerbohm nor the "pedestrian manner" (72) of Arnold Bennett; the concerned novelist could be neither "a plain writer" nor "a gem-like writer."<sup>3</sup> He was "on his own, struggling in a collapsed tradition, uncertain of his intractable medium and uncertain of his constantly changing material" (72). Although Toynbee hoped that this disturbing situation would give rise to new

forms, he was not optimistic. He feared, rather, that the novelist would retreat into isolation and would abandon the attempt to be socially relevant, because "there is no longer any obvious material or obvious method; there is no longer a fruitful form of plain talking or a fruitful body of accepted ideas" (73). His conclusion was equivocal: the outlook for the future was "harsh and stimulating" (73).

Toynbee's paper dealt explicitly with the experimental novel. But other critics' analyses of the novel in general disclosed similar reservations. In 1958, for example, two years after The Craft of Letters was published, the London Magazine also held a symposium--"The New Novelists: An Enquiry." The contributors, Frank Kermode, Maurice Cranston, Anthony Quinton, and Lettice Cooper, although they disagreed over the relative merits of certain novels, were unanimous on three key points: first, no contemporary English novelist was of a major stature; second, no novelist had responded to the changes occurring in the social fabric; third, no novelist was significantly innovative. As in Toynbee's analysis, emphasis fell on the need to engage a changing Britain in new fictional forms and on the deplorable lack of attempts to do so. Quinton claimed that there was "no notable writer openly dedicated to the idea of literary experiment" (15). Cranston lamented that there was no longer an avant-garde and that without one there could be no revival of the English novel. Kermode, concurring with Toynbee, argued that experimentation should not refer to technique alone. It was an indispensable

aspect of any major writer's attempt to see the world whole and to unify it through form. Postwar novelists, he averred, seemed not to have grasped this distinction.

Both Toynbee and the London Magazine symposiasts were making the same point--the English novel, which they argued was dull and stodgy, needed new life to be breathed into it, and experimentation, when conceived as more than technical innovation, was required for the task. Other novelists and poets echoed this sentiment. They claimed that social change--often interpreted as decline--was ubiquitous, yet literary responses to it were scarce. Colin Wilson noted: "Our civilization is in decline; we could not do better than to write under this realization" (55). John Wain observed that we inhabited "a new world" (60) and that the novel was "more than ever vital to the thinking, discussing, and judging mind" (60). And Julian Mitchell claimed: "The old tradition is dead. Writers must now construct a new kind of literature, must found a new tradition" (35).

Two influential analyses of post-war culture and society supported these perceptions of England as a country facing crisis and decline: John Holloway's "English Culture and the Feat of Transformation" and Perry Anderson's "Origins of the Present Crisis" (1965). Revealingly, although their theoretical and political presuppositions were different, both Anderson and Holloway agreed that the causes of the contemporary crisis lay not in recent history but in unresolved conflicts from England's past.

In 1957, writing in the London Magazine, Holloway was unsure about the rhetoric of decline but in no doubt as to the magnitude of post-war social change. He claimed that whether or not English culture was "in decay" it was "certainly in process of a transformation more radical than it has undergone for several centuries" (64). He developed this thesis in "English Culture," a series of talks for the BBC's Third Programme in 1967. Attempting to confront present problems by tracing the historical development of English culture, he stressed the predominance of the Anglo-Saxon empirical temper in English intellectual life. Although he acknowledged its strengths, he warned that a refusal to be more "analytical," to ignore "reason" because of an ingrown faith in "sense," would inhibit England's ability to resolve its problems:

Whatever we may think about openness towards a visionary apprehension of life, there is now growing up a fairly general agreement about something else: that somehow a long partial holiday period is coming to an end for us as a nation, and that because of this we must be ready to re-think our position in fundamental terms, and perhaps transform our life in fundamental ways. Yet the regime of "sense," of "everyday styles of thought" --these things do not look like the intellectual equipment which most lends itself to transformation, and self-transformation, and the kind of thinking which can most naturally and easily prepare for those things . . . [T]he quality which I have put forward as rather distinctive of our intellectual life--something of an avoidance of the abstract-analytical on the one hand, and visionary-daemonic on the other--that distinctive double withdrawal into sense and sobriety, into a down-to-earth manipulation of the usual, reflects sharply and disquietingly on our present situation. (89)

Holloway concluded on a characteristically sombre note. The present time seemed "to demand transformation, and nothing short of that" (132) but "almost every aspect of our culture" seemed to "invite us to any measures, and to any spirit, save that radical one we need" (132).

In "Origins of the Present Crisis" the young Marxist historian Perry Anderson dealt with the past in more detail because he hoped to ascertain the specific historical roots of what he saw as the decay of post-war society. In brief, he attributed England's malaise to the 1645 Revolution's failure to transform the social structure and to the Industrial Revolution's failure to provide the working classes with an ideological legacy that would help them oppose the ruling class. In addition, he suggested that because the country's infrastructure had not been destroyed during the Second World War, England had not been forced to renew and reorganize its society in any major way. The country remained, Anderson contended, fundamentally unaltered: there had been no strong challenge to the hegemony of the ruling class, no major social restructuring, no notable political realignments, and no opposition to the firmly entrenched ideology of common-sense. Thus he argued that England was atrophying. Identifying a widespread lassitude, a torpid economy, a regressive educational system, and a prevalent cultural philistinism, he saw the crisis as "a general malady of the whole society, infrastructure and superstructure--not a sudden breakdown, but a slow, sickening entropy" (47).<sup>4</sup>

The views I have outlined indicate that certain members of the intelligentsia were deeply disturbed by many aspects of post-war culture and society. They may have disagreed over the causes of the **malaise**, but they agreed on its presence. Furthermore, many of those who belonged to the literary world were disappointed in the dearth of attempts by novelists to respond to the crisis. Both critics and writers frequently bemoaned a literary stultification that seemed to have spread through the ranks of the nation's creative artists.

In The Reaction Against Experiment in the English Novel, 1950-1960 Ruben Rabinovitz claimed not only that there was little innovative fiction being written in the 'fifties but also that this was part of a general reaction against the very idea of modernism. This claim is misleading for two reasons: first, as I have shown, because critics such as Toynbee, Kermode, and Cranston, together with writers such as Mitchell and Wilson, were disappointed with post-war fiction's narrowness and argued that innovation was a sorely needed tonic; second, as recent scholarship by critics such as Malcolm Bradbury and David Lodge has shown, because 'fifties fiction was more experimental than Rabinovitz allowed. Although some novelists did react negatively to modernism, there was no general endorsement of Movement aesthetics. The anti-experimentalism and the return to traditional forms and concerns were far from being unanimously commended. Many writers and critics felt the inutility of the neo-realist



response to the contemporary literary and social situation and lamented the insular nature of its consequences. They argued that the refusal to extend the insights of the modernists, to continue the search for new forms, revealed a loss of nerve and a lack of creative energy. They could not long remain satisfied with, on the one hand, the established novelists of what Robert Hewison calls the "Evelyn Waugh--Nancy Mitford axis" (1981 79), and on the other hand, the Angry Young Men, who had reverted to traditional modes. Both kinds of novelist, unable to comprehend the ramifications of the social changes taking place around them, were either nostalgic for a lost childhood and a lost England (i.e., The Go-Between; Brideshead Revisited) or dealt with small segments of social life (i.e., Hurry On Down; Lucky Jim; Saturday Night, Sunday Morning).<sup>5</sup>

It is not surprising, then, that critics of the contemporary novel urged a connection between its limitations and a wider socio-cultural crisis. Whether they thought that England was decaying or merely that it was being transformed, many observers discovered in its state of crisis an explanation for the corresponding crisis in the novel. The novel, after all, was the literary form, **par excellence**, that could represent society. Perhaps society was in such turmoil, was changing so much and so rapidly, that it had become unrepresentable; or perhaps society could no longer legitimize the ideology that had originally given birth to the novel, thus dooming it to extinction. If some critics saw the experimen-

tation of the **nouveau roman** as heralding the traditional novel's death, then others saw the traditionalism of English neo-realism as presaging another kind of exhaustion.

### III

The criticism of Malcolm Bradbury and David Lodge stands as an important corrective to the work of those critics who supported the "death-of-the-novel" thesis--their balanced evaluations tease out many of the nuances and complexities present in the situation of the post-war novel. In particular, they have urged critics to accept three points: first, that post-war English fiction has not been unadventurous but displays a wide spectrum of fictional writing; second, that the simplistic assumption that novels self-evidently fall into the categories of "experimental" or "traditional" needs to be challenged and the interpenetration of these categories recognized; third, that the fictional scene is far from moribund and has produced many imaginative novels.

There are differences between their critical approaches, but both Bradbury and Lodge have persistently questioned the assumption that the post-war novel has been insular and provincial. Bradbury has suggested that realism comprises only one of two strains in the history of the English novel. The other strain, parodic and self-reflexive, treats the novel as a complex verbal form that favours ambiguity and explores the hiatus between truth and falsehood. Bradbury argues that

this second strain, which has hitherto been marginal, has now come to the fore. Thus he writes of post-war novelists that "what is noticeable is how senseless the old lore about the essentially realist disposition of English fiction is to the extraordinary variety represented by their work" (1978 26). In his editor's "Preface" to The Contemporary English Novel he challenges those who dispraise English fiction. Noting the emergence of Muriel Spark, Iris Murdoch, Anthony Burgess, William Golding, and Angus Wilson in the 'fifties, and the arrival of B. S. Johnson, Christine Brooke-Rose, Alan Burns, and Gabriel Josipovici in the 'sixties, he observes that only by ignoring such writers can critics maintain that English fiction is without force or vitality. And in The Novel Today he argues that although there was a partial return to realism after the war, many novelists, reassessing modernism, began to focus once again on the surreal and the fabulous and on the idea of art as play, forgery, or invention. This return to experimental questioning entailed the examination of two dominant literary codes: the realist emphasis on "plot" and "character" and the modernist emphasis on "pattern," "form," and "myth." The result is that much fiction, far from escaping into the apparent safety of tried and trusted subject matters and forms, has become provisional, ludic, and innovative.

Lodge reads the situation similarly. He notes the absence of dominant movements "around or against which writers might define their literary identity" (1978 49), stresses the

many kinds of novel being written, and concludes that if there is a direction it is toward "formal experiment and formal self-consciousness" (50). In his well-known book The Novelist at the Crossroads he argues that whereas the writer had formerly followed the relatively straight realist highway, s/he is now "standing at a crossroads" (18) and must choose between several possible directions. Lodge identifies four key fictional forms: the novel, the non-fiction novel, the fabulation, and the "problematic" novel ("the novel-about-itself, the trick-novel, the game-novel, the puzzle-novel" (22)). He suggests that because these new modes are putting the realist novel under increasing pressure, it is gradually losing its pre-eminent position. Claiming that reality has become "extraordinary, horrific or absurd" (33), experimental novelists and their advocates argue that art cannot represent life any longer. In their view writers should either "cleave to the particular" (33) by creating non-fiction novels or "construct pure fictions which reflect in an emotional way the discords of contemporary experience" (33).<sup>6</sup>

Bradbury and Lodge have done much to move criticism of the post-war novel beyond the sterile binary opposition of realism versus experimentalism. They have shown that there exists a range of possibilities within and between these two positions and have indicated that they often interpenetrate. Furthermore, they have argued that the novel, which has not simply been traditional and small-scale, is in no danger of

imminent extinction. As Bradbury puts it in the "Postscript" to an overview of postwar fiction: "Obviously, the novel today is not dead" (Cox and Dyson 381).

Both Bradbury and Lodge reject the "death-of-the-novel thesis" as facile and regard the "reaction-against-experiment" thesis as false. Nevertheless, in common with other critics of an openly liberal disposition, they are disturbed by the implications of the changes they are describing, for they perceive a good deal of contemporary experimentation as hostile to the ideals of liberal culture. They are uneasy about the ultimate consequences for the novel if present trends continue, and they are troubled by what they perceive as an attack on humanist values. They view the undermining of the traditional realist novel, which they perceive as closely linked to liberal ideology, as but one aspect of a more far-reaching disaffection with the central principles of liberalism. They are not alone in holding this view.

Bernard Bergonzi begins The Situation of the Novel by observing that although the novel seems to be an open and all-embracing form, it is actually "intimately connected with a particular technology and form of commercial development, neither of which may be permanently protected from obsolescence" (13). This observation sets the tone for the book. Throughout, Bergonzi vacillates between grudging admiration for American fiction, which seems vital and imaginative, and fear that American writing is destroying the English realist novel, which by comparison seems quaint and conventional. He

admits that American novelists are inventive but warns that they lose sight of "the traditional human preoccupations" (101). The overall outlook is worrying. The novel, apart from certain American variants, is no longer "novel" and has turned to genre and pastiche; it is "losing its total commitment to originality and the immediate unique response to individual experience" (23). Apparently unable to represent contemporary reality, the novel either follows in the now well-worn ruts furrowed by earlier innovators or, as with Beckett and Robbe-Grillet, reduces itself to stasis. Neither kind of novel is compatible with "the ideology that sustained the novel for the first two centuries of existence, its belief in unpremeditated experience, in originality and individuality and progress" (34).

Bradbury and Lodge have voiced similar concerns. Bradbury suggests, for example, that "behind the exploration of modern society there runs a deep sense of personal crisis, of value deprivation, of social uncertainty and aimlessness" (Cox and Dyson 346). He argues that the novels that foreground style in order to disclose their distrust of traditional concepts of reality and character produce "an art of detached fictional technology in parallel with the world" (1980 203). Whereas they seek to attack contemporary dehumanization they often simply reproduce it, giving us an art filled with arid city scapes, post-humanist characters, and technological domination. This kind of art, Bradbury concludes, does not permit us "to see the pain in the

strangled victim" (208). Yet he cannot envisage any valid alternatives, because he believes that recent history has revealed the impotence of the two most significant post-Enlightenment ideologies: Marxism and Benthamite liberalism. Both intellectual traditions "depend on such highly exhausted philosophies that I perceive our situation as being **fin-de-siecle**" (Haffenden 34). Hence, Annie Callender, the voice of liberalism in Bradbury's novel The History Man, is the lone figure "who is systematically attempting to preserve a way of life which she knows must be smashed" (Haffenden 40).

Lodge, in turn, reveals his doubts about fiction's more radical options through the very terms in which he discusses them. In The Novelist at the Crossroads he views "with something less than enthusiasm the disappearance of **the novel** and its replacement by the non-fiction novel or fabulation" (22 my emphasis). For Lodge the realist novel is the form's exemplar; he regards other kinds of novel as related, but inferior, fictional forms. Because realism constitutes the novel's central highway, "these **side roads** will seem to lead all too easily into desert or bog--self-defeating banality or self-indulgent excess" (22 my emphasis). But this position is problematic. For we can question both whether the realist novel represents the form's acme and--temporarily granting Lodge his point--whether its achievements are relevant to the post-war period. In short, Lodge's presuppositions about the novel conceal the very issue at stake--have the "side roads" he disparages not become our new thoroughfares, rendering the

old highway obsolete? Moreover, Lodge's choice of metaphor is the reverse of felicitous. For while it is far from clear that these paths lead to the desert, many writers would argue that even if they do, they represent the novelist's only valid option. As Virginia Woolf remarked *à propos* the dead end to which the Edwardian realists--Wells, Bennett, and Galsworthy--had led the novel: "[T]he sooner English fiction turns its back upon them, as politely as may be, and marches, if only into the desert, the better for its soul" (1953 151).

Bradbury, Bergonzi, and Lodge recognize the reasons for which some writers have turned away from realism but refuse to accede to their apocalyptic conclusions. They endeavour, rather, to defend both the realist novel and the liberalism that, for them, underpins it. If "the case for realism has any ideological content it is that of liberalism," Lodge contends, adding that because the "aesthetics of compromise go naturally with the ideology of compromise . . . it is no coincidence that both are under pressure at the present time" (1971 33). It is this pressure that he wishes to resist:

The realist--and liberal--answer to this case must be that while many aspects of contemporary experience encourage an extreme, apocalyptic response, most of us continue to live most of our lives on the assumption that the reality which realism imitates actually exists. (33)

Lodge, Bradbury, and Bergonzi conceive the crisis of the realist novel as a crisis of liberalism. For these critics the realist novel constitutes the mainstream of the form, and, although they understand why it has been challenged, it



is this tradition they wish to uphold. Their defence of it is valuable because it mitigates a too casual assent to the fashionable view that the nature of contemporary society is cataclysmic, hence unrepresentable. Nevertheless, the equation of realism with liberalism, the assumption that the realist novel should be regarded as a model for the form, and the supposition that both realism and liberalism should be defended are propositions that are open to question. To approach these issues we need to situate them in the wider context of the history of the novel as well as in the contemporary socio-cultural context.

#### IV

In order to understand the vehemence with which so many critics have asserted the novel's imminent demise it is necessary to recapitulate the main Anglo-American theory of the novel's origin--that its development is connected to the establishment of capitalism and a liberal bourgeois ideology. The **locus classicus** of this theory is still Ian Watt's The Rise of the Novel, and its central thesis has been supported by such distinguished figures as Lionel Trilling, George Orwell, and George Steiner.

Watt's argument is too well-known to require extended discussion, but its salient features can usefully be recalled. In brief, Watt accounts for the "rise of the novel" by seeing it as the representative form of an emergent, and

newly dominant, mercantile class that developed in parallel with the social and economic changes instigated by modern capitalism. Several factors contributed to its emergence at this time: first, a burgeoning distrust of classical modes of thought culminated in philosophies of "realism" (Bacon, Descartes, Locke) that influenced the style and structure of the new literary form; second, the rise of "individualism" led to an emphasis on subjectivity and privacy that found its expression in the portrayal of characters' inner conflicts; third, the economic specialization characteristic of capitalism resulted in greater leisure time for an increasingly well educated and literate middle class, which was ready for a literature that reflected its own interests; fourth, this same class was able to develop this literature when the stranglehold of patronage was loosened by the emergence, and subsequent prevalence, of booksellers who ensured that novels were subjected to the exigencies of the marketplace. The first novelists--Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding--wrote for this new class. With their emphases on the density of social life, on the subjective experiences of concrete individuals, on minute particularization, on historical specificity, on chronological continuity, and on a prose style that approximated everyday speech patterns, they endeavoured to create fictional worlds as similar as possible to the real world inhabited by their readers. For Watt, this "formal realism" is the newly emergent form's "defining characteristic" (10) and is "typical of the novel genre as a whole" (294). Thus

he regards the novel as inseparable from the birth of modern capitalism and the **bourgeois** class.

Watt's overall thesis has been widely endorsed. George Steiner, for example, expresses the same view of the novel in Language and Silence:

As is well known, the rise and primacy of the prose novel are closely inwoven with that of the post-revolutionary bourgeoisie. In its moral and psychological focus, in the technology of its production and distribution, in the domestic privacy, leisure, and reading habits which it required from its audience, the novel matches precisely the great age of the industrial, mercantile bourgeoisie. (82)

Similarly, W. J. Harvey, in Character and the Novel, notes that "the development of the novel is intimately connected with the growth of the bourgeoisie in a modern capitalist system" (24) and that the novel "is the distinct art form of liberalism" (24). Bergonzi and Lodge, as I have pointed out, concur. And George Orwell claims in "The Prevention of Literature" that "[p]rose literature as we know it is the product of rationalism, of the Protestant centuries, of the autonomous individual" (337).

It is important to distinguish between two senses of liberalism here because it is not always clear exactly what the critics whom I am discussing mean by the word. On the one hand, liberalism refers specifically to the values and ideology of eighteenth-century laissez-faire capitalism; on the other hand, it refers to a more generally humanist sensibility, to an ethos of open-mindedness and tolerance. I make this distinction because those critics who link the novel to

liberalism often fail to. But it is one thing to relate the early novel to the rise of the middle class and to the emergence of liberal ideology--a position that can be supported by historical scholarship--and another to claim that this subsequently becomes a necessary relation, particularly when a different meaning of liberalism is actually being invoked. Thus Harvey, for example, connects the early novel with the bourgeoisie, seeing it as a distinctly liberal art form, and then goes on to assert that liberalism is "a state of mind" (24)--it believes in the diversity of individuals, in tolerance, in the dignity of reason, in healthy scepticism, in pluralism. This liberal state of mind--now a sensibility rather than a political creed--is a prerequisite of the form, for "the novel cannot be written out of a monolithic or illiberal mind" (25). (Orwell makes much the same claim in "Inside the Whale" when he avers that the writer "**as a writer . . . is a liberal**" (526)). Harvey concludes that if the novelist does not share his liberal assumptions then he writes "**a kind** of fiction" (28) but not a realistic novel, the form's exemplar: "The realistic novel I take to be the central, classic tradition of modern fiction" (28).

Raymond Williams has shown that the word "liberalism" is semantically complex and that unless it is used precisely its meanings are hard to disentangle. Dictionary definitions distinguish between two key senses of liberalism: relating to or having social and political views that favour progress and reform; giving and generous in behaviour or temperament.

But Williams, who agrees with these distinctions, adds that when used in the first sense liberalism "is a doctrine based on individualist theories of man and society," which makes it "a doctrine of possessive individualism" (1987 181). The slippage in meaning that we can discern in critics' use of the word is no doubt attributable to the fact that both of its senses are applicable to fiction. The newly emergent novel can be connected to the ethos of possessive individualism, and it can be argued that this link reaches its fullest expression, its culminating point, in naturalism's inventorying of the world. At the same time, the novel can be linked to the second sense of liberalism, to the open-mindedness and tolerance on which the writer's evocation of the world's richness and complexity is seen to depend.

The ambiguity inherent in critics' use of the word "liberalism" is to be regretted. Nevertheless, I think it fair to assume that their failure to distinguish between its two senses implies that, on the whole, they mean to invoke both of them. This is certainly true of Trilling, Orwell, and Steiner, who have related the novel's difficulties to the wider dissolution of the liberal culture that they argue has sustained the novel since its inception.

In "The Prevention of Literature," for example, written during World War Two and reflecting a concern with fascism, Orwell warns that "if the liberal culture that we have lived in since the Renaissance actually comes to an end, the literary art will perish with it" (337). In "Inside the Whale"

he argues that we live in a "**shrinking** world" (500) whose democratic ideals have culminated in "barbed wire" (500). For Orwell "[w]hat is quite obviously happening, war or no war, is the break-up of laissez-faire capitalism and of the liberal-Christian culture" (525). The consequences will be bleak:

The autonomous individual is going to be stamped out of existence. But this means that literature, in the form in which we know it, must suffer at least a temporary death. The literature of liberalism is coming to an end and the literature of totalitarianism has not yet appeared and is barely imaginable. As for the writer, he is sitting on a melting iceberg; he is merely an anachronism, a hangover from the bourgeois age, as surely doomed as the hippopotamus. (525)

The world, Orwell argues, is no longer going to be "a writer's world" (526) because the writer's sensibility must be liberal, "and what is happening is the destruction of liberalism" (526).

Although Orwell's prophecy of a totalitarian domination of the world has not yet come to pass, his fear that liberalism was being destroyed and that prose writing would die with it has been widely shared. George Steiner examines this possibility at length in his collection of essays, Language and Silence. Steiner, whose subject is European humanistic culture as a whole, relates the crisis of the novel to the wider crisis of Western civilization. Beginning with the barbarism of World War Two (particularly the Holocaust), he contends that it cannot be dismissed as an aberration from humanism: "It rose from within, and from the core of European civiliza-

tion" (viii). But Europe may be unable to come to terms with the truth about its recent history and language may be unable to bear its burden. Perhaps Europe is thus leaving behind "an historical era of verbal primacy" and passing into "a phase of decayed language, of 'post-linguistic' forms, and perhaps of partial silence?" (vii). Thus Steiner's more particular claim that there is a **crise de roman** is but an aspect of his belief in a wider crisis of language, literacy, and culture.<sup>8</sup>

In "Retreat From the Word" (1961) Steiner argues that until the seventeenth century, language "encompassed nearly the whole of experience and reality" (24), but since that time, under the pressure of scientific, non-verbal languages (mathematics, symbolic logic) and, more recently, electronic media (radio, television, video, stereophonic music), it has been steadily retreating: "The world of words has shrunk" (24). As a result language has suffered; it has "thinned out," become less vital, less able to communicate with clarity, vision, and imagination.

In "The Pythagorean Genre" Steiner extends this analysis to an assessment of the contemporary novel. Echoing Watt, he claims that the novel "sought to make itself master and inventory of the sum of life" (79) and that in doing so it made itself the form of the capitalist middle classes. According to Steiner, "the classic form and claims of the novel are inseparable from the bias of a middle-class, humanistic culture" (80). Thus "their ruin," he concludes, "is a common

one" (80). Despite the disclaimers to the contrary, "there is a crisis of the novel" (80), and "the sense of disarray is perceptible" (80). The novel has been undermined in two ways. First, technological society is changing so rapidly and is so overloaded with information that writers cannot encompass it and turn to forms of limited "reportage." At the same time, because they must compete with the communications media for the attention of readers, they have to find "new areas of emotional shock" (81); this leads to "topics formerly exploited by trash-fiction" and to "the compulsive sadism and eroticism of so many current novels" (81). Second, the novel, as the literary form of the age of the "mercantile bourgeoisie," is becoming obsolete, for "[t]hat age is obviously over, gutted by two world wars and the decline of Europe from economic preponderance" (82). The novel, as Watt argued, has its origin in, and relevance to, a particular historical epoch; when that epoch faces disintegration, so do its pre-eminent forms of literary expression.

Steiner does not know what will supersede the novel. He suggests, however, that it will be a fragmented, provisional form that will abandon generic distinctions, extend language toward "new relations" and "a new syntax" (85), and be sensitive to developments in music and mathematics. This new form will draw on the eccentric styles and insights of writers as diverse as Blake, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Karl Kraus, Walter Benjamin, Hermann Broch, Wittgenstein, and Ernst Bloch. Its discontinuous forms will recall a pre-Socratic time when



literature "was an act of magic, an exorcism of ancient chaos" (90). It will be a Pythagorean genre. For Steiner, such books will not be like any novels that we have known, but he avers that "like sparks from Heraclitus' fire" (90) they are now desperately needed if literary culture is to be renewed.

# V

Watt, Orwell, Trilling, Harvey, and Steiner present persuasive arguments for the view that the novel has traditionally been a liberal art form. By equating the novel with realism they are subsequently able to link the realist novel with liberalism. Thus in their view the crisis of the novel reveals a wider crisis of liberalism. But should we define the novel by its realism? Furthermore, should we accept that the link between realism and liberalism is as clear as these critics suggest?

Nothing less than the definition of the novel is at stake here. Bergonzi, Harvey, and Lodge defend the novel by arguing that its exemplary form is realist and that its ideology is liberal. But the connection they perceive between liberalism and realism is problematic. Whereas the view that the early English novel was tied to the ideology of laissez-faire liberalism is convincing, it does not follow that the realist novel has been linked to liberalism throughout its subsequent history. Moreover, as critics like Robert Alter

have argued, the early novel comprises both a realist strain and a parodic, self-questioning one. Thus it is misleading to suggest that realism--which reached its apogee in the great novels of the nineteenth century--is constitutive of the novel as a genre. Yet this is exactly the claim being advanced by the critics I have discussed. Thus Harvey avers that the non-realist novelist writes "a kind of fiction," and Lodge contends that s/he is bringing about "the disappearance of the novel."

Realism can be conceived in three ways: first, as a general mimetic orientation that can be traced back at least as far as Aristotle's Poetics and that informs a book such as Eric Auerbach's magisterial Mimesis; second, as a specific historical movement that occurred in the middle of the nineteenth century; third, in a non-conventional sense, as any artistic movement that claims, by virtue of its new forms and techniques, to be rendering reality more closely than other modes have done.<sup>9</sup>

The view of realism informing the work of the critics I have grouped together is an amalgam of the first two of these theories. In general they are committed to a view of the novel as representational, arguing that fiction achieves its highest expression when it keeps its mimetic function firmly in mind. For them, although the Realist movement took place some time after the novel's initial appearance, the early novel is seen as presaging, in its forms and techniques, the nineteenth-century masterpieces that constitute the genre's

acme.

Scholars who have studied realism suggest, however, that this slippery concept eludes definition. Indeed, they argue that the many different accounts of realism, which all claim that it transcribes reality objectively, reveal a contradiction at the heart of realist theory--what is taken to be the nature of reality actually depends on the perspective of the writer. Thus in his book Realism Damian Grant points out not only that there are two general theories of realism--the "correspondence" and "coherence" theories--that are opposed to one another but also that the word "realism" displays an "uncontrollable tendency to attract another qualifying word" (1). Proceeding to list twenty-six such compound phrases, he suggests that this plethora of competing "realisms" indicates how unstable both the term and the world it designates are. George Levine, in turn, stressing the conflict between different concepts of realism, points out that the term's becoming a subject of debate indicates uneasiness about the nature of reality. As Wallace Martin remarks: "Discussion of realism begins when we are not confident about our understanding of reality" (62).

These critics suggest that realism cannot be equated with any single world-view. They argue that it is a convention whose meaning changes historically. But if realism is conventional rather than objectively true, if different ideologies inform its diverse forms, then it is a mutable concept. To look for a common thread in theories of realism

is thus fruitless, for realist forms do not "reflect" the world but structure our understanding of it by trying to make sense of reality. J. P. Stern articulates this theory of realism by quoting Ludwig Wittgenstein:

We are inclined to think that there must be something common to all examples of realism, and that this common property is the justification for applying the general term "realism" to the various writings; whereas "realistic writings" form a family the members of which have family likenesses. (Stern 28)

These internal likenesses enable us to identify different realist families: socialist, magic, naturalist, ironic, and so on. But their very existence discloses how elusive a concept realism is, thus suggesting that the link between liberalism and realism is tenuous. Stuart Laing has made this point forcefully, arguing that the realist novel does not exemplify any particular ideology and that there are no "fixed relations between literary forms and political/philosophical positions" (256).

I have argued that the link between liberalism and realism is inconclusive. But there remains another question: does realism, however defined, constitute the novel's central tradition, its main line of development? To approach this question I draw on the seminal work of the Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin and on the polemical positions adopted by the English modernists.

Bakhtin, who conceives the novel to be a modern literary form, begins with an analysis of the society that produced

the novel rather than with the novel itself. His first concern is to understand modernity. Bakhtin sees modern society as constituted by stratified social groups that interact in multiple ways as they compete for pre-eminence and power. Each group develops internal cohesion by producing discourses (argots; jargons) that enable it to articulate its specific concerns and its socio-political outlook. Modern society displays a teeming diversity of mutually interanimating languages, which Bakhtin terms heteroglossia. He contends that in the Middle Ages heteroglossia was largely suppressed and only burst out occasionally in popular protests, carnival, and "low" forms of folk literature; modernity, however, is characterized by the eruption of heteroglossia--as a result of the demise of Latin, the birth of internally stratified national languages, and the socio-economic reorganization of society--onto the public arena.<sup>10</sup> Thus social life is now characterized by a more open struggle between competing groups, alternative perceptions of the world, and opposed social discourses. For Bakhtin the novel is not a modern literary form because it developed realistic techniques but because, releasing heteroglossia, it is the genre best able to disclose the multifarious and contradictory complexities particular to modern societies.

Bakhtin argues that heteroglossia is the novel's "native element" (12) and that because the novel is a fluid, protean genre it can depict "reality itself in the process of its unfolding" (7). Furthermore, the novel also has affinities

with the "low" parodic-travestying literatures that ridicule "high" culture and the monoglossic languages of hegemonic groups. For Bakhtin the novel neither pertains to any particular social group or ideology (i.e., liberal) nor is it defined according to technique (i.e., realistic). The novel is characterized, rather, by its fluidity, by its ability to adopt multiple guises. Thus it attempts to outstrip itself in its search for fresh articulations. It is "a genre-in-the-making," a literary form whose features cannot be made into "a system of fixed generic characteristics" (11). It requires only "the speaking person and his discourse" (332), for in other respects it is "plasticity itself" and is "ever questing, ever examining itself in a zone of direct contact with developing reality" (39).

For Bakhtin the novel can be neither defined nor restricted, because its **raison d'être** is to attest to the "contradictory and heteroglot" (55) nature of social reality. Put another way, the novel is forced to transgress its own previous boundaries because its aim is to find different ways to explore the entire range of social life. The novel defies definition because its investigations of society reveal the stratified and conflictual nature of society--it makes itself the heteroglossic ground of the linguistic competition for a hearing of opposed voices. Thus Bakhtin sees the novel as an anti-canonic form around which a tradition--realist or otherwise--can only be elaborated if the novel's transgressive character is occluded. The novel, he claims, "has no canon

of its own. It is, by its very nature, not canonic" (39).

The view of the novel as an anti-canonic, transgressive form is also central to the aesthetics of modernists such as Henry James, Virginia Woolf, and D. H. Lawrence. Woolf and Lawrence, in particular, seeking a greater realism than they found in the novels of the writers whom Woolf disparagingly called "Edwardians," asserted their need to break away from established conventions.

Woolf argued that there could be no single topic or form for the novel, contending "that there is no limit to the horizon, and that nothing--no 'method,' no experiment, even of the wildest--is forbidden, but only falsity and pretence" (1953 158). What for other writers was "'the proper stuff of fiction,'" did not exist for Woolf: "everything is the proper stuff of fiction, every feeling, every thought; every quality of brain and spirit is drawn upon; no perception comes amiss" (158). When Arnold Bennett claimed that the novel should be based on character and E. M. Forster suggested that it must render life, Woolf agreed. She noted, however, that what people meant by the words "character" and "life" was the very issue at stake and that where agreement concerning their meaning was absent there could be none concerning how they should be rendered. Rejecting the methods and techniques established by the Edwardians, she wrote: "[T]hose tools are not our tools, and that business is not our business. For us those conventions are ruin, those tools are death" (1950 110). Seeking new tools and conventions in

pursuit of an altogether different business, Woolf refused to accept that the novel's scope could be limited in any way:

The process of discovery goes on perpetually . . . Therefore, to fix the character of the novel, which is the youngest and most vigorous of the arts at this moment, would be like fixing the character of poetry in the eighteenth century and saying that because Gray's Elegy was 'poetry' Don Juan was impossible. (Sharma 38)

Lawrence, in turn, also emphasized the novel's need for constant renewal. He claimed in "The Novel" that it was becoming "harder and harder to read the **whole** of any novel" (416) because the form had become so predictable. Claiming that the novel had no pre-given subject matter or form, he asked why novels were always the same: "You can put anything you like in a novel. So why do people **always** go on putting the same thing? Why is the **vol-au-vent** always chicken!" (416). Arguing in "Morality and the Novel" that new forms of fiction were desperately needed, he stressed that the resistance with which they would be met would reveal their power: "[T]o read a really new novel will **always** hurt . . . . You may judge of [its] reality by the fact that [it does] arouse a certain resistance, and compel, at length, a certain acquiescence" (112). And in "Surgery for the Novel--or a Bomb" Lawrence contended that the novel needed to reject the old forms outright:

Instead of snivelling about what is and has been, or inventing new sensations in the old line, it's got to break a way through, like a hole in the wall. And the public will scream and say it is sacrilege: because, of course, when you've been



jammed for a long time in a tight corner . . . you are horrified when you see a new glaring hole in what was your cosy wall. You back away from the cold stream of fresh air as if it were killing you. But gradually, first one and then another of the sheep filters through the gap and finds a new world outside. (118)

Although Henry James stressed, in turn, that "[t]he only reason for the existence of a novel is that it does attempt to represent life" (Hazell 37), he noted that "reality has a myriad forms" and that "some of the flowers of fiction have the odor of it, and others have not; as for telling you in advance how your nosegay should be composed, that is another affair" (42). The house of fiction has "not one window, but a million," and each of these "has been pierced, or is still pierceable, in its vast front, by the need of the individual vision and by the pressure of the individual will" (Hazell 54).

Modernist writers like Woolf, James, Lawrence, Joyce, Proust, and Kafka opened the novel to possibilities that had not hitherto been imagined. Finding established fictional modes inadequate or irrelevant to their artistic needs and interests, they refashioned the novel to their own purposes. The novel changed, but it did not wither and die. Contemporary experimental writers take their cue from the modernists but move in a direction that would probably have disturbed the latter. Woolf's polemical "nothing is forbidden" becomes Carlos Fuentes' significantly different, "nothing matters, anything goes" (Fokkema 1984 45). The key issue, however, for those critics who oppose much of what is being undertaken

in the name of the novel today, as it was for earlier opponents of modernism, is whether they are right to claim that these undertakings so undermine the genre of the novel that its imminent death can be announced.

Frank Kermode argues that those critics who proclaim the death of the novel mistakenly "represent accident as essence" (1983 52). He means by this that the novel's past forms, which are the product of historical accident, do not represent the essence of the novel--its necessary nature, properties, or intrinsic qualities--and cannot determine the forms it may yet take in the future. The novel, for Kermode, is multifarious and cannot **be**, in essence, any one thing alone; it is best conceived as a prose narrative of a certain length and needs only conform to this loose definition. Thus he argues that whereas critics' misgivings about contemporary experimentation may be valid, they misconstrue the novel as a form when they claim that because this experimentation undermines other novelistic traditions--even established, distinguished ones such as realism--it undermines **the novel** itself. Kermode, in short, convicts these critics of making the same kind of mistake as that made by Woolf's poetry critics. We may be dismayed by the contemporary novel's destruction of older forms, but we are wrong if we assert that because George Eliot's Middlemarch was a novel, B. S. Johnson's The Unfortunates is impossible.

According to Bakhtin and Kermode, the novel is a plastic and mutable form that escapes definition. Paradoxically, in

fact, the novel's refusal to be pinned down becomes for them its most singular characteristic. In their view the novel has never represented any particular ideology but has been marked by internal conflict from the start. Thus to think of the novel as presently being in difficulties, to suggest that it is in a state of crisis, is to presuppose that it has an exemplary form from which its current manifestations are aberrant departures. Bakhtin's theory suggests that this is to misunderstand the nature of the form; Kermode, agreeing, argues that it is to confuse accident with essence. For both critics the novel has a built in impulse to innovation. Thus to find new kinds of novel wanting (i.e., the **nouveau roman**, metafiction, magic realism) because they fail to conform to established conventions is to assess them according to inapplicable criteria. Furthermore, to argue that these kinds of novel exemplify a crisis in the form is to misunderstand its generic identity: it is the very nature of the novel to be in perpetual crisis, to be in perpetual ferment.

## VI

I have argued two things: first, that there is no necessary relation between the realist novel, itself a heterogeneous form, and liberal ideology; second, that the novel should not be conceived as primarily a realist form. Realism constitutes one of the novel's central lines of development, to be sure. But realism no more exhausts the

novel's possibilities than Shakespearean drama exhausts those of theatre. The transformation recently undergone by the novel has led some critics, fearing the disappearance of a form they greatly admire, to claim that the novel is dying. But what they perceive as the dissolution of the genre as a whole is actually nothing of the kind. The novel is alive and flourishing, albeit in strange and perhaps unexpected ways. The realist novel, on the other hand, may indeed be experiencing a crisis. This is not, however, a crisis of liberalism but a wider crisis of representation.

In The Postmodern Condition Lyotard, like Steiner, is concerned with understanding post-war society as a whole, but his approach is similar to Bakhtin's. Like Bakhtin, he focuses on the link between human structurations of reality and linguistic forms. He too perceives heteroglossia--which he calls, after Wittgenstein, language games--to be ubiquitous. For Lyotard modern society consists of a plethora of competing discourses that attempt to interpret it and endow it with meaning; because these language games are incommensurable, it is impossible to adjudicate among them. His central contention, indeed, is that knowledge, which is mediated through language, is fundamentally narrative in nature. Human beings attempt to make sense of society, to encompass and structure it, by narrativizing it. As Fredric Jameson notes in his "Foreword" to the book: "[W]hat is . . . striking in his methodological perspective . . . is the way in which narrative is affirmed, not merely as a significant new field of

research, but well beyond that as a central instance of the human mind and a mode of thinking fully as legitimate as that of abstract logic" (xi).

Lyotard argues that contemporary society can no longer support a meaningful hierarchy of metanarratives. These are not only philosophical discourses; they also comprise values and systems of belief. Typical examples are "the dialectics of Spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or working subject, or the creation of wealth (xxiii). While he claims that all such creeds are now suspect, he rejects in particular the two great metanarratives (myths) of our recent past--the dream of a unified philosophy of knowledge (expressed through totality) and the political liberation of humankind. Their ruin signals a major crisis of belief, a legitimization crisis. Postmodern society is characterized by a distrust of the great explanatory frameworks of the past and increasingly falls "within the province of a . . . pragmatics of language particles" (xxiv). The old totalizing metanarratives that sought to explain society have been discredited by the events of human history and by radically sceptical scientific and philosophical models of knowledge. Metanarratives have splintered into narratives ("petits récits") behind which there stands no authority, no legitimizing power. For Lyotard philosophy, science, and politics, valued now according to their performativity, have dissolved into a Bakhtinian heteroglossia, into a plurality of competing discourses, which disclose the relative and con-

textual nature of human forms of knowledge.

Lyotard's analysis of contemporary society enables us--paradoxically, given his own rejection of totalizing frameworks--to understand both the situation of the post-war novel and the unease it calls forth in critics, for the various crises identified by the critics I have discussed constitute aspects of the wider crisis described in The Postmodern Condition. Consider once more the following statements: the novelist "is on his own, struggling in a collapsed tradition" (Toynbee); "the old tradition is dead" (Mitchell); the present time "seems to demand transformation, and nothing short of that" (Holloway); English society is suffering "a general malady . . . a slow sickening entropy" (Anderson); because both liberalism and Marxism depend on "highly exhausted philosophies . . . our situation [is] **fin-de-siecle**" (Bradbury). It is hardly surprising, given the despairing tone of these views, that as early as 1956 Lehmann claimed that "the problem of belief [is] the central problem of modern criticism" (2). He shared Steiner's view that European humanistic culture was disintegrating, and both critics' assessments were as bleak as Lyotard's later one. Thus Lehmann concluded:

Mankind is confronted by vaster dangers, more bewildering problems than ever before. The assumptions behind the confident machine civilizations of the West are being questioned in the light of the obvious, the appalling failure of that civilization to fulfil its promises and justify the untold human sacrifice and effort that has gone into its century and a half of industrial expansion and competition. (Appleyard 138)

And Steiner wrote:

The house of classic humanism, the dream of reason which animated Western society, have largely broken down. Ideas of cultural development, of inherent rationality held since ancient Greece and still intensely valid in the utopian historicism of Marx and stoic authoritarianism of Freud . . . can no longer be asserted with much confidence. The reach of technological man, as a being susceptible to the controls of political hatred and sadistic suggestion, has lengthened formidably toward destruction. (ix)

Steiner and Lehmann concede the defeat of exactly those central beliefs--in humanism, rationality, progress, politics--that Lyotard terms metanarratives. But although all three thinkers' diagnoses are similar, there is a significant difference between their attitudes to what they describe. Lehmann and Steiner both perceive occidental humanist culture in consensual terms and deplore its breakdown; Lyotard, in contrast, seeing humanism in terms of a conflict between metanarratives, which he argues are terroristic, celebrates its dissolution. And these different responses to our current predicament--one positive and exultant, one negative and lachrymose--take us to the heart of the thorny problem of postmodernism.

The word "postmodernism" has now been used in such a variety of contexts and with so many different meanings that it has, I think, become more of an obstacle than an asset to critical writing. Be that as it may, the term is with us, and I see no way of discussing contemporary experimental fiction without on occasion--however mistrustfully--referring to

it. Because there are already several excellent accounts of the history of the word, which reveal how deeply problematic it is, I offer, in what follows, only a brief outline of this history and then clarify the sense in which I shall be using the word when such use seems unavoidable.

In "Naming and Difference: Reflections on 'Modernism versus Postmodernism' in Literature" Susan Robin Suleiman identifies a key problem faced by theorists of postmodernism: is it continuous or discontinuous with modernism? All too often, as Suleiman notes, critics' answers to this question depend on their attitudes to both movements. Thus she distinguishes between three approaches to postmodernism: ideological/evaluative; diagnostic; classificatory/analytical. She argues that the first two approaches "flatten out" both modernism and postmodernism by defining them according to a series of problematic "characteristics," which either simplify or distort both phenomena. The third approach, in turn, describes the formal and technical features exhibited by the literature of both movements but eschews cultural analysis, making no attempt to explain postmodernism. I find it more helpful, for my present purposes, to convert Suleiman's tripartite scheme into a simpler bipartite one. Thus I distinguish between evaluative and descriptive (classificatory, for Suleiman) approaches to postmodernism.

Suleiman concludes that there is a continuity between Anglo-American modernism and postmodernism, but she admits that attempts to link or separate the two movements are to



some extent arbitrary because the conclusions that critics draw largely depend on what they are looking for. In short, the question of continuity or discontinuity between modernism and postmodernism is inseparable from the widely divergent conceptions that critics have of both movements. Douwe Fokkema concurs with Suleiman, arguing that the debate must remain inconclusive because our access to empirical data--the literature itself--comes to us via the concepts through which we "read" it: "In principle, either conception is valid, and their different relation to empirical reality will appear only if one notices that, at a higher level of abstraction, the continuity model constructs invariants where the discontinuity model has maintained variables" (1984 4).

Suleiman's and Fokkema's position enables us to understand why postmodernism has been interpreted in so many different ways. For the phenomenon seems to have no stability; it takes on whatever guises its commentators make it assume. Thus we can identify at least seven mutually contradictory views of postmodernism: first, critics such as Ihab Hassan and Leslie Fiedler praise it as a fruitful alternative to a once radical but now exhausted modernism; second, a critic like Lyotard argues that it is the radical continuation of an equally oppositional modernism; third, a writer such as Tom Wolfe sees it as the conservative rejection of a failed and aberrant modernism; fourth, the social theorists Jürgen Habermas and Albrecht Wellmer maintain that it is a conservative force, which has abandoned the political aspirations of

a critical modernism; fifth, a neoconservative like Hilton Kramer perceives it as a nihilistic phenomenon that seeks to destroy the achievements of an apolitical, purely aesthetic, modernism; sixth, the Marxist, Manfredo Tafuri, views it as an extension of modernism but argues that both movements are to be rejected because they are politically regressive; and seventh, the sociologist, Daniel Bell, and the literary critic, Gerald Graff, consider it to be a hedonistic and nihilistic movement that represents, via modernism, the final flowering of a debased romanticism.

It is clear, I think, how closely description and evaluation are bound up here. But although on some level they are inseparable and although the critic is entitled to assess the phenomena s/he discusses, these contradictory views of postmodernism help us to understand the minds of its analysts rather more than they help us to comprehend the phenomenon apparently under discussion. This confusion, which is often tinged with acrimony, has led Fredric Jameson, himself an important participant in the debate concerning the nature of postmodernism, to exhort his interlocutors to analyse rather than to condemn or to celebrate. Most of the evaluative approaches to postmodernism, he argues, adopt a moral and judgemental stance in relation to the phenomenon, which is out of keeping with the fact that we are all implicated in the postmodern age and cannot gain a vantage point outside it.

Jameson's plea has been heeded, perhaps unintentionally,

by those who have focused on description rather than evaluation. Literary critics such as Christopher Butler, David Lodge, Douwe Fokkema, and Brian McHale have sought to classify the modes and techniques of postmodernist writing. In After the Wake Butler argues that postmodernist art exhibits three crucial features: a reaction against order; a dialectic between a demand for artistic organization and an impulse toward chaos; and a self-conscious mediation of these problems within the art work. Lodge, in an early account of postmodernist style, identifies the following aspects: contradiction (i.e., self-cancelling texts); permutation (i.e., refusal of artistic selection through devices like multiple plots); discontinuity and randomness (i.e., logic of the absurd); excess (i.e., devices taken to extremes in order to disclose their arbitrary nature); and short circuit (i.e., disruption of convention). Fokkema, in turn, notes the following characteristics: rejection of representation; abandonment of explanatory hypotheses and hierarchies in favour of a commitment to the principle of non-selection; no concern over the status of the art work (i.e., internal incoherence); abdication of attempts to explain the world (i.e., old forms parodied); emphasis on the code itself (i.e., self-reflexivity); and stress on the reader's co-creation of the text. Patricia Waugh's Metafiction and Brian McHale's Postmodernist Fiction, drawing on the scholarship of these critics, have since offered still more comprehensive descriptions of postmodernism's formal innovations and tech-

niques.

Just as the ethos of postmodernism can be both compared to and contrasted with that of modernism, so some of these techniques can be seen as separate from and others as continuous with modernism. In his first-rate survey of the way the term has been employed, "The Postmodern **Weltanschauung** and its Relation with Modernism," Hans Bertens concludes that there are both continuities and discontinuities between the two movements. But although he stresses that postmodernism must be seen as a heterogeneous, multifarious, internally contradictory phenomenon, which cannot be reduced to a single account of it, he also distinguishes between two dominant literary strains: first, an avowedly non-referential mode that eschews all concern with epistemological validity; second, a partially referential mode that does not abandon representation altogether and that attempts to establish at least provisional knowledge.

Bertens' distinction between these two broad strains within postmodernism meshes with Patricia Waugh's similar distinction--in her book Metafiction--between two poles of metafiction: one that accepts an external reality that isn't entirely created in and through language, and one that believes there is no escape from language's prisonhouse. Waugh argues that the first attitude leads primarily to experimentation at the level of structure, whereas the second response, which may be characterized either by delight or despair, results primarily in experimentation at the level of

the sign.

These two sets of distinction not only allow us to see postmodernism as an internally fissured phenomenon (clearly within each of these broad strains there are many possible variations), but they also help to explain why accounts of it --on the level of both description and evaluation--differ so markedly. For there is no single postmodernism; rather, there are several (often competing) postmodernisms. Acceptance of this insight has recently led some critics to reject as fruitless the attempt to pin down the concept once and for all. These critics, acknowledging the heterogeneity and instability of the phenomenon that the single term seeks to cover, focus instead on those developments within it that seem to them to be the most significant. Thus Linda Hutcheon, emphasizing that postmodernism is paradoxical and internally contradictory, focuses primarily on texts that are partly referential and that attempt, often through ironic and parodic reworkings of established textual models, to establish a provisional knowledge of contemporary reality.

Taking my cue from Hutcheon, I wish to emphasize both my awareness of postmodernism's contradictory nature and my belief that its multiple modes do not conform to any single pattern. But I find Bertens' and Waugh's distinction between two broad kinds of postmodernism--provided this distinction is seen as a loose one--very helpful. Thus although I am not primarily concerned to situate the writers examined in this thesis in relation to postmodernism--largely because the term

is so semantically slippery--I consider that their experimental works can be classified into these two categories. Thus Johnson's metafictional novels belong to a non-referential postmodernist mode, whereas those of Berger, Lessing, Murdoch, and Wilson belong to a postmodernist mode that both utilizes referentiality and questions it. Although I eschew the word wherever possible, for the purposes of this thesis, when used, it will have these descriptive connotations.

## VII

Taken together, Bakhtin's theory of the novel as an inherently heterogeneous genre that constantly recasts itself in new forms, and Lyotard's account of the postmodern age as characterized by a crisis of metanarratives, illuminate the contemporary fictional scene. Modernism's rejection of a stultified naturalism in favour of a deeper realism freed the twentieth-century novelist to explore fiction's farthest reaches; postmodernism continues this investigation of the nature of narrative today. Whether or not Bakhtin is right that the novel has from its beginning been a parodic, self-questioning, and transgressive genre, it is certainly the case that in its modernist and postmodernist manifestations it has become one. In Bakhtinian terms, then, the novel, by nature heteroglossic, has found its fullest expression in the proliferation of interanimating fictional modes for which Lyotard's wider crisis of metanarratives is responsible. The

post-war novel has not declined as a form; undergoing what Thomas Kuhn would call a "paradigm shift," it has merely changed its preoccupations. Thus the shift away from realist representation, away from a view of the novel as society's mirror, far from heralding the novel's immediate extinction, has resulted in the creation of a whole new corpus of imaginative works.

Bakhtin's perspective is shared by Stuart Laing, one of the contemporary English novel's most astute critics. In an excellent overview of post-war English fiction, Laing argues that novel criticism is bedevilled by terms such as "rise" and "turn," which are misleading because they either suggest or presuppose evolution rather than change. Recalling Virginia Woolf's modernist assertion that the novel "is clearly splitting apart into books which have nothing in common but this one inadequate title" (Sharma 39), he questions the validity of the term "novel" as an "organizing term" (236) in discussions of contemporary fiction. He argues that it is currently more accurate to speak of "novels" rather than of the "novel" because the singular term implies homogeneity whereas heterogeneity characterizes recent fiction. The diversity of novels in our time shows, he contends, how multiform and flexible the genre is. Thus Laing, employing typically Bakhtinian language, sees post-war fiction as "the site of conflicts, differences, and a range of diverse literary projects" (236).

Thinking of the post-war novel in this way encourages us

to see it in terms of novelists' variable, and all too often competing, approaches to contemporary artistic and social questions. The five novelists discussed in this thesis, although they are different from one another in important respects, have variously attempted to confront and mediate contemporary reality through new fictional forms. They share reservations about the adequacy of realist modes, which they express by experimenting with the novel form. This thesis discusses their dissimilar reasons for taking issue with realism and tries to show how these reasons determined the contours of each novelist's unique "experimental turn."

Contending that their reasons for questioning realism are diverse, the thesis identifies three kinds of response to the crisis of representation. B. S. Johnson--a dominant figure in a group that includes Burns, Josipovici, and Figes--has focused on narrative's theoretical underpinnings and technical properties. Thus he has challenged realism primarily on linguistic and formal grounds. On the other hand, Doris Lessing and John Berger, who are both committed socialists, bypassed modernism altogether when they began their literary careers. They started out as realist novelists but turned to experimental modes when realism came to seem inadequate to the task of dealing with increasingly problematic political issues such as commitment, feminism, revolution, and the nature of history. Iris Murdoch and Angus Wilson, in turn, have sought to redefine their commitment to a liberal realism of which they are both appreciative and critical.



This has led them to retain much of the social density and moral concern found in realist novels but to submit both realism's naive claim to mirror reality and liberalism's over-optimistic view of the world to a rigorous scrutiny. Incorporating a variety of self-reflexive alienating devices, they have subverted realist forms while at the same time disclosing their deep respect for them.

In the following chapters, I examine the important experimental novels of Johnson, Lessing, Berger, Murdoch, and Wilson, endeavouring at the same time to place these novels in the context of their authors' critical writings.

In chapter two I discuss four of Johnson's key novels: Travelling People, The Unfortunates, Albert Angelo, and Christie Malry's Own Double-Entry. Distinguishing between two kinds of novel--those that give us "truth" and those that give us "fiction"--Johnson attempted to produce the former by writing strictly autobiographical works. Fearing, however, that even autobiography is imbued with fictional elements, he turned to the writing of radically metafictional texts, which questioned the possibility of knowledge by suggesting that truth and fiction are inseparable. I suggest that Johnson's theory of the novel is deeply flawed and that his own novels demonstrate its untenability. His practice is interesting, I contend, when it contradicts his theory, which otherwise leads him into a self-defeating **cul-de-sac**.

In chapter three I focus almost exclusively on Lessing's **magnum opus**, The Golden Notebook, although I discuss it in

relation to some of her earlier novels and her subsequent fusion of realism with apocalypse (The Four-Gated City), mythopoesis (Memoirs of a Survivor), and science fiction (Canopus in Argos). The Golden Notebook exhaustively analyses the alienation experienced by former communists when their faith in the metanarrative of Marxism crumbles. Examining both the novel's themes, which are central to its disruption of the realist form, and its structure, I argue that for Lessing realism was closely tied to socialist ideology and that when, under the pressure of contemporary history, that ideology's limitations became apparent to her, so did the limitations of realism. But Lessing's disillusionment with realist forms, which led her to explore a variety of other modes, is not a wholesale rejection of it. There is no tidy movement from realism to experimentation in her work but, rather, an oscillation between traditional and innovative forms that denies they are mutually exclusive.

In chapter four I examine Berger's first novel, A Painter of Our Time, and his most experimental work, G., winner of the Booker McConnell Prize in 1972. Situating his novels in relation to his art criticism, I show that Berger's early and problematic espousal of realism in A Painter derived from his opposition to what he saw as the empty gestures of an apolitical, hence exhausted, post-war avant-garde. By the time he wrote G., however, Berger had softened his attitude to post-war art and had turned for inspiration to Cubism. In G., which Linda Hutcheon usefully calls an "his-

toriographic metafiction," he rejects realist techniques as inapplicable to our contemporary understanding of history and utilizes, instead, Cubist principles in the construction of a self-reflexive narrative.

In chapter five I discuss Murdoch's Under the Net, The Unicorn, and The Black Prince. In "Against Dryness," an early and influential discussion of the novel, Murdoch distinguished between two modes of writing, the crystalline and the journalistic. These two modes, which loosely correspond to experimental modernist and traditional realist forms, comprise the two literary strains between which Murdoch's fiction oscillates and which she attempts to fuse. I argue that Murdoch's desire to have access to reality's **ding-an-sich** and to render it in realist novels is undermined by her awareness that human beings cannot escape the mediations of language and human concepts. Far from vitiating her work, the resultant tension nourishes it. Attempting to distinguish between appearance and reality in order to avoid the tempting consolations of fantasy, Murdoch's novels fuse the journalistic and the crystalline in a bold effort, which she knows must fail, to gain an unmediated vision of the world.

Finally, in chapter six, I turn to Wilson, examining his first novel, Hemlock and After, which is a realist novel, and his masterpiece, No Laughing Matter. Like Murdoch, Wilson admires the tradition of the nineteenth-century realist novel and desires to retain its strengths in his own fiction. His commitment to a liberal humanist realism, which he neverthe-

less questions, particularly in Hemlock and After, is evident in his early novels and in his initial repudiation of modernism. But although Wilson respects the realist novel, he has become increasingly conscious of its limitations and has sought to extend his own artistic range. In No Laughing Matter he pays tribute to the nineteenth-century burgher novel but subverts its conventions--thereby disclosing his critical distance from a form he admires--by writing a multiple-voiced and self-questioning saga of family life, which celebrates the pleasures of literary artifice.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Lehmann implies that although the Modernists were also beset by a crisis of belief, their works did not suffer because, being structured around recurring mythical and symbolic patterns, they developed powerful new aesthetic forms. By contrast, post-war writers, reluctant for various reasons to follow the Modernists, seemed to have no satisfactory artistic solution to a similar "problem of belief," which in the light of the Second World War was felt to be still more pressing.

<sup>2</sup> There was a continuous debate over the "condition of England" question throughout the 'fifties and 'sixties. For the most important contributions, see the following texts: Martin J. Wiener, "The Janus Face of English Culture"; Perry Anderson, "Origins of the Present Crisis" and "Components of the National Culture"; John Holloway, "English Culture and the Feat of Transformation"; E. P. Thompson, "The Peculiarities of the English"; Raymond Williams, "Retrospective" to The Long Revolution; Anthony Hartley, A State of England.

<sup>3</sup> Toynbee's distinction between "high" and "plain" style is common in English criticism. In Enemies of Promise Cyril Connolly argues that since the end of the last century there has been "a perpetual action and reaction" (73) between the "Mandarin" and the "vernacular" styles. In Children of the Sun Martin Green argues that the last one hundred years of English literature evinces a struggle between the aesthetic sensibilities of the dandy and the anti-dandy. In "Against Dryness," her early analysis of the contemporary novel, Iris Murdoch distinguishes between "journalistic" and "crystalline" styles of writing.

<sup>4</sup> Raymond Williams makes the same point in his "Retrospective" to The Long Revolution. He argues that England's problems are of long-standing origin and that they persist because the main structural features of English society have not been overhauled. Anderson's thesis provoked much debate, particularly in Marxist circles. E. P. Thompson responded angrily in "The Peculiarities of the English". Anderson replied to the attack in "The Myths of Edward Thompson."

<sup>5</sup> In John Osborne's Look Back in Anger Alison says to her father:

You're hurt because everything is changed. Jimmy is hurt because everything is the same. **And neither of you can face it.** Something's gone wrong somewhere, hasn't it." (68 emphasis added)

The colonel cannot accept the passing of Edwardian England,

and Jimmy cannot accept the society that has replaced it. None of the characters in the play is able to understand, or come to terms with, a radically altered England.

<sup>6</sup> The American novelist Philip Roth argues that reality is changing so rapidly and becoming so "incredible" that the novelist is forced to invent ever more bizarre fictions just to keep pace. Doris Lessing has made a similar point in her "Introductory Remarks" to Shikasta. See also Paul Coates in The Realist Fantasy:

And because the Anglo-Saxon world is becoming increasingly trans-Atlantic, the modern English novel can seem merely quaint, its realism further from reality than the apocalyptic fantasy of Thomas Pynchon. At a time when the consequences of technological advance are incalculable, fantasy becomes a form of realism, perhaps a speculative instrument for survival. At present, fantasy is the--often bitter--truth. (184)

<sup>7</sup> Iris Murdoch has raised a similar objection to the philosophy of existentialism, particularly to the Sartrean variant. Murdoch argues that everyday reality is not at all as Sartre presents it and that this everyday reality cannot be ignored because it is so central to our lives. She suggests that it is false to think of people as being in a permanent state of anguish over their questionable ontological status and as agonizing over the meaning of reality.

<sup>8</sup> Steiner's fears are comparable to those expressed by Lionel Trilling in The Liberal Imagination. Trilling addresses himself to the "death-of-the-novel" theory and, although he argues that the form can be revived, notes that the novel, which used to show us "man's weakness and depravity" (255) is no longer able to do so. This is because recent history has been so horrific that it has become unrepresentable:

A characteristic activity of mind is therefore no longer needed. Indeed, before what we now know the mind stops; the great psychological fact of our time which we all observe with baffled wonder and shame is that there is no possible way of responding to Belsen and Buchenwald. The activity of mind fails before the incommunicability of man's suffering. (256)

See also Susan Sontag's important essay, "The Aesthetics of Silence," which explores the difficulties of artistic communication in the postmodern age.

<sup>9</sup> For more detail on the problem of realism, which is one of the most difficult in literary scholarship, see the following: Damian Grant, Realism; Linda Nochlin, Realism; Rene Wellek, "The Concept of Realism in Literary Scholarship"; George J. Becker, Documents of Literary Realism; Georg Lukacs, "Art and Objective Truth"; Terry Lovell, Pictures of Reality; J. P. Stern, On Realism.

<sup>10</sup> Bakhtin's thesis has been supported by the findings of other scholars, who disagree in their explanations of this change but agree that by the end of the seventeenth century Latin had largely been displaced by the vernacular. See Robert Adolph, The Rise of Modern Prose Style; Ian Gordon, The Movement of English Prose; Walter J. Ong, Orality and Literacy.

## I

In Writing Degree Zero Roland Barthes advanced the thesis that contemporary literature has been "openly reduced to the problematics of language" (82). He was referring, of course, to the avant-garde.<sup>1</sup> He argued that the avant-garde focus on language was born of its conviction that language did not provide a "transparent" way of describing the world; language, rather, was a rule-governed signifying system that not only imposed certain constraints on how reality could be conceptualised but was saturated with historical meanings that crucially determined the ways it could be perceived. By foregrounding the complex ways language contoured and defined the boundaries of human perception, the avant-garde opposed both correspondence theories of language and the mimetic theories of literature they underpinned. It contested existing social relations, Barthes argued, by disclosing that neither society nor the language used to legitimate it was "natural" but that both, being historically and culturally constituted, were fundamentally alterable.

Barthes' target, clearly, was mimesis in general. He objected to mimetic literature because it relied on what he regarded as an untenable theory of language and because, in claiming to "name" and "mirror" the world, it implied that its representations were self-evidently veracious rather than partial, context-laden, and subjectively motivated accounts. It presented as natural that which was historical.

Four years later, reconceptualising his argument in



Mythologies, Barthes described mimetic literature as a form of myth. He defined myth as any form of narrative that "transforms history into nature" (129), that presents, in other words, what is particular and historical as though it were universal and eternal. Myth "naturalizes" contemporary society, he argued, because it occludes its historical evolution and makes its present structure appear familiar, right, and inevitable. He noted that "it is well known how often our 'realistic' literature is mythical" whereas "our 'literature of the unreal' has at least the merit of being only slightly so" (137), and referred to Writing Degree Zero as a first attempt to show how the avant-garde tried "to reject Literature as a mythical system" (135).

Barthes' argument offers an insight not only into the concerns of the French **nouveau romanciers** but also into those of a group of young experimental English novelists who began writing at around this time: Eva Figes, Gabriel Josipovici, Alan Burns, Ann Quin, Brigid Brophy, Christine Brooke-Rose, and B.S. Johnson. Barthes' suggestion that realism was a form of myth and his belief that myth should be challenged closely parallel the efforts being made by these avant-garde novelists in their fiction and illuminate their main objectives. Asking himself whether a non-mythical language is possible Barthes replied as follows:

There is . . . one language which is not mythical, it is the language of man as a producer: wherever man speaks in order to transform reality and no longer to preserve it as an image, wherever he links his language to the making of things, meta-

language is referred to a language object, and myth is impossible. (Mythologies 146)<sup>2</sup>

This restatement of the position articulated in Writing Degree Zero stresses the need to problematize the concept of reality. The emphasis is on creating and producing, not describing or reflecting; on making and transforming, not transcribing and preserving. For Barthes, mythical language takes the world for granted and merely copies it, **represents** it, whereas non-mythical language tries to unmask existing accounts of reality in order to foreground the possibility of change. The literature that employs language in this way is, to borrow Brian McHale's terms, illusion-breaking, not illusion-making.<sup>3</sup> In its suspicion of metanarratives and its conviction that language co-creates the world in which we live, this literature dissects discourse, choosing to analyse how human pictures of reality are made rather than to make more such pictures itself.

The English novelists mentioned above share many of Barthes' concerns. They argue that the contemporary novel should investigate language, reveal its own provisional and fictional status, and develop new forms in an effort to refuse what they perceive as the univocal perspective of realism. They are in overt reaction against the return to conventional forms exemplified by the Angry Young Men. They deplore these writers' treatment of modernism as an aberrant interlude in the history of the novel and regard their putative realism as naiveté or **mauvaise foi**. They concur, in

short, with Stephen Heath's polemical claim that the function of realism is "the naturalization of that reality articulated by a society as the 'Reality' and its success is the degree to which it remains unknown as a form" (20). Eva Figes, for example, argues that "the novels of the past were portraying a false reality" (Burns 33), that "new models of reality" are required, and that "people must be made aware that a statement is being made" (Gordon 114). Thus she notes that Johnson, Burns, and she "were concerned with language, with breaking up conventional narrative, with 'making it new' in our different ways" (Figes 1984 70).

These writers' rejection of established fictional forms and their focus on language and literary renewal are central to their theories of the novel. They are particularly pertinent to the work of Bryan Johnson, which offers a critique of realism through an investigation of how narrative forms gain their meanings and effects. These two concerns lead Johnson to oscillate between two kinds of novel: those that try to control language in an attempt to capture the "**ding-an-sich**," to reach what Barthes in Mythologies calls "the transcendent quality of the thing" (133); and those that, acknowledging the futility of this attempt, analyse language itself in the form of self-reflexive metafiction. In both cases his novels exemplify Barthes' dictum that avant-garde writing has been reduced to "the problematics of language."

## II

In the "Introduction" (a kind of literary manifesto) to his book of stories Aren't You Rather Young to be Writing Your Memoirs, Johnson claims that the novel is an evolving form and that every writer must respond to the innovations of the past. He argues that the modern novel was revolutionized by the moving picture and by Joyce. Film usurped the novel's representational function because it created the illusion of "imitating" the world directly; Joyce, in turn, whom Johnson calls "the Einstein of the novel" (12), faced the challenge presented by film and broke free from the constraints of realism. For Johnson, Joyce's work rendered traditional novelistic forms obsolete. After Joyce:

[T]he only thing the novelist can with any certainty call exclusively his own is the inside of his own skull: and that is what he should be exploring, rather than anachronistically fighting a battle he is bound to lose. (12)

Johnson's view is unremittingly evolutionary. He conceives the novel as an organic form that does not so much change as it improves and progresses. As though ascending an evolutionary scale, the novel moves only forward, and its imitations of older modes are anachronistic because these have been superseded. According to Johnson it is clear that "where Joyce left off should ever since have been regarded as the starting point" (13). In an interview he asserts that "no one can write the same after Ulysses" and he fulminates, as he did throughout his life, against those who continue to

write "as though Ulysses never happened, let alone Beckett" (Burns and Sugnet 93).

For Johnson, the novelist is duty-bound to create new novelistic forms not only because Joyce and Beckett have exhausted the old ones, but also because human perception of reality is constantly changing and new representations of it are required. Novelists, like Levi-Straussian **bricoleurs**, "must evolve (by inventing, borrowing, stealing or cobbling from other media) forms which will more or less contain an ever-changing reality" (Johnson 1973 16-17). Thus Johnson's own novels differ markedly from one another because in each of them he attempts some bold innovation, tries to find a new way to extend the novel's form and to express the themes that perennially obsessed him: the chaotic and unfathomable nature of reality and the instability of language. These two themes lie at the heart of Johnson's fiction and interpenetrate throughout it, for his belief in the unknowability of reality is inseparable from his concern with the ambiguities of language.

Johnson argues that life is disordered and random and that to construct narratives about it is to impose invented patterns on it and, hence, to falsify it. He realises, however, that if this is true of novel writing **per se** it means that he himself is implicated in such falsification every time he puts pen to paper. Aware of this difficulty, he distinguishes between fiction, which he dismisses as a mendacious form, and the novel, which he defends as a

truthful one:

I am not interested in telling lies in my own novels. A useful distinction between literature and other writing for me is that the former teaches one something true about life: and how can you convey truth in a vehicle of fiction? The two terms, **truth** and **fiction**, are opposites, and it must logically be impossible. (14)

He goes on to explain that within the novel form "one may write truth or fiction" and that he chooses "to write truth in the form of a novel" (14). Fiction, he declares, imagines and fabricates; it tries to control the chaos by ordering it, by imposing patterns. By doing so it tells lies. The novel, in contrast, resists the urge to invent false patterns by restricting itself to autobiography; it transmutes real events and experiences into literature so that they can be better understood. By doing so it tells the truth. Fiction and truth are polar opposites, Johnson argues, and trying to forestall those who might think him artless, he avows that one of his goals was to break through "the English disease of the objective correlative to speak truth directly if solipsistically in the novel form" (22).

This theory is seriously flawed and, apart from seeming a trifle sophistic, betrays a naive view of both language and literature. If Johnson's novels had enacted his theory they would probably be of little value. They are interesting, rather, because the more Johnson tried to keep fiction and truth separate the more they melded, and the tension between his views and his practice resulted in two fascinating texts,

Albert Angelo and Christie Malry's Own Double-Entry, which paradoxically disclose the untenability of their author's theory of the novel.

Johnson's autobiographical works are his least rewarding ones. In writing them, however, he came to realize that autobiography is not self-evidently organised in advance but, like every form of narrative, needs to be structured. He grasped, to use Roman Jakobson's terms, that even the "facts" of a life require selection and combination (at the levels of event and text) and that omission, interpretation, and the imposition of order were unavoidable. He realized, in short, that he could never capture the truth, could never render the actual, essential state of affairs. Autobiography proved to be fundamentally tainted by fiction and failed to offer him the safe harbour from a world of fabrications and lies that he sought. Thus he turned to metafiction.

Johnson, however, never openly repudiated his distinction between truth and fiction. His metafictional novels do not therefore follow the autobiographical novels chronologically. Rather, there is a constant oscillation between the two modes of writing. The metafictional impulse derives from his mistrust of language, which threatens to elude him and to prevent him from expressing himself with precision. He turns to metafiction whenever the impossibility of pinning language down overwhelms him, frustrated that the concentration and exactness to which he aspires are escaping him. Johnson yearns for a minimum of misunderstanding. He endeavours to

use language not to excite the reader's imagination but to control it:

[I]t follows from what I have said earlier that I want my ideas to be expressed so precisely that the very minimum of room for interpretation is left. Indeed I would go further and say that to the extent that a reader can impose his own imagination on my words, then that piece of writing is a failure. I want him to see my vision, not something conjured out of his own imagination. (28)

This is autocratic, totalitarian almost, but it perfectly reveals Johnson's obsession with trying to curb language's ambiguities and his fear that this is a Sisyphean task. He acknowledges, for example, that language "is an imprecise tool with which to try to achieve precision" (28) but then cavalierly claims that because this is beyond his control he cannot allow it to deflect him from his course. Yet it was precisely his awareness of language's imprecisions and ambiguities that did deflect him from his self-imposed course and, in doing so, led him to produce his finest work.

### III

Johnson published six novels in his lifetime: Travelling People (1962), Albert Angelo (1964), Trawl (1967), The Unfortunates (1969), House Mother Normal (1971), and Christie Malry's Own Double-Entry (1973).<sup>4</sup> These novels fall into distinct groups: Travelling People, Albert Angelo, and Christie Malry's Own Double-Entry are overtly metafictional; Trawl and



The Unfortunates are autobiographical; and House Mother Normal is a rigorous exercise in point of view.<sup>5</sup> Travelling People, Johnson's first novel, touches on most of the themes that obsessed him throughout his life and thus provides clues to the later novels. Albert Angelo, his second work, is internally contradictory; it seems to eschew the truth/fiction distinction but then readmits it at novel's end. When Johnson writes himself into Angelo's final pages in an attempt to control the polyglossia released by the text, he reveals his refusal to accept what he has himself disclosed. Thus although all his novels show the inseparability of truth and fiction, this insight torments him in the early work--hence the authorial intrusion at the end of Angelo--leading him to write the "autobiographical" works, Trawl and The Unfortunates, which try to resist the blandishments of invention.<sup>6</sup> When this attempt to keep truth and fiction apart fails, Johnson temporarily abandons his theory and writes Christie Malry's Own Double-Entry, an overtly playful metafictional text, which, accepting that truth and fiction are inseparable, takes pleasure in its own artifice.

Travelling People is Johnson's most obviously derivative work. Clearly following his own dictum that "Ulysses changed everything" (Burns 93), Johnson produced a novel that not only pursued Ulysses too closely but also drew rather too openly on the writings of Flann O'Brien, Vladimir Nabokov, Samuel Beckett, and Laurence Sterne. Travelling People's central protagonist, Henry Henry, clearly, if rather gra-

tuitously, recalls Lolita's Humbert Humbert. Johnson lifts a tabular description of character, which provides various bodily measurements, straight out of Murphy. He employs Sterne's marbled pages to depict a character's loss of consciousness and black pages to symbolize his subsequent death. He also mimics the lexical exhibitionism so beloved of both Nabokov and Beckett, as in the following example, where a Mrs. Louise Bunde is enabled, "in despite of a firm belief in cicisbeism, to regularise her relationship with a certain Mr. Corby, a pyknic uniorchid of Lyme Regis" (248).

The greatest influences on Travelling People were undoubtedly Joyce and O'Brien. The novel's "Prelude," for example, distinctly recalls the opening page of O'Brien's At Swim-  
Two-Birds:<sup>7</sup>

Seated comfortably in a wood and wickerwork chair of eighteenth-century Chinese manufacture, I began seriously to meditate upon the form of my allegedly full-time literary sublimations. (Travelling People 11)

Having placed in my mouth sufficient bread for three minutes' chewing, I withdrew my powers of sensual perception and retired into the privacy of my mind, my eyes and face assuming a vacant and preoccupied expression. I reflected on the subject of my sparetime literary activities. (At Swim-  
Two-Birds 9)

O'Brien concludes that "[o]ne beginning and one ending for a book was a thing I did not agree with" (9), while Johnson avers that "one style for one novel was a convention I resented most strongly" (11).

Other similarities abound. O'Brien foregrounds the

fictive nature of his text by disrupting the novel with a variety of digressions. These are marked off from the narrative by being introduced in italics. Johnson notes in his "Prelude" that he would provide "clear notice, one way or another, of digressions" (12), and peppers his text with divagations modelled on At Swim-Two-Birds. Similarly, O'Brien persistently draws attention to his style and literary techniques. For example:

But taking precise typescript from beneath the book that was at my side, I explained to him my literary intentions in considerable detail--now reading, now discoursing, *oratio recta* and *oratio obliqua*. (25)

Johnson, in turn, gives us the following:

He was behind the bar engaged in a conversation for which I shall have to descend to **oratio recta**, a technique I have so far been scrupulous to avoid in this section. (161)

He then laments the restrictive nature of this technique, thereby further foregrounding its rhetorical nature.

Joyce's presence is evident in the structure of the novel. Where Ulysses comprises eighteen styles for eighteen chapters, Travelling People comprises eight styles for nine chapters, utilising a third person narrative for the first and last chapters to establish continuity. Within this structural envelope it employs a wide variety of narrative modes: stream of consciousness (with two different characters), omniscient, epistolary, cinematic, diaristic, and metafictional. Johnson's purpose is to refuse what he

perceives as the monological perspective of realism and, by revealing how the various discourses he employs shape his subject matter in different ways, to suggest the importance of examining discourse itself.

Many of these techniques fail in Travelling People because they are too openly derivative and because they are insufficiently motivated by the novel's thematic concerns. Nevertheless, the techniques themselves, self-referentially commenting both on this text and on the novel as a genre, emerge as central themes in their own right. Two metafictional concerns are dominant: the foregrounding of the novel as fiction and the questioning of diegetic authority.

Johnson is at pains to expose the fictionality of his text at every possible opportunity. In the "Prelude," for example, having decided to reject a uniform style, he expresses his conviction that "it was not only permissible to expose the mechanism of a novel, but by so doing [he] should come nearer to reality and truth" (12). The narrative's fictionality is subsequently disclosed by the constant foregrounding of the novel as a literary text. This is achieved by employing eight styles; by making intertextual references to other literary works (quotation, reference, and imitation); by indulging in lexical exhibitionism; and by utilising metafictional commentary, as for example: "Kim was a better cook than Henry will allow on page 58" (232).

Diegetic authority is not so much questioned in the novel as it is exposed through the flaunting of authorial

omniscience. This is done by allowing the author to obtrude his presence and, in particular, by showing the power he wields over plot and character. At a certain point in the text, for example, Henry is apparently unable to describe a series of events because he is so disgusted by them. The narrator immediately appears:

Henry was unable to find words to describe the events of the night of Saturday, August 24th; I am under no such difficulty, however, and feel it no less than a duty to record what happened. (159)

Moreover, when the author concludes a scene, he often refuses to exercise his power silently, but deliberately remarks on it, saying, for example: "there I think I shall draw a veil of asterisks over the scene" (256).

In much the same way characters are shown to be the author's dupes. Although there is some attempt to make them "round," they are self-consciously "flattened" out at other points in the text so that their fictiveness is never concealed for long.<sup>8</sup> Thus the reader is proleptically informed that Gwendy had to marry her boyfriend two years after the events taking place in the novel, but immediately afterwards she is exposed as a figment of Johnson's imagination. She gets drunk, and he tells us that part of him wanted "to have her bereft her maiden head on the same inebriated occasion," but because he was "too fond of her for that" he will "let her lose it at her leisure" (231). At one stroke the author reveals both the fictional nature of his characters and of his narrative. Elsewhere, he disdainfully refers to his

characters as "puppets" (143); in an intertextual reference to O'Brien he acknowledges that they are "unnaturally born at the ages I have chosen for them" (143) and then remarks that they are not so much "born" as "quarried" (143).<sup>9</sup>

Because Johnson himself considered Travelling People an immature work, he refused to allow it to be reprinted. However, in keeping with the theory of the novel to which he strove to adhere, he regarded it as weak not because it failed to develop its themes adequately but because it was "part truth and part fiction" ("Introduction" 22).

#### IV

Reading Albert Angelo, one wonders why Johnson went on to write Trawl and The Unfortunates. Angelo already illustrates the inadequacy of the fiction/truth distinction and thus undermines the subsequent two works' project from the outset. The novel deals explicitly with writing: "what im [sic] really trying to write about is writing" (167). It is also about a good deal more. It focuses on the concept of authority in order not only to examine the novel genre but also to offer a critique of class society.

The issue of authority lies at the heart of both Trawl and The Unfortunates, which represent failed attempts to guarantee textual veracity through an appeal to the trust-

worthiness of the author. But Angelo, written before either of these novels, shows that the truth/fiction dichotomy is untenable and, suggesting that all narratives are part invention, focuses overtly on the consequences for textual authority. At the same time the novel establishes a series of links between textual authority and social authority. Its scepticism about the way metalanguages organize novels in order to sanction certain readings of them is related to its scepticism about the way metanarratives legitimate existing social relations. Thus the word authority is given a double articulation within the novel--like a palimpsest it flickers between its literary and its social referents, foregrounding their similarities. These two senses of the word commingle throughout so that within the novel's parameters a critique of conventional textual order implies a critique of social hierarchy, and vice-versa. Challenging both textual and social hegemony the novel inverts "high" and "low" and creates, within its own textual space, a carnivalesque "world-turned-upside down."

Structurally, Angelo is so organised that its fictional status is consistently foregrounded. It alerts the reader to its fictionality at the outset by parodying traditional chapter headings. Its five chapters, entitled "Prologue," "Exposition," "Development," "Disintegration," and "Coda," do not outline the novel's content but reveal its form, thereby exposing it as a piece of fiction. Furthermore each chapter employs a plethora of narrative styles: first, second (sin-

gular and plural), and third person; past and present tense; poetry; and stream of consciousness. Oscillating between them, the text ensures that it cannot be read smoothly. The different styles create discontinuities, disrupt narrative flow, and prevent the privileging of any single perspective. They point both to the multiplicity of social discourses and to the novel's predicament as merely one of them. And by being deliberately unsettling they keep the novel's status as fiction, as a literary artefact, prominent.

The use of alternative narrative modes to foreground the novel's fictionality is complemented by the incorporation of **objets trouvés**, the reorganisation of conventional page layouts, and the use of an array of typographical devices. The novel includes an extract from an eighteenth-century medical manual, a letter, typographical markers that enclose physical descriptions, pages split into double vertical columns, holes cut into pages, and the reproduction of a poster. These various technical innovations keep the text's "made" nature firmly in view. A self-proclaimed **bricoleur**, Johnson creates a linguistic collage out of what he calls "the fragments of my own life, the poor odds and sods, the bric-a-brac" (169), and allows its constituent elements to coexist polyphonically. Refusing to adopt a monological perspective, the novel offers a series of questions, not answers, and gives great latitude to the conflict between opposed social voices. It offers no metalinguistic resolution to the heteroglossia it has put into play, and its closure is purely parodic.



Thematically, Angelo explores class conflict through a critique of the education system. Albert, a supply teacher in London's toughest schools, witnesses the deprivations that working-class children suffer: lack of adequate facilities, inept timetables and curricula, disorganised classes, and incompetent teachers. The teacher coming into such a school " 'is beaten before he starts' " (129), Albert notes, because the pupils, uninterested in an education that is irrelevant to their position in a class society, reject it out of hand. Albert comprehends their frustration. He recognizes that education touches no part of their lives, noting that " 'it's so boring for them, so bloody boring' " (128). He fears, moreover, that the injustices of the education system enact more fundamental social inequalities:

'If we go on half-educating these kids any more,' he said suddenly to Terry, 'then the violence will out. I'm sure they know they're being cheated, that they're being treated as subhuman beings. And the school **is** a microcosm of society as a whole.' (133)

Albert finds himself in an ambivalent position. As a teacher he represents an authority in which he has little faith as a person.<sup>10</sup> Thus he persistently undermines his authority within the diegesis just as his author, Johnson, undermines his own extradiegetically.<sup>11</sup> The first instance of this occurs when Albert gives a lesson on religion. On one level the lesson simply investigates the possibility of believing in an omnipotent God. On another level, however, it raises questions about the status and authority of fictional worlds and foreshadows both Albert's and Johnson's

later questioning of their own authority. The emphasis that is placed on the word "omniscience" makes this secondary nuance evident:

You have been told, too, that he is a God who knows everything: **omniscient** is the word we use to mean "knows everything", **om - ni - sci - ent**, it's a Latin word. I'll put it on the board. But does God know everything? **Everything?** Does he really?  
(55)

In thus phrasing his question Johnson challenges the validity of omniscient narration thematically, just as his entire novel challenges it structurally. In this context, Albert's subsequent demand that his pupils question the words of school hymns ("if you do not believe them to be true, then think why you are singing them" (58)) is double-edged, and can be read as a sly criticism of those writers who continue to write novels from an omniscient standpoint.

Within the school, in keeping with his claim that he only teaches for a living, Albert establishes an uneasy balance between his external "role" and his private convictions. Although to his pupils he "seem[s] to be on the other side" (148), he understands that their rebelliousness represents a desire for autonomy and a refusal to defer to an education system that was not designed with their needs in mind. Education, he avers, cannot be imposed from above: "it's the authority which is wrong, not those it's forced upon" (148).

The conflict between authority and the students upon whom it is forced is primarily linguistic. Johnson regards

different languages as sociolects (discourses that represent alternative worldviews) and sees the fight against authority as inseparable from the issue of whose language is permitted to speak. Albert, the author's mouthpiece, defends his pupils' alternative constructions of reality.<sup>12</sup> In a school debate, arguing against the proposition "That These Children's Speech is Bad" (138), he supports his pupils' use of English by emphasising the relation between language and worldview. The children's speech, he claims, is forged in their environment--it is **their** language, and it enables them to articulate their class-based perceptions of the world. A child "saying **prize** for **praise** was using the same sound as in the word **prize**" (138) so the sound itself could not be said to be "wrong." It was context that made it seem so. But neither language nor forms of speech are context-free or neutral, he argues, because language inherently expresses a worldview. Thus he suggests that arguments about language use are really arguments about how the world is perceived:

The offence to Miss Crossthwaite's lovely ears, Mr. Albert suggested, came about because these children were not speaking as she spoke herself, these children **were not imposing the same pattern on their worlds as she imposed on hers:** for who approves, Mr. Albert quoted Petronius without attribution, of conduct unlike his own? For communication within their own social context, the speech of these children was perfectly suited. (138 my emphasis)

Albert's stress on language's **social** dimension, on the alternative ways that different languages frame and structure reality is crucial to the novel. Echoing the point Johnson

is trying to make through Angelo's form, Albert suggests that reality is malleable and that how it is conceptualised partly depends on the prism through which it is perceived. This view destabilizes reality. It suggests that the world is open to divergent interpretations and, in so doing, reveals its transformable nature. It indicates, moreover, that the struggle over how the world should be organised is intimately related to the struggle over whose language "names" it.

The issue of "naming," which is central to the novel, is brought to the fore when Albert tries to give a lesson on the origins of the world.<sup>13</sup> His attempt to offer a scientific and authoritative account of the world's geological structure is disrupted by his own private reservations about its validity and by his pupils' persistent scepticism. Johnson renders the conflict between Albert's speech and his thoughts spatially. He divides the section's pages into two vertical columns--the left column presents Albert's speech and the right column his inner thoughts--and in this manner discloses Albert's hidden sympathy with the external challenge being mounted against his authority. This challenge is directed at his discourse. His pupils, relatively powerless within the school because overt insubordination is met with expulsion, avoid direct confrontation with authority, preferring to challenge it obliquely. They travesty Albert's "naming" of reality by attacking his language, dissolving his univocal meanings in a wave of associations, double-meanings, and puns.

Throughout the section Albert's students refuse his attempts to endow the world with solidity and stability. They reveal a preference for a mutable, indeterminate world and challenge Albert's claim to establish its fundamental nature objectively. When he describes grass and soil as "a thin topcoat, like the skin on a rice-pudding, say, while underneath lies rock, solid rock" (73), someone calls out: "Give me that rice-pudding rock, daddy-o" (73). When he describes the sun and the earth he is interrupted: "'Ow does 'e know about the sun and the middle of the earth? 'As 'e bin there?" (75). He shares this scepticism, thinking: "**True, how do I bloody well know?**" (75), and acknowledges to himself that he will "**invent answers**" to their questions (75). When he asks if anyone can name an igneous rock he receives a punning reply: "Sar fend Rock?" (78). When he names basalt and gneiss as two examples he is interrupted: "Basil is nice?" (83). He passes round a piece of gneiss that he had "knocked off" an outcrop. His explanation is immediately given an alternative meaning: "Albie's knocked off some ice . . ." (86). And when he tries to control the unruly class by threatening them with a detention, the response symbolizes authority's inability to legitimate its own sociolect by shutting down the oppositional discourses of heteroglossia: "You won't keep me in, Albert, boy!" (96).<sup>14</sup>

Albert, despite his internal complicity with his pupils' heteroglossic perspective, functions externally as a figure of authority, and in this role fails to "keep in" the

disruptive language of polyphony. This language becomes increasingly dominant in the novel as the students present their views of school in a series of short narratives that are apparently class essays. But these alternative accounts are also disrupted as Johnson, in a final frame-breaking gesture, introduces the author into the novel, hijacking it with his infamous aposiopesis: "OH, FUCK ALL THIS **LYING!**" (163). Once again, apparently unwilling to give up the distinction between truth and falsehood, Johnson attempts to confirm the text's veracity himself:

Im trying to say something not tell a story telling stories is telling lies and I want to tell the truth about me about my experience about my truth about my truth to reality. (167)

This last desperate move fails.<sup>15</sup> The preceding pages have portrayed heteroglossia all too powerfully and, in refusing to shut it down, have undermined the authority of the author. Even in "Disintegration," while trying to retain his vision of truth, Johnson acknowledges this. Thus he explains that his collage is an attempt "to reproduce the fragmentariness of life" (169), that unable to capture all of life he has presented "a paradigm of truth to reality as I see it" (170), and that language cannot be pinned down for "each reader brings to each word his own however slightly idiosyncratic meaning" (170). Finally, recognizing that he cannot stamp his authority on the text, he offers a parodic ending ("even I (even I!) would not leave such a mess") (176) by including a gratuitous "Coda" in which Albert (symbol of

authority) is killed by his pupils, whose marginalised discourse closes the novel.

Angelo dissects language in order to show that there is no unmediated contact with reality and to challenge those authoritative accounts that claim to have it. In doing so it exemplifies Figs' demand that novels should make people "aware that a statement is being made" (Gordon 114). Sceptical of any view of language that legitimates metanarratives, Angelo opens up a space for the agonistic conflict between Lyotard's "petits recits" and between Bakhtin's "social dialects," which acknowledge the contextual and partial nature of their truth-claims. Despite its author's metafictional intervention in its final pages, Albert Angelo remains unremittingly polyphonic. It puts a panoply of sociolects into play and, recognizing that each is in its own way valid, denies itself the right to judge among them.

## V

The Unfortunates is a grand failure.<sup>16</sup> An attempt to capture, by being strictly autobiographical, the true nature of Johnson's relationship with a friend who had passed away, it dissolves into a study of language and writing. Born of a belief in the opposition of truth and fiction and the necessity of keeping them distinct, it actually collapses them together and in so doing demonstrates the untenability of Johnson's theory of the novel.

The Unfortunates takes place in the mind of a narrator. Reporting a soccer match in a city where his friend Tony once lived, he returns to the past in his memory and tries to recapture it.<sup>17</sup> In order faithfully to approximate the chaotic working of the mind, Johnson makes The Unfortunates a loose-leaf novel that consists of twenty-seven sections. These, apart from two sections ("First" and "Last") that function as a framing "envelope," are to be read in random order. The narrative itself is written in a tortuously hypotactic "stream of consciousness" mode. Thus the text introduces randomness both through the loose-leaf format and through its literary style.

Johnson's detractors focus on the novel's structure, which is its most obvious but not necessarily most important feature. It can readily be granted that the box-novel structure is on the whole unsuccessful: the impression of randomness is a mechanistic one, the events described quickly fall into a "realistic" chronology, and the chronology thus arrived at ensures that reading the sections in some orders leads to nonsense. Furthermore, the technique seems gimmicky and provides, as Judith Mackrell claims, "a superficial experience of indeterminacy" (55).<sup>18</sup>

The loose-leaf format is not the most significant aspect of The Unfortunates, however. Its interest lies in the gap it exhibits between its theory and its practice and in the tension created by their internal conflict. Whereas Albert Angelo's narrator finally enters his text and admits that he



is writing about writing, the narrator in The Unfortunates is metafictionally present throughout. This seems strange in an autobiographical novel that purports to eschew fiction in order to tell truth, yet nonetheless it discloses the narrator's inability to suppress the difficult nature of his enterprise. The novel originates with a promise made to the dying Tony--"I'll get it all down, mate" ("So he came" 5)--but, by foregrounding the ambiguousness of both "it" and "all," it undermines itself from within.

A true account of the narrator's relationship with Tony proves to be impossible because it depends on the subjective nature of his memory and on the limitations of language. The narrator's awareness of these two problems permeates the novel, whose narrative oscillates between the extradiegetic, diegetic, and hypodiegetic levels. Thus the narrator extradiegetically questions both his diegetic account of the present (his experience of the city) and his hypodiegetic reconstruction of the past; depictions of past and present are persistently disturbed by a self-reflexive commentary on the mind's active role in co creating them.<sup>19</sup>

The narrator primarily does this by qualifying most of what he says. He praises a gift received from Tony, for example, but then observes: "how I try to invest anything connected with him now with as much rightness, sanctity almost, as I can, how the fact of his death influences every memory of everything connected with him" ("At least" 1). In another section Tony is characterised as "our Merlin" ("Up

there" 1), but then this designation is withdrawn: "yes, that must be it, Tony did not lead us, I impose Merlin, it must have been some other occasion when he led us" (3). The fear of imposing interpretations is prevalent, leading the narrator to ask: "do I impose this in the knowledge of what happened later? A constant, ha, distorting process, what is true, about that past . . . ?" ("Up there" 2). This is likely, he realizes, for the mind displays a penchant for systems; it "arranges itself, tries to sort things into orders, is perturbed if things are not sorted, are not in the right order, nags away" ("Southwell" 1). More disturbingly still, the mind may mistakenly invent altogether:

And the river from the valley, the little stream, rather, ran down through the rocks and flint pebbles and chalklumps of the beach, its estuary and mouth, all so unimpressive, or do I invent? Was there any sign of a stream there? It is so easy to invent, by mistake, not to remember what was there, what is truly remembered? ("For recuperation" 4-5)

The mind is shown to circle between past and present, re-organizing old memories in the light of new experiences and symbiotically altering its understanding of both. The past cannot be rendered definitively; it remains subject to the vagaries of the memory and is dependent on perception and interpretation. The notion of totality, of an overview, is rendered suspect. Why, asks the narrator, "do I suppose all this from so little" ("This poky" 7). The "all" that he promised to "get down" proves to be chimerical, for it is spun out of veiled memories and hazy suppositions.

Language is extradiegetically foregrounded in a similar manner. The narrator notes that Tony "had a great mind for such detail, it crowded his mind like documents in the Public Records Office" ("First" 3). But he is uneasy about imagery and undercuts his own use of it: "there, a good image, perhaps easy, but it was even something like as efficient, tidy, his mind" (3). Elsewhere he extends this suspicion of figurative language by refusing to use it altogether. He debates with himself, writing: "think of an image, no" ("First" 3); or: "Images for rain are common, I cannot think of one, I do not need to think of one, really, for what purpose?" ("Away from" 1). These extradiegetic disruptions foreground the way linguistic usage determines the meaning of what is articulated.

The narrator's self-reflexivity about language makes it as much the novel's subject as is Tony. Ultimately, the extradiegetic interference threatens to obscure Tony from view altogether as the text turns into a commentary on its own process of construction. Nowhere is this more clear than in the section that deals with the soccer match the narrator has gone to report, which functions as a **mise-en-abyme** for the whole novel.

The section comprises three representational strata: that of the narrator's perception of the match, that of his initial verbal shaping of it, and that of the final report. It exemplifies, in true Barthesian spirit, the work that goes into the production of literary artefacts. The novel has

already foregrounded its materiality by being presented as a box-novel that requires constant physical manipulation. In this section it foregrounds the gap between the object (the soccer match) and its linguistic mediation by suggesting that language does not correspond to the world but co-creates it and that all narrative is partially, albeit fundamentally, fictional.

The narrator's initial recording of the match reveals how hard he must work to make sense of it. This is no neutral transcription of the game with words naturally falling into place, but a construction of it.<sup>20</sup> The narrator is active throughout, selecting and discarding words and phrases, interpreting, criticizing, and self-consciously commenting on his own creation of meaning:

**City's goal had a narrow escape** alter that, cliché, cross it through, later **early on when their goal-keeper, the prehensile** or something **Phipps dropped a high centre from Lomax but fearlessly courageous-ly indomitably recklessly notwithstanding dropped himself followed it** and smothered the **attempts of two United forwards to force the ball into the net.** Or something. ("The pitch" 2)

Alternative adjectives and adverbs stand together, their (heteroglossic) equality suggesting that each hints at an aspect of what is being observed but none can render it fully. Furthermore, the concluding qualification, "or something," destabilizes this pluralistic version still further, revealing it as but one possible account of many. The novel, warning that the final report will make a narrow selection from this early linguistic diversity, alerts us to

the distance travelled between event and depiction.

In the above passage, which is typical of the section, the narrator partly fears that his perception of the match is being determined by language. He understands that he is working within a genre (sports report) which has its own discourse (journalism) and that this discourse structures and organizes his perception of the match in advance. **Langue** is shown to precede **parole** and to set the limits on the latter's possible articulations. Thus the narrator's awareness of the constraints imposed by both his discourse and his genre does not enable him to escape them; thus his text is full of the clichés he seeks to avoid.<sup>21</sup> And his awareness of these problems leads him to acknowledge that he is not reproducing a ready-made reality but is patterning it in accordance with the demands of his genre: "Now I must hack this into some shape, now I must make it into 500 well-chosen words" (9). As this secondary labour is performed the gap between initial perception and final report grows ever wider. This reveals not that the first narrative was the "true" one but that no narrative is natural because all are **produced**.<sup>22</sup>

Finally, to drive home the point that his words are influenced not only by genre, but by language itself, the narrator explicitly focuses on language as **langue**. He shows it to be a system with its own internal structure and rules, which must be complied with if meaning is to be generated at all. He defamiliarizes language by emphasising its structure --its diction, syntax, and punctuation:

Copy, please.                      Soccer, City versus United.  
 Right.                      City one, United nil.                      Skill  
 was as uncommon as grass                      on the bone hyphen  
 bare bone hyphen bare pitch                      on which City  
 beat United one hyphen nil                      at home yesterday  
 comma                      and only a farcical incident  
 towards the end enlivened the tedium                      and  
 crudity of the match full point new par. (10)

This section functions as a **mise-en-abyme** because it discloses in miniature how the narrator's subjectivity and his dependence on language transform his initial perceptions, just as the novel discloses how, under the same pressures, he is constantly forced to alter his perception of Tony. The section foregrounds the process by which the soccer report is constructed, parallels the way the novel as a whole foregrounds its own process of construction. By doing so it reveals both accounts to be tinged with fictional elements.

The disruptions caused by subjectivity and language are compounded by the narrator's fear that reality is ultimately unknowable. He hovers between a belief in the possibility of truth, established through the excision of everything that is tainted with fiction, and a belief that there can be no truth and no knowledge because all is fiction. Thus throughout the text he doubts his own assertions and observations and finally questions his whole undertaking:

I used to drink beer then but do not now, so much,  
 there's another change, it's meaningless, though,  
 it all is, this wallowing in recollection, stupid  
 even, as well, I mean, where does it lead . . . .  
 so why this, if it is so meaningless, anything

means something only if you impose meaning on it, which in itself is a meaningless thing, the imposition. ("Away from" 3)

Elsewhere he claims that "it is all chaos, I accept that as the state of the world, of things, of the human condition, yes, meaningless it is, pointless" ("Just as" 3). The only reality remaining seems to be the perpetually circling mind of the bewildered narrator. In asserting that external reality is unknowable and solipsism inescapable, the text abjectly concedes defeat and collapses under the weight of its own contradictions.

The Unfortunates demonstrates the untenability of its own premises. It is fractured by its internal contradictions rather than by its exotic loose-leaf form. It fails because its author, although aware of the dissonance between his theory of the novel and his actual practice, was unable, in this text at least, to accept the inadequacy of the theory. But the failure was a fruitful one--it led Johnson to use the distanced approach he had already employed in the first part of Albert Angelo in the overtly metafictional Christie Malry.

## VI

In his important essay, "The Literature of Exhaustion," John Barth claims that fictional forms have been so fully explored that the novel has become a genre of "exhausted possibility" (70). However, while the problem for novelists

is not even how to succeed Joyce and Kafka, "but those who've **succeeded** Joyce and Kafka" (73), the situation is "by no means necessarily a cause for despair" (70). By examining older forms through parody and pastiche novelists can "rediscover validly the artifices of language and literature" (74) and thereby renew the genre.

In Christie Malry's Own Double-Entry Johnson continues his own quest for new novelistic forms by producing a text that embodies Barth's precepts. He jettisons the dichotomy between truth and fiction and turns to parody. Embedded within his text, and providing a broad hint as to how he desires it to be read, is a quotation from Szell Zsuzsa: ". . . the novel, during its metamorphosis in respect of content and form, necessarily regards itself ironically. It denies itself in parodistic forms in order to be able to outgrow itself" (163). Christie Malry, embracing parody, endeavours to outgrow earlier forms of the novel as well as Johnson's own previous fictions and his theory of the novel.

Albert Angelo and Christie Malry have similar concerns. Both texts foreground language and writing. But whereas the former manifests despair, the latter, achieving a distanced perspective, displays great humour and an uncharacteristic lightness of touch. Towards the end of Angelo, anticipating criticism of his work, Johnson rails against his implied readers: "Tell me a story, tell me a story. The infants" (169). In Christie Malry, which purports to be a simple story, he seems to reverse himself. This is a fake reversal,



however. He does indeed tell a story, thus humouring his critics, but he takes great pleasure in undercutting it metafictionally, thus satisfying himself.

Christie Malry, the novel's central protagonist, is, as his ever present creator never tires of stressing, "a simple person" (11). Recognizing that money represents power, that only a few possess it, and that he is not one of them, he hopes to improve his situation by placing himself "next to the money, or at least next to those who were making it" (11). By working as a bank employee and an accountant he learns Double-Entry book-keeping, and before long decides that the principle of Double-Entry should apply to society as a whole.<sup>23</sup> He arrogates to himself the right to debit society for the injustices it perpetrates. Beginning humbly, he exacts small penalties at first, but as his awareness of social injustice grows so does the size of the debits. At the end of the novel, having blown up a Tax Office and poisoned twenty thousand Londoners with cyanide, he is plotting, like Guy Fawkes before him, to dynamite the Houses of Parliament. His creator senses that the joke has gone far enough, however, and, warning him that "it does not seem . . . possible to take this novel much further" (165), kills him off before this final act of terrorism can take place.

Johnson's attack on social inequality is farcical. The author distances himself from Christie's attempts to redress social injustice at the outset. He emphasises his protagonist's lack of intelligence and dismisses his faith in the

possibility of justification. Early in the text his mother notes that the belief in "'a reckoning, a day upon which all injustices are evened out . . . when the light of our justification blazes forth upon the world'" (30) is false. There will be no "'day of reckoning, except possibly by accident'" (30). Johnson ironizes Christie's attempts to even out injustice by making him a simple-minded buffoon who believes that social rights and wrongs can be tallied up on a balance sheet. At the same time, by having Christie question various aspects of society in a seemingly absurd manner, he defamiliarizes them and foregrounds their problematic status.

For example, when Christie reads in a church newsletter that religion offers "'the answer to all problems, personal, political and international'" (35), he is outraged. Being a reader of sublime simplicity, however, like Archie Bunker's wife, he refers the matter to the government's Weights and Measures Department: "I would be grateful if you would check upon the factual accuracy of this claim and, if you find it to be in any way false or exaggerated, I trust you will institute proceedings under the relevant section of the Trade Descriptions Act" (35).<sup>24</sup> His naive reading of the pamphlet's claims throws them into a new light and invites the reader to re-think their validity. Similarly, when he disapproves of the uses to which his taxes are put, he blithely blows up his Tax Office. This rather excessive act spectacularly draws attention to the lack of control ordinary citizens have over the minutiae of a country's government.

Christie's bizarre acts tilt the novel towards fantasy and black humour. His grotesque punishments of innocent people, in the name of attacking the government, and the specious logic with which he justifies them, are laughable and are meant to be so. His fantastic debits are no more meant to be taken seriously than was the surface meaning of Swift's "Modest Proposal." Their meaning, rather, as with that of Swift's pamphlet, derives from their deliberate exaggerations, or misreadings, of certain injustices in order the better to expose them.

Johnson makes it clear that his tongue is firmly in his cheek by indulging in black humour throughout. The Tax Office is blown up by running a bomb-laden toy train up a sewage pipe. Christie and his friend Headlam go to see the damage and are considered to be "amongst the lucky ones: they saw three bodies brought out and were in one of the television news shots" (107). Later, apparently unconcerned that he has killed three people, Christie boasts to his girlfriend that "he had been on television, and she had not!" (107). He explores a variety of absurd and grotesque methods for carrying out his war against society: "Shall I experiment with explosive mice, thought Christie? Or other small rodents? Bomb-carrying blackbirds?" (123). In a direct address to the supposedly appalled reader, the novel's putative author renders the horror of cyanide poisoning banal:

Not a pretty sight, eh? Think what it would have been like if it had been cadmium (twenty-five times more toxic than cyanide) or chromates (fifty times more toxic) or beryllium (two thousand five hundred times!). You may consider it fortunate that Christie did not know about beryllium at the time. (146-47)

Finally, and most ludicrously of all, Christie justifies the deaths by arguing that they cannot compare with the wrongs inflicted by society on "fifty-odd million others" (147). He concludes that in fact the government is "responsible in every way for letting such things be and become and remain possible" and avers that feeling guilt over "personal responsibility would be liberal wishwashiness" (147).

This travesty of terrorist acts and reasoning meshes with the novel's parodies of fictional forms. At the heart of Christie Malry lies a critique of the conventional novel, but in keeping with his text's lighthearted tone, Johnson largely focuses on popular literature, especially the thriller. Treating the thriller as a debasement of the realist novel, he lampoons its formulaic nature. At the same time he implies that the thriller's ability to reduce many of realism's most typical elements to cliché reveals realism itself as a fundamentally conventional form.

Both sex and action are presented parodically in Christie Malry. Sex, for example, involves the improbably erotic use of various household appurtenances. The Shrike, Christie's girlfriend, strips him with an old vacuum cleaner "whilst at the same time giving him a good going over with the Goblin, using the full range of accessories as well as

simply the end of the tube or pipe" (57). This is followed by "an infinitely alluring dance" (57) that is eventually "being performed on top of him" (57) so that both are "able to enjoy almost simultaneous orgasms of unforgettable proportions and intensities" (57). Action, in contrast, instead of being suspenseful and exciting, is suppressed. By refusing to include heroic feats of bravery and ingenuity, Johnson hints at their implausibility in popular fiction. Thus when Christie requires gelignite the author avoids describing how he obtains it, and breezily remarks that "if you want gelignite seriously enough, then you can come by it" (106). Similarly, when Christie steals a lorry and bridges its ignition, the theft is treated as such a simple act that it "does not bear further elucidation here" (145).

Johnson complements his burlesque of the thriller by parodying realism's treatment of character, omniscience, and plot. Christie Malry's characters, for example, are ciphers, cardboard cut-outs. No attempt is made to give them a palpable existence, to bring them to life. They are figments of the author's, and occasionally his reader's, fancy. Fearing that he cannot control his readers' imaginations, Johnson offers the barest description of Christie himself, and invites the reader to supply the details: "Christie is therefore an average shape, height, weight, build, and colour. Make him what you will: probably in the image of yourself" (51). He creates the Shrike before our very eyes, pruriently dwelling on this act of invention because of the pleasure it

affords him: "But Christie's girlfriend! I shall enjoy describing her! Come along, what's your name, let's have your name" (52).<sup>25</sup>

The author's address to the Shrike, as he is in the process of creating her, marks the novel's exploration of what Umberto Eco terms "transworld identity."<sup>26</sup> This occurs when characters move between a text's different diegetic levels, occupying textual spaces in which they apparently have no logical right to be. Such characters may be aware that they are fictional, may discuss their roles amongst themselves or with authors who enter their own fictional worlds, may even seek to escape their texts or to commandeer them. Novels that blur diegetic levels in these ways create internal dissonance in order to expose their own fictiveness and to hint that reality and fiction are in many ways inseparable.

Christie Malry is replete with "transworld" characters. Most of them metaleptically understand that they exist within a fictional world and calmly distinguish between diegetic levels. Unlike certain characters of Muriel Spark and Flann O'Brien, however, they are undisturbed by being trapped in somebody else's world and submit to their creator's whims without a word of complaint.<sup>27</sup> Christie's mother performs her single textual function and obligingly dies. Headlam good-naturedly refers to himself as "'the comic relief in this novel'" (103). The Shrike's mother even considers fictional status to be a privilege, informing Christie that

"it was worth it, all those years of sacrifice, just to get my daughter placed in a respectable novel like this, you know" (156).

Diegetic boundaries are particularly blurred when characters discuss the novel's progress amongst themselves or with their author, who inscribes himself into the text. The Shrike asks Christie, for example, how they can be said "'to be perfectly happy a few lines back, and now be complaining about the monotony of the diet?'" (139). Christie, in turn, suggests that she "'go and work for Pork Pie Purveyors Ltd . . . now they've been invented. That would be a logical progression of the kind that very much appeals to the vast majority of readers'" (139). Johnson himself enters the text as a character in order to inform Christie that he has only twenty-two pages left to live and to apologize for his impending death. Christie is undisturbed and, telling Johnson not to be sorry, engages his creator in a discussion about his infamous views on the novel.

These disruptions of diegetic order blur the boundaries between fiction and reality and suggest that they intersect at significant points. At the same time, Johnson's treatment of character raises questions about human selfhood. He systematically "flattens" out his characters, permitting them only to play small parts of his own choosing, and exposes them as puppets throughout. By doing so he implies that human autonomy in the twentieth century has been so violated that people have been reduced to the playing out of insigni-

ficant "roles." Furthermore, trapping his characters in **his** fictional world, one over which they have no control, Johnson hints that we are all caught up in "worlds" that circumscribe our spheres of activity. Jerking on the ends of their puppet-master's strings, dependent on him for their every action, Christie Malry's benighted characters are like pawns in a game whose rules and significance they hardly understand.

Johnson flaunts his omniscience and omnipotence throughout. He describes Christie's thoughts, for example, but then announces that he has perpetrated an illusion "since you know only too well in whose mind it all really takes place" (23). Like a plenipotentiary, he alternately divulges and conceals information. He plays with his characters' lives, creating and decreating them at will. The Shrike, for example, like Flann O'Brien's John Furriskey, is created before our very eyes, and Christie is afflicted with cancer when he threatens to blow up the Houses of Parliament. Events are similarly arranged to suit the author. When Christie desires to change jobs a vacancy is created by removing its former holder from the text. When he poisons London the novel's "sympathetic characters" (147) are improbably spared. And the author arbitrarily decides on twenty thousand deaths because that "was the first figure that came to hand as it is roughly the number of words of which the novel consists so far" (147).

Christie Malry highlights the analogy between author and God. In typically postmodernist fashion, however, the text



consistently undermines the meaningfulness of the author's power and invites the reader to question it. Johnson alerts the reader to his role as puppet-master by exercising his authority capriciously and by metafictionally commenting on it. In so doing he foregrounds the fictional status of his own text, announcing that "a statement is being made," and implies that all novels should be similarly self-referential. Thus when he remarks that "nothing happens by accident in this novel" (57) he is insinuating that this is true of every novel and criticizing those that, occluding their "authored" nature, present themselves as **imitations** of the world.

As Brian McHale has cogently argued, this breaking of the frame by emphasizing a novel's fictionality represents an attempt to achieve a form of superrealism. The author exposes his or her text as an invention, drawing attention not to the "picture," but to the "frame," thereby suggesting that how the world is perceived depends on the observer's standpoint. The author presents his or her text as the portrayal of a world, not **the** world, by foregrounding it as a text, a statement. At the same time, by doing so, s/he paradoxically claims to be **more** realistic. But this breaking of the frame involves a sleight of hand. Johnson, for example, attempts to establish a greater veracity for his novel by displacing it from the level of "fiction" to that of "truth." He not only lays open his text's fictional nature but also invites the reader to complicity with him. He makes clear "in whose mind it all really takes place" (23) and shares this "higher"

level of knowledge with the reader. Together, reader and author are placed above the text--they look down on it from a shared, and apparently superior, vantage point. As McHale points out, however, this vantage point is not superior at all:

[T]o reveal the author's position within the ontological structure is only to introduce the author **into the fiction**; far from abolishing the frame, this gesture merely **widens** it to include the author as a fictional character. (197-98)

The author cannot establish his perspective as "a higher, 'realer' reality" (197) because he fictionalizes himself when he enters the text. According to McHale, a writer like Johnson thus becomes what Barthes calls a "paper author," and "the **real** world retreats to a further remove" (197).

Johnson, finally, is no more able to pin reality down in this text than he was in his other novels. But Christie Malry reveals how much of a departure it is from the other works and from Johnson's truth/fiction distinction through its humour, its light tone, and its parodic mode. Whereas in The Unfortunates and Albert Angelo Johnson was visibly obsessed with the distinction between truth and fiction and lamented the impossibility of keeping them apart, Christie Malry delights in acknowledging their inseparability. In short, although Johnson's practice always belies his theory, it is only in Christie Malry that he overtly abandons it. Playfully blurring the boundaries between veracity and falsehood, he treats them as different points on a continuum,

not as diametrical opposites. He turns to an overt parody of mimetic literature in order to suggest that the artist's time-honoured ambition to imitate the world represents an illusory goal. Acknowledging the grey expanse in which truth and fiction, reality and its representations, meld and intertwine, he deliberately locates his novel within this ambiguous space.

## VII

In "The Postmodern **Weltanschauung** and its Relation with Modernism," Hans Bertens suggests (as I pointed out in my introduction) that postmodernist literature displays two distinct modes: those that abandon referentiality altogether and those that remain partially referential in an attempt to establish some form of knowledge, however provisional. Echoing this view, Patricia Waugh distinguishes between novels that suggest the world is not entirely created by language and novels that assert the impossibility of our ever escaping language's prisonhouse.

B. S. Johnson oscillates between these two metafictional poles. His avowed goal is to avoid invention altogether by keeping truth and fiction utterly separate. He endeavours to capture reality by sticking as closely as possible to the "truth" of autobiography, but realizes, ultimately, that this truth is saturated with fiction. As a result, he turns to the pure invention of metafiction's more extreme pole and,

parodying the mimetic impulse, produces overtly fabricated texts such as Albert Angelo and Christie Malry. His novels exhibit a tension, in short, between the hope that truth and fiction can be distinguished and the fear that they are fundamentally inseparable. Christie Malry, however, is the only novel in which Johnson openly celebrates the artifice of fiction, for in Trawl, The Unfortunates, and Albert Angelo his inability to remove the taint of invention torments and oppresses him.

In a story entitled "Everyone Knows Somebody Who's Dead," Johnson writes that he has in mind "the conflict between understanding and what does not appear to be understandable" (16). It is this conflict that permeates his novels, which perpetually seek new ways to render, if not exactly make sense of, a reality he believes to be chaotic, random, and unfathomable. Thus in the "Introduction" to Aren't You Rather Young to be Writing Your Memoirs, Johnson argues that new novelistic forms are required because present-day reality changes so rapidly that "no sooner is a style or technique adopted than the reasons for its adoption have vanished or become irrelevant" (17). He concurs with Beckett that the key task for the contemporary novelist is "to find a form that accommodates the mess" (17), to develop ways of rendering chaos without falling prey to artistic formlessness.

Johnson never succeeded in fully rendering the chaos, but, in his parodic and metafictional texts, he did succeed

in demythologizing (defamiliarizing) those mimetic accounts of reality that claim to mirror it. Realizing that the "**ding-an-sich**" of reality could not be captured, he located these metafictional texts in the fissure between reality and fiction and foregrounded the ambiguous ways in which they intersect. He produced, as McHale suggests postmodernist art does in general, an illusion-breaking literature. Focusing thus on "the problematics of language," he acted very much like Barthes' mythologist, who grasps that "the potent seed of the future **is nothing but** the most profound apocalypse of the present" (1980 157). Johnson's novels exemplify not only the conflict between the understandable and the non-understandable, but also the attempt to reconcile them. They thus epitomize the dilemma of Barthes' mythologist, for they "drift between the object and its demystification, powerless to render its wholeness," yet seek "a reconciliation between reality and men, between description and explanation, between object and knowledge" (159).

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Barthes' polemical style, which tends to generalizations that are not supported by close readings, is alien to critics working in Anglo-American traditions. When he claims that "literature" as a whole has been reduced to questions of language Barthes is really referring to the avant-garde.

<sup>2</sup> Barthes differentiates between first-order language, (**language-object**) and **metalanguage**, "a second language, in which one speaks about the first" (115). A metalanguage appropriates its language-object, presenting it as "truth" rather than as a subjective viewpoint. In this way, like myth, it **naturalizes** its language-object's view of reality. Tolstoy's Anna Karenin, for example, begins with an authoritative statement whose provenance is concealed: "All happy families are alike but an unhappy family is unhappy after its own fashion" (13).

<sup>3</sup> See Chapter 14 of his book Postmodernist Fiction.

<sup>4</sup> See The Old Lady Decently, the first part of Johnson's projected Matrix trilogy, was posthumously published. Although it is unclear how the trilogy would have developed, it looks as though Johnson was once again concerned to try and distinguish between truth and fiction. Thus Christie, which is so humorous and playful, seems to have been something of a departure for Johnson rather than a solution to his problem.

<sup>5</sup> The novel enters the minds of nine residents in an old people's home and, using a stream-of-consciousness technique, offers their different perceptions of a single set of events.

<sup>6</sup> In the "Introduction" to Aren't You Rather Young to be Writing Your Memoirs Johnson explains that The Unfortunates is an autobiographical novel that examines his feelings about a close friend, Tony. The text tries to capture the "truth" of Johnson's relationship with his friend by excising all "fictional" elements from the novel's reconstruction of the past; at the same time, as Johnson explains, it tries to be transcript of how his mind worked during one particular day. These two goals are incompatible, however, and the more the text discloses the random workings of the narrator's mind the more it discloses how difficult it is to keep truth and fiction distinct, thus implicitly undermining its author's general theory of writing.

<sup>7</sup> Randall Stevenson has also noted certain similarities between Travelling People and At Swim-Two-Birds.

<sup>8</sup> These terms are taken from E. M. Forster's Aspects of the Novel.

<sup>9</sup> In At Swim-Two-Birds O'Brien writes that literature "should be regarded as a limbo from which discerning authors could draw their characters as required, creating only when they failed to find a suitable existing puppet" (25). Like

Johnson, O'Brien "flattens" out his characters.

<sup>10</sup> The novel portrays Albert as a divided personality from the outset: "I'm an architect--that is, I'm a teacher really, but I want to be an architect. No, that's the wrong way round, I'm an architect but I have to earn my living by teaching" (12).

<sup>11</sup> Johnson's extradiegetic comments in "Disintegration" are meant to bolster his authority but, paradoxically, they only serve to undermine it further. See below.

<sup>12</sup> In "Disintegration" Johnson writes: ". . . im [sic] my hero though what a useless appellation my first character then im trying to say something about me through him" (167).

<sup>13</sup> Nicolas Tredell discusses the significance of naming in Albert Angelo. He also describes the science lesson in detail and I am indebted to his analysis in what follows.

<sup>14</sup> Bakhtin's account of parody perfectly describes the point of this section. He writes:

Parodic-travestyng literature introduces the permanent corrective of laughter, of a critique on the one-sided seriousness of the lofty direct word, the corrective of reality that is always richer, more fundamental and most importantly too contradictory and heteroglot to be fit into a high and straightforward genre. (1981 55)

<sup>15</sup> Brian McHale claims that such moves always fail because authors who try to guarantee the "truth" of their texts by appearing in them effectively "fictionalize" themselves. He suggests that nothing "prevents the author's reality from being treated in its turn as an illusion to be shattered" and concludes that "the supposedly absolute reality of the author becomes just another level of fiction" (197). I discuss this question in greater detail when analysing Christie Malry.

<sup>16</sup> The Unfortunates is a box-novel consisting of stapled sections. When quoting from it, I will give the first two words of the section, as well as its individual page numbers.

<sup>17</sup> In the "Introduction" to Aren't You Rather Young to be Writing Your Memoirs Johnson tells us that the narrator is himself. But despite Johnson's claim that the novel is autobiographical, The Unfortunates rapidly reveals itself to be a highly self-conscious text that challenges its author's own theory of the novel. Instead of taking Johnson at his word (i.e., treating the narrating persona as though it were unproblematically Johnson himself) I refer to "the narrator" throughout.

<sup>18</sup> John Fowles dismisses the experiments of Johnson and his **confrères** as "twentieth century rococo" (Ziegler 121).

<sup>19</sup> I distinguish between these levels because although

the novel's events take place in the narrator's mind, there are clearly three narrative strata in the text: reconstruction of the completed past (hypodiegesis); portrayal of the present (diegesis); commentary on the act of narration (extradiegesis).

20 Alain Robbe-Grillet writes: "I do not transcribe, I construct" (For A New Novel 162).

21 For example: "City's attacks were breaking down in midfield" (3); "a crunching tackle" (4); "blasted the ball" (6).

22 I am thinking here of Terry Eagleton's claim, in Marxism and Literary Criticism, that literature does not reflect its object but "reproduces" it in the way that a dramatic performance reproduces the dramatic text. (51)

23 The principle of Double-Entry has a double resonance: it recalls Albert Angelo's division of its pages into two columns, which destroys what Bakhtin calls "the one-sided seriousness" of the language of authority, and it hints at the text's own **modus operandi**--parody as a form of double entry.

24 Like Archie Bunker's wife, Christie "misreads" the pamphlet's figurative meaning because he cannot see beyond its literal meaning:

[A]sked by his wife whether he wants to have his bowling shoes laced over or laced under, Archie Bunker answers with a question: "What's the difference?" Being a reader of sublime simplicity, his wife replies by patiently explaining the difference between lacing over and lacing under, whatever this may be, but provokes only ire. "What's the difference" did not ask for difference but means instead "I don't give a damn what the difference is." The same grammatical pattern engenders two meanings that are mutually exclusive: the literal meaning asks for the concept (difference) whose existence is denied by the figurative meaning. (De Man 9)

25 It is easy to see how far behind Johnson has left his avowed theory of the novel by comparing this incitement of the reader's imagination to his claim in Aren't You Rather Young that if "a reader can impose his own imagination on my words, then that piece of writing is a failure" (28).

26 See his "Lector in Fabula."

27 See Spark's The Comforters and O'Brien's At Swim-Two-Birds.



## I

Doris Lessing, whose literary career is not yet over, is a prolific writer. Since writing her first novel, The Grass is Singing (1950), she has published eighteen novels, as well as numerous plays, short stories, poems, and essays. During this time she has modified her initial commitment to realism and has produced several works that incorporate elements of fantasy, science fiction, and mythopoeisis. Her novels trace a circular path that begins and ends with realism, but which takes a detour through the terrain of apocalypse, myth, and space fiction, as the result of a loss of faith in the power and validity of traditional realist forms. Because the best explanation for this detour can be found in the thematic concerns and the fragmented form of The Golden Notebook (1962), the **magnum opus** that stands at the heart of Lessing's corpus and that marks her transition from realist to experimental novelist, in my discussion of her novels I deal primarily with this text.

In 1957 Lessing contributed a literary manifesto, "The Small Personal Voice," to Declaration, a collection of essays by young writers. In it, Lessing claims the great nineteenth century realists for her masters and situates herself firmly in the humanist tradition. Before doing so, however, she avows her Marxism, emphasizing her belief "in the class analysis of society and therefore of art" (1974 3), and turns to a defence of committed writing. The question of whether or not literature is good, she argues, is distinct from the

question of whether or not it is propagandistic. Since both good and bad writing can derive from propagandistic impulses, what counts is how skilfully literature conveys its effects and meanings; the criteria are primarily literary.<sup>1</sup> For Lessing the debate over commitment is misleading, because the claim that committed art is necessarily good (i.e., because it is politically progressive) is as spurious as the opposite claim--that committed art is necessarily bad (i.e., because it is tendentious). Art, she argues, may be praised or criticized for its political sentiments, but ultimately it should be judged according to aesthetic criteria.

Lessing's praise for realism was unstinted in "The Small Personal Voice":

For me the highest point of literature was the novel of the nineteenth century, the work of Tolstoy, Stendhal, Dostoevsky, Balzac, Turgenev, Chekhov; the work of the great realists. I define realism as art which springs so vigorously and naturally from a strongly-held, though not necessarily intellectually defined, view of life that it absorbs symbolism. I hold the view that the realist novel, the realist story, is the highest form of prose writing; higher than and out of the reach of any comparison with expressionism, impressionism, symbolism, naturalism, or any other ism. (4)

Although the novelists of the nineteenth century differed in their political, religious, and aesthetic beliefs, Lessing contends that their differences were encompassed by the humanistic outlook they held in common. Their humanism ensured that they shared "a climate of ethical judgement" (4-5); it enabled them to see society as a whole and to portray the relations between its diverse features through

totalizing artistic visions.

Lessing argues, however, that the humanist metanarrative has since splintered into a plethora of conflicting discourses. Contemporary literature reveals "a confusion of standards and the uncertainty of values" (5); writers accept only "the condition of being uncertain and insecure" (5). Thus the novel divides into two broad tendencies: the abstract, despairing novels of writers like Camus, Sartre, and Beckett; and the concrete, insular novels of writers like Amis, Braine, and Osborne. The former see "man as the isolated individual unable to communicate, helpless and solitary" (12). The latter see him "as collective man with a collective conscience" (12). For Lessing, both tendencies capitulate to the problems facing the post-war writer. Works that are "despairing statements of emotional anarchy" and that disclose an "acceptance of disgust" (11) betray the writer's task as much as those that adopt a narrow social and economic view of humanity: "both are aspects of cowardice, both fallings-away from a central vision, the two easy escapes of our time into false innocence" (12).<sup>2</sup> Thus she urges her fellow writers to find "a resting point" (12) that balances these false options against one another: "The point of rest should be the writer's recognition of man, the responsible individual, voluntarily submitting his will to the collective, but never finally; and insisting on making his own personal and private judgements before every act of submission" (12).

Warmth, compassion, and humanity illuminate the novels of the nineteenth century for Lessing because they represent "a statement of faith in man himself" (6). The contemporary novelist, having lost this faith, creates works that succumb either to despair or to parochialism. Lessing refuses to countenance these alternatives. She demands that writers boldly confront the postwar world, that they face its dreams and its nightmares, its beauty and its horror, in order to strengthen "a vision of a good which may defeat the evil" (7). In 1957, although she is aware of the challenge to realism and acknowledges the pressures that seem, in the eyes of other novelists, to have crippled it, Lessing refuses to sanction what she regards as artistic admissions of defeat. The realist novel's strength, she argues, is that it enables the novelist to speak directly, without evasions, in a small personal voice, to the reader. This is both its gift and its obligation:

The novelist talks, as an individual to individuals in a small personal voice. In an age of committee art, public art, people may begin to feel again a need for the small personal voice; and this will feed confidence into writers and, with confidence because of the knowledge of being needed, the warmth and humanity and love of people which is essential for a great age of literature. (21)

"The Small Personal Voice" remains a landmark essay in Lessing's **oeuvre**. Her espousal of realism requires some clarification, however, if we are to understand her subsequent desire to break free from its constraints.

Lessing's view of realism, as should be clear from the

opening paragraphs of her essay, was strongly influenced by Marxism. Lorna Sage observes that Lessing's early faith in realism implied not only belief in "a tradition and a cluster of stylistic strategies inherited from the nineteenth century," but "a set of values, an ideology" (45). This ideology, Sage notes, was Marxist; it entailed a view of realism as a "radical and in some sort revolutionary" (45) literary mode. Jenny Taylor, in an excellent article that situates Lessing in the context of post-war English politics, concurs, arguing that Lessing's background "reinforced a radical liberal tradition and explicitly identified it with the communist movement" (21).

Taylor points out that Lessing was not a Stalinist. She supported, rather, the socialist humanism associated with E. P. Thompson and Raymond Williams, which found its voice in the pages of the New Reasoner (of which Lessing was an early editor) and in the peace movement. This clarification makes it easier to understand Lessing's early aesthetic position and to see how her Marxism, which was never abstract or mechanistic, enlivened her writing. Lessing's attempts to portray the relations between the individual and society were informed by both socialism and humanism. Believing in the individual's social nature, in the class struggle, in the economic analysis of society, and in political activism, she focused on these issues in her novels. But these concerns were tempered by an affection for people, by a belief in the individual's intrinsic self-worth, and by a faith in personal

communication. Thus her early work was not dry and tendentious, but spirited and compassionate.

The optimism evinced in "The Small Personal Voice" was to change dramatically, however, and Lessing's faith in a realist literature that depended on the direct communication between two individuals was to diminish. There were two key reasons for this: first, Lessing's disillusionment with Marxism and rationalism forced her to question the realism that, for her, had largely been informed by them; second, she perceived post-war social and technological change to be so monstrous that realist writing could no longer evoke it.

One of Lessing's central concerns, particularly in her early novels, had been to view society dialectically, to see each part as related to and interacting with a wider whole. She notes, for example, that her Children of Violence series was intended to be "a study of the individual conscience in its relations with the collective" (1974 14). Similarly, The Golden Notebook was primarily about "the individual in relation to his society" (1974 79), and one of its central themes was a critique of modern man's tendency to atomize social life, a theme derived from Marxism because "Marxism looks at things as a whole and in relation to each other" (1981 14). But neither The Golden Notebook nor The Four-Gated City, the fifth and final volume of Children of Violence, both of which attempted panoramic portrayals of contemporary society on the model of the nineteenth-century novel, could remain confined by realist conventions. Both novels, far from giving rise to

totalizing, unified visions, became records of fragmentation, psychological breakdown, and cultural collapse. The dissolution of Lessing's metanarrative of humanist Marxism, which had, in her view at least, underpinned the nineteenth-century novel, was revealed by these two texts' inability to enclose their themes within a realist framework.

Lessing's faith in realism began to unravel in the nineteen-sixties, as she became increasingly convinced that it could not mediate the chaotic nature of the post-war world. Before she began work on The Four-Gated City she remarked that she knew "perfectly well that when I've finished it I shall think, Christ, what a lie. Because you can't get life into it--that's all there is to it--no matter how hard you try" (1974 82). After completing the novel she noted: "By the time I wrote the last volume I'd put myself into a damned cage, but it's probably better now that I've heaved the rules out" (1974 65). She repeatedly claimed that The Golden Notebook was intended, through both its formal structure and its themes, to comment on the impossibility of telling truth in the shape of traditional fiction. She explained that in the "Free Women" envelope of The Golden Notebook she was "trying to express [her] sense of despair about writing a conventional novel" (1974 81). She reiterated this point in the 1972 "Preface" to the novel, arguing that she had tried to show that the conventional novel falsifies experience because its form patterns experience according to its own logic. By the time she wrote Shikasta,

the first volume of Canopus in Argos: Archives, she had not only moved away from realism but had also abandoned the attempt to confront contemporary social problems and, to the chagrin of many of her readers, had embraced Sufi mysticism and science fiction. The commitment to "a vision of a good which will defeat the evil" had taken a disturbing turn, for good and evil were no longer perceived in human and social terms, but instead were presented in terms of a cosmic struggle between the empires of Shammatt and Canopus. The small personal voice had seemingly been rendered impotent.

Lessing, however, regarded Canopus in Argos as a major personal breakthrough. For her, science fiction offered a welcome release from the constraints of realist conventions; because it was still relatively new, it provided the writer with great latitude and encouraged her or him to experiment in the exploration of a different terrain. In her introductory remarks to Shikasta she describes her sense of new-found freedom in glowing terms. The writing of the novel, she avers, engendered an "exhilaration that comes from being set free into a larger scope, with more capacious possibilities and themes" (ix). Turning to science fiction enabled her to act on her conviction that "novelists everywhere are breaking the bonds of the realistic novel because what we all see around us becomes daily wilder, more fantastic, incredible" (ix).

Novels like The Golden Notebook (1962), The Four-Gated City (1969), Briefing for a Descent Into Hell (1971), and The



Memoirs of a Survivor (1974) had been pervaded by Lessing's fear that society was on the verge of breakdown and by her belief that established rationalist views of reality were limited. These texts disclosed a gradual shift away from realism. Shikasta, Lessing's first space fiction, represented a more fundamental break with the literary forms that adhere to, and legitimize, the common-sense perceptions of reality that she now largely rejected. Her turn to space fiction disclosed her belief that the realist novel had, for a while at least, played itself out and that other fictional forms were better able to render what she perceived as the apocalyptic nature of post-war society. Thus she argued that science fiction had enlivened a moribund novelistic tradition and was literature's "most original branch" (ix). Unlike the traditional novel, moreover, science fiction was able to evoke the seemingly unreal nature of contemporary reality; it played the role of the "despised illegitimate son who can afford to tell truths the respectable siblings either do not dare, or, more likely, do not notice because of their respectability" (x). For Lessing, as for the other novelists in this thesis, the present had, for a time at least, become unrepresentable in traditional literary forms.

## II

The Golden Notebook is central to Lessing's oeuvre for both thematic and formal reasons. Thematically, the novel

documents--through the figure of Anna Wulf--Lessing's disillusionment with and ultimate rejection of the Marxist meta-narrative. For Lessing, this loss of faith in politics, which led to an increasing awareness of social fragmentation and alienation, had a direct effect on the novel's form. Because her affinity for realism was bound up with her belief in socialism, when she lost faith in the latter she was led to question the former. In The Golden Notebook, convinced that the realist novel can neither evoke nor encompass the chaotic nature of contemporary society, she explores the formal consequences for the novel genre of the collapse of the ideology that, for her, had primarily underpinned it. Thus the novel, which marks a shift in her fiction from realist writer with strong socialist beliefs to experimental writer with little faith in politics, not only documents the breakdown of the Marxist metanarrative thematically but also enacts it structurally through its fractured form.

The Golden Notebook remains Lessing's most powerful and original work. An attempt to portray contemporary English society panoramically, "in the way Tolstoy did it for Russia, Stendhal for France" (11), it becomes an account of social and psychological breakdown. In her first spoken words Anna Wulf observes that "everything's cracking up" (25), and the rest of the novel exhaustively describes the various areas of social life in which this "crack up" is evident: the alienation of people from themselves and from one another; the ineffectuality of the individual in the face of world-scale

problems such as poverty, famine, and war; the atomization of social life; gender conflict; class struggle; and madness. Anna perceives the events of the post-war period as "a record of war, murder, chaos, misery" (251). She herself functions as a microcosm of society, and her internal conflicts and eventual self-healing through psychological disintegration are homologous to the reality of the world in which she lives.<sup>3</sup>

The Golden Notebook does not, however, luxuriate in despair, for its very *raison d'être* is to work through the chaos it enacts and to go beyond it. As Lessing observes in her 1972 "Preface," "the essence of the book, the organisation of it, everything in it, says implicitly and explicitly, that we must not divide things off, must not compartmentalise" (10). But Anna, in an effort to resist the pull of madness and the dissolution of the self in chaos, can only maintain a hold on reality by sifting her experience into four categories. The four notebooks are, in short, an admission of defeat. Contributing to Anna's writing block by consuming her creative energy, they also disclose her inability to perceive herself and her society holistically. In order to heal herself, to put "all of [her]self in one book" (585), she must succumb to temporary madness in the "Golden Notebook." By doing so she overcomes her creative *impasse* and gives us The Golden Notebook, which contains both the orderly parodic frame, "Free Women," and the disorderly notebooks.

The structure of The Golden Notebook is complex. One

question arises immediately--who is the text's author? It is difficult to answer this question conclusively. Most critics who focus on the novel's structure claim that Lessing has absented herself from the novel and that effectively it is written by Anna. John Carey, for example, in an important article, maintains that Anna functions as the novel's central intelligence and that "Lessing filters herself out of the novel entirely" (23). Joseph Hynes concurs, arguing that Anna is the novel's editor and that Lessing exists only as the name on the book's title page. Ellen Cronan Rose argues against this view, however. She suggests that Lessing's search for new ways to represent reality is "prefigured in The Golden Notebook, but not by Anna Wulf" (69). Ultimately this issue is undecidable. There is, however, good reason to read the novel as though it were written by Anna, although neither Hynes nor Carey gives it.<sup>4</sup> Unacceptable, however, is the simplistic identification, made by some early critics, of Anna with Doris. The Golden Notebook is most assuredly not strict autobiography; it is not, as its author has been at pains to explain since the book was first published, The Confessions of Doris Lessing, but is a highly structured work of the literary imagination.

Two interrelated concerns underpin The Golden Notebook's structure: first, to dramatize Lessing's conviction that the fragmentation of society is such that it cannot be contained by traditional novelistic forms; second, to investigate the collapse of Marxism, which for Lessing was a secular attempt

at "a world-mind, a world ethic" (1981 15), and to suggest that with its dissolution no systematic world-view is any longer possible. These twin concerns undermine Lessing's faith in the realist novel, and The Golden Notebook discloses her fear that reality has outstripped both the techniques and the philosophical rationale of realist writing.

The text disrupts the coherent world-picture of realist writing thematically and structurally. Anna writes in four diaries, each corresponding to a different aspect of her life: "I keep four notebooks, a black notebook, which is to do with Anna Wulf the writer; a red notebook, concerned with politics; a yellow notebook, in which I make stories out of my experience; and a blue notebook which tries to be a diary" (461-62). Whenever Tommy, who probes Anna's conscience in "Free Women," questions this self-division, she explains that it enables her to keep at bay the chaos that would otherwise overwhelm her. Without four notebooks everything would be "a scramble" (265), "a mess" (265), "chaos" (272).

The notebooks allow Anna to hold herself together, but they also enable her to control her impulse to "fictionalize" her experience. She fears that her tendency to turn everything that happens to her into a story permits her to evade reality. For example, Frontiers of War, her one successful novel, was written out of a nihilistic self-disgust that she repudiates, yet she fears that she requires this very emotion in order to write at all. Similarly, her fictional double, Ella, allows her to face repressed facets of her own psyche,

yet at the same time threatens to obscure others: "It struck me that my doing this--turning everything into fiction--must be an evasion . . . . Why do I never write down, simply, what happens? Why don't I keep a diary? Obviously, my changing everything into fiction is simply a means of concealing something from myself" (232).

The notebooks reveal the contradictory nature of Anna's practice. On the one hand, while disclosing her fragmented existence, they protect her from a collapse into chaos and madness. On the other hand, they indicate that this protection entails a fictionalizing of her experience that allows her to perceive it in terms of distorting patterns. Anna's private fictional reconstructions of her life--*Mashopi* and *The Shadow of the Third*--fail to escape the evasions and fatalism that also dog her public fiction, *Frontiers of War*. Thus, as Betsy Draine has observed, the drama enacted in all the notebooks is that of Anna's battle with the "lying nostalgia" that perpetually haunts her (33).

Surrounding the chaos of the four notebooks is still another fiction, "Free Women." What initially appears to be the truth about Anna's life, the genuine account of her experience, turns out to be a novel within a novel, which is written by Anna herself. It is, in short, one more reworking of the material that has gone into the notebooks.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, it is soon apparent that "Free Women," with its ironic title, its banal summaries at the head of every chapter, its conventional narrative structure, its tidy dialogues, and its

flat tone, is a parody of realist writing. The reader thus suffers a double shock--s/he realizes not only that the supposed "reality" of "Free Women" is actually fiction but also that it is a **critique** of fiction. As Lessing wrote: "To put the short novel 'Free Women' as a summary and condensation of all that mass of material, was to say something about the conventional novel, another way of describing the dissatisfaction of a writer when something is finished" (14). Thus The Golden Notebook comments on the problems faced by the post-war writer by raising them thematically and by foregrounding its own tortuous process of construction.

The Golden Notebook is a metafictional text that is constructed out of, and through, the interaction between its constituent parts, the notebooks and their outer frame, "Free Women."<sup>6</sup> The notebooks and the parody that summarizes them offer parallel accounts of the central problems raised by the novel as a whole, but no single part of the text can resolve these problems conclusively. Furthermore, by dividing each notebook into four segments and by framing the resulting four blocks (each of four segments) with five chapters of "Free Women," the text disrupts perspective, linear chronology, and authorial omniscience. Every chapter of "Free Women" is followed by four notebooks, each dealing with the same time-period from a different viewpoint, which ensures that the complex reality portrayed remains open-ended and labile. As Roberta Rubinstein has suggested, the novel's structure forces the reader "to consider the simultaneity of events

described from several perspectives as if at once" (90) and to realize that its different sections function as "fictional variations on equivalent themes" (102).

### III

My discussion of The Golden Notebook's themes focuses on three in particular: the consequences of a loss of faith in Marxism, which leads to a growing awareness of Freud's death instinct; the alienation of the individual from her- or himself and from others; and the problem of writing in the post-war period.

The "Golden Notebook" ends with a synopsis of the story written by Saul Green, which is about a student whose thoughts "fall into pigeon-holes, one marked 'Marx' and one marked 'Freud'" (618). His aim is to free himself from these twin influences: "he wished that just once, just once in his life, he felt or thought something that was his own, spontaneous, undirected, not willed on him by Grandfathers Freud and Marx" (618).

In a novel replete with characters who double and mirror one another, this student's goal sheds a good deal of light on one of Anna's central concerns. Throughout The Golden Notebook, Anna struggles to retain her sanity by freeing herself from the legacies of Marx and Freud. Anna is in danger of slipping into madness for many reasons: she is isolated as a result of her fight for female emancipation, frustrated



at being unable to write, and helpless in the face of world crises that torment her. Above all, she goes in terror of chaos. Her fear, which pervades the novel, is particularly provoked by her disillusionment with communism. The collapse of this secular "world ethic" (15), which had provided her existence with a meaning and a purpose, has cruelly cut the ground from beneath her. Socialism, Anna tells Tommy, has "ceased to be a moral force" (59). Communism, in turn, has become a nightmare: "I wouldn't organise revolutions . . . Because now we know what happens to revolutionary groups--we'd be murdering each other inside five years" (262).

Anna must not only come to terms with the consequences of this loss of belief, but must also contend with internal denials, which her fellow communists echo all too readily. Thus in "Free Women," arguing with Molly (a character in her own right as well as Anna's double) Anna asks why they, as communists, cannot "admit that the great dream has faded and the truth is something else--that we'll never be any use" (71). She herself is prepared to acknowledge that the god of Marxism has failed and to recognise that she is bereft of a secular doctrine in which to believe.<sup>7</sup>

The text portrays Freud and Marx as counterparts. If the latter proposed a way of healing social sickness (class division), then the former offered a way of healing personal sickness (self-division). Anna undergoes psychoanalysis with the slyly named Mrs. Marks (Mother Sugar) in the hope that by doing so she will be able to integrate her various "selves."

She concludes, however, that psychoanalysis--in Mrs Marks' Jungian variant, at least--is a failure. Mother Sugar's reactionary views and her insistence on interpreting Anna's experience ahistorically, in terms of ancient and cyclical archetypal patterns, is unacceptable to Anna. She sees Mother Sugar's Jungian universalization of her experience as another form of denial, one that parallels those of the communists as much as it does her own fictional denials. She demands that Mrs. Marks acknowledge the particularity and historicity of her experience: "I don't want to be told when I wake up, terrified by a dream of total annihilation, because of the H-bomb exploding, that people felt that way about the cross-bow. It isn't true. There is something new in the world" (459). And further: "I want to be able to separate in myself what is old and cyclic, the recurring history, the myth, from what is new, what I feel or think that might be new . . ." (459). For Anna, psychoanalysis distorts the truth; by concealing history, it refuses to acknowledge the fragmented and potentially cataclysmic nature of contemporary reality. Like the fiction-making of the notebooks and the self-parodying humour of the communists, it anaesthetizes reality: "all the pain, and the killing and the violence is safely held in the story and it can't hurt me" (457).

Anna's struggle to make sense of her life in the absence of an all-encompassing creed is not hers alone. She and Molly are well-realized characters in the naturalistic sense,

but like Saleem--and his double, Shiva--in Salman Rushdie's Midnight's Children, they also point to the struggle between wider historical forces. This aspect of the text is made particularly clear in "Blue Notebook 4" and in the "Golden Notebook."

First and foremost, Anna represents those women who are struggling against oppression: "I am the position of women in our time" (559), she informs Saul. But Anna, like The Golden Notebook itself, cannot be claimed for the women's movement alone. Indeed, when she and Saul break down into one another in the "Golden Notebook," male and female blur together, and broader historical problems displace gender-conflict and come to the fore. This is pre-figured in the "Blue Notebook":

My emotions had switched off, but my mind ran on, making images, like a film. I was checking the images, or scenes as they went past, for I was able to recognise them as fantasies common to a certain kind of person now, out of common stock, shared by millions of people. I saw an Algerian soldier stretched on a torture bed; and I was also him, wondering how long I could hold out. I saw a communist in a communist jail . . . . Then I saw the soldier in Cuba, the soldier in Algeria, rifle in hand, on guard. Then the British conscript, pressed into war in Egypt, killed for futility. Then a student in Budapest, throwing a home-made bomb at a great black Russian tank. Then a peasant, somewhere in China, marching in a procession millions strong. (575)

Finally, in the "Golden Notebook," in which Saul and Anna become "as many different things or people as possible" (590-91), Saul comments to Anna that the room in which they voluntarily immolate themselves is "extraordinary . . . it's

like a world" (589). Anna realizes, in turn, that "if there were a tape recorder of the hours and hours of talk in that room . . . it would be a record of a hundred different people living now, in various parts of the world, talking and crying out and questioning" (600).

This babel stems from the dissolution of the great meta-narratives. Anna and Saul, representatives of "a hundred different people living now," enact the despair and confusion of those who have lost faith in any kind of over-arching **Weltanschauung**. Having once believed in an all-encompassing Utopian dream, which they have seen defeated, they now aver that "'everything's cracking up'" (25). The strength of their despair is directly related to the strength of their former convictions. Anna's internal world has fallen apart, and she is haunted by the fear that intellectually she has nowhere else to go. Michael sums up one aspect of her problem perfectly: "'Do you realise, Anna, that when you and Molly talk of leaving the Party, the suggestion always is that leaving it will lead you straight into some morass of moral turpitude'" (296).<sup>8</sup>

Michael is only partly right, however. Anna does indeed see the Party as the last bastion of opposition, but she knows that it is protecting her from a part of reality that it too is unprepared to face. The Party is corrupt; it resolutely denies both its theoretical weaknesses and its international crimes. Anna is not afraid that leaving the Party will lead her to abandon her ideals, for it is these that are

urging her to break with it. She realizes, rather, that her main reason for leaving the Party--that its theory is flawed and cannot explain the horrors of the twentieth century--will force her to confront those very horrors alone. The Party's myths, inside which she has been hiding, will no longer protect her from the fears that she will be compelled to explore.

Anna apprehends what will later seem to her Marxism's fatal blindness early in her life, although the scene that portrays her moment of illumination does not occur till late in the novel. This is the Mashopi pigeon-shooting episode in "Black Notebook 3." Against a background of primal beauty, Lessing contrasts the natural savagery of the animal world with the inexplicable malevolence of human beings. As a myriad insects copulate and kill one another, watched by Anna's group, the normally cynical Paul, who is shooting pigeons for their supper, experiences an epiphany. Suddenly struck, as though for the first time, by the daily reality of apartheid, he perceives it not in terms of abstract theory but in terms of human suffering: "One might imagine . . . this million-and-a-little-over-a-half people exist in this pretty piece of God's earth solely in order to make each other miserable" (418). He struggles to hold a fleeting insight, to express his intuition that humankind is in thrall to a maliciousness of which Marxism has no conception, to articulate, in short, his sense of the disparity between communist idealism and the horrors of civilization:

'Comrade Willi, would you not say that there is some principle at work not yet admitted to your philosophy? Some principle of destruction?'

Willi said, in exactly the tone we had all expected: 'There is no need to look any further than the philosophy of the class struggle,' and as if he'd pressed a button, Jimmy, Paul and I burst out into one of the fits of irrepressible laughter that Willi never joined. (418)

This is an important passage, for Willi's response will later be duplicated by Anna's English communist friends. Willi cannot countenance Paul's insight but like a pre-programmed machine must reject it out of hand. The laughter that he induces reveals, more clearly than all the group's theorizing, their understanding that Willi's Marxism, for all its surface subtlety, is at bottom inescapably simplistic. The impact of this laughter extends beyond this scene, moreover, because throughout the "Red Notebook" sceptical Party members disclose their doubts through uneasy, self-ironic humour. Jokes, which camouflage and censor unspoken thoughts, reveal the communists' unwillingness to discuss their reservations openly. Willi's humourlessness--like Anton Hesse's in Children of Violence and James Graine's in Maydays--marks him, and the scientific Marxism for which he stands, as deficient. It indicates both his refusal to question himself or the doctrines in which he believes and his blind faith that these doctrines have the answer to every social problem.<sup>9</sup>

Anna's disillusionment with Willi and the subsequent disintegration of their relationship prefigure her defection

from the British Communist Party. Whereas Willi ridicules Paul's moment of illumination, Anna shares it. Like Paul, she is gripped by the presentiment, blithely denied by Willi, that socialism ignores this principle of destruction at its own peril. Paul does not repudiate Marxism, but he senses its hidden weaknesses. In his dystopian vision he sees Marxism creating a society that is little different from the present capitalist one because it is unable to see that economic exploitation is not the main source of human misery. When Willi concedes only that "[t]here will be certain outward similarities" (421), laughter interrupts him once more. Paul explains that he is amused not only by the predictability of Willi's response, but also by "what he's saying. Because I'm horribly afraid it's not true" (421).<sup>10</sup>

In a novel whose two grandfathers are Marx and Freud, it is perhaps inevitable that the challenge to the former should come from the latter. The spectre that haunts Paul, poisoning his faith in the socialist utopia, is nothing less than a manifestation of Freud's death instinct. In Civilization and its Discontents Freud avers that Marx's analysis of society's pathologies is false because it depends on an overly optimistic view of human nature. Marx claims that capitalism corrupts humanity; Freud posits innate human aggression. Marx suggests that alienated labour "estranges from man his own body, as well as external nature and his spiritual essence, his **human** being" (114); Freud argues that the aggressive instinct is "an original, self-subsisting instinctual dispo-

sition in man" (69). Freud regards the Marxist view of human nature as "an untenable illusion" (60).<sup>11</sup> Private property has not corrupted human nature, he avers, for aggressiveness "reigned almost without limit in primitive times" and lies behind "every relation of affection and love among people" (60). Whatever paths civilization may take, he expects "that this indestructible feature of human nature will follow it there" (61). For Freud, civilization "is a process in the service of Eros" (69), whereas the instinct of aggression, which "opposes this programme of civilization" (69), is "the main representative of the death instinct" (69), and the latter "constitutes the greatest impediment to civilization" (69). Thus he concludes:

And now, I think, the meaning of the evolution of civilization is no longer obscure to us. It must present the struggle between Eros and Death, between the instinct of life and the instinct of destruction, as it works itself out in the human species. This struggle is what all life essentially consists of, and the evolution of civilization may therefore be simply described as the struggle for life of the human species. (69)

It is this struggle that is enacted in Anna's mind when her faith in the Marxist dream collapses. No longer able to believe in the "myths" of communism, she recalls the words prophetically uttered by a weeping Maryrose at Mashopi: "'We believed everything was going to be beautiful and now we know it won't'" (169). Freeing herself from the over-confident predictions of communism and the self-satisfied interpretations of Jungianism, Anna opens herself to the malevolent



reality of Freud's death instinct, which she names "the principle of joy-in-destruction" (573), and confronts it both in society and in herself.

Anna tells Molly that, the "great dream" having faded, the "truth is something else" (71). The pervasive presence of the spirit of destruction stands at the centre of the very chaos from which she is in flight. In a crucial exchange with Mother Sugar, she hints at what she conceives this truth to be: "'It seems to me that ever since I can remember anything the real thing that has been happening in the world was death and destruction. It seems to me it is stronger than life'" (237). Thus in the final "Blue Notebook" she identifies the death instinct with its ultimate manifestation--war: "And I thought that we were talking about political movements, the development or defeat of this socialist movement or that, whereas last night I had known, finally, that the truth for our time was war, the immanence of war" (570-71). She fears, in the wake of the Second World War, as did Freud, just prior to its outbreak, that the world is witnessing the baleful flowering of the death instinct.<sup>12</sup>

## IV

The Golden Notebook urges resistance to self-division.

Anna partly rejects communism because it has neglected this humanist aspect of Marx's early thought:

'Alienation. Being split. It's the moral side, so to speak, of the communist message. And suddenly you shrug your shoulders and say because the mechanical basis of our lives is getting complicated, we must be content to not even try to understand things as a whole? . . . . But humanism stands for the whole person, the whole individual, striving to become as conscious and responsible about everything in the universe. But now you sit there, quite calmly, and as a humanist you say that due to the complexity of scientific achievement the human being must never expect to be whole, he must always be fragmented.' (353-54)

People "know they are in a society dead or dying" (529), Anna maintains: "They are refusing emotion because at the end of every emotion are property, money, power. They work and despise their work, and so freeze themselves. They love but know that it's a half-love or a twisted love, and so they freeze themselves" (529). Anna identifies here the three forms of alienation to which Marx refers: alienation from labour, from the self, and from others.<sup>13</sup> Central to The Golden Notebook are alienation from others--revealed through the novel's various failed relationships--and alienation from the self, which is disclosed through denial ("blocking off"), role-playing, and self-parody.

Marion and Tommy illustrate most tellingly how people preserve a measure of sanity by refusing to face reality when they find it unbearable. Both of them avoid breakdowns by

hiding from the world. Tommy, for example, "heals" himself through an act of physical self-mutilation. Molly realizes to her horror that it is Tommy's blindness, his literal inability to see, that paradoxically enables him to be "'all in one piece for the first time in his life'" (371). Yet this wholeness is illusory. Anna sees Tommy as "a sort of zombie" (394) and reflects that a vital, irreplaceable part of him has "gone completely--I suppose Tommy killed him when the bullet went through his head" (494).<sup>14</sup> Marion, in turn, can free herself from Richard only by turning to drink. It is "better for Marion to be a lush and a whole person" (390), Anna persuades herself, "than sober, if the price of being sober is that she must be an awful tripping coy little girl" (391).

Throughout the novel characters display their lack of identity and self-worth by adopting roles in which they do not believe. Anna tells Mother Sugar that people "'decide to be this thing or that. But it's as if it's a sort of dance --they might just as well do the opposite with equal conviction'" (235). Before shooting himself, Tommy tells Anna of a friend who has thrown himself into left-wing activism, but who "'doesn't really believe in it. It's an attitude he's taken up'" (270).

Most of the novel's characters indulge in self-parody, as though they are unsure of their genuine feelings. Marion, for example, conceals herself within the persona of a young child. She protects herself from the consequences of her

decision to leave Richard by escaping into a world of games, behaving in a way that "parodie[s] a guilty but defiant little girl's" (393). Self-parody is taken to an extreme by the Americans with whom Anna briefly comes into contact: "Nelson comes over, and says loudly in parody: 'I'm going to dance with Anna' . . . . His eyes are desperate with self-dislike, misery, pain" (477-78). The entire scene, which exposes scarcely concealed suffering, shows role-playing at its most destructive. The parodic behaviour is in earnest; there is no humour here, only a desperate attempt to escape pain. The result is self-division--the private, conflicted self, on the one hand, and the public, apparently untroubled self, on the other.<sup>15</sup>

Self-alienation is most acute for the novel's women. In an extended portrayal of gender conflict, which runs through the entire novel, Lessing depicts the alienation of women from themselves--from their deepest emotions and thoughts--as deriving primarily from their sexual oppression. But The Golden Notebook's portrayal of women and their struggle for emancipation has been criticized. In particular, several feminists have argued that the novel's sexual politics are problematic.

There are several strands to feminist objections to The Golden Notebook. In an important early essay, Ellen Morgan argues that Lessing's portrayal of Anna/Ella fails to go beyond their own criticisms of themselves. Morgan notes that Anna/Ella grasp how disastrous their relationships with men

are but deny the validity of their perceptions and conceal their anger, choosing instead to blame themselves. This self-blame, Morgan continues, derives from a loyalty to men, which precludes solidarity with women. Anna/Ella, moreover, seem to have an ahistorical and apolitical view of female/male roles, one that relies on a concept of fixed, natural sex differences: men are active, women passive; men are analytical, women emotional; men initiate sex, women respond. For Morgan, the women of The Golden Notebook are alienated from society, to be sure, but they are equally alienated from their own perceptions, the validity of which they are afraid to countenance. She concludes that "Lessing has so conceived the book that nowhere within it are Anna's and Ella's judgments of their experiences implied to be anything but unavoidable" (63).

More recently, other feminists have approached the novel from another angle. Whereas Morgan discussed its flawed analysis of women's relationships with men, these critics attack its assumption that the male/female couple should be central to women's experience. Adrienne Rich, for example, admits that in 1962 The Golden Notebook "seemed like a very radical book" (Sprague and Tiger 181), but claims that it is so no longer. The text's women, she notes, seem "to have no real center to their lives apart from trying to relate to men and to male politics" (181). For Rich, a critique of Lessing that does not point out her privileging of the male perspective and her "failure to envisage any kind of political

bonding of women" (182), itself fails to break out of a male-centred analysis of women's experience.

Elizabeth Wilson concurs. In an essay on Lessing and de Beauvoir, she writes that in the 'sixties, she admired both women, but "noticed neither their political isolation (as women), nor their contempt for lesbianism, nor their romanticism when it came to sexuality" (Taylor 71). Wilson, going further than Rich, concludes that in some ways what Lessing says in The Golden Notebook is "the antithesis of women's liberation" (72). It actually reveals, she suggests, the attitudes that 'sixties feminists "were in revolt **against**" (72).

No account of women's self-alienation in The Golden Notebook can ignore these criticisms, which point to some of the novel's biggest weaknesses. Nevertheless, if The Golden Notebook is read as a novel that portrays women who are pre-feminist in sensibility and political awareness, it remains a powerful text. It depicts the intolerable pressures to which women are subject, and to which they may succumb, in the absence of a feminist analysis of their position. Having to a great extent internalized male perceptions of women, the novel's female characters trust neither their own feelings nor their analyses of male/female relationships. They reveal the extent of their oppression by being unable to break free of their commitments to the very men who circumscribe their scope for living. The clearest example of this is Ella, Anna's fictional alter ego.

In her relationship with Paul Tanner, Ella is by turns passive, unable to trust her thoughts and feelings, and prepared to be defined by him. Paul rapidly becomes the focal point of her life, taking it over, and Lessing feelingly depicts Ella's slow subsidence into dependence on him. There is, however, a particular edge to Lessing's treatment of this issue--she focuses on Paul's persistent undermining of Ella's intellect, of her ability to think for herself. The nature of Ella's oppression is subtle. She is not so much bullied, or overtly mistreated (although there are elements of this); rather, her personality is insidiously sapped and belittled until her sense of self is nullified. Her mind, a metonym for her personality as a whole, is put to sleep by Paul, and it is Paul who defines the boundaries of the dream-world she subsequently inhabits. Her autonomy is destroyed, in short, by her submission to a way of perceiving life that is not her own and that alienates her from her own perceptions, making them seem invalid. It is this self-alienation that discloses the real nature of Ella's oppression.

When they first meet, Ella allows Paul to establish the framework of their relationship: "She was thinking that soon he would marry her. Or perhaps not soon. It would be at the right time, and he would know when that was" (205). Ella does not perceive herself as an actor in her affair with Paul, but as a malleable being who is acted upon. Apart from assuming that **he** will marry her--rather than that **they** will marry one another--she is unconcerned when this event will

take place, for he will know when, and he will be right in his decision. Paul gradually takes over Ella's life. It occurs to her later that his "arms had slowly, over the years, shut out everyone e'se" (223). She feels that her sexuality should be bounded and controlled by his. The normal woman's sexuality, she tells herself, should "ebb and flow in response" to a man's--her sexuality is "contained by a man, if he is a real man; she is, in a sense, put to sleep by him, she does not think about sex" (443).

The assumptions that inform this passage, and the metaphors in which they are expressed, are disturbing. The reference to "real men," which occurs several times in the text--usually accompanied by homophobic denigrations of its homosexuals--reveals both Ella's essentialist, ahistorical view of gender and her willingness to adopt a subordinate position in relation to men. Ella, moreover, is unable to think of herself as a conscious decision-making person. The double connotation of the second metaphor, which is central to the Ella/Paul couple, is particularly revealing. Not only does sleep--especially in this novel--allow people to "block off" unpleasant truths through an escape into the world of dreams, but also the expression, "put to sleep," is a euphemism for killing. Thus in desiring the dissolution of her self into Paul's, Ella voluntarily accepts the death of her own personality.

Ella's passivity is inseparable from this readiness to be defined by Paul and from her concomitant refusal to think.



At the beginning of their relationship she "drifted along on a soft tide of not-thinking" (205). Later, she registers that "somewhere in her a mechanism had started to work which would prevent her hearing him when he made remarks that might make her unhappy" (210). As a result of being with Paul, her life gains meaning, and her identity, defined by and through him, takes shape. Feeling herself "a real woman at last," she "let herself go into Paul's love for her, and did not think" (211), for looking at their relationship dispassionately made her feel "frightened and cynical" (212).

Anna eventually informs us that Ella is her fictional double: "I, Anna, see Ella. Who is of course, Anna. But that is the point, for she is not" (447). Ella is not Anna exactly, is not a mirror of Anna, but a fictional alter-ego on to whom Anna displaces her problems so that, by distancing them from herself, she can try to resolve them. Thus Ella's complicity with sexual oppression, which results either in a censoring of critical thoughts or in a self-division that blocks off unpleasant truths, also discloses Anna's willing submission to the male. In the sexually disastrous encounter with Cy Maitland, Ella splits herself into two until the sexual act is over. Only at this point does she reintegrate herself, becoming "one person, both of them thinking as one" (320). Anna suffers this form of self-division both politically and sexually. Unable to resolve the contradictory nature of her political stance, she splits herself into two people, "the dry, wise, ironical political woman" and "the

Party fanatic who sounds, literally, quite maniacal" (170). In her relationship with Michael--which is mirrored by Ella's with Paul--she undergoes two crippling forms of self-division: first, she must keep her roles as Janet's mother and Michael's mistress apart; second, she must separate her love for Michael (her emotions) from her reason (her intelligence).

It is here that the resonances of the "putting to sleep" metaphor can be fully felt. Whenever Anna senses that she is in danger of mental collapse, two things keep her sane: her daughter Janet and her critical mind. But these two aspects of her life that give her strength--her responsibility to her child and her ability to think--are the very features of her existence that Michael undermines. Michael, she notes, likes Janet to have left for school before he wakes. In response to this demand Anna comments: "And I prefer it, because it divides me. The two personalities--Janet's mother, Michael's mistress, are happier separated. It is a strain having to be both at once" (332). The tension, however, is inherent not in the two roles, but in the difficulties that Michael makes about them. Furthermore, he dislikes "the critical and thinking Anna" (327), but this Anna, significantly, is the very Anna who survives the ordeal of psychological breakdown and who ultimately overcomes her internal fragmentation.

When Anna admits that Ella is herself, she focuses above all on this blind refusal to think, which allowed Anna/Ella to begin what she now knows was a "barren, limited relation-

ship" (216). In claiming that she is "'the position of women in our time'" (559), she announces her awareness of her own oppression. Thus she drily informs Marion, who idealises her, that she is "'not free'" (277). Yet Anna is not able (and this, as Morgan, Wilson, and Rich have argued, is the novel's failure) to go beyond a certain point in her understanding of her oppression. To her dismay she realises that she complies with it, that she is willing, despite herself, to be negated by men: "Now I am not Anna, I have no will, I can't move out of a situation once it has started, I just go along with it" (470). Her female self, in short, is not so much paralyzed as it is nullified. Thus she comes to see these relationships in the following terms:

I see above all my naivety. Any intelligent person could have foreseen the end of this affair from the beginning. And yet I, Anna, like Ella with Paul, refused to see it. Paul gave birth to Ella, the naive Ella. He destroyed in her the knowing, doubting, sophisticated Ella and again and again he put her intelligence to sleep, and with her willing connivance, so that she floated darkly on her love for him, on her naivety, which is another word for a spontaneous creative faith. And when his own distrust of himself destroyed this woman-in-love, so that she began thinking, she would return to fight to naivety.

Now, when I am drawn to a man, I can assess the depth of a possible relationship with him by the degree to which the naive Anna is created in me. (216)

This piece of self-criticism explains the self-alienation experienced by Anna/Ella in their relationships with Paul/Michael. In both cases the woman's identity is submerged beneath the man's; it is the man who cancels that identity

and gives birth to a new woman. This destructive male impulse and the female willingness to submit to it is present in most of the couples in the text. The loss of self to which this dynamic gives rise lies at the heart of women's self-alienation in The Golden Notebook.<sup>16</sup>

V

Anna's writing block is related to her personal sense of alienation but cannot be explained by it alone. Indeed, to speak of her struggle to write in terms of a personal block is to prejudge the issue, to imply that it is Anna's problem rather than a social one. This is misleading, for Anna's refusal to write stems from deeply held reservations about the validity and meaningfulness of art in the post-war world. She is experiencing a creative drought, to be sure, which manifests itself in her personal inability to write, but its provenance is social. Anna has not so much lost the power to produce novels, as she has lost faith in their relevance. This is so for two reasons: she fears that to write while society faces problems that may lead to its collapse is an abdication of responsibility, a turning away from reality to the consolations of art; she fears that society has become so chaotic and horrific that it is now unrepresentable.

Like Janos Lavin, Anna refuses any version of *l'art pour l'art*. Literature, she believes, should engage social reality, should embroil itself in the conflicts of its time, not

evade them. This view, which is a plea for commitment in art, contains the seeds of Anna's problem. To believe in committed art the writer must have faith that society can be improved and that art, by provoking people to think, can play a role in its amelioration. But Anna's confidence in political solutions to social problems has been destroyed. She fears, moreover, that the death instinct is flourishing and that literature is powerless to oppose it.

In "Free Women 1" Anna explains to Molly that she cannot write because she thinks that "the world is so chaotic, art is irrelevant" (60). She informs Mrs. Marks that although she is not suffering from a writer's block, she "no longer believe[s] in art" (235). Whereas her analyst persistently interprets Anna's problems in terms of personal neuroses, refusing to accept that their aetiology is largely social, Anna focuses on this latter dimension. Why does Mother Sugar not understand, she asks, "that I can't pick up a newspaper without what's in it seeming so overwhelmingly terrible that nothing I could write would seem to have any point at all?" (252). How is she to ignore that it is just luck that she hasn't been "tortured, murdered, starved to death or died in a prison" (251)? Is it not true, she wonders, that the creation of art in the twentieth century reveals a failure of sensibility and an abdication of one's responsibilities to one's fellow human beings?

Anna's torments derive from her passionate empathy with suffering and oppression. Anna's anguish, like the young

Sartre's of Existentialism and Humanism, derives from her sense of responsibility for others and from her understanding that in legislating her own choice of action--on which she thereby confers value--she legislates for humankind. Sartre, moreover, defined "man by his action"--existentialism "tells him that there is no hope except in his action, and that the one thing which permits him to have life is the deed" (44). Anna's inaction torments her, for she fears that by choosing a secular quietism for herself she may be turning her back on those who are most in need of support. She is paralyzed by the thought that her failure **directly** to participate in social struggle means that she has abandoned it.<sup>17</sup> Thus she tells Saul:

'I can't write that story or any other, because at that moment I sit down to write, someone comes into the room, looks over my shoulder, and stops me.'

'Who? Do you know?'

'Of course I know. It could be a Chinese peasant. Or one of Castro's guerrilla fighters. Or an Algerian fighting in the F.L.N. Or Mr. Mathlong. They stand here in the room and they say, why aren't you doing something about us, instead of wasting your time scribbling?' (614)

Anna's sense of responsibility for the oppressed--the figures who interrupt her work are all freedom fighters--prevents her from writing. To sit "scribbling" seems an admission of defeat, an acknowledgement that both she and art are impotent in the face of the world's most pressing problems. This major cause of her creative silence is enacted through her internal conflicts, but its origin is undoubtedly social.

Anna's suspicion that literature is irrelevant to post-war life is compounded by her inability to find a literary form that could evoke reality. There are three reasons for this: first, she believes that language itself is decaying, that words can no longer capture reality's flavour; second, she posits a radical distinction between truth and fiction, regarding the latter as distortion and evasion; third, she rejects as corrupt the creative spirit in herself that enables her to write what she feels is genuine literature.

Anna perceives a growing gap between language and reality. Language seems to be dissolving; it is sub-dividing into specialist discourses, losing its comprehensiveness. It is unable to evoke the fragmentation of the world without itself threatening to disintegrate. This partly results from a misuse of language that discloses a failure of the intellect and the imagination, a refusal to face a changed reality with fresh eyes and explain it anew. People seem to be trapped in old modes of thought, and they search neither for new explanations nor for a living language in which to couch them. This leads to disturbing ambiguities. Anna frequently cannot decipher a writer's intentions, cannot decide whether works are serious, humorous, or parodic. Their lifeless, imprecise language furnishes too few clues as to their meanings; their grip on the world is too tenuous. Anna tries to explain this to herself: "It seems to me this fact is another expression of the fragmentation of everything, the painful disintegration of something that is linked with what I feel

to be true about language, the thinning of language against the density of our experience" (301).

This thinning of language functions as one more sign of the difficulties inherent in rendering contemporary reality. Although it is partly interpreted as a failure on the part of individual people, it is also a failure of language itself. Language cannot keep up with reality, which outstrips it, becoming increasingly fantastic. Language and reality float apart, and the individual finds it hard to build bridges between them. The result is an existential anguish akin to the nausea suffered by Sartre's Roquentin. Anna reads her diary entries and finds herself "increasingly afflicted by vertigo" (462). Words, she says, "mean nothing" (462); they become "not the form into which experience is shaped, but a series of meaningless sounds, like nursery talk" (462). Trying to match language with what it describes, she finds that the words seem "to detach themselves from the page and slide away, as if they had detached themselves from their own meaning" (623). The discrepancy between what is seen and how it is described causes attacks of panic:

And something happens I get more and more afraid of--words lose their meaning. I can hear Jack and me talking--it seems the words come out from inside me, from some anonymous place--but they don't mean anything. I keep **seeing**, before my eyes, pictures of what we are talking about--scenes of death, torture, cross-examination and so on; and the words we are using have nothing to do with what I am seeing. They sound like an idiotic gabbling, like mad talk. (346-47)

In the "Golden Notebook" this problem is so acute that



Anna considers abandoning language: "real experience can't be described. I think, bitterly, that a row of asterisks, like an old-fashioned novel, might be better. Or a symbol of some kind, a circle perhaps, or a square. Anything at all, but not words" (609). Yet this is not a linguistic problem alone. As Anna knows, it is equally a problem of literature and the personality. Words, she remarks, "are form, and if I am at a pitch where shape, form, expression are nothing, then I am nothing" (463).

Anna recognizes that formlessness may lead to the dissolution of the self. She also realises that just as the personality is "nothing" without form, so too is art. Yet her fear of form's limitations plagues her. Throughout the notebooks she distinguishes between fact and fiction, which she translates, as did B. S. Johnson, into a distinction between truth and fiction. Fiction, she avers, falsifies reality. It does not convey the simple truth of events, does not evoke them as they happened, but interprets them, dresses them up, adds to them. Fiction alters reality; it does not represent it. There is a danger, moreover, that in changing reality, however subtly, fiction may make it more palatable and easier to bear. By consoling, fiction may encourage an escape from reality rather than a confrontation with it.

At the beginning of "Black Notebook 1" Anna contrasts her novel, Frontiers of War, with the experiences that gave rise to it. She asks herself why she shaped a story at all, why she did not simply write "the truth?" (82). She makes a

distinction between the truth of her experience and her moulding of it into literature. It is interesting to note, however, that although she contrasts "story" with "truth," as though they were complete opposites, she admits that her story was not "untrue." She senses, in short, that her view of truth and fiction as opposites is simplistic. Yet she is unable to move beyond it. Like Johnson, she is caught between her desire to capture the truth, to portray reality exactly, and her awareness that literature cannot avoid being the expression of an individual artistic vision that gains its power from the subjective shaping that creates it.

Anna's inability to resolve this conflict paralyzes her creativity. She fears shaping and patterning, which she recognizes are indispensable to literature, because she cannot accept the distortion of reality that they imply. She criticizes The Shadow of the Third, but does not "see any other way to write it" (231). The writer begins at the end of an experience; s/he has already interpreted it, allowed it to "fall into a pattern" (231). This pattern is false, however. The Shadow of the Third's portrayal of the affair between Ella and Paul "is seen in terms of what ends it. That is why all this is untrue. Because while living through something one doesn't think like that at all" (231). Anna concludes that "[l]iterature is analysis after the event" (231), to which it cannot be faithful, because it patterns the event according to its (already known) resolution.

Anna's doubts about fiction's intrinsic truth-telling

capabilities are compounded by her reservations about the novel's ability to render contemporary reality. Genuine creativity seems impossible; novels no longer make "philosophical statements about life" (79), but have degenerated into forms of reportage:

The novel has become a function of the fragmented society, the fragmented consciousness. Human beings are so divided, are becoming more and more divided, **and more subdivided in themselves**, reflecting the world, that they reach out desperately, not knowing they do it, for information about other groups inside their own country, let alone about groups in other countries. It is a blind grasping out for their own wholeness, and the novel-report is a means towards it. (79)

For Anna, as for Iris Murdoch and Angus Wilson, this form of writing is failed art--the artist needs to overcome alienation and **anomie**, not avoid them through the writing of journalistic works.<sup>18</sup> She claims to have fifty subjects for a minor novel of this type but will never write it because it would represent an artistic admission of defeat. She longs for "a book powered with an intellectual or moral passion strong enough to create order, to create a new way of looking at life" (80), yet admits that she is herself "too diffused" to write it.

If reportage comprises one of two major pitfalls that Anna seeks to avoid, then nihilism is its twin. Her sense of responsibility for others not only causes her to fret over her abandonment of politics, but also lies behind her fear of acceding to despair. She is "'afflicted with an awful feeling of disgust, of futility," (58) she tells Tommy, and

refuses to communicate these emotions. Her single published novel is immoral because it was written out of a poisoned emotion, "a lying nostalgia" (82). This nostalgia is nothing less than "nihilism, an angry readiness to throw everything overboard, a willingness, a longing to become part of dissolution" (82).

Anna's position is contradictory and incoherent within its own terms. She rejects as poisoned the emotion that allows her to write genuine novels but ridicules literature that does not exhibit it. This results in self-paralysis: "And so this is the paradox: I, Anna, reject my own 'unhealthy' art; but reject 'healthy' art when I see it" (344). There is confusion here because Anna fails to keep two distinct emotions separate. She confuses the negative desire for nihilism with strongly held private emotions. These are not at all the same. Anna's refusal to submit to despair--a paraphrase of Lessing's stand in "The Small Personal Voice"--which leads her to reject nihilism, attests to her utopian need to look beyond present conditions. Her distrust of private emotions, however, derives from her refusal to accept that the socialist dream of a communal art, one that does not spring from the isolated, alienated individual, has broken down. Art that originates in a personal vision need not be nihilistic, but Anna, who already fears that the aesthetic shaping inherent in art leads to distortion, conflates personal emotion with nihilism and, rejecting both, finds herself in a literary limbo.

Despite her carefully articulated disenchantment with Marxism, Anna cannot countenance what her own private convictions are telling her--that the truth of her time is despair. Rejecting both reportage (including its "committed" variant) and literature that comes out of a personal artistic vision, she is as paralyzed as Janos Lavin. Like Anna, Lavin fails to create a politically meaningful art, but whereas he renounces it in favour of political action Anna, unable to believe in this option, renounces it in favour of temporary silence.

To speak of Anna's silence is misleading, however. It is perhaps more accurate (and more revealing) to distinguish between public reticence and private garrulity here. A major part of the novel's impact lies in the reader's perception of the discrepancy between Anna's apparent silence, her persistent claims that she is not writing, and the mass of words that she is daily churning out. This discrepancy constitutes a large part of Lessing's achievement. She creates a character who articulates the major artistic questions that torment Lessing herself but that would prevent her from writing if she permitted them to paralyze her. By paralyzing Anna instead--arguably a double of one of her own selves--Lessing frees herself. Anna's private, hidden outpourings become Lessing's public, open art-work. By making The Golden Notebook an account of why it could not be written, the text not only gets written but also manages to include the very complexity and richness of detail that were apparently

preventing it from coming into being. This is the beauty of the novel's structure, the reason why it does indeed "talk through the way it [is] shaped" (14). Anna is blocked, but writes voraciously; she is publicly silent, but privately clamorous. Through the text's ingenious construction, this paradox becomes Lessing's equally paradoxical "wordless statement" (14), a book that says what it apparently cannot say, disclosing chaos and despair without giving in to them.

## VI

At the beginning of her analysis Anna denies that she has a writer's block. Towards the end of "Blue Notebook 4" she explains to Saul why she does not write: "'I could give you a dozen reasons why not, I could speak on the subject for several hours, but the real reason is that I have a writer's block'" (582). This assertion is a long way from the earlier denials, but it is no closer to the truth. To begin with, it suppresses the complex reasons for Anna's creative **impasse** that the text has taken six hundred pages to dissect, making it seem a purely personal problem. But Anna's creativity has not just dried up; it has been derailed by an oppressive social reality that dwarfs her literary endeavours, rendering them impotent. The "dozen reasons" to which she refers, and which the novel has so powerfully portrayed, cannot now be reduced to the dimensions of a private problem.

As we have seen, Anna's problem is largely one of

literary form. She is trapped between two terms of a rigid dichotomy--fiction on one side and truth on the other. She despairs in the face of a reality that she cannot capture in words, a reality that makes words, in the form of fiction, seem to purvey lies. She senses, however, that this radical distinction between literature and truth is flawed, admitting that she desires to write a book that could "create a new way of looking at life" (80) and that "flashes of genuine art" originate in an individual vision, in a "deep, suddenly stark, undisguisable private emotion" (344).

The Golden Notebook is partly the account of Anna's growing realization that fiction and truth are not polar opposites, that although fiction does not reproduce reality, it can approximate it. By lowering her expectations of what art can achieve, she is enabled to break out of the creative **impasse** in which she is mired. She understands, in short, that she cannot "cage the truth" (632), but can only disclose it. She bequeaths The Golden Notebook to us as her approximation of reality, making the chaos of her private life a homonym for that of the world (Lessing makes the individual "a microcosm" (13)). But she turns chaos into art through a heavily artificial structure--which reveals the arbitrariness of structure in the absence of teleology--and a framing envelope that provides a secondary perspective on the chaos that it encases and artistically "controls."

The trajectory of The Golden Notebook's two narratives thus suggests that Anna moves toward a gradual resolution of

her problems. Both the Anna of the notebooks and the Anna of "Free Women" heal themselves by working through their internal (psychic) as well as external (social) conflicts. Anna's sense of self-division is overcome when she throws off her doubles and reintegrates her diverse selves into her personality. Her psychic health is revealed by the way she parts from her most significant doubles, Saul and Molly, for these partings, as Claire Sprague has argued, are amicable. Anna and Saul collaborate before they go their different ways. They renew one another's creativity by exchanging the opening sentences of their next books, and when they separate Anna leaves Saul the Golden Notebook. Anna and Molly, in turn, part with a kiss, and in reply to Molly's suggestion that "'we'll get on very well'" (638), Anna replies: "'I don't see why not'" (638). Having overcome self-division, the two Annas are able to effect a **rapprochement** with society. In the notebooks Anna confronts and defeats the paralyzing will-to-destruction in herself. Conquering her writing block, she gives her private outpourings a public forum. In "Free Women" Anna undergoes a similar breakdown, but decides to give up writing and to take up local (non-revolutionary) politics and welfare work. Although she views these plans with irony, it is cheerful rather than self-punishing.

What remains is The Golden Notebook itself. All meta-fictional novels offer at least a double-focus; in The Golden Notebook's case one can speak of triple-focus. Anna offers two parallel versions of her experience--the notebooks and



"Free Women"--and, third, a self-reflexive commentary on both versions, which foregrounds the process by which they came into being and articulates her reservations about the writing of literature. Despite Anna's doubts, however, in her use of the double-narrative (notebooks and "Free Women") she finds a way of rendering the disturbing nature of her experience without succumbing to despair. Placing "Free Women" within the wider context of The Golden Notebook, she offers parallel accounts of reality that evoke both parody and nihilism, the two tendencies she most fears, but overcomes them by playing them off against one another. She creates both order and a new way of looking without offering premature resolutions of conflict. The chaos that has tormented her is not smoothed over, rendered manageable--as it is in "Free Women"--but assumes centre-stage. At the same time, it is artistically held in check by the novel's highly patterned structure. Thus the novel admits chaos, fragmentation, and alienation as the central problems of our time but refuses to succumb to them. It remains both structured and fractured. Like Anna, and paralleling her personal self-reconstruction, which allows the coexistence of different selves, the novel keeps its literary integrity by retaining the disordered notebooks within a wider, structured whole that encompasses them.

Erich Fromm, in a formulation that seems particularly apt to The Golden Notebook, writes as follows: "Free man is by necessity insecure; thinking man by necessity uncertain" (174). Anna Free(man) Wulf learns to live with the insecu-

rity and uncertainty that characterize the thinking person; she also produces an insecure and uncertain novel that reveals how literature can represent the chaos of our times without succumbing to it.

## VII

The Golden Notebook's complex metafictional structure attests to Lessing's conviction, most clearly articulated in her later introduction to Shikasta, that contemporary reality could no longer be contained by realist forms. Her reference to the "cage" of realism, her claim that "Free Women" shows the limitations of conventional fictional form, and her fear that realist fiction has become a kind of reportage reveal her need to break free from the constraints imposed by the traditional novel. If The Golden Notebook signals her first major break with realism, then the apocalyptic The Four-Gated City, which points forward to her science fiction, enacts its (temporary) collapse.

Unlike writers who experiment with language and style, however, Lessing continues to employ realist language and her innovations, which bypass those of modernism, are primarily structural. In a witty criticism of Lessing's denotative style Margaret Drabble writes: "The point is The Four-Gated City is littered with sentences that begin, bluntly, desperately, with the words, 'The point is . . .'. And the point follows" (186). As Drabble is aware, Lessing's writing is

often awkward; she has a marked preference for "telling" over "showing." Simply put, she distrusts the mandarin style of modernism. In a revealing interview with C. J. Driver, she says that she believes in simplicity and directness, which she associates with accuracy and truth, but is suspicious of fine style and highly wrought language. Of her own writing she says: "I don't **polish** it--that would be the entirely wrong word, because in a way I roughen it; I try to get it simple, clear, which for me is the same as getting it right" (20).

Lessing's comments reveal the anti-modernist nature of her aesthetic. Her commitment to clarity leads her to eschew the linguistic nuances that characterize modernist writing. Valuing communication above all, she fears that what she wants to say may be obscured by an overtly fine style. Thus her break with realism bypasses modernism altogether. Claire Sprague notes, for example, that Lessing's radicalism lies in her subject-matter rather than in her style. Even in The Golden Notebook, Sprague points out, "disruptions of voice and chronology" (1987 2) are minimal. Virginia Tiger concurs, observing that Lessing adopts a plain style and that her depiction of chaos in The Golden Notebook is discursive and surprisingly unchaotic.

Lessing's partial shift away from realism involves a transformation not of language or style but of content and structure. She does not experiment at the level of the word or the sentence. The surface of her writing remains con-

stant, although in some novels (i.e., The Summer Before the Dark; Memoirs of a Survivor) she achieves a greater lyricism. But she constructs neither "geometric fields," like Berger, nor "collages," like Johnson; rather, she extends her realist style so that it embraces fantasy, speculation, and myth.

The Golden Notebook remains a landmark transitional text in Lessing's **oeuvre**. The novels written prior to it are conventionally realist, exhibiting omniscient narration, linear chronology, unaffected language, naturalistic character, and detailed social observation. Landlocked, the fourth volume of Children of Violence, marked a first attempt to go beyond this realism. Lessing abandoned omniscience, using Martha as her centre of consciousness, and included Thomas's fragmented diary towards the end of the novel. But The Golden Notebook marked the real change, rupturing Lessing's realism from within, and splintering her creative energies into several different directions.

It would be a mistake, however, to infer from novels like The Four-Gated City, Briefing for a Descent into Hell, Memoirs of a Survivor, and the Canopus in Argos sequence, that Lessing rejected realism altogether. Realism, rather, no longer fully able to evoke her view of the world, had to be stretched into new shapes. Lessing developed what might be called an experimental realism; through it she discovered new fictional terrains and explored different aspects of contemporary reality. At the same time she wrote occasional novels in the conventional style that had been her **métier** for

so long. Thus the more innovative novels such as Briefing, Memoirs, and the Canopus series, can be counterpointed by The Summer Before the Dark, The Diaries of Jane Somers, and The Good Terrorist.

Nevertheless, the period between 1962 and 1974 reveals Lessing's growing awareness of realism's limitations. This was closely related to Lessing's loss of faith in the meta-narrative of revolutionary politics and her increasing fear of apocalypse. The Four-Gated City ends with the destruction of the earth by gas poisoning; Memoirs describes the breakdown of civilization and concludes with an entry into a different realm of existence; Briefing warns of the world's imminent doom; and in Shikasta Lessing turns her back on earth, portraying it as a space colony.

Lessing's move away from realism derived from her loss of faith in realism's ability to portray what she perceived as the fantastic nature of the contemporary world and from her reservations about the rationalism that underpins realism. Her use of science fiction, myth, and fantasy disclosed her belief that fabulation was better equipped to render post-war reality. Furthermore, the implausible imaginative resolutions to her texts revealed a new pessimism and suggested that she no longer believed in a vision of good that could combat evil. She offered three kinds of solution to the novels of this period: first, following her Sufi mentor, Idries Shah, she suggested that human beings, if they forego a narrow commitment to rationalism, can evolve to a

higher state through the development of extra-sensory powers (The Four-Gated City; Briefing); second, she offered the possibility of escape into a parallel mythical world (Memoirs); third, she portrayed the earth as an inter-galactic empire's colony (Canopus).

Lessing's frustration with humankind's inability to solve its problems, which is already present in The Golden Notebook, turns to despair in The Four-Gated City. Consider the following passage, in which Martha observes women and men as though from the perspective of a superior alien being:

What an extraordinary race, or near-race of half, uncompleted creatures. There they were, all soft like pale slugs, or dark slugs, with their limp flabby flesh, with hair sprouting from it, and the things like hooves on their feet, and wads or fells of hair on the tops of their heads . . . with their roundish bony heads, that had flaps of flesh sticking out on either side, then the protuberance in the middle, with the air vents in it, and the eyes, tinted-jelly eyes . . . but these organs, the eyes, had a look which contradicted their function, which was to see, to observe, for as she passed pair after pair of eyes, they all looked half-drugged, or half-asleep, dull, as if the creatures had been hypnotized or poisoned . . . . It was painful in a way she had never known pain, an affliction of shameful grief, to walk here today, among her own kind, looking at them as they were, seeing them, us, the human race, as visitors from a spaceship might see them, if he dropped into London or into any city to report. 'This particular race is inhabited thickly by defectively evolved animals who . . .' (521)

As so often in Lessing, sight is equated with awareness and knowledge. Here, human beings are either half-asleep (their eyes are closed) or blind. Martha sees that they live "in a condition of sleep-walking," are "shut in . . . behind their

dreaming drugged eyes" (522).

Living alongside these pitiful masses are a few gifted individuals who have evolved into a higher state. Lessing, having despaired of political solutions to such problems as nuclear stockpiles and environmental damage, posits a strange evolutionary schema that goes far beyond Darwinism. In a curious mix of R. D. Laing and Idries Shah, individuals break down into one another, dissolving the naturalistic bonds of character, and either progress to a healthier psychic state through madness (Laing) or develop extra-sensory capabilities (Shah).

Disintegration is central to The Four-Gated City, but only individual breakdown, which leads to higher states, is viewed positively. Echoing The Golden Notebook, the novel depicts the collapse of politics, through the futile figure of Phoebe Coldridge, whose lifetime work on behalf of the Labour Party is revealed to be fruitless; of community, through the dissolution of the Coldridge household; of civilization as a whole, through the biological warfare that all but destroys the world. Whereas social and political action are presented as sterile, personal evolution through the development of higher powers is offered as humankind's only hope.

Martha, Mark, and Lynda, the dominant triumvirate in the novel, merge, becoming a composite figure. The three of them, doubling and mirroring one another, become interchangeable and after a certain point in the novel are frequently

referred to not as individuals but as a triad. Lynda and Martha, furthermore, go beyond a Laingian self-healing (The Golden Notebook), developing Sufian powers of telepathy and prophecy. Although Laing's theories are problematic, his idea that madness can be a **logical** response to unbearable pressures is at least plausible. But here, Lynda's madness turns out to be nothing of the kind; she can, in fact, "hear" other people's thoughts and can see into the future, powers that she passes on to Martha. It is Lynda who "sees" that the world is being poisoned, thus enabling some of the Coldridge family to escape the ensuing ruin. At novel's end, civilization has been destroyed, and hope lies with Joseph Batts, a mutant who possesses similar abilities. Lessing has left rationalism far behind.

Lessing's distrust of rationalism, her belief that it is severely limited and that our too-trusting faith in it may have led to many of our problems, is expressed equally forcefully in Memoirs, whose anonymous narrator observes:

As for our thoughts, our intellectual apparatus, our rationalisms and our logics and our deductions and so on, it can be said with absolute certainty that dogs and cats and monkeys cannot make a rocket to fly to the moon or weave artificial dress materials out of the by-products of petroleum, but as we sit in the ruins of this variety of intelligence, it is hard to give it much value: I suppose we are undervaluing it now as we over-valued it then. It will have to find its place: I believe a pretty low place, at that. (71)

In Memoirs, as civilization crumbles and the attempt to combat its disintegration meets with failure, the real world



assumes less importance than the parallel world that the narrator discovers on the other side of one of her walls. This mystical realm, which enables her to see into the past, offers an escape from the horrific reality of the real world. Thus when society finally degenerates into a state of anarchy the narrator and her little group pass "out of this collapsed little world into another order of world altogether" (182). Martin Green argues that Memoirs shows "Lessing saying good-bye to the novel form" and moving "into a legendary and emblematic land, away from people, cities, and actuality" (Sprague and Tiger 34). By the time she wrote Shikasta, Lessing had moved onto the terrain of science fiction proper; no longer dealing with contemporary society, she now viewed earth as a planet on which cosmic forces of good and evil struggled for supremacy.

Green's comments on Memoirs are interesting, but he goes too far in asserting that Lessing abandons the novel. Other critics overstate this case in like manner. Lorna Sage, for example, writes that Lessing's career "displays an exemplary transformation from a socialist realism that recalls her nineteenth-century predecessors, to the speculative forms she borrows from 'mystical' writing and space fiction" (10-11). David Lodge makes essentially the same point.

The path that Lessing has followed, however, does not evince quite such a smooth progression as this. She does indeed lose faith in realism, largely because of her disillusionment with the socialist humanism and the rationalism that

she believed underpinned it. Thus her gradual turn away from the realist novel cannot be explained by reference to a crisis of liberalism. On the contrary, because she perceived such a close link between realism and socialism, the crisis of representation enacted in her novels should be explained by reference to her disenchantment with Marxism, which she nostalgically called "the first attempt, for our time, outside the formal religions, at a world-mind, a world ethic" (1981 15). Lessing's abandonment of realism was temporary, however; it does not conclude her career as a realist novelist but represents a hiatus in it. Even though she moves away from realism in order to explore other forms, her subsequent re-examination of it leads her not to reject realism entirely but to return to it when it seems useful. Thus Ruth Whittacker is undoubtedly right when she notes that critics are tempted "to give a spurious cohesion to [Lessing's] fiction, to suggest that she moves steadily from realism to fabulation, as if one excluded the other" (16). For realism and fabulation are not mutually exclusive. Lessing's experimental realism proves the point.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Lessing was clearly indebted to Marxist theories of art at this time. It is possible that she owed her awareness of the dangers of propagandistic art to Engels. In a well-known letter to Margaret Harkness, Engels writes:

I am far from finding fault with your not having written a point-blank socialist novel, a "Tendenzroman" as we Germans call it, to glorify the social and political views of the authors. That is not at all what I mean. The more the opinions of the author remain hidden, the better for the work of art. (Marx and Engels on Literature and Art 91)

<sup>2</sup> This view resembles Berger's critique of contemporary avant-garde painting. Compare Berger's claim that the avant-garde reveals only "the desperation of despair" (213) with these assertions by Lessing.

<sup>3</sup> In the "Preface" Lessing explains that she tried to combat "the problem of 'subjectivity'" (13) by seeing the individual "as a microcosm and in this way to break through the personal, the subjective, making the personal general" (13).

<sup>4</sup> The Golden Notebook moves from disintegration to unification. The four notebooks become the "Golden Notebook" in which Anna reintegrates her personality. In her diaries Anna has inveighed against parody, a form that for her indicates a failure of vision. Thus she ends the "Yellow Notebook" by observing: "If I've gone back to pastiche, then its time to stop" (525). There is no reason to suppose that Anna would write "Free Women" (by her own standards a failure) unless she offers us the entire Golden Notebook, in the context of which "Free Women" appears as a sardonic piece of internal self-criticism, a comment on past failures.

<sup>5</sup> As most critics have noticed, there are factual discrepancies between "Free Women" and the notebooks. In the former, for example, Richard's children are boys, Tommy goes on holiday with Marion and has a friend, Tony, who is a conscientious objector. In the latter, Richard's children are girls, Tommy marries, and he himself is the conscientious objector. Because the text offers no definitive version of events, there is no way of knowing which of these accounts, if any, are "true." These minor discrepancies hint at the difficulty of disentangling reality and fiction in this text.

<sup>6</sup> In her useful book, Metafiction, Patricia Waugh defines the genre as "fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an arte-

fact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality" (2). According to Waugh's definition The Golden Notebook is clearly metafictional. Moreover, it combines its metafictional elements with its political concerns. As Jenny Taylor notes, it is "an explicitly political novel which contains within it a discussion of its own position and status as a cultural object" (13).

<sup>7</sup> See Richard Crossman's The God that Failed (1949), a collection of six essays by former communists and fellow-travellers (Koestler, Silone, Wright, Gide, Fischer, and Spender) in which they describe their initial attraction to, and subsequent disillusionment with, Marxism.

<sup>8</sup> David Edgar examines this issue in his play, Maydays. Martin, a young communist, agonizes over his defection from the Party. Like Anna, he eventually realizes that the Party does not have a monopoly on social struggle. As Amanda tells him: "It's not the end . . . Why should it be the end . . . Why should it be the only place to be?" (40). See also Edgar's portrayal of the professional revolutionary, James Graine ("the man who put the 'rot' in Trotskyism"), who closely resembles Willi Rodde.

<sup>9</sup> Anton Hesse's dogmatic Marxism, in A Ripple from the Storm, arouses similar laughter. He meets every reverse with the assertion that "we need to analyse the situation" (65). Like Anna, Martha senses that Anton is blind to the intractability of certain social problems. Consider the following exchange between Anton and Martha, which echoes the dialogue between Paul and Willi in The Golden Notebook:

Martha said obstinately: 'I sometimes think a good deal more than socialism is needed to cure this place.'

'Socialism,' said Anton, 'will cure everything.'  
(58)

<sup>10</sup> Sight, which functions as a metaphor for knowledge throughout The Golden Notebook, is central to this scene. Paul is a latter-day Saul of Tarsus: "I deduce nothing. I am being struck by a new . . . it's a blinding light, nothing less . . ." (418). Lessing inverts the biblical account, however. The light that strikes Saul, making him Paul, opens his eyes to the life-giving light of God. But the light that strikes Paul opens his eyes to the life-denying darkness of the principle of death, making an unbeliever (Saul) of him. Willi refuses to see the light and so remains blind.

<sup>11</sup> In The Golden Notebook socialist optimism is seen as a failure of sensibility, a refusal to allow experience to disturb the claims of abstract theory. Maryrose tells Paul that he laughs most when he's "saying something terrible" (419), but she laughs only when she is happy. The following

exchange ensues:

'Good God,' said Paul in awe. 'I couldn't say that. Jimmy, have you ever laughed because you were happy?'

'I've never been happy,' said Jimmy.

'You, Anna?'

'Nor me.'

'Willi?'

'Certainly,' said Willi, stubborn, defending socialism, the happy philosophy. (419)

<sup>12</sup> The conclusion to Civilization and its Discontents reads:

And now it is to be expected that the other of the two "Heavenly Powers," eternal Eros, will make an effort to assert himself in the struggle with his equally immortal adversary. But who can foresee with what success and with what result?

The last sentence, Freud's translator writes, was added in 1931 "when the menace of Hitler was already beginning to be apparent" (92).

<sup>13</sup> See The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844. The Golden Notebook departs from Marx in its suggestion that estranged labour is neither the primary nor the only cause of alienation. For a full discussion of the concept of alienation see Richard Schacht, Alienation.

<sup>14</sup> In Peter Shaffer's play, Equus (1973), Dysart, its brooding psychiatrist, fears that "normality" is maintained by the same kind of life-denying "blocking off" that worries Anna: "The Normal is the good smile in a child's eyes--all right. It is also the dead stare in a million adults" (63). In another act of mutilation involving the sight-organs, Equus's Alan Strang attempts to hold on to his sanity by blinding, not himself, but six horses.

<sup>15</sup> Lessing's portrayal of self-alienation through parodic role-playing is not an attack on the kind of role-playing that is a part of social intercourse, and that has so ably been described in Erving Goffmann's The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life. She contends, rather, that one can speak of self-alienation when a person's "selves" are at **war** with each other.

<sup>16</sup> In The Sane Society, Erich Fromm argues that contemporary self-alienation is "engendered by the lack of self" (181). He adds that "[i]nasmuch as 'I am as you desire me' --I am **not**; I am anxious, dependent on approval of others, constantly trying to please" (181). Compare this statement with Anna's, "now I am not Anna, I have no will . . ." (470).

<sup>17</sup> Later, arguing for **une littérature engagée**, in What is Literature?, Sartre argued that literature was a form of social action, albeit a secondary form. Anna does not seem to hold this view, however.

<sup>18</sup> See Murdoch's essay "Against Dryness" and Wilson's "Depth and Diversity" and "The Dilemma of the Contemporary Novelist" (in Wilson 1983).

## I

John Berger's novels are suffused with a utopian spirit. Doubtless this statement will provoke a few raised eyebrows and will not endear Berger to those who consider that utopian hopes distract from present struggles. But one must be clear what one means by utopianism. Most critics of utopia, as Zygmunt Bauman points out, reduce Thomas More's dual sense of it as "a place to be desired" and "a place which does not exist" (10) to the latter meaning alone. Treating utopias as "predictions which turned out to be false, or plans which failed to prove their realism" (10), they regard the pursuit of utopian visions as governed by impractical flights of fancy. On the contrary, argues Bauman, utopias help to structure human actions because they orient them to an ideal future. They "cause the reaction of the future with the present, and thereby produce the compound known as human history" (12). Thus for Bauman, utopias play "a crucial and constructive role in the historical process" (13).

One aspect of Bauman's argument is especially pertinent to Berger's fiction. Contending that human history "is not entirely determined by the structure of its own past," Bauman notes that "more than one string of events may follow" (10) from any given present. This freedom from determinism is central to utopian thinking, he suggests, for human beings will not desire to change social reality if they perceive its future course to be fixed in advance. By relativizing the present, by suggesting that different possible futures can

follow from current conditions, "utopias pave the way for a critical attitude and a critical activity which alone can transform the present predicament of man" (13). They attack the portrayal of history as nature, writes Bauman, and refuse to accept the "normalcy" of the existing social structure:

If the reality-protecting ideology attempts to disguise history as nature, utopias, on the contrary, unmask the historical status of alleged nature. They portray the future as a set of competing projects, and thereby reveal the role of human volition and concerted effort in shaping and bringing it out.  
(15)

Utopian writers defamiliarize the existing social structure and thus suggest that it can be altered. Their aspirations may lie in an as yet unrealized future, but they locate their critiques in the contemporary situation. In short, they root their feet in the muddy present while their eyes scan the distant horizon. It is in this sense that John Berger is a utopian novelist.

In the opening pages of A Painter of Our Time (1958), his first novel, Berger's central protagonist observes: "There is something even more fundamental than sex or work. The great universal, human need to look forward. Take the future away from a man, and you have done something worse than killing him" (20). Although Berger's work is motivated by an orientation to what is yet to come, it predominantly begins with an analysis of the present. In attempting to bring closer the horizon of a more equitable future, Berger does not offer a blueprint for a different society but



delivers a critique of the existing one.

## II

Berger's cultural interventions began when he was art critic for the New Statesman during the nineteen-fifties. Through a series of stinging attacks on what he perceived as the vapidty of contemporary painting he tried to clarify his own aesthetic position. Overtly confrontational and political, his early art criticism was often bellicose and crude. As a committed Marxist who desired to promote art that was resolutely engag  e and who felt isolated from the English art world, Berger occasionally fell victim to the temptations of hyperbole. All too often his polemical views, in particular his ill-concealed contempt for post-war abstract art, were either overstated or presented in unsatisfactorily general terms. In time, however, his work became more subtle and nuanced, less aggressive and univocal. Indeed, Berger is a rewarding writer--both as a theorist of the arts and as a novelist--because he persistently reassesses his own thinking in an ongoing struggle to work through its unresolved contradictions. Thus although utopian aspirations have always informed his fiction, the styles and techniques of his novels have changed over time. Whereas A Painter, which privileges content over form, is not free of the influence of socialist realism, G., which is written out of a renewed interest in Cubism, moves beyond Berger's formerly hard-headed Marxist suspicion that formal experimentation detracts from art's

content. A comparison of these two texts shows that there are continuities between his early Marxist novels (A Painter) and his later, more utopian, fiction (G.).

Berger's early art criticism, as I have already noted, was inseparable from his politics. It depended on two related premisses: first, that genuine art comprised a social as well as an aesthetic dimension and that a full understanding of it required attention to both aspects; second, that most art criticism, being formalist and ahistorical, neglected art's social implications because it focused primarily on its aesthetic qualities. For Berger, paintings did not express timeless truths that were located on the surfaces of their canvases; they were living works whose relevance and meanings derived from the interaction between their formal features and the historical viewer. Art could not be fully meaningful, he contended, if the historical context of its production was not related to that of its reception: "The specific meaning of a work of art changes--if it didn't, no work could outlive its period, and no agnostic could appreciate a Bellini" (1960 18). At the same time, he argued that the "purely aesthetic appeal and justification of art is based on less than a half-truth" because genuine art "must also serve an extra-artistic purpose" (1969 39). He rejected pure formalism, in short, because it ignored, occluded even, art's social and historical dimensions.

In Permanent Red, an early collection of essays, Berger claimed that the greatest art was that which encouraged "men

to know and claim their social rights" (15). Although his arguments in support of this case were vague, it should be noted that they did not imply support of propaganda in art. Berger suggested, rather, that while all paintings depicted an "artist's way of looking at the world" (16), the most powerful art made people aware of their potential. Such art, whether its content was optimistic or pessimistic, offered "the possibility of an increase, an improvement" (17)--it implied that reality could be different. Genuine art, Berger contended, disclosed social contradictions and provided hints, however oblique, that alternative forms of social life were possible. It was utopian in that it foregrounded hope.

In the nineteen-fifties, Berger made evident his commitment to this view of art through a series of fierce attacks on post-war abstraction. Although he claimed not to oppose abstract art *per se*, the terms of his critique forbade him to recognize anything of value in it. Obsessed as he was with the need for art's content to be socially relevant and widely accessible, he was almost bound to regard abstraction as vacuous, irresponsible, and elitist. Nowhere was this made more clear than in his reviews of the 1952 Venice Biennale and the 1953 ICA "Unknown Political Prisoner" exhibitions. He deplored the abstract works that dominated the two shows, arguing that because they privileged form and abjured content, they were aimless and inane. He claimed, for example, that the artists of the Biennale subscribed "to a diffused international style, which can no more produce a tradition of

art than Esperanto can produce a tradition of literature" (1952 12). Those of the ICA exhibition, in turn, seemed "driven by a futile ambition to rise above their local limitations"; attempting "to transcend language itself" they produced "a sort of obverse Babel" (1953 338). Concluding with an air of bravado, he asserted that "the 'official' modern art of the West is now bankrupt" (338).

Berger contended, quite simply, that there was a significant difference between the contemporary avant garde and the painters of the early twentieth century. The latter, he argued, however despairing at times, however critical of society, were passionately implicated in their era, and their fervour led them "to make extremely important technical and aesthetic discoveries" (213). The former, by contrast, had become so alienated that they comprised a group of isolated individuals who interacted primarily amongst themselves. For Berger, the extremism of the early modern masters was valuable because it inspired art that glittered with original insights and bold innovations. These painters participated in the ferment of their times by making revolutions on their canvases. The post-war avant garde, however, had proved incapable of working its sense of crisis into the art it produced and revealed only "the desperation of despair" (213). For Berger, because it had failed to generate any kind of meaningful content, it had reduced art to the question of form alone.

Berger's early art criticism often relied on a distinc-

tion between form and content that was too clean; it implied not only that content and form were easily separable but also that too much concern with the latter detracted from the former. Furthermore, because his Marxist aesthetics committed him to a defence of strongly representational art--art that **directly** engaged a reality external to itself--he was forced to make the dubious claim that non-representational art was **per se** incapable of being socially or politically relevant. Yet Berger's sensitivity to painting's multiple modes and his grasp of its purely formal attributes, which are evident from his writings on art, pulled against his strict adherence to a representational aesthetic. The tension between his overt espousal of content and his covert responsiveness to form can be seen in his defence of a non-conventional realism that gains vitality from technical innovations against a formalism that is crippled by its reliance on moribund styles.

Berger's support for realism, in short, did not entail a return to its traditional avatars.<sup>1</sup> Consistent with his belief that art should not be viewed ahistorically, he argued that realism must be defined contextually, not formally, because "its methods and aims are always changing" (208).<sup>2</sup> The only thing to be said in advance about realism is that it is **primarily** oriented, however obliquely, to a world outside the work of art rather than to the internal reality of the art-work itself. Thus the main question to be asked of every technical innovation was whether it "emphasizes an aspect of the truth, or is simply made to improve the formal effect of

the picture" (1960 209).<sup>3</sup> For Berger, realist innovations pointed beyond the work of art to some hitherto undisclosed aspect of reality--they offered new perceptions and insights --whereas those of formalism were only internally significant --they offered purely technical breakthroughs. In a formulation that paralleled those of Sarraute and Robbe-Grillet Berger explained the distinction between realism and formalism thus:

The only thing shared by all Realists is the nature of their relationship to the art tradition they inherit. They are Realists in so far as they bring into art aspects of nature and life previously ignored or forbidden by the rule-makers. It is in this sense that Realists can be opposed to Formalists. Formalists are those who use the conventions of their medium (conventions that originally came into being for the purpose of translating aspects of life into art) to keep out or pass over new aspects. (208)

For Berger, modern abstract art was formalist because its rules forbade "any precise hopeful reference to the objective world" (208). Thus the Realist task, he argued, was to "look at the modern world, which has so unnerved the Formalists, and come to terms with it" (208-209). The Realist was constrained to answer the question: "What is man? A question which, as Gramsci pointed out, really means: What can man become?" (209). We have come full circle, back to Berger's most fundamental conviction: art must orient itself towards a utopian future by confronting the present.

Berger's early commitment to representational painting was softened when he devoted himself to a re-examination of modernist art, in particular to a detailed study of Cubism.

In Permanent Red he had already suggested that "the question of Cubism is a--and probably the--fundamental one" (113) for the future of art. He referred in particular to "the Cubist attitude to nature, to the content of art, which has opened up so many real and truly modern possibilities" (113). For Berger, Cubism had challenged the single perspective of the omniscient observer by creating an art of multiple viewpoints and by stressing the fluid nature of reality. Thus when he began writing G. he turned to Cubism, a movement whose insights were central to twentieth-century art and whose pulse, he maintained, still beat strongly.

In "The Moment of Cubism," Berger observed that Cubism overthrew the Renaissance concept of painting by replacing the goal of imitation with that of creation. Cubism, he argued, responded to the secularization of the world and the birth of modern subjectivity by recognizing that in the absence of God a unitary, omniscient view of the world was untenable. No longer concerned to glorify nature as the manifestation of God's genius and bounty, the Cubists glorified their own imaginations and talents. Realizing that the artist's "awareness of nature was part of nature" (1985 176), they eschewed simple referentiality and replaced the metaphor of the **mirror** with that of the **diagram**. Instead of trying to expunge the perspective of the painter from the art-work, they introduced the painter **into** the art-work, making her or his viewpoint integral to it. Viewing art as making rather than reflecting, they emphasized process over closure.

For Berger, Cubism, which attended to the external world while at the same time stressing the interaction between artist and subject matter, offered valuable guidelines for a committed art. Its principles, moreover, were equally valid for the writing of novels:

We hear a lot about the crisis of the modern novel. What this involves, fundamentally, is a change in the mode of narration. It is scarcely any longer possible to tell a straight story sequentially unfolding in time. And this is because we are too aware of what is **continually traversing the story line laterally**. That is to say, instead of being aware of a point as an infinitely small part of a straight line, we are aware of it as **an infinitely small part of an infinite number of lines, as the centre of a star of lines**. Such awareness is the result of our constantly having to take into account the simultaneity and extension of events and possibilities. (1969 46 my emphasis)

As Berger's thinking developed, his belief in the need for the novel to deal with the question of representation itself became more pronounced. In "The Moment of Cubism," for example, he suggested that any writing that began with the Cubist insight that the "world-as-it-is is more than pure objective fact, it includes consciousness" (Ways of Seeing 11), will look for new ways of evoking reality. In particular, such writing will focus on the various ways that reality is constructed through human consciousness. For Berger, Cubism proved instructive here; emphasizing flux, it opposed a static view of the world. It suggested that, like its own artefacts, human understanding of the world was **made**, and in doing so, opened up the question of **how** that understanding was made.



Berger's view of realism was partly influenced by Cubism because the latter could accommodate his politics. Realism, he had persistently maintained, is "always consciously political" because "it aims to shatter an opaque part of the ruling ideology, whereby, normally, some aspect of reality is consistently distorted or denied" (1985 17-18).<sup>4</sup> This political and, as I have stressed, non-conventional view of realism, which drew on Cubism, melded well with Berger's subsequent reading, in the nineteen sixties, of Heidegger and the young Lukacs.<sup>5</sup> In "The Secretary of Death," for example, using distinctly Heideggerian language, he argued that the tenses of the novel "are those of the future or the conditional" because novels "are about Becoming" (1985 241). And in "Sekher Ahmet and the Forest" he echoed Lukacs's claim that the novel "was born of a yearning for what now lay beyond the horizon: it was the art-form of a sense of homelessness" (1980 83). This homelessness, he argued, represented "an openness of choice . . . such as man had never experienced before" (83). For Berger, as for Lukacs, this possibility of choice implied the possibility of change, of combatting dispossession and being restored to one's birth-right. It offered the hope that the homeless state was not permanent and that a resting place might be found at journey's end.<sup>6</sup>

Berger's emphasis both on the conditional nature of the future and on his faith that it could be an improvement on the present accords well with Bauman's claim that the utopian

writer criticizes her or his own world in the name of what is yet to come. The utopian, he writes, "is perhaps the one who most faithfully approximates the Heideggerian vision of man as a creature to whom the future is primary because it is the region toward which man projects and in which he defines his own being" (22).

Bauman's picture of the visionary writer could almost be a portrait of Berger, for Berger's recent comments on the novel, which have been influenced both by Heidegger and the young Lukacs, are clearly utopian in orientation.<sup>7</sup> In "Sekher Ahmet" Berger notes that Heidegger describes thought as the "coming-into-the-nearness of distance." This description of thought parallels Lukacs's description of the novel as a form that, trying to overcome a state of homelessness, endeavours to bring closer that which is glimpsed but remains distant. Berger's linking of Heidegger with Lukacs, which would have been unthinkable in the nineteen fifties illuminates our understanding of his conception of the novel and shows how far he has moved beyond orthodox Marxism. He notes that "in the 'coming-into-the-nearness of distance' there is a reciprocal movement. Thought approaches the distant; but the distant also approaches thought" (85-86). It is exactly this reciprocal movement, which Lukacs describes as "a fluctuating yet firm balance between becoming and being" (1978 73), that Berger believes must lie at the heart of genuine art.

## III

A Painter of Our Time (1958), Berger's first novel, is not an experimental text. Indeed, its occasionally socialist realist tone reveals that Berger was still trying to free himself from a too close allegiance to orthodox Marxist aesthetic theory. But its discussion of the artist's role in post-war society illuminates Berger's objectives in C., by far his most innovative work of fiction, and helps to explain why he turned to Cubist insights for the writing of it. A Painter of Our Time makes its concern with the legacy of modernism clear at the outset. Encased within two brief framing sections, "The Beginning" and "The End," its main narrative consists of an exiled artist's journal, which recalls that of an earlier exile-to-be, Stephen Dedalus, from the closing pages of A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man. The narrator makes the allusion explicit by designating the journal a "Portrait of the Artist as an Emigré" and announces one of the novel's central themes when he notes that "today in one sense or another most artists are **emigrés**" (16).

The notion of the contemporary painter as an emigré has several nuances. The novel presents the majority of artists as alienated from their own culture, unsure about the validity of their art, and bereft, in the wake of modernist innovation, of a tradition in which to work. Contemporary artists, working in isolation and lacking direction, are perceived as victims of an internal exile. Janos Lavin, the

novel's central protagonist, tells the art collector Banks that because artists today "are cut off," they "paint for themselves" (44). Because nobody knows any longer what the artist's role is to be, "he makes exercises, he makes pure colours and pure shapes--the abstract art--until it is decided what he can do" (45). Yet Lavin's own status as an emigr  is equally ambiguous, for he is at once a foreigner, a painter who must also come to terms with modernism, and an exile from the political tradition that inspires him.

Lavin is not a heroic figure. Berger refuses to portray him as an unrecognized genius, as a painter who, unbeknown to the world, has overcome the problems of post-war art. Not only is he racked with guilt over his failure to contribute to the struggle for socialism in his homeland, but he also fears that he has not succeeded in fusing his political and artistic beliefs in his painting. As a young man, he and his friends Laszlo and Erno were implicated in the historical process. Laszlo likened them to "three men holding a sheet, always encouraging each other to keep it taut because we were waiting for a fourth man to jump down from the sky--into the sheet" (49). But Lavin left Hungary, Erno died, and "only Laszlo saw that fourth, Socialist man appear" (50). Whereas Laszlo stayed to fight, Lavin notes that he "never went back to the front," but "slipped away to paint" (102). Thus when Laszlo is executed in the turbulent 'fifties Lavin, forced to re-examine his life, agonizes over the consequences of his exile:

I have made myself doubly an **emigré**. I have not returned to our country. And I have chosen to spend my life on my art, instead of on immediate objectives. Thus I am a spectator watching what I might have participated in. Thus I question endlessly. Thus I risk reducing the world within my own mind to my own dimensions for the sake of discovering a small truth that has remained undiscovered by others. It may be that we have both betrayed that fourth man we were waiting on. (93)

Lavin fears that being doubly an emigre he may have become doubly an apostate--a man who has betrayed both his politics and his art. Whereas in his youth his painting and his fight for socialism animated one another and ensured that he was involved in the making of history, now his life seems meaningless. Reduced to playing the role of spectator, he fears that history, having passed him by, has effectively shunted him from the playing field to the sidelines.

Lavin's concern over his marginal status is central to A Painter of Our Time. Unlike the fashionable London art world that regards him as a quaint idiosyncrasy, he desires to make his painting both socially and aesthetically meaningful. It is his struggle to fuse his politics with his aesthetics, which is by no means presented as particularly successful, that distinguishes him from his contemporaries. But there are serious problems with Berger's articulation of this struggle. Despite his obvious empathy for Lavin, he not only fails to define his protagonist's politics (we know only that Lavin is a socialist, probably a communist) but also he is unable to clarify precisely how Lavin proposes to create a political art.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, a further difficulty with the novel,

which is thrown into high relief by its "resolution" of Lavin's problem, is that his politics, far from informing his painting, are actually in conflict with it at a subconscious level. When he says of his departure from Hungary, for example, that he "slipped away" his language reveals his fear that in choosing art he has actually betrayed politics. Lavin's pursuit of a political art is thus in subtle ways undermined by a deeper contradiction in his thinking--that the pursuit of art entails an escape from "real" (activist) politics.

Lavin's primary artistic commitment is to representational art. When the art dealer De Quincey dismisses his work on the grounds that post-war reality is "'chaotic'" and any art "'that rejects that reality becomes mechanical'" (139), he points to the difference between Lavin, a realist painter, and the abstract artists who were then in vogue. According to Lavin, those artists who accept the chaotic nature of reality and who refuse to oppose it also accept the irrelevance of their own work. He, on the other hand, fights against despair and tries to produce art that refuses to succumb to cultural pessimism. In thus swimming against the current, he perceives himself as an emigré both from his own country and from the art world of his adopted country. Hardwick, the principal at the art school where he teaches, considers him to be behind the times and dismissively refers to him as "'our link with tradition'" (94). The irony of this view of him is not lost on Lavin, who remarks to him-

self: "yes, I who was painting abstract paintings when you were five years old" (94).<sup>9</sup>

Despite the perceptions of Hardwick and De Quincey, however, Lavin does not desire to return to a tradition he knows has been superseded. He refuses to accept, rather, that contemporary art should be primarily self-referential and suspects that abstract art, having increasingly taken this path, has become moribund. He believes, moreover, that most artists themselves sense this but are uncertain how to move forward. In the past, he claims, "the trail the painter had laid was clear" and "he never had to pause to look back" (166). Now, however, "we have no confetti in a bag to throw behind us because we have no tradition. And so we are always stopping to see whether we are lost, to check whether the path we've come along is a path at all" (166). Lavin wishes to retain a "link" with tradition because he believes that contemporary painters no longer have the faith in their art that motivated the great painters of the past. It is this link that he desires to retain in his search for a way through the present **impasse**.

For Lavin, the great artists were motivated by a passion for the truths of art, which they struggled to render with an intensity that brooked no opposition:

All of these men were militant: militant to the point of being prepared to die for what they believed in. Delacroix believed in what he called "the beautiful"; Cezanne in his **petite sensation**; Van Gogh in his "Humanity, humanity, and again humanity." They fought for their various visions and most of their militant energy was concerned

with fighting the difficulties of realising their vision, of finding the visual forms that would turn their hunches into facts. Each of their different visions, however, sprang from the same kind of conviction; they each knew that life could be better, richer, juster, truer than it was. (177)

This passage (whose argument paraphrases Berger's early art criticism) reveals Berger's commitment to a socially oriented art but at the same time discloses his sleight-of-hand. His strategic use of the word "militant"--with its political overtones--as well as his closing statement may give his aesthetic a leftist cachet but it also papers over the cracks of a contradiction. For Berger, as the rest of the passage suggests, is committed to art itself and understands that it possesses a dimension that cannot be reduced to politics. Yet his desire to equate artistic commitment with social commitment leads him to frame his commentary with an explicitly political rhetoric that the rest of the passage cannot uphold. It is this unresolved tension in Berger's thinking that informs Lavin's tortuous attempts to clarify his own aesthetic position.<sup>10</sup>

Lavin sees abstraction and propaganda as two extremes that must be avoided. While he accepts that propagandistic works can be valid--which hints at his partial sympathy for socialist realism--he asserts that it is impossible to "work for anything under the cover of art . . . You can only work for something else under the cover of non-art. Art does not cover--it reveals" (89). Abstract art, he contends, is formalistic, an "art which gets over its problems without a



glance at anything outside itself" (172). For Lavin, its practitioners inhabit an "amoral limbo" in which "any attempt to connect art with social responsibility and morality is immediately ridiculed by parody" (178-79). Thus his espousal of representational art entails neither proselytization nor a return to nineteenth-century realism but demands an unwavering assessment of the present.

Rejecting both abstraction and propaganda, Lavin argues that true art "communicates and so extends consciousness of what is possible" (180). True artists struggle to present their visions and truths so precisely that they make "a maze seem a highway" (49). They desire "others to take away the best possible thoughts that [they] can struggle to make manifest. And in that is [their] fraternity" (79). Lavin's dismissal of facile distinctions between "progressive" and "decadent" art, however, is inconsistent with his own earlier implication that abstract art, which he maintains is nihilistic, is decadent. Thus when he notes that "we have made a profound mistake whenever we have used our Marxism to make an arbitrary division between art that is for us (progressive art) and art which is against us (decadent art)" (181), he reveals yet another contradiction in his thinking that the apparent sincerity of Berger's rhetoric cannot smooth over. To argue, as Lavin does, that we should distinguish only between good and bad art and that "all good art is for Man" (181) may be valid, but it leaves us to conclude that all non-representational art is bad and, presumably, "against

Man."

Berger's failure to clarify these inconsistencies and contradictions returns to haunt the novel's closing pages. A Painter of Our Time begins at the chronological end of the story. Lavin has disappeared, leaving behind the journal that constitutes the novel's main narrative and a series of unanswered questions. Only in the brief final section, for which the journal has been preparing us, does it become clear that, a week after his first successful exhibition, he has returned to Hungary in order to participate in the revolution of 1956. His decision to return represents a conclusion reached only after a painful internal struggle. The pages of his journal reveal a concern not only with artistic questions but also with the consequences of the road he has taken in life. The journal discloses his fear that he has betrayed both his politics and his art. Bereft of a cultural context in which to paint, he has worked in isolation and has been socially inactive. His recent life, as he notes on the journal's first page, has been politically and artistically "eventless" (19). Politically, because he claims that "in the past I recognised myself in the critical events in which I took part" (19); artistically, because what "constitutes an event" is "not the creation of a painting," but "the way it is welcomed by others" (19).

Lavin's awareness of his marginal status permeates the entries in his journal, but as the journal unfolds, it becomes clear that he will not long continue to accept his

position as an outsider. Cut off from a social context and an artistic milieu, he will refuse, finally, to remain an historically marginal figure. Thus at the very moment when his first exhibition proves successful, he baffles his Western well-wishers by bowing to the prior claims of politics. The reader, however, has been warned that Lavin is likely to make such a choice. Towards the end of the journal, Lavin had noted that "it is not shameful to cease to be an artist" (177) and that when "Hogarth said that he would rather rid London of cruelty than paint the Sistine chapel, he was making a more than reasonable choice" (177). Lavin's desire "to be a useful man again" (145), to cease being a spectator of human life and to become a participant in it, leads him to abandon his art and return to Hungary. At the very moment when his painting is publicly recognized, he asserts his faith in the primacy of life over art and his belief that at critical historical moments the political must take precedence over the personal. Rejecting the role of emigré--in all the senses of the word that the novel has established--he returns to his homeland and symbolically enacts the movement from margin to centre by reimmersing himself in history.

It is here that the dubiety of Berger's metaphor for the artist--the emigré--is most clearly revealed. For Lavin's return to political activism entails the abandonment of art. The "homecoming"--physically a return to Hungary but symbolically a return to politics--allows him to overcome his status as an emigré but only at the cost of his ceasing to be an

artist. If the contemporary artist must be an emigré, as the text affirms, then Lavin's rejection of one role implies his renunciation of the other. The novel, which does not interpret Lavin's decision to return to Hungary, offers no explanation of what it signifies for his art. The text's silence on this point is disturbing, however, for once again it foregrounds the unresolved tension between art and politics and leaves the reader with an unanswered question--does Lavin, by renouncing art in favour of politics, solve his problem in the same way that Alexander "solved" the Gordian knot?

#### IV

G. shows how far behind Berger has left the tormented political realism of A Painter. He transforms Lavin's failure to come to terms with modernism, which Lavin acknowledges has undermined the unitary viewpoint, into the success of G. Suggesting that the Marxist metanarrative has at least partly come undone, Berger creates a multi-layered and open-ended text that articulates a heteroglossic understanding of politics and history. G.'s discontinuous and self-reflexive form discloses Berger's belief that traditional realism, occluding how deeply our conceptions of reality are structured and mediated through language, must be superseded by a literature that is both referential and self-referential.

An unmistakeably utopian impulse lies at the heart of G., but it refuses to romanticize its subject or to offer

falsely optimistic hopes for the future. This refusal represents one of the novel's main strengths. G. does not propose a different form of social life; it discloses the need for a certain kind of attitude to any given present if an alternative future is to become possible.

G.'s third section opens with a haunting dream sequence that provides a clue to the novel's concerns. Its putative author recounts a dream of a journey from darkness into light that ends in death. Although there is "a strong sense of rightness" (122) about the route being taken, he is aware that it has been abandoned, that it is "the wrong one" (122). At the very moment when the train turns the final bend and enters "an idyllic landscape" (123), it becomes clear that the route has been relinquished because the tracks lead directly into the sea. The unstoppable train hurtles into the water, and although the author escapes with his life several other passengers drown.

This dream sets up resonances that echo throughout the novel. Specifically, because it occurs just before Chavez's attempt to cross the Alps, it helps to clarify the meaning of this particular flight and foreshadows both its failure and Chavez's death. More generally, it establishes the twin motifs of dream and journey that recur throughout the text, which focuses on G.'s dream of a different world and on his internal journey from political innocence to historical self-consciousness.

Although Berger's dream, like Chavez's flight, offers a

brief and tantalising glimpse of utopia, it ends in defeat. But the novel does not try to overturn this oneiric defeat by giving a victory to the utopian hopes that, as Laura reveals, initially centre on G. himself:

She wants to worship him because with her he seems to transcend the world as it is. She desires to be totally committed to him, so that this commitment amounts to a rejection of all other claims. **She wants with her baby to start an alternative world, to propose from his new-born life a new way of living.** (24, my emphasis)

G. has already been associated with Garibaldi, whom the novel portrays as a Christ-like figure, and this passage, which alludes to the hopes inspired by Christ's birth, identifies G. as a nexus of revolutionary possibilities. But the text --eschewing the dictates of socialist realism--immediately undermines this identification and hints that it will neither make G. a heroic figure nor provide an overtly uplifting conclusion. It deflates Laura's optimism with the opening words of the next section: "Laura did not achieve the new way of living with her baby which she had wished" (27). Revolutionary aspirations may be focused on G., but the text implies that his attempts to realize them will be fraught with obstacles and may meet with little success.

G is, in fact, a curious kind of revolutionary, and his final act represents little more than a victory over himself. This victory is significant, however, because it symbolizes G.'s identification with a collective, as opposed to a personal, struggle and reveals his grasp of history as a living

present that calls upon him to participate in its creation. He understands, in short, that he can contribute to the moulding of the future only if he consciously involves himself in the activity of the present. By tracing G.'s path, the novel emphasizes that social relations are historically produced and can be transformed if women and men grasp that it is they who make history.

G. evidences a utopian spirit not because it offers blueprints for an alternative society, but because it adopts an oppositional stance in relation to the existing one--it urges a reclamation of the present in the name of the future. Thus G.'s triumph over his own past is represented through his growth into self-awareness. His internal journey, which resembles a secular Pilgrim's Progress, leads not to the Celestial City and a willing obedience to God, but to fraternity with the oppressed and a self-conscious submission to the demands of history.

V

In A Painter of Our Time Janos Lavin exclaims: "What eyes Cubism has given us! Never again can we make a painting of a single view. We now have a visual dialectic" (169). G., in turn, paraphrases this insight as follows: "Never again will a single story be told as though it were the only one" (133). These two statements help to explain the style and structure of Berger's most ambitious novel.<sup>11</sup>

According to Berger, Cubism's disruption of traditional perspective has affected narrative in that it has discredited the single viewpoint; readers are too aware of what traverses the story-line, what interferes with linear chronology and the omniscient view. A Painter of Our Time partially acts on this insight--it offers both Lavin's and the narrator's viewpoints, and it blurs past and present by allowing Lavin's thoughts to range between them freely. G. takes Cubist principles of construction still further.

Written out of a conviction that the single (implicitly omniscient) view subtly distorts reality, G. rejects the mimetic impulse of conventional realism and attempts to find a fictional form that utilizes modernist insights. For Berger the unitary view of a scene falsifies it because it omits those elements that traverse its surface diagonally--it is silent about its own aporias and uncertainties. G., by contrast, foregrounds reality's complexity by self-reflexively incorporating clashing viewpoints into its narrative fabric. Eschewing the unitary viewpoint and the chronological progression, it achieves its meanings and effects through montage and association. Berger explains his technique thus:

I have little sense of unfolding time. The relations which I perceive between things--and these often include causal and historical relations--tend to form in my mind a complex synchronic pattern. I see fields where others see chapters. And so I am forced to use another method to try to place and define events. A method which searches for co-ordinates extensively in space, rather than consequentially in time. I write in the spirit of a geometrician. One of the ways in which I establish co-ordinates extensively is by likening aspect with aspect, by way of metaphor. I do not



wish to become a prisoner of the nominal, believing that things are what I name them. (137)

This metafictional passage, which already relativizes G.'s perspective by drawing attention to its own process of construction, offers clues to Berger's central preoccupations. I propose to discuss how the novel's style is affected by two of the issues raised in this passage: time and nominalism.

It might be more accurate to say that Berger, rather than having no sense of unfolding time, has reservations about **presenting** events as they unfold in time. This is an important distinction, for Berger's style has little to do with his sense of time **per se**, but a good deal to do with the aesthetic implications of alternative narrative structures. For Berger, the linear telling of stories implies order and cohesion, at least at a formal level. Linear narrative begins and ends at a distinct point in time, and because it moves inexorably forward to its point of resolution, its trajectory and outcome have an air of inevitability about them. Berger's aim, by contrast, is to escape the bonds of determinism. Thus he opens up his narrative and focuses on process rather than outcome in order to suggest that life is not preordained, to show, as Bauman puts it, "that each moment of human history is . . . an open-ended situation . . . from which more than one string of events may follow" (10). He eschews simple chronology because he fears that it makes a narrative's trajectory seem fixed in advance and that it inclines towards a point of closure that resolves its con-

flicts into what he sees as a false unity.<sup>12</sup>

G.'s attempt to avoid determinism suggests that Berger has to a large degree moved beyond a strict adherence to Marxism. Lavin's tortured attempt to justify his art in relation to the dictates of socialist realism is replaced here by a more flexible and less theory-bound concept of fictional form. Berger's persistent efforts in G. to create a fluid narrative that stresses process over outcome reveals that socialism can no longer fully encompass his thinking. Indeed, it often seems in G. that the more pronounced his utopianism becomes, the less he is able to unify it with his Marxism.

G. not only escapes the negative implications of linear story-telling but also affirms Berger's faith in the positive aspects of alternative novelistic modes. For Berger, because a chronological account moves forwards, it is primarily oriented to the revelation of what is yet to come. Its narrative tension lies in the suspense it generates, and the reader's attention focuses on the expected resolution of events. Berger, however, much like B. S. Johnson, wishes to place novelistic emphasis elsewhere. The tension of a story, he writes in Another Way of Telling, lies "not so much in the mystery of its destination as in the mystery of the spaces between its steps towards that destination" (285). Thus G. functions largely by way of association and montage. It darts back and forth between its main story-line and diverse "petits récits" in order to draw parallels between them. Its

"fields," a series of brief **tableaux**, illuminate different aspects of the novel's central themes by linking them through the text's structure and through its repetition of motifs.

Nevertheless, despite Berger's disavowals, the question of time lies at the heart of G., for the text emphasizes the need for men and women to become historically self-conscious. In doing so, it distinguishes between the completed past and the still-unfolding present in order to suggest that, while the past cannot be altered, the present is continually open to transformation. Berger defamiliarizes social relations in order to reveal that they are historically produced because he grasps that as long as they appear to be natural they will appear to be unalterable:

Every ruling minority needs to numb and, if possible, to kill the time-sense of those whom it exploits by proposing a continuous present. This is the authoritarian secret of all methods of imprisonment. (72)

G. disrupts this proposal of continuity without end or change and tries to restore the time-sense of the exploited by reclaiming the present for purposive activism.

The novel achieves this by oscillating between present- and past-tense narration. Moments of revolutionary promise tend to be narrated in the present tense, whereas scenes of repression or disengagement from history tend to be narrated in the past tense. This has an interesting effect. Present-tense scenes sparkle with hope and drama. As each such scene unfolds before the reader, its outcome is unknown, and the success or failure of the action being described remains an

open question. By disrupting the present, by revealing the possibility that it can be transformed, the novel challenges the view that existing social relations are necessary and inevitable. Scenes of defeat, by contrast, are narrated in the past tense. They imply failure not only because they represent actions that, being in the past, cannot be changed, but also because they are described in a flat, dejected tone. Thus the entire "I Fatti Di Maggio 1898" episode, which is so rich with promise, takes place in the present tense, but the consequences of the defeat, with its air of finality, are described in the past tense.

G.'s style is equally characterized by its rejection of nominalism. Berger buttresses his contention that the single overarching perspective is an illusion with his belief in language's limitations. He suggests that although language is basically referential, it cannot exhaust the meaning of the objects which it "names." There remains a subtle, albeit fundamental, gap between the signifier and the signified. This gap, which attests to the impossibility of capturing reality fully, provides artists with the freedom to offer different readings of the world, but paradoxically also undermines them--it indicates that because no reading is complete, all readings are partial.

Berger's fear of nominalism, characterized by his open suspicion of language, pervades G. Throughout the text the author announces that he cannot convey his meaning, cannot render events imaginatively, because human experience always

escapes language. Everything that he perceives amazes him "by its particularity" (136). Hence his difficulty: "How am I to convey such uniqueness?" (136). Convinced that he is unable to, because language is not adequate to the task, he foregoes the attempt. This occurs, for example, in the scene with the two dead horses, which he abandons when unable to describe G.'s disgust: "It is beyond me to create a name for this revulsion: the ones I can think up all simplify" (49). Later he explains that "description distorts" (80), because it entails selection of "both the facts and the words describing them" (80).

A similar refusal of the single viewpoint characterises Berger's presentation of character. Although he at times adopts an omniscient perspective, he also undercuts it by frequently acknowledging his partiality and his ignorance. In particular, he tries to free his central characters from authorial determinism. Of Jocelyn and Beatrice he writes: "I do not know for how long the relationship between [them] had been incestuous" (94). Trying to explain G.'s uneasiness about his era, he admits that he cannot: "I do not know" (239). And later we are told that G. "was incapable of seeing" beyond his planned revenge on von Hartmann, but that "the degree to which we can postulate or see beyond this is the degree to which we cannot be him" (274). Berger's desire to render his characters' uniqueness and to foreground his rejection of determinism leads him to veil their actions and motivations in partial obscurity.

Although Berger often abandons his attempts to describe a scene, he is far from treating this as a debilitating failure to communicate. The reason why this is so clarifies the novel's style. Berger believes that while his silence closes one channel of communication it opens up another, possibly more meaningful one. He has, of course, long been concerned with different forms of communication, as the titles of his books suggest: About Looking, Ways of Seeing, Another Way of Telling. In G., openly announcing his distrust of language, he puts his faith in a pre-linguistic reality that can be grasped visually and sanctioned by the raw "facts" of history itself.

The conclusion to "I Fatti Di Maggio 1898," which first foregrounds sight and then authorizes what has been witnessed by an appeal to history, illustrates this well. The crowd, initially suspicious of the well-dressed boy, ceases to be hostile to him when it realizes that he cannot speak Italian. They adopt him as a mascot because they hope that he, unable to comprehend their words, will bear witness to their actions. The boy will be able to **see** what is happening, and seeing, will understand more than they could explain verbally: "If the boy cannot understand their language, he is immune to the hypocrisy of deception of words and thus can be the pure witness of their actions" (67). In the scene that follows, Berger stresses that it is what the boy sees that has a lasting effect on him. He comprehends the pain of the workers' plight despite being unable to grasp the meaning of

their words. Berger displaces language in this key scene in order to reveal its limitations:

Write anything. Truth or untruth, it is unimportant. Speak but speak with tenderness, for that is all that you can do that may help a little. Build a barricade of words, no matter what they mean. Speak so that he can be aware of your presence. Speak so that he knows that you are there not feeling his pain. Say anything for his pain is larger than any distinction you can make between truth and untruth. (75-76)

Emphasizing that certain experiences defy language's ability to render them, the novel implies--echoing the crowd--that it is not always what language alone can express that is significant.

These reservations about the nature of perception and language's referential function have important consequences for G.'s narrative mode. Berger acknowledges that certain experiences are indescribable, but maintains that, although the ineffable eludes language, rendering the storyteller speechless, it can still be communicated in other ways. In the scene described above he privileges visual understanding. But he tries to sanction this understanding by appealing, finally, to the raw events of history, in the hope that they will authorize his account. Thus Berger reintroduces a form of omniscience through a discourse that relies for its authority on the one witness he believes is reliable--history itself. Appealing again and again to what he presents as the "facts" of history, Berger suggests that they resonate with a power that, when liberated--paradoxically--by the writer's words, speaks for itself.

This appeal to history is as fascinating as it is problematic. If parts of G. recall The Pilgrim's Progress then this is particularly evident in Berger's puritan fear of the duplicity of language. His attempt to retreat to the pre-linguistic truth of events implies a dubious equation of "history" with "event" and, although his interrogation of this equation is far more searching in G. than it was in A Painter, it also discloses a similar suspicion of form and a similar desire for content to those which informed his early art criticism.

Fearing that reality always slips from under language's cloak, Berger strips language down to its bare essentials in an attempt to let the facts alone speak. Umberto's fulsome description of a fifteen kilometre tunnel, for example, which he labels "a marvel of science" (7), is interrupted by the following interjection: "(The St Gothard tunnel was opened in 1882. Eight hundred men lost their lives in its construction.)" (7). The imaginative account of the misery and poverty of the Milan workers is similarly interrupted: "(The eldest of these girls earns less than 10d a day.)" (68). G. includes many such small interjections and at key narrative moments falls back on the authority of this historical discourse. Thus at the end of "I Fatti Di Maggio 1898" Berger writes: "I cannot continue this account of the eleven-year-old boy in Milan on 6 May 1898" (77). This admission of defeat is followed by a summation of the scene that purports to be both authentic and authoritative because of its claim



to historical veracity:

Between 6 May, when martial law was declared in Milan, and 9 May one hundred workers were killed and four hundred and fifty wounded. Those four days marked the end of a phase of Italian history. Socialist leaders began to lay more and more stress on parliamentary social democracy and all attempts at direct revolutionary action--or revolutionary defence--were abandoned. Simultaneously the ruling class adopted new tactics towards the workers and the peasantry; crude repression gave way to political manipulation. For the next twenty years in Italy--as in most of the rest of Europe--the spectre of revolution was banished from men's minds. (77)

It is difficult to respond to this form of appeal to historical evidence for two reasons: first, because the tone of a passage such as this one seems objective--it appears merely to "report"--it succeeds in establishing a rhetorical power over the reader; second, because despite the apparent neutrality of such a passage, its strategic location within the text communicates Berger's heartfelt compassion for the oppressed and implicitly engages the reader's own sympathy. It is easy to understand why Berger, fearing that the palpable awfulness of human suffering can be concealed by language, seeks to minimize his use of words in an attempt to avoid obscuring that suffering. Berger, however, is no naive empiricist and is aware both that "facts" are partly constituted through interpretation and, as G. itself demonstrates, that there can be no univocal account of history. Thus his appeal to an authoritative historical discourse, which G.'s general narrative mode partly undermines, reveals an important tension in his work.

## VI

When discussing a novel whose title is the name of its central protagonist, it seems reasonable to focus on this figure, and several critics have done so. David James, in particular, has suggested that to read G. is to begin with G. himself and has offered an interesting account of the novel's structure, pointing out that its four sections correspond to G.'s birth, adolescence, maturity, and death. The text provides, James argues, an "orthodox pattern of psychological determination" (99).

This, as far as it goes, seems helpful. But puzzling questions remain. What is the relevance of a psychological reading to a novel whose main personage is never given a full name, but is known only by an initial? Why is he referred to only as "the boy" throughout the first third of the novel? And why, when Berger finally "names" him, does he stress the arbitrariness and apparent insignificance of this act: "Among them is the principal protagonist of this book, whom I will now call, for the sake of convenience, G." (127)?

One does not need to go as far as Ian Craib, who describes G. as a "walking phenomenological reduction" (322), to see that a psychological understanding of G. will not do. The novel G., in fact, rings the changes on those eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novels that tried to reflect their eras by describing representative lives. It suggests that the individual has become a cipher and, far from being central to history, exists ineffectually on its margins.

Nevertheless, although G. undermines the individual, it does not suggest that human beings are irrelevant to history. It aims, rather, to portray the interplay between historical forces that are beyond any individual's control and the actions of individuals (and groups) who are inescapably implicated in history and who help to shape it.

If I begin with G. myself it is because I wish to stress the importance of moving beyond him. The novel can neither be understood if G. occupies centre stage alone, nor if he is conceived primarily in psychological terms. The text makes it clear that G. is not a traditional character: it does not name him until a third of the book has unfolded; it denies him a proper name; and it stresses his intertextual status through a series of allusions to Don Juan, Garibaldi, Chavez, and the devil. Berger presents G. both as a living character who has a genuine existence and as a relatively minor figure who is little more than the insignificant cipher that his "name" evokes. Moreover, the novel renders G.'s status ambiguous both by focussing on his life and by displacing him from its narrative centre at critical moments. Thus it reduces his importance within the text and suggests that its subject is equally history itself.

Berger's purpose is as subtle as it is complex. His aim is not to erase the individual altogether (as some postmodern writers have been quick to do), but to suggest that, although his or her scope for activity has been severely reduced by the events of recent history, s/he can and must still

participate in them. Whereas the view of the individual as history's puppet has recently become commonplace, Berger, far from acceding to it, suggests that the puppet can still give its master a few hard knocks. History in G. resembles an enormous network in which a myriad lines clash. While the individual can act, s/he is also at the mercy of events over which s/he has little control. History is at once local, occurring in what Graham Swift calls "the here-and-now," and global, happening everywhere else. G. is both cipher and individual because whereas on a local scale he is a fully participating actor **on** history's stage, on a global scale he is acted **upon** by a historical stage that dwarfs him.

G.'s four sections correspond, as James has noted, to different periods in G.'s life, but they also exhibit other structural parallels. The first section, which introduces the novel's main protagonist and hints at its main themes, stands apart from the remaining sections. These, all of comparable length, share two distinct features: each contains a turbulent historical episode in which G. is implicated and in relation to which he must define himself; each contains discussions or enactments of historical moments that have little direct bearing on the events being narrated. Section 2 features the "I Fatti di Maggio 1898" uprising, together with a discussion of Boer colonialism and an account of "The Great Amaxosa Delusion." Section 3 includes the flight of Chavez, as well as the analysis of "A Situation of Women." Section 4 contains the Trieste riot, together with a

description of the Young Bosnians and an account of the Battle of Auvers Ridge. Each of these moments illuminates different aspects of the imperialism that Berger perceives to be at the heart of late nineteenth-century history: class oppression ("I Fatti di Maggio 1898," Trieste); sexual oppression (Beatrice, Camille, "A Situation of Women"); and national oppression (the Boers, "The Great Amaxosa Delusion," the Hapsburgs).

If history in G. resembles a series of clashing lines, as I have suggested, then the purpose of the structure outlined above becomes clearer. Berger situates G. within history, makes him an active participant in its creation. At the same time he draws attention to events that significantly alter history's course, but which, taking place elsewhere, do not directly influence G. Trying to evoke the complexity of history, Berger suggests that the individual is directly involved in the historical process because s/he is always located at the nodal point of certain intersecting lines, but is also implicated in wider events and socio-cultural formations over which s/he has little control. At the same time, by establishing parallels between different, apparently unrelated, aspects of history--through structural montage, repetition of motifs, and allusion--he develops a thought-provoking critique of imperialism.

## VII

Three historical events are of crucial importance to G.'s development: the Milan uprising of 1898, the flight of Chavez, and the riot in Trieste. The incidents in Milan and Trieste, moreover, which occur at the beginning and end of the novel respectively, blur in a way that sheds light on the meaning of G.'s life. The three incidents are related to one another in several ways, but the motif of the crowd (and G.'s relation to it) is perhaps the most significant. Thus in Milan, G., caught up in the fervour of a crowd whose despair he feels but whose grievances he cannot grasp, is a silent spectator. In Brig, while Chavez attempts to cross the Alps, G. is an uninterested outsider. Finally, in Trieste, recalling his Milan experience and better able to comprehend it, he immerses himself in the crowd and declaring his solidarity with it becomes one of its leaders.

The crowd motif is central to G., for it represents the hopes of all oppressed classes. To members of the ruling class, such as Umberto, crowds are redolent of the mob to be feared. An ineluctable link between crowds, madness, and revolution is established in the novel's opening pages. Umberto, who perceives madness as "native to Livorno" (9), understands that "it breaks out only spasmodically" (9), but each time madness does break out it reminds him of his first terrifying experience of it in the shape of a crowd--i **teppisti** of 1848. Because the symbol of the crowd is so important to G. I quote this first account in full:

Such a crowd is a solemn test of a man. It assembles as a witness to its common fate--within which personal differentiations have become unimportant. This fate has consisted, so far as its own memory is concerned, of continual deprivation and humiliation. Yet its appetites have not atrophied. A single pair of eyes, met in that crowd, are enough to reveal the extent of its possible demands. And most of these demands will be impossible to meet. Inevitably, the discrepancy will lead to violence: as inevitably as the crowd is inexorably there. It has assembled to demand the impossible. It has assembled to avenge the discrepancy. Its need is to overthrow the order which has defined and distinguished between the possible and the impossible at its expense, for generation after generation. In face of such a crowd there are only two ways in which a man, who is not already of it, can react. Either he sees in it the promise of mankind or else he fears it absolutely. The promise of mankind is not easy to see there. You are not of them. Only if you have previously prepared yourself, will you see the promise. (10)

Umberto feared the crowd of 1848 and "justified his fear by believing that they were mad" (10).<sup>13</sup> Significantly, what he calls madness is "what threatens the social structure in which he lives as a privileged being" (11). But the sanity or madness of a crowd depends on one's position in relation to it. For this reason, G.'s responses to three different crowds, at three climactic textual moments, clarify the stages of his growth into an awareness of the individual's historical responsibilities.

At the age of twelve, G. finds himself immersed in a crowd whose demands are beyond his comprehension. Because he speaks no Italian, "the significance of most of what he sees is ambiguous" (66). But Berger makes it clear, as I have argued, that although G.'s understanding of what he witnesses

is limited, it is nevertheless important to his development. "I Fatti Di Maggio 1898" functions, in fact, as G.'s first lesson in the brutality of politics and history. Although his grasp of the events that sweep him up is small, his perceptions, because he shares its perspective, are the same as the crowd's. For the first time in his life, he sees the view from below: "A line of cavalry approaches. The nearest horse rears above a huddled group. The boy has never as yet seen from the ground a horse used as a weapon. Like his uncle he has always been a rider" (69). He empathizes with the crowd because, although he is ostensibly a spectator, he shares its vulnerable position.

As the crowd is slaughtered, the Roman girl who has adopted G. as her **affianzato** whispers her imaginary dreams to him, speaking of another life and of the gifts he will buy her: white stockings and a hat with chiffon round it. To G., the meaning of her words is insignificant; of importance "is that what he is seeing, he is seeing in her presence" (72). Language, Berger is at pains to stress, is irrelevant here. Thus when G. experiences his epiphany he is initially unable to put it into words. Transfixed by the Roman girl's face as she splashes water on his own, he realises that "never before has a second person's expression appeared to express what he is feeling" (75). But it is only later that he can verbalize the revelation's meaning: "what matters is what her expression in the yard confirmed but what, until this moment, was wordless. What matters is not being dead"



(79).

G. dramatizes the Milan debacle vividly. Its meaning is more fully brought out in the following chapter, however, when the suffering that the boy has witnessed in Italy is linked to another form of oppression--colonialism. The text's debt to Cubism's multiple perspectives is nowhere more apparent than in this chapter. The narrative, a montage of fragments that oscillate between Beatrice's seduction of the boy and her experience of Africa, defamiliarizes Boer imperialism by placing it in several contexts and viewing it from a variety of perspectives. Defamiliarization, indeed, lies at the heart of the chapter; just as G. glimpsed the perspective of the Milan crowd, Beatrice glimpses that of the colonized Africans.<sup>14</sup> As a result, both of them grasp for the first time that the values and beliefs of their class, which they had implicitly shared, are far from disinterested.

Unlike Laura, Beatrice has no interest in politics or history. Discussions of these topics bore her. Because of this, however, "her time and her attention were frequently unoccupied. And this is what led to her disturbance, to the possibility of the sub-continent haunting her" (103). Beatrice is free of prejudice, she lacks "the protection of ready-made generalizations and judgements" (103), and this enables her to see Africa with fresh eyes. Thus "she began to feel, between the interstices of formal social convention, the violence of the hatred, the violence of what would be avenged" (103-104).

Beatrice imagines that everything around her is "being tilted" (98) and the novel describes her experience as a "disturbance" and a "delusion." But words such as these, with their connotations of madness and dreams, possess ambiguous overtones in G. The crowd in Livorno, which is fighting for its birthright, seems "mad" to Umberto. Weymann describes the early aviators, who symbolize another crowd's utopian aspirations, as "a little mad" (129). And Hennequin, amused when Camille wonders if anyone will ever fly to the moon, patronisingly labels her "an extremist, a dreamer" (157).<sup>15</sup> Beatrice's delusion, moreover, is associated with another--"The Great Amaxosa Delusion." The Amaxosa, believing in a prophecy that promises to rid Africa of the white man, slaughter their own cattle. As a result, almost the entire tribe is decimated, as fifty thousand of its members starve to death. The text offers no comment, but notes only that this "delusion" constituted the ultimate stage of the Amaxosa nation's defence of its independence" (99).<sup>16</sup> Thus Beatrice's delusion, which discloses her sense of oppression, is juxtaposed with the tribe's delusion, which offers a horrifying testimony to the possible consequences of colonialism.

The link that has been established between Beatrice and the Amaxosa is subsequently extended to G. Of those Amaxosa who survived, the novel notes, many became wage slaves. The next fragment shows G. questioning Umberto about the slaves chained to the statue of Ferdinand I. This scene bridges the

distance--psychological as well as geographical--between Italy and Africa by hinting at the parallels between the oppression of slaves and that of workers. This is followed by an account of Boer history that reveals Berger's view of what lies at the heart of imperialism:

In South Africa the Boers were unable to establish such a self-justifying "moral" hegemony. They could accommodate neither victory nor victims. They could draw up no treaty with those whom they had dispossessed. There was no settlement possible, because they were unable to use what they had taken. There was consequently less hypocrisy or complacency or corruption among the Boers than among other colonizers. (103)

Berger suggests that the Boers, because they failed to cloak their depredations, reveal the true nature of all forms of colonialism.<sup>17</sup>

While the events of "I Fatti di Maggio 1898" and "The Great Amaxosa Delusion" are presented from the point of view of the dispossessed, the flight of Geo Chavez represents the individual's struggle to go beyond what has been deemed possible. The meaning of Chavez's achievement is established, however, by the crowd that gathers to pay tribute to him. This crowd is different "in spirit and formation" from "the crowd which had assembled in the piazza in May 1898" (127), but their hopes and dreams are fundamentally the same:

He is the first man to fly the Alps; he has done what was previously thought impossible. It is a momentous event that we are witnessing, yet, look! it is simpler than we imagined, he is flying straighter than a bird and effortlessly, and that is how he has flown over the Alps; achieving greatness is perhaps less hard than we have been led to believe. This sequence of

feelings (formulated in many different ways) leads to a conclusion of sudden elation. Why can we not all achieve what we wish? (141)

Yet Chavez, although he crosses the Alps, crashes on landing and loses his life. His symbolic achievement is transformed into a defeat. For "the straggling procession of thousands" (212) who come to pay their respects at Chavez's funeral, his death is a tragedy. At the sight of Chavez's victory "being apparently so easily gained, in face of the impossible being so quickly transformed into the possible" (212), elation had provoked a question: "Why should we too not achieve what we wish?" (212). With Chavez's death, however, "the question was closed" (213); the only choice was between "accepting life as it is and dying a hero's death" (213).

Chavez's flight, one individual's attempt to transform the impossible into the possible, to make a "reality" out of "the great utopia of yesterday" (212), represents a journey with a clear (symbolic) destination. G. grasps this. While the pragmatic Weymann deplores Chavez's foolhardiness, G. praises his achievement, asserting that he "has shown that something was possible which people thought impossible" (147). But G. excludes himself from Chavez's enterprise. When Weymann, who views the aviators as makers of history, offers to teach G. to fly, G. demurs, claiming that he is more interested in their maid. Thus while the crowd watches Chavez's flight and nervously awaits its outcome, G. seduces Leonie. Weymann, unable to comprehend G.'s self-centredness, lambastes him: "Amongst these men, these men who fill the

town like pilgrims and lend it their dignity, there is a little--there is a little runt!" (211).

This indictment is not wholly accurate. While it is evident that, in contrast to Milan, G. deliberately places himself outside history here, he nevertheless pursues a personal vendetta against another form of social injustice--sexual inequality.<sup>18</sup> In "A Situation of Women," a paraphrase of the argument he advances in Ways of Seeing, Berger clarifies G.'s actions. Berger takes women's commodity status as his point of departure. For him it is clear that nineteenth-century women, who "were born into the keeping of men" (149), were treated like forms of property and used to reflect their husbands' power and glory. What particularly interests him, however, is how this situation affected women's psyches. He argues that women, in order to survive, had to see themselves as men saw them and were thus "split into two" (149). Every woman was accompanied "by her own image of herself" and "came to consider the surveyor and the surveyed within her as the two constituent yet always distinct elements of her identity as a woman" (149). Ultimately, a woman's "own sense of being **in herself** was supplanted by a sense of being appreciated **as herself** by another" (149). G., in contrast, desires to see Camille as she is because he wants to free her from the control of the men who own and define her. Hence his insistence that she be "'solitary' (i.e., unsurveyed by her own agency)" (153).

G.'s seduction of Camille is in large part provoked by

his hatred of the bourgeoisie. His attempt to liberate Camille, which in itself is highly questionable, is rendered still more problematic when it becomes clear that he is using Camille to attack Hennequin, a representative of the class G. despises. Nevertheless, G.'s critique of the bourgeoisie, although flawed, establishes a link between him and Chavez, and hints at the similarities between their projects.

Given the text's obsession with the question of time, the nature of G.'s attack on the bourgeoisie is particularly revealing. He despises them less for their wealth than for the power that their wealth represents; specifically, he fears their power to impose that sense of a "continuous present" against which the Milan workers and the Amaxosa battled: "I do not want to live indefinitely in a world which you dominate; life in such a world would be short. Life would choose death rather than your company" (180-81). Chavez, of course, symbol of life's best aspirations, loses his own life in the fight to reveal that the eternal present--that of existing social relations--can be challenged. G. shares his aspirations:

Why should I fear you? . . . . I shall be beyond the far reaches of your ridiculous and monstrous continuity, as Geo Chavez has gone. I shall be dead, so why should I fear?

I fear the idea now: the idea of your immortality: the idea of the eternity you impose upon the living before they are dead. (181)

In Milan, G.'s revelation taught him the value of life. Here the revelation is qualified by a question: what is the value

of life when hope has been killed?

G.'s fourth section brings the novel's various concerns to a climax. In particular, it focuses on the enigma of G. himself and on the impact of the events that culminated in the Great War. Thus the novel, whose events take place within a time-frame that extends from 1848 to 1914, begins with the revolutions that transformed nineteenth-century Europe and concludes with the war that transformed twentieth-century Europe. History, indeed, assumes an ever greater importance in this final section, as Berger evokes the urgency of the times by offering brief snapshots of the key events that led to the outbreak of war and by rapidly cutting between them.

The depiction of the Battle of Auvers Ridge illustrates this technique. At the same time, it offers another example of Berger's view that history in part consists of forces over which individuals have no control but which may nevertheless massively affect them. In a series of brief paragraphs, the text cuts between its protagonists, who pursue their plans and intrigues in ignorance of events taking place elsewhere, and the slaughter of Flanders Field. While a war that will transform the world begins, individuals, blissfully unaware of how their lives will be altered, behave as though nothing were happening. Berger does not indict them, for they cannot know of what is occurring elsewhere. He suggests, rather, that while the individual can at times make a difference to history's course (Chavez), at other times s/he is at the

mercy of historical events.

The novel concentrates on one aspect of the many factors that combined to produce war--the Young Bosnians. In doing so, it offers a last portrayal of imperialism, focusing in particular on how imperialism tries to maintain power by controlling its subjects' languages. The text hints at the importance of this issue when G. first meets Nusa, for when he asks her to speak in Slovene she replies: "Most Italians despise our language" (221). The Young Bosnians, who are described in some detail, seek to free the Slavs from the despotism of Hapsburg rule, which denies them their national identity. The impulse that motivates them is the same as the impulse that motivated the Amaxosa, the workers in Milan, and the peasants at Brig, for these "peoples" were also fighting for their respective identities. Thus Gavrilo Princip's assassination of Franz Ferdinand is linked to those earlier moments of revolt:

It reaffirmed the natural law of justice. It demonstrated that even crimes committed in the name of order and progress would not go forever unavenged: crimes of coercion, exploitation, oppression, false testimony, intimidation, administrative indifference. But above all, the crime of denying a people their identity. The crime of compelling a people to judge themselves by the criteria of their oppressors and so to find themselves inferior, helpless, and wanting. (226)

But the desperate action of a Serbian fighting for his nation's freedom is implicated in a wider net of events and provokes the outbreak of the Great War. Bojan recognizes that what has begun has gone beyond the Young Bosnians' relatively limited



goals, for the war will change everything: "What is happening to the world, Nusa, has never happened before" (228).

As international tensions escalate, the text once again returns to the enigma of G. He is likened to Garibaldi, Don Juan, and Chavez; to Nusa he resembles a ghost; Donato regards him as a dreamer; and Raffaele thinks him a traitor. G., in turn, claims that he is neither a believer "in the Great Causes" (241) nor "a dreamer" (246). Berger, in keeping with his rejection of determinism, refuses to solve the riddle. He acknowledges, however, that G. "was aware of the fateful days Trieste was living through" (274) and notes that he could have been "aware of them as an accompaniment to his own" (275). The momentous events that are transforming the world comprise the backdrop against which G., changing the direction of his previous life, enacts his own self-transformation. For what he "intended to do at the Stadttheater was the contrary of all he had done since the end of his childhood" (274).

The meaning of this self-transformation can only be understood in relation to the novel's concern with time. Running from the Stadttheater with Nusa, G. grasps that his adult life has been framed by his experiences in Milan and Trieste, which now blend into a single continuous moment: "he was still running the same run and in the course of it the Roman girl had grown into the woman, all of whose clothes he had bought, now running fast but heavily beside him" (296). Unable to distinguish between the two women, because of the "mysterious continuity" (297) in their expressions, G. grasps that his

adult life has taken place "between the first and the second face" (297). Yet this realization has disturbing consequences, for "he found it impossible to separate one memory from another . . . . Memory alternately stretched and compressed his life until, under this form of torture, time became meaningless" (301).

G. feels as though he is stationary in time, trapped in a "continuous present." And this is exactly what he has always feared. When he excoriated the bourgeoisie, as we remember, he focused on their power over time, fearing "the idea of the eternity [they] impose upon the living before they are dead" (181). But now, trying to put a distance "between himself and his past" (302), G. feels imprisoned by time himself:

He had come to the point of feeling condemned to live even the present in the past tense. What had not yet happened was merely a section of his past not yet revealed. When they released him from the police station, he had the impression of walking back, regardless of the direction he chose, towards the past, towards the life he had lived before von Hartmann had offered him Marika and he plotted to take Nusa to the Stadttheater. Whatever he chose was like re-entering a choice he had made before, a choice of which the consequences had already taken place. The opportunities before him were illusory. Time refused to face him. (305-306)

G. desires "to defy time" (303), however, desires to avoid re-entering a choice already made. Seeking to escape entrapment in a life determined by his own past, a life that would condemn him to continue running the same run, he bows to the exigencies of the present and re-enters history. As he walks

towards the docks, he meets one last crowd and joining them begins "to walk with [them] in their direction" (307).

The significance of G.'s involvement in the riot that ensues is unmistakable. His participation represents the fulfillment of his debt to the Milan workers slaughtered in 1898.<sup>19</sup> Just as Nusa and the Roman girl have blurred in his mind, so the crowds of Milan and Trieste are connected.

The Milan crowd was ignorant "of the reality of politics" (69); in Trieste, few members of the crowd "had any political theory" (311). The Milan crowd was "suppressed and impoverished" (69); in Trieste, the crowd have "in common . . . their poverty and destination" (307). But whereas in Milan G. was a spectator and in Brig an outsider, in Trieste, attempting to live meaningfully in the present, he becomes, finally, a participant and a leader.

It is only now that Berger's use of a passage from R. G. Collingwood's The Idea of History, which appeared earlier in the novel, becomes fully meaningful:

All history is contemporary history: not in the ordinary sense of the word, where contemporary history means the history of the comparatively recent past, but in the strict sense: the consciousness of one's own activity as one actually performs it. History is thus the self-knowledge of the living mind. (54)

G.'s final steps cannot be read in a directly political way and the novel concludes on a note of ambiguity. Just as Lavin's return to Hungary affirms Berger's belief in the need for individuals to be politically involved but says nothing about the path such involvement should take, so G.'s final

acts symbolize only his commitment to participate in history. But Berger's hopes rest on such commitments--he is convinced that if society is to be freed from an eternal present which proposes that everything will always remain the same, then men and women must become conscious of themselves as historical beings.

### VIII

Berger remains an overtly political writer and thinker. Yet over the years both his politics and his artistry have become more subtle. Indeed, although he is still a utopian novelist, the less explicitly he identifies with Marxism as a systematic body of thought the more challenging his work becomes. Berger is stimulated by Marxism and his thinking continues to be informed by its concerns, but it is no longer the sole metanarrative to which he gives his allegiance. Thus whereas in A Painter he struggles to justify a committed realism that is often both simplistic and internally contradictory, in G., although its theorization of history is problematic, he succeeds in creating a multivocal political narrative that continues to be thought-provoking.

Focusing on G.'s debt to Cubism, David E. James argues that, like Cubist art, Berger's novel is both referential and self-referential; it attacks both naive realism and pure abstraction. As James notes, G. is an open-ended text that

avoids closure. This is so because for Berger human action in the present is oriented to an always unknown future, which it endeavours to bring closer. Consider, for example, his explanation of what he believes political writing should be:

We live in a world in which we are surrounded by a very tall and gigantic wall, almost invisible, which cuts us off from any very different past.

. . . . .  
If we live within that wall, the most profound political function of the writer is somehow to try to describe what is happening within, as if it were addressed to those who might be in the future outside, on the other side of that wall . . . .

I am saying that all works should be addressed to that possible future, because mostly inarticulated, often with a sense of great political importance, little bits of that future actually exist within everybody who is trapped within the wall . . . .

One has to have a much longer view--endurance actually. It is simply to keep hope alive. It is a question of putting hands around that flame.  
(Quillian 94)

Berger's novels, testaments of his long-term outlook, his refusal to give up hope, and his faith in a different world, rewrite the past from the perspective of the present in order to send a message to the future.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Thus in A Painter of Our Time, Janos Lavin stresses that modernism's disruptions of traditional realism have been so far-reaching that a return to pre-modernist representationalism is impossible:

I am not a great innovator--none of my generation has been. But the best of us have fixed a way of painting, a way of looking at the world which cannot now be gone back upon. (200)

<sup>2</sup> Berger may well have been influenced by Brecht here, who writes:

Methods become exhausted; stimuli no longer work. New problems appear and demand new methods. Reality changes; in order to represent it, modes of representation must also change. (Aesthetics and Politics 82)

<sup>3</sup> Brecht notes: "For instance if someone makes a statement which is untrue--or irrelevant--merely because it rhymes, then he is a formalist" (Aesthetics and Politics 72).

<sup>4</sup> Brecht puts it as follows:

Realistic means: discovering the causal complexes of society / unmasking the prevailing view of things as the view of those who are in power / writing from the standpoint of the class which offers the broadest solutions for the pressing difficulties in which human society is caught up. (Aesthetics and Politics 82)

<sup>5</sup> Lukacs's The Theory of the Novel was written in 1915. It belongs to his pre-Marxist Hegelian phase and in a 1962 "Preface" to the book he criticizes it severely. Alluding to his subsequent discovery of Marxism, he explains that "it was written in a mood of permanent despair over the state of the world. It was not until 1917 that I found an answer to the problems which, until then, had seemed insoluble" (12).

<sup>6</sup> Bakhtin, in turn, sees the novel as born of social heteroglossia; by allowing previously marginalized groups to represent themselves and to challenge, however tentatively, hegemonic groups, it too offers the possibility of change. The very revelation of heteroglossia, like the multiple viewpoints of Cubism, reveals the inauthenticity of monologic perspectives and shatters their legitimating powers. Both Lukacs and Bakhtin, although their organizing frameworks are

different, see the novel as the form **par excellence** that can challenge existing socio-political orders.

<sup>7</sup> In his 1962 "Preface" to The Theory of the Novel Lukacs explains that it was written out of a utopian impulse:

"[It] is not conservative but subversive in nature, even if based on a highly naive and totally unfounded utopianism--the hope that a natural life worthy of man can spring from the disintegration of capitalism and the destruction, seen as identical with that disintegration, of the lifeless and life-denying social and economic categories. (20)

Given these comments, it is easy to see why Berger would be drawn to The Theory of the Novel. What is particularly interesting, however, is that whereas Lukacs moved away from utopianism and toward Marxism, Berger seems to have moved away from Marxism and toward utopianism.

<sup>8</sup> The text informs us that Lavin had been a supporter of Bela Khun (129) but it offers no clear description of his present political beliefs.

<sup>9</sup> For Lavin, painting is a vocation; for the members of the art "establishment" it is a profession. The abstract painter H--, who is otherwise a sympathetic figure, seems primarily concerned with sales. As the first day of his and Lavin's respective exhibitions draws to a close, he remarks: "'Good. You've holed Montreal. I've got Melbourne and Chicago. Not so bad. Not so bad. Eh?'" (230). Lavin, by contrast, responds to Max's claim that the day was a success because he "'made \$2000 in one day!'" by ironically commenting: "'That is one way of putting it'" (231).

<sup>10</sup> I am arguing that the contradictions in Lavin's thinking reveal contradictions in Berger's own thinking because the novel establishes a strong link between its author and its central protagonist. The narrator who discovers Lavin's diary is called "John" and his commentary on the diary is always respectful, often admiring, but almost never ironic. "John" frequently contrasts Lavin's simplicity and integrity with the decadence and hypocrisy of the London art world, and he too believes in strongly representational art. At one point Lavin writes of "John" that he admired a painting "because he needs to believe in my genius to prove some obscure point that dominates his mind" (74). The narrator does not disagree.

<sup>11</sup> In this section I discuss the rationale behind G.'s style and focus on its main features. Because the novel's style is closely linked to its structure and because its techniques develop and illustrate the text's themes, I have chosen to provide detailed examples in the following section, which discusses G.'s structural and thematic components.

<sup>12</sup> Thus Berger abandons his account of "I Fatti Di Maggio 1898" and writes:

To stop here, despite all that I leave unsaid, is to admit more of the truth than will be possible if I bring the account to a conclusion. The writer's desire to finish is fatal to the truth. The End unifies. Unity must be established in another way. (77)

This last sentence makes it clear that Berger is not opposed to unity as such but, rather, to the kind of unity that is achieved by closure.

<sup>13</sup> This passage is interesting in that it portrays the crowd as a spectator rather than an actor. The crowd, in other words, described as a "witness" to its own fate in the first sentence of the passage, is already identified with the onlooker described in the last four sentences of the paragraph. For Berger, the key point is how this onlooker responds to the crowd. Whereas Umberto can only fear it, G. identifies with its suffering, as my subsequent analysis makes clear.

<sup>14</sup> Most critics discuss Beatrice's "delusion" in some detail. See in particular George Szanto, who argues, rightly I think, that Berger perceives defamiliarization to be the committed artist's best weapon against capitalist culture.

<sup>15</sup> Berger achieves two things here. First, he makes a joke at the expense of the execrable Hennequin, who ridicules the idea that one day human beings may be able to fly to the moon. Second, because Berger knows that this has since been made possible, he suggests, a crucial point for this novel, that supposedly unattainable dreams can be transformed into reality.

<sup>16</sup> Berger's refusal to question the Amaxosa's perception of events--revealed by the scare quotes which he places round the word "delusion"--is problematic, especially given his own invocation of historically reliable evidence. The Amaxosa's decision to pay no attention to the white man's warnings of impending famine functions both as a declaration of independence and as a sign of their inability to engage colonialism on the grounds of the rationality that gives it superior power. Furthermore, Berger, who elsewhere in G., as I have argued, de-



pend on a rational occidental concept of what passes for valid historical knowledge, suppresses all information that would present the colonizers in a slightly better light. Consider, for example, what Elias Canetti, who discusses the Amaxosa delusion at length in Crowds and Power, has to say:

The government did everything possible to protect the frontiers. Watch posts were strengthened and every available soldier was dispatched there. The colonists, too, prepared to meet the shock. As soon as the defences had been seen to, provisions were laid in to save the lives of the starving.  
(229)

Later, he writes that "thousands of lives were saved by the stocks of food laid in by the government" (230). In drawing attention to Canetti's comments I do not seek to act as an apologist for colonialism but to stress the selective nature of Berger's critique of it.

17 Berger perhaps reveals his (Marxist?) yearning for a clear-cut struggle in which the boundaries are tidily drawn. His willingness to succumb to this kind of historical simplification--which parallels those problematic appeals to historical "fact"--once again suggests that on occasion his utopianism prevents him from admitting the complexities of reality.

18 Much has been written on G. as a reworking of the Don Juan myth. Here, Weymann's criticism of G. corresponds to similar criticisms of Juan in the source texts. But Weymann misses the point of G.'s behaviour at Brig, which is clearly that of Hoffmann's idealist Juan: "[T]he thought entered Don Juan's mind that through love, through the enjoyment of woman, he might obtain on earth what dwells in our hearts merely as a heavenly promise" (Weinstein 82).

19 McCallum writes of this concluding scene:

History and praxis turn out to be incomparably more important than the palpitations of desire. If G. begins his life as a sexually promiscuous Don Juan, he concludes it by joining the Slovene crowd in the street. (75)

## I

Life, according to Plato, resembles a pilgrimage from appearance to reality. Iris Murdoch concurs. But whereas Plato distrusted art, fearing that it might become a false substitute for the pursuit of truth and virtue through philosophy, Murdoch sees it as the highest embodiment of that very quest. In The Sovereignty of Good she argues that art and morality are not to be contrasted, for in their concern with truth and virtue they are "two aspects of a single struggle" (41). Thus in The Fire and the Sun, her brief book on Plato, she maintains that genuine art both "points in the direction of the good" (77) and shows us "the world as we were never able so clearly to see it before" (78). Recasting Plato, she concludes that art, life's handmaiden, is itself "about the pilgrimage from appearance to reality" (80).

Many of Murdoch's novels, which ask whether this pilgrimage can be completed, focus on language in order to examine the ways in which it both aids and impedes human knowledge. As Murdoch explained in a review of Elias Canetti's Crowds and Power: "The paradox of our situation is that we must have theories about human nature, no theory explains everything, yet it is just the desire to explain everything which is the spur of theory" (Wolfe 47). Her novels explore this very paradox, giving rise to a complex canon that veers between the two modes she designates "open" and "closed."<sup>1</sup>

The form of Murdoch's novels is difficult to pin down. On the whole, critics concur that she is not a realist, but

they differ in their descriptions of her work. She is a fabulator (Scholes, Todd); a symbolist (Martin); a fantasist (Stevenson, Kriegel); and a magic realist (Conradi). Furthermore, as John Burke Jr. points out, critics argue that her work falls into distinct phases, but perceive them quite differently.<sup>2</sup>

I do not attempt to resolve these disputes. Rather, by focussing on her theory of fiction and then on three of her novels--Under the Net (1954); The Unicorn (1963); and The Black Prince (1973)--I examine the ways that Murdoch, combining aspects of realism with an internal questioning of them, explores the problem of representation. Distinguishing between journalistic (open) and crystalline (closed) literary modes, which she attempts to fuse in her own work, Murdoch displays both her allegiance to realism and her consciousness of its limitations. Under the Net humorously asks whether language reveals the world, giving us genuine knowledge of it, or conceals it, providing us with duplicitous nets that falsify it. The Unicorn, in turn, inscribing a secondary story inside its outer frame, focuses on how the act of reading that story (a metaphor for interpreting reality itself) is conditioned by the literary patterns imposed on the text by its readers. Finally, The Black Prince, moving from textual readers to textual novelists, is a metafictional text that explores the nature of fiction in order to show that literature does not reflect the world but attempts to endow it with meaning through the aesthetic use of humankind's

supreme tool--language.

## II

Between 1959 and 1961 Iris Murdoch wrote three important essays: "The Sublime and the Good" (1959), "The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited" (1959), and "Against Dryness" (1961). Examining the weaknesses of both liberal theory (particularly its account of the personality) and late Romanticism, she criticized their negative influence on the post-war novel and outlined an alternative aesthetic position. Although her views have since developed, this first articulation of the issues remains central to her thought and to her novelistic practice.

In "The Sublime and the Good" and "The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited" Murdoch revises Kant's aesthetics. Outlining Kant's distinction between the beautiful (imagination and understanding in harmony) and the sublime (imagination and reason in conflict), she notes that whereas Kant treats the beautiful as "an analogy of the good" (1959b 45), he considers that the sublime **partakes** of the good because it "sets the mind in motion and resembles the exercise of the will in moral judgment" (45). For Murdoch, there are two problems in Kant's position: he reduces art to beauty; he is unable to see the sublime in anything other than nature. Kant argues that art is pure, perceptual, immediate, and uncontaminated by cognition; it is found in birdsong, flowers, a perfectly moulded vase. His ideal art objects, writes Murdoch, are

"simple, clean things not tainted by any historical or human particularity" (51). Thus he fails to accord any value to particularity and refuses to acknowledge its connection with cognition and the sublime. For Murdoch, he has misconstrued the sublime:

Art and morals are, with certain provisos which I shall mention in a moment, one. Their essence is the same. The essence of both of them is love. Love is the perception of individuals. Love is the extremely difficult realisation that something other than oneself is real. Love, and so art and morals, is the discovery of reality. What stuns us into a realisation of our supersensible destiny is not, as Kant imagined, the formlessness of nature, but rather its unutterable particularity; and most particular and individual of all natural things is the mind of man. (51-52)

This dense passage, with its emphasis on "the discovery of reality," summarizes Murdoch's position. She contends that goodness and truth, the pursuit of which is central to both art and morality, are only attainable (though never fully) through suppression of the self. The individual is always tempted to distort reality, to see it as s/he wishes to see it, not as it is. Although Murdoch recognizes that reality is mediated, that we can never fly the nets of language and theory, she argues that true art lies in the attempt to do so. This selfless contemplation of the world is love--love of the other, of a reality that precedes, transcends, and is independent of the observer. To grasp, not that reality is chaotic, but that it is ineffably particular is to touch, and be overwhelmed by, the sublime. It is not awe in face of a mighty mountain range that humbles us, as

Kant thought, but awe in face of the mystery of our own minds.

Murdoch's reinterpretation of Kant's sublime strips it of its eighteenth-century flavour and makes it meaningful to twentieth-century sensibilities. She argues that writers should not rest content with beauty alone. Art must immerse itself in history and confront the contingent otherness of human beings ("Kant does not tell us to respect whole particular tangled-up historical individuals but to respect the universal reason in their breasts" (51)). Kant's position is too abstract for Murdoch. What makes a novelist great, she writes in her book on Sartre, is "an apprehension of the absurd irreducible uniqueness of people and their relations with each other" (1959a 146). This apprehension (the sublime) defies form (the beautiful), and when they are held in tension, are unified without either taking precedence, we are in the presence of genuine art. On the one hand, the art work should be a self-contained object controlled by form, but on the other hand, incorporating the opacity of human life, should refuse to be reduced to form alone. Art must disturb as well as delight, and it does this when "self-contained form is combined with something, the individual being and destiny of human persons, which defies form" (1959b 55). Such art holds the beautiful and the sublime in tension; it endeavours to achieve the unity of art, but refuses to mask the disunity of life.

The temptations of form are central to the argument of

"The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited." Murdoch argues that the contemporary novel no longer portrays convincing characters because it depends on a flawed liberal view of the personality and because it has failed to challenge the legacy of Romanticism. Neither existentialism nor linguistic empiricism, which represent "the wisdom which philosophy has now to offer to the Liberal tradition" (255-56), offer adequate theories of the personality. The latter's model of the individual "is too abstract, too conventional" (255), while the former's "is too concrete, too neurotic" (255):

Existentialism shares with empiricism a terror of anything which encloses the agent or threatens his supremacy as a center of significance. In this sense both philosophies tend toward solipsism. Neither pictures virtue as concerned with anything real outside ourselves. Neither provides us with a standpoint for considering real human beings in their variety, and neither presents us with any technique for exploring and controlling our own spiritual energy. (255)

While this view of the personality as a solitary will confronting a hostile world represents one negative influence on the novel, the other is what Murdoch terms "Romanticism in decline" (258)--the Symbolism of T. S. Eliot and T. E. Hulme. Focussing on the Symbolists' desire to create precise, clean, self-contained works, she argues that their aesthetics, a revised version of Kant's theory of the beautiful, shows a fear (as did Kant's) of "history, real beings, and real change, whatever is contingent, messy, boundless, infinitely particular, and endlessly still to be explained" (260). In order to defend this aesthetic the Symbolists distinguish between

prose (which uses language loosely, didactically) and poetry (which uses language concisely, evocatively). The result is that prose, treated as denotative language, is devalued while poetry, seen as connotative language, is praised.<sup>3</sup>

Murdoch argues that the modern theory of personality goes hand in hand with a late Romantic distrust of prose, and that these twin influences lead to typically "closed" novel forms. Thus on the one hand, there is the novel that is "a tight metaphysical object, which wishes it were a poem, and which attempts to convey, often in mythical form, some central truth about the human condition," and on the other hand, there is the novel that is "a loose journalistic epic, documentary or possibly even didactic in inspiration, offering a commentary on current institutions or on some matter out of history" (264). Both kinds of novel neglect the irreducible mystery of human beings: "We are offered things or truths. What we have lost is persons" (264).

Murdoch rejects these two extremes and pleads for them to be combined through the reinstatement of character. It is here that the link between "The Sublime and the Good" and "The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited" is most explicit: Liberalism should abandon the Symbolist view of prose, reject the modern theory of the solitary personality, and strive to evoke the sublime through renewed attention to "the manifold of humanity" (269). The artist must be "the analogon of the good man . . . the lover who, nothing himself, lets other things be through him" (270). Thus the novel must defend,



against the modern impulse, "the naturalistic idea of character" (270), must strive to envisage believable persons whose contingent existence is respected.

"Against Dryness," the most pithy statement of Murdoch's early position, synthesizes these arguments. We live in a sceptical age in which religion and philosophy have lost their power; philosophy (existential and empirical) offers us "far too shallow and flimsy an idea of human personality" (16); the adoption of the welfare state has been socially positive but has led to a loss of depth in our ideas and to an atrophying of theory:

We no longer use a spread-out substantial picture of the manifold virtues of man and society. 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. What we have never had, of course, is a satisfactory Liberal theory of personality, a theory of man as free and separate and related to a rich and complicated world from which, as a moral being, he has much to learn. (18)

Murdoch argues that the novel should oppose sincerity with truth, in particular by evoking the complexities of the individual and of the social lifeworld s/he inhabits. She contends that this was the great strength of the nineteenth-century novel, which, by merging the idea of the person with the idea of class, was able to explore the dynamics of both. But contemporary novels are either crystalline (abstract, compact, quasi-allegorical) or journalistic (social, diffuse, quasi-documentary). Neither kind wrestles with the problem

of the individual in society. Both crystalline and journalistic novels, perceiving the individual as solitary and isolated, fail to see that human life consists of "degrees of freedom" and cannot envisage "in a non-metaphysical, non-totalitarian, and non-religious sense, the transcendence of reality" (19). Their view of human freedom as complete and untrammelled induces "a dream-like facility" whereas what is needed is "a renewed sense of the difficulty and complexity of the moral life and the opacity of persons" (20). The novel must reject both dream and social epic; it must affirm the particularity of the world and of individuals; it must refuse to mask the incompleteness of human life by offering us the consolations of aesthetic form:

Reality is not a given whole. An understanding of this, a respect for the contingent, is essential to imagination as opposed to fantasy. Our sense of form, which is an aspect of our desire for consolation, can be a danger to our sense of reality as a rich receding background. Against the consolations of form, the clean crystalline work, the simplified fantasy-myth, we must pit the destructive power of the now so unfashionable naturalistic idea of character . . . . We need to turn our attention away from the consoling dream necessity of Romanticism, away from the dry symbol, the bogus individual, the false whole, towards the real impenetrable human person. That this person is substantial, impenetrable, individual, indefinable, and valuable is after all the fundamental tenet of Liberalism. (20)

Although Murdoch has since softened her stance, particularly with regard to her fear that form tends to console, the above passage represents the kernel of her thought.<sup>4</sup> Placing the novel in a philosophical as well as a literary context, she argues that because its theoretical underpinning derives

from the liberal tradition, its weaknesses can be illuminated through a critique of liberalism's inadequacies. Liberalism, she contends, offers a flawed account of the personality and a too confident view of the world. As a result, the novel loses two of its most important features, both of which were the glory of nineteenth-century realism: a non-supernatural, transcendent sense of reality as "a rich receding background" against which individuals should be seen; and a profound sense of people as inexplicable and always still to be known. We are not fully rational beings whose behaviour is transparent to ourselves and others, but "benighted creatures sunk in a reality whose nature we are constantly and overwhelmingly tempted to deform by fantasy" (20). Reality is not simply there for Murdoch, is not an easily apprehensible given, but stands before the writer as a challenge. By allowing an awareness of human mystery and of the intractable dynamics in human relationships to suffuse literature the writer approaches the sublime, art's highest aspiration.

Murdoch's polemical distinction between the crystalline and the journalistic has not only contributed to analysis of the post-war novel, but has also illuminated her own work. There is a dialectical quality to Murdoch's thought, which finds its full expression in her fiction. Consider the following pairs of terms: open/closed; sublime/beautiful; imagination/fantasy; crystalline/journalistic. These appear to be antithetical. Indeed, Murdoch frequently speaks of them as though they were. But what makes her novels consistently

rewarding is that she is unable to choose between them, that she understands the claims of each, and that, as Under the Net shows, she tries to balance these claims against one another.

Murdoch desires to be a realist writer, for example, yet is unable to avoid creating highly structured and heavily patterned novels that rely on an external framework: myth (The Italian Girl, The Black Prince); Jacobean tragedy (A Severed Head); philosophy (Under the Net); and Gothic (The Unicorn, The Time of the Angels). She distrusts the crystalline but is drawn to it nevertheless. Distinguishing elsewhere between closed novels (strong internal structure) and open novels (full of accidents and free characters), she admits that, despite her commitment to the latter, she tends to produce the former. She wants the novel to be a house for free characters but is so conscious of human unfreedom that she traps many of her characters in fictions of their own--sometimes her own--making.<sup>5</sup>

Murdoch's novels, in short, oscillate between open and closed forms, between the crystalline and the journalistic. The most powerful novels are those in which both forms clash: Under the Net; The Unicorn; The Black Prince. These texts enact the conflict between the chaos of reality and the order of artistic form without succumbing to either. They focus self-reflexively on artistic form and examine social life minutely. Murdoch's awareness of the irresolvable conflict between the necessity for form and the claims of contingency

permeates these novels. Without form, she says in an interview, there is no "art object present" (1982 228); but a form that dominates, she writes in "Against Dryness," imposes a false structure on reality. The task of the novelist is to build indeterminacy into determinacy without allowing either to gain control of the art object. Her desire to achieve this balance, to disclose the struggle between order and chaos, art and life, leads to the fruitful tension that lies at the heart of her work.

### III

In most of Murdoch's novels the pilgrimage from appearance to reality does not proceed very far; her characters either do not begin at all or they quickly lose their way. Frequently, they remain mired in the illusions with which they began. Indeed, there is a tension in Murdoch's work between her wish to portray perceptive, self-aware individuals and her fear that the majority of people are ensnared in the nets of private fantasy and/or cultural shibboleths. Under the Net, however, is an affirmative first novel. It shows, moreover, as Peter Conradi notes, that Murdoch began not as a realist who moved towards "more 'apocalyptic' and Gothic forms" (16) but as a writer who was remarkably self-conscious about literature's truth-claims.

Under the Net examines one person's attempt to free himself from the nets that ensnare him. It manages to be both a

philosophical disquisition and a comic picaresque tale. Murdoch describes its subject as "the problem of how far conceptualising and theorizing, which from one point of view are absolutely essential, in fact divide you from the thing that is the object of theoretical attention" (Wolfe 46). The novel asks whether human structures of thought provide us with knowledge of reality or whether they impose meaning on what is fundamentally ineffable. This question is closely tied to the problem of literary form, because if linguistic patterning in some subtle way distorts the contingent nature of reality, then this is doubly true of verbal art, which is removed from reality both by language itself and by the artistic forms into which it is moulded.

To speak of the novel in this way is partially to mislead, however, for its serious concerns are undercut by its humour. Above all, Under the Net is an immensely funny text. Indeed, this aspect of the novel, together with its vivid descriptions and well-realized characters, led it initially to be read as a typical Movement novel. But Under the Net actually focuses on the very issues that the Angry Young Men were in reaction against. Refusing to take a common-sense view of the world for granted, it raises epistemological questions and reflects on the conflicting claims of language and silence, form and contingency, action and contemplation. Its wit, however, is central to an understanding of the novel, which cautions against over-reliance on preconceptions (personal and philosophical) about the world and urges an

acceptance of its irreducibly particular nature. The text's humour both prevents the story from sinking under the weight of its philosophical content and ironizes that content, thus revealing its author's awareness of the limits to theoretical speculation.

Under the Net is a comic picaresque novel; its structure is that of the double quest. Jake Donoghue, an outsider with no job and no fixed abode, pursues knowledge (through debates with Hugo Belfounder, Dave Gellman, and Lefty Todd) and love (in the shape of Anna Quentin). The story is told by Jake himself, the first of Murdoch's male first-person narrators, and it is the tale of his moral education. By the end of the novel Jake has been stripped of his illusions and has learnt that he must escape the constricting bounds of the various "nets" that entrap him. In particular, he realizes that his desire for an all-encompassing philosophical view of the world and his over-active imagination have prevented him from facing reality. Instead, he has persistently deformed it.

Re-evaluation is forced on Jake when his life is thrown into crisis. Returning to London from Paris, he discovers that he has been ejected from his flat and that his cosy world has been destroyed: "This was what always happened. I would be at pains to put my universe in order and set it to ticking, when suddenly it would burst again into a mess of the same poor pieces . . ." (9). Jake knows that he must "put" his universe in order, that order does not reside in the nature of things. Yet he is obsessed with regularity,

with patterns and forms: "I hate contingency. I want everything in my life to have a sufficient reason" (24), he remarks. As he picks up the pieces of his life once more he realizes that they do not fit together like the pieces of a puzzle that has but one solution. He grasps, too, that through his erstwhile attempts so to fit them he has deformed reality. Instead of seeing people and events as they are, he has conceived them according to a pattern in his own mind. Thus he discovers that Anna loves Hugo and not himself; that he has misunderstood Hugo's theories; that Madge, far from being a defenceless innocent, is the most ruthless figure in the book; and that Finn has a life that is different from anything he had thought possible.

Jake searches for enlightenment through conversations with Dave, Lefty, and Hugo. Dave, a linguistic philosopher, denies that philosophy can illuminate the central problems of human existence (25). Jake's discussions with Dave achieve little: "Hegel says that Truth is a great word and the thing is greater still. With Dave we never seemed to get past the word" (22). Lefty argues that theory must be united to practice: "'All one can do is first reflect and then act. That's the human job'" (101).

The novel's central debate, however, takes place between Hugo and Jake. Hugo argues that human concepts distort reality because they separate us from its essence. In Jake's fictional description of their discussions, The Silencer, Hugo's Annandine tells Jake's Tamarus: "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'" (80-81). Hugo sees the world as mysterious, contingent, and mutable. His aim, though he knows it to be unattainable, is to rend the net of human concepts in order to confront reality itself. He passionately desires an unmediated contact with the world. His obsession with particularity means that there is no centre to Hugo's thought; he possesses "no master theory" (58) and is devoid "of anything which could be called a metaphysic or general *Weltanschauung*" (58). Jake, by contrast, argues that belief in an unmediated reality is chimerical. We cannot live without concepts, he argues, for it is through them that we make sense of the world. Like Wittgenstein, from whom the metaphor of the net is taken, he contends that the limits of our language are the limits of our world.

As A. S. Byatt has pointed out, this philosophical debate, which deals with liberation from false thinking, is paralleled by numerous comic scenes that play with the motif of imprisonment and escape. Murdoch ironizes Dave's students for seeing the world as "a mystery to which it should be reasonably possible to discover a key" (25). When Jake and Hugo first meet they are locked inside a clinic in which they seek the same metaphysical key. Sadie locks Jake inside her flat, and after a protracted search he fails to find her house-key (85-86). Jake and Finn try to release the alsa-

tian, Mr. Mars, from his cage (thus freeing him from his role as a film star), but they cannot find the cage's spring mechanism and are forced to saw through the bars (134). Finally, Jake and Hugo, again locked inside a hospital, are forced to break out of it after they clarify the novel's various misunderstandings. These scenes playfully reinforce a serious point made in "Against Dryness"--we are not free beings, but are trapped in patterns of thought and behaviour that we cannot easily slough off.

If one of the novel's central conflicts is between freedom and imprisonment, then that between silence and speech--by implication a conflict between art and non-art also--is undoubtedly the other. Under the Net, as several critics have noted, in many ways responds to Sartre's Nausea.<sup>6</sup> Like Roquentin, Hugo suffers because he senses that reality eludes him, that language, instead of bringing him into closer contact with the nature of things, divides him from it. In her book on Sartre Murdoch describes this problem thus: "To lose the discursive 'thingy' nature of one's vision and yet to feel the necessity of utterance is to experience a breakdown of language" (66). Hugo, experiencing this Sartrean collapse of language, espouses the virtues of silence. Like B. S. Johnson, but without his desperation, he argues that "'the whole language is a machine for making falsehoods'" (60). There is always a gap between what one feels to be true and what one is able to say, he tells Jake. It is not that one "touches up" (59) one's experience, but that "[t]he language

just won't let you present it as it really was" (59).

The conflict between the necessity of utterance and the temptations of silence dominates the text. When Hugo and Jake first meet they do not speak for several days; writing about their discussions, Jake entitles his book, in honour of Hugo, The Silencer; Hugo himself makes silent films; when Jake is trapped on Sadie's fire escape he pretends to be deaf and dumb in order to evade discovery; Anna gives up singing, which she claims is "corrupt" (43), in favour of mime, which is "pure art" (41); finally, the novel's denouement takes place in whispers, for Jake and Hugo are (again) locked inside a hospital where Jake has no right to be.

Both Hugo and Anna, who mimics his theories, correlate silence with truth and speech with falsehood. In particular, they distrust, as does Berger in G., the seductive powers of linguistic eloquence, fearing that its surface glitter may all the more easily conceal falsehood. Hugo maintains that when he "really speak[s] the truth the words fall from [his] mouth absolutely dead" (60). He claims that only "**actions** don't lie" (60). Anna, in turn, has given up singing because "[t]here's no truth in it. One's just exploiting one's charm to seduce people" (41). Like Hugo, she puts her faith in action. When Jake professes his love for her she tells him: "This talk of love means very little. Love is not a feeling. It can be tested. Love is action, it is silence" (40).

Hugo's position is a strong one. Through conversations

with him Jake learns that the claims of theory must be offset by attention to reality and that no amount of philosophical speculation will provide a metaphysical key to the enigma of the world. But Hugo's position is not that of his creator, and he does not have the final say in the novel. When Jake rediscovers The Silencer he finds "Hugo's arguments very much less impressive" (81) and thinks of numerous "ways in which the position of Tamarus might be strengthened" (81). Murdoch sympathizes with Hugo's position, but she ironizes the suspicion of language to which his thinking leads him:

'But at this rate almost everything one says, except things like 'Pass the marmalade' or 'There's a cat on the roof', turns out to be a sort of lie.'

Hugo pondered this, 'I think it is so,' he said with seriousness.

'In that case one oughtn't to talk,' I said.

'I think perhaps one oughtn't to,' said Hugo, and he was deadly serious. Then I caught his eye, and we both laughed enormously, thinking of how we had been doing nothing else for days on end.

'That's colossal!' said Hugo. 'Of course one does talk.' (60)

This passage, with its joke at the expense of English logical positivism, points to Murdoch's own position. She recognizes that neither language nor human theories can fully encompass reality, and that although we cannot do without them we must remain alert to their inability to disclose the core of human life. Thus Jake understands, finally, that Hugo's insistence on a respect for the independent existence of the world destroys the illusions fostered by grand philosophies and personal fantasies, but also realizes that Hugo

is wrong in thinking that the discipline of attention allows one to do without speculative thought altogether.

Through his final meeting with Hugo Jake realizes that he has misconstrued virtually everything. When Hugo tells him that it was Sadie, not Anna, whom he loved, Jake is stunned: "A pattern in my mind was suddenly scattered and the pieces of it went flying about me like birds" (225). Just as his orderly universe burst into pieces at the start of the novel, so it scatters now. Realizing that Anna loves Hugo, he sees that he has never perceived her, has never bothered to find out if she conforms to his theory about her:

I had no longer any picture of Anna. She faded like a sorcerer's apparition; and yet somehow her presence remained to me, more substantial than ever before. It seemed as if, for the first time, Anna really existed now as a separate being and not as a part of myself. (238)

Jake has painted a picture of Anna that has depended solely on a private vision. In doing so he has created a phantom, a shadow of the real human being before him. Anna has been an extension of his own mind in the same way that Finn has been. Of Finn he has said: "I count Finn as an inhabitant of my universe, and cannot conceive that he has one containing me" (9). But Finn turns out to have a rich inner life and leaves for a new life in Dublin, prompting more of Jake's self-criticism: "I felt ashamed, ashamed of being parted from Finn, of having known so little about Finn, of having conceived things as I pleased and not as they were" (247).

Jake has even misconceived Hugo's theory, as has Anna.

Hugo has no idea that The Silencer was a virtual transcript of conversations between himself and Jake. Nor does he understand Anna's commitment to the mime theatre (which is based on his theories), saying that she "had some sort of general theory about it" (229) that he had never comprehended. Jake realizes, finally, that there is no key to the universe, that the truth, as Hugo puts it, "lies in blundering on" (228), and that he and Hugo must pursue their own paths in life. Hugo, he concludes, "had nothing to tell me. To have seen him was enough" (238).

Under the Net is an affirmative book. Jake frees himself from his solipsistic view of the world and from his enthrallment to the theories of an other. As the novel draws to a close he is about to begin life anew. Abandoning translation in favour of his own creative work, he discounts his earlier assertion that "the present age was not one in which it was possible to write a novel" (19). Thus Under the Net is, as Malcolm Bradbury has pointed out, a self-begetting text, a novel of apprenticeship in which the writer passes through the crucible of experience that will enable him to embark on his career.<sup>7</sup>

Jake realizes that the claims of language and silence, of contemplation and action, of theory and particularity must be balanced against one another. In a nicely worked ending, Murdoch stresses that we cannot choose between these paired options, but need to see them as the boundaries within which all our thinking takes place. At the very moment that Jake

decides to write again, to commit himself to speech (action), he is reduced to silence by the miracle of another kind of procreation. Faced with Mrs. Tinckham's kittens, half of which are pure Siamese and half pure tabby, he begins by attempting to provide a rational explanation for this bizarre phenomenon, but then gives up in helpless laughter: "'I don't know why it is,' I said. 'It's just one of the wonders of the world.'" (253). Thus Murdoch discloses her sense of reality as a mystery that is enclosed by a net, which we must try to uncover, although we know that we can never finally do so.

### III

Under the Net examines the themes that recur throughout Murdoch's **oeuvre**: the tension between artistic form and contingent reality; the conflict between genuine vision (gained by turning away from the self) and distorted fantasy (produced by solipsism); the need to balance speculation against observation; the tension between the desire for an unmediated view of the world and the realization that no such perspective is attainable. But whereas Under the Net is optimistic

in its ending--Jake completes the pilgrimage from appearance to reality and prepares to begin life anew--much of Murdoch's subsequent fiction is less sanguine about the possibility of distinguishing true knowledge from self-deception. In texts such as The Unicorn and The Black Prince, for example, which disrupt their realist surfaces from within, apprehensions and interpretations of reality are clouded in uncertainty and remain ambiguous to the end.

#### IV

The Unicorn is a novel about the nature of perception. It portrays the conflict between true vision and fantasy in terms of Plato's distinction between reality and appearance, a distinction that it fails to establish. Perception and imagination prove to be inseparable. Treading a fine line between appearance and reality itself--blending allegory, Gothic, and fabulation with realism--the novel urges that they be distinguished, but actually reveals how closely they are interwoven. The text warns against the distorting powers of fantasy but undermines its own warning from within.

The Unicorn combines art with morals. On the one hand, it tells the story of Hannah Crean-Smith, which meditates on the meaning of suffering in a secular age. On the other hand, through its censure of that story's interpreters, the readers who are inscribed in the text, it examines the nature of perception. Hannah signals its ambiguities herself.



Standing at the heart of the novel, both as character and as symbol, she demands to be read. Yet the act of reading to which we are invited, the injunction to interpret both Hannah and the novel as a whole, is persistently thwarted. Just as each of the characters within the novel fails to interpret Hannah and to comprehend the meaning of her story, so do we, the text's external readers. We can no more decipher the unicorn than the novel's benighted characters, and in their fate we read our own.

The Unicorn's characters are readers in bad faith because they perceive Hannah according to their own preconceptions about her. Instead of directing attention "outward, away from self . . . towards the great surprising variety of the world" (Sovereignty 66), in this case to the reality of Hannah, they direct attention inward, interpreting her in the light of their private fantasies.<sup>8</sup>

Marian initially regards Hannah as a victim, a trapped woman who is under a vicious spell from which she must be freed. Later, in a more informed reading, she views her as "a woman infinitely capable of crimes" (223), a view that accords with Violet's claim that Hannah is "a murderous adulterous woman" (181). Effingham, the most ill-informed reader, initially sees her as a sequestered lady from the literary tradition of Courtly Love and then, in a debased Freudian reading, as a substitute mother-figure. Gerald and Jamesie, in turn, perceive Hannah in terms of the seven-year enchantment established by her husband, Peter Crean-Smith.

The most searching questions are asked by Denis and Max. Denis sees Hannah's suffering as the enactment of a profound spiritual struggle. His Manichean view of the world posits a humanity that has fallen and is separated from the deity that created it: "All creation suffers. It suffers from having been created, if from nothing else. It suffers from being divided from God." (198). Denis sees Hannah as a representative of humankind. Her suffering is redemptive; she takes the guilt of others upon herself in an effort to atone for their sins. At the same time, she magnifies the human predicament. Thus when Marian speaks of freeing her from the confines of Gaze Castle, he chides her for her naiveté: "The soul under the burden of sin cannot flee. What is enacted here is enacted with all of us in one way or another" (65).

The Greek scholar Max offers a philosophical perspective that complements Denis's religious one. Max believes that although suffering is inescapable, it may lead to knowledge. He too sees Hannah as "our image of suffering" (98), as a being who embodies the human condition--her guilt makes her "like us" (98). He concurs with Denis that humanity is fallen and cannot be redeemed by a simplistic notion of freedom: "In morals, we are all prisoners, but the name of our cure is not freedom" (97). Max, who like Denis is a sophisticated reader, recognizes that he may not know the truth about Hannah, that his view of her may be as fictional as that of the other characters, but through the Greek concept of Ate he offers a way of interpreting her suffering:

'Ate is the name of the almost automatic transfer of suffering from one being to another. Power is a form of Ate. The victims of power, and any power has its victims, are themselves infected. They have then to pass it on, to use power on others. This is evil, and the crude image of the all-powerful God is a sacrilege. Good is not exactly powerless. For to be powerless, to be a complete victim, may be another source of power. But Good is non-powerful. And it is in the good that Ate is finally quenched, when it encounters a pure being who only suffers and does not attempt to pass the suffering on.' (98-99)

Hannah does not prove to be that person, nor do Denis's and Max's theories, however convincing they are, resolve the enigma of her being. Her own interpretation of her life provides a valuable corrective to the inventive readings of the novel's other characters, but it also undermines Denis's and Max's. At the same time, however, she bequeaths her possessions to Max, prompting Effingham to reflect that "Max will tell the world what she was" (254). Max's and Denis's theories do not fully reveal her, but they come closest to it. Whereas Max is Hannah's material inheritor, Denis is her spiritual legatee. Attempting to become Max's pure being, he assumes her guilt in order to try to quench the negative power of Ate.

The Unicorn fuses its moral concerns with its artistic preoccupations, for Murdoch is convinced that both morality and art depend on vision, on the attempt to see the world as it really is. The novel's characters are criticised for their moral failure; this is nothing less than a failure of vision. But although she exposes her characters' lack of interpretative energy--thus revealing them to be readers in

bad faith--Murdoch suggests, through the text's structure and its use of Gothic, that the ideal vision to which she aspires may be unattainable.

The novel's Gothic ambience is unmistakable. Marian's arrival at Gaze--a transition from the "real" world off-stage to a "fantasy" world on-stage--represents an entry into the Gothic domain. The landscape is appalling (7); God-forsaken (8); frightening and repellent (11); sublime (11); ancient (12). Marian realises in dismay that "[s]he had never seen a land so out of sympathy with man" (11). Gaze Castle is "a big grey forbidding house with a crenellated facade and tall thin windows," which "rear[s] itself out of the landscape, rather like the dolmen, belonging yet not belonging" (15). The house's uncarpeted floors creak and echo; its "soft hangings" and "vague cobwebby textiles" tug at the "passing sleeve" (17). Marian is "helpless and frightened" (7), fears the loss of her identity (8), and is "overcome by an appalling crippling panic" (15).

Gothic explores the dark, unsettling space between apparently incompatible worlds: natural and supernatural; sacred and profane; real and fantastic. Linda Bayer-Berenbaum notes that Gothic works by "expansion and intensification" (143). It heightens perception through contrasts--inside/outside, high/low, nature/self, distant/near--but gradually erodes the boundaries between them, making contrasts into comparisons. Thus it blurs common-sense distinctions between world and self and evokes the labyrinthine complexity of the

latter via an oblique approach through the sublime topography of the former. Focusing intently on exits and entries, on passages between inside and outside, on the self and its other, it enters the hidden, taboo areas of the personality and finds that the internal self's relation to external reality defies the tidy explanations of empiricism. It discloses the interdependence of perception and imagination, attesting that the line between fantasy and reality, between delusion and vision, is very thin indeed.

The ambiguities that The Unicorn's use of Gothic establishes--to which I return below--are complemented by the novel's structure, which depends on a series of framing devices that further blur the distinction between appearance and reality. The most important of these is that of the play within the novel. This establishes a distinction between on-stage and off-stage and a correspondent distinction between two worlds--the real and the imaginary. The on-stage world is one of fantasies and illusions, which seduces characters by its intricately woven, beguiling patterns. The off-stage world is one of reality, which claims to be empirical and truthful.

The distinction between off-stage and on-stage is apparent from the outset. The internal story, which is framed by the novel as a whole, begins with events--Peter's fall from the cliff and Hannah's subsequent imprisonment--that take place off-stage, well before the narrative gets under way. The absent Peter functions as the internal drama's director.

He it is who starts the seven-year enchantment and who fixes the pattern of events that enslaves the on-stage characters, most of whom see themselves as actors playing out the roles they have been assigned. When Effingham arrives a haze hangs "like a curtain" (74) over the station; he sees the others as "**dramatis personae**" (105); and when he leaves he reflects that he is "the angel who drew the curtain upon the mystery, remaining himself outside in the great lighted auditorium" (270). Hannah, in turn, admits that she has behaved as though she were acting in front of an "audience" (219). And Jamesie, who is compared to Puck (210), sums up the action with the words, "[t]he play is over, the Vampire Play let us call it" (253).

Unlike Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern*, who struggle to escape the roles that have been mapped out for them, most of the novel's characters voluntarily assume the postures in which they have been cast. Denis tells Marian that the only way to help Hannah is to "play her game" (65), and Gerald, Peter's demonic shadow, tells her that she must submit to the pattern that "has authority here, and absolute authority" (151). Moreover, they view one another in terms of fantasy fictions--myths, legends, fairy tales--that are at two removes from reality. Hannah is a legendary unicorn, a vampire, a Sleeping Beauty, a Circe; Marian is a Maid Marian; Denis is a unicorn, a sprite; Jamesie is a Puck and a Peter Pan. Characters expect others to behave in pre-determined ways, to act out fictional parts. Marian, for

example, initially believes that Hannah will be freed if she breaks out of the enchanted garden. When this expectation proves to be false she merely switches tales. Seeing Hannah as a Sleeping Beauty, she assumes that Gerald's ravishment of her (counterpart to the traditional chaste kiss) has brought her back to life.

If Peter is the play's director, then Marian and Effingham, the novel's two narrators, are members of the audience who try to disrupt its enactment. Arriving after the action is under way, they are outsiders, off-stage figures who work their way into the drama. Representing the real world outside the enchanted garden, they endeavour to see the situation clearly, to escape the fantastic patterns in which the others are ensnared.<sup>9</sup> Their attempt to do so fails, however. Marian realizes that she has "been accepted into the family . . . become part of the pattern" (154). Later still she loses all contact with reality: "There is no outside any more. Everything is inside, the sphere is closed upon itself, and we can't get out" (228). Nevertheless, although both Marian and Effingham become implicated in the pattern, they make use of markedly different interpretative strategies.

Marian, the governess who arrives to teach, is herself willing to be taught. She is self-critical and arrives with the hope that her experience at Gaze will be a personal watershed, reflecting that "[p]erhaps the era of realism was beginning" (18). She has no preconceptions about life at

Gaze and is determined to give "her full and devoted attention" (18) to whatever may befall her. Her attentiveness to the world outside herself--a prerequisite of true perception for Murdoch--is inseparable from her desire for realism.

Nevertheless, despite her intentions, Marian allows herself to be sucked into the spiral. Her youthful naiveté prevents her from retaining her independent perspective. Bewildered by what Denis tells her, she is soon perceiving Hannah as a figure trapped in a fable and is looking for her own role in it: "Her own place in the story occurred to her for the first time. The ghastly tale had become a reality all about her, it was still going on. And it was a tale in which nothing happened at random" (64-65). Beginning to see events around her as a fairy-tale in which the pattern is fixed, leaving its figures merely to play out established roles, she concludes that she is to be Gerald's "adversary, his opposite angel" (65). By opposing Gerald "she would make her way into the story" (65).

The story, however, takes an unexpected turn, and Marian is forced to revise her reading of events. Although she fails to decipher the drama's meaning, she becomes conscious of both its ambiguity and her own failure of sensibility. In particular, her relationship with Denis shocks her into a new awareness. She realizes that she "couldn't see [him] properly" (201) and reflects to herself that Denis, "after an interval . . . of simply looking at herself in a mirror, was the real other, the real unknown" (201). Thus she con-



cludes, in a key passage, that "[n]o one should be a prisoner of other people's thoughts, no one's destiny should be an object of fascination to others, no one's destiny should be open to inspection" (200). Like Jake in Under the Net she has conceived things not as they were but as she wanted them to be. Falling victim to fictions--other people's and her own--about Hannah, Marian has read her according to a schema that does not fit.

Effingham, in contrast, learns nothing. The most self-centred character in the novel, he is the very image of Murdoch's bad reader. Whereas Marian directs attention outward, he directs attention inward. He has a well-defined theory about Hannah's life, which, when undermined, he merely exchanges for another. Both theories, moreover, require him to be at their centre. A classical narcissist, he is studying his reflection in the train window when he arrives and debating whether to kiss one of the maids when he departs.

Effingham actively courts the pleasures of fantasy. He responds to Hannah's predicament by reflecting that it "had undeniably the qualities of a wonderful story" (73). Utterly in thrall to the fictional quality of events, he is primarily concerned with his own role in the drama. He wonders whether it was not "his action for which they were all waiting" (68), but does not act because he is "not resigned to having the story end so suddenly" (182-183) and because he is "'too moved by the story'" (207). When Hannah dies, his strongest emotion is anger towards Max, to whom her memory has been

entrusted.

Murdoch's pessimism about the possibility of true perception is disclosed when she vouchsafes the novel's central epiphany to Effingham, the person least able to benefit from it. Lost in the bog and convinced that he is facing certain death, he experiences a moment of illumination:

Since he was mortal he was nothing and since he was nothing all that was not himself was filled to the brim with being and it was from this that the light streamed. This then was love, to look and look until one exists no more, **this** was the love which was the same as death. He looked, and knew with a clarity which was one with the increasing light, that with the death of the self the world becomes quite automatically the object of a perfect love. (167)

But Effingham is saved by Denis. Paradoxically, this rescue from physical death results in a spiritual one. Feeling his "old unregenerate being . . . with him again" (168), he forgets his vision and returns to an even greater state of solipsism. Unlike Marian, he cannot unself himself. At the very moment that he acknowledges that he too has been "looking into a mirror, and only been vaguely conscious of the real world at [his] side" (208), he is busy analysing himself. Moving from the sentimental tradition of Courtly Love to a pseudo-Freudian interpretation of events, he stays mired in a fictive world of illusions. Thus when he reads of Pip's death---in a newspaper story--he sees it in terms of its place in the tale: "And his death rounded the thing off, gave it a tragic completeness . . ." (269).

Although Marian, Denis, and Max come closest to it, none

of the characters passes from the world of appearance to that of reality. All fail to apprehend the reality of Hannah; at once character, symbol, and text, she is a sign whose meaning asks to be deciphered. Yet she defies interpretation. Those who behold her do not see her; she remains a projection of others' thoughts, a reflection of private fantasies. She is the sum of all the images that her many readers impose on her blank visage. Thus she tells Marian that her life has been "nothing . . . a dream" (218), that she has been "a legend" (218) and a "secret vampire" (219) who has battered on her audience: "I have lived by their thoughts, by your thoughts . . . I lived in your gaze like a false God . . . I have become unreal. You have made me unreal by thinking about me so much. You made me into an object of contemplation . . . I had no feelings, I was empty" (219). It is this emptiness that has allowed others to fill her with their own meanings. She has been an invention of her readers, who have woven narratives around her person. Thus when she dies, the enigma of her life remains unbroached, and the palindromic sign that was her name remains opaque.

Hannah's emptiness raises perplexing questions. In one sense it is The Unicorn's greatest weakness. The novel urges resistance to fantasy through attention to the constraints of the real. Yet Hannah, its central character, is so vague and undefined that she lacks the presence that could curb the wilder flights of fancy. Her interpreters are able to misread her precisely because there is so little of her there to

be read. Murdoch undermines her own position and reduces her characters' culpability by making Hannah such a flimsy figure, such an insubstantial representative of the real. In another sense, however, if one reads across the text's grain, Hannah can be seen as the "precious and unique" being of whom Murdoch spoke in Sartre: Romantic Rationalist. She remains an enigma both because there is no solution to people's personalities, no ultimate truth about them, and also because people can only be known through the subjective, flawed interpretations of others. The selfless perception that allows the other to become "the object of a pure love" is unattainable.

It is here that The Unicorn's subtle appropriation of the Gothic genre helps us to understand it. By placing the novel in a literary tradition that blurs the distinctions between reality and imagination, truth and fantasy, Murdoch signals her awareness of their interdependence. At the same time, she includes within her text--as Jane Austen did in Northanger Abbey--a critique of the Gothic sensibility. She censures her characters for their willingness to "read" the world as though it were a Gothic text. But Murdoch, writing in 1963 not 1818, does not share Austen's confidence in empirical reality. Austen reproves Catherine Moreland by clearing up Northanger Abbey's misunderstandings, thus revealing that Catherine's perceptions have not corresponded to reality. Empiricism wins the day. Murdoch's characters are equally guilty of fictionalizing their experience, but Mur-

doch's sense of the ambiguous interchange between world and imagination prevents her from positing an objective reality against which their perceptions could be judged. Gothicism and empiricism fight to a draw.<sup>10</sup>

The Unicorn is opposed to the willing submersion of the self in invention, both in art and in life, but discloses that imagination and fantasy are so closely linked that they are in many ways inseparable. It urges that we struggle to free ourselves of the nets that enclose us and criticizes us when we voluntarily entwine ourselves in them. But it recognizes that our struggle to be rid of these nets altogether is doomed to fail. The novel's most genuine readers--Marian, Denis, and Max--embark on this struggle; its most solipsistic reader, Effingham, avoids it at all costs, and for this he is dispraised. But nobody completes the pilgrimage from appearance to reality. If at the end of the novel many of the novel's meanings remain ambiguous, this is perhaps because of Murdoch's fear that appearance and reality may in fundamental ways be indistinguishable.

V

The bad-faith readers of The Unicorn might seem to indicate that Murdoch is profoundly sceptical about the reliability of language itself. On the contrary, although she recognizes that language can neither inventory the world nor exhaust it of meaning, she repeatedly affirms her belief that language--the most potent expression of which can be found in

literature--provides us with the wherewithal for endowing our world with meaning. Thus in The Black Prince she focuses on the act of writing itself.

Lecturing Julian Baffin on Hamlet, Bradley Pearson, The Black Prince's first-person narrator, describes Shakespeare's achievement in the following terms:

'He has performed a supreme creative feat, a work endlessly reflecting upon itself, not discursively but in its very substance, a Chinese box of words as high as the tower of Babel, a meditation upon the bottomless trickery of consciousness and the redemptive role of words in the lives of those without identity, that is human beings. Hamlet is words and so is Hamlet.' (199)

For Bradley Hamlet is primarily a linguistic construct. Both the play and its central character consist only of **words**, he emphasizes, yet it is these very words that render humanity sentient. It is through language that we gain identity and make sense of our place in the world. Echoing Hamlet, he claims that "[w]e are tissues and tissues of different **personae** and yet we are nothing at all. What redeems us is that speech is ultimately divine" (200). The highest form of speech, he argues, the place in which it reveals its true divinity, is art, for "art speaks truth, indeed **is** truth, perhaps the only truth" (11).

Consider in turn this passage from The Sovereignty of Good:

Words are the most subtle symbols which we possess and our human fabric depends on them. The living and radical nature of our language is something which we forget at our peril. . . . [T]he most

essential and fundamental aspect of our culture is the study of literature, since this is an education in how to picture and understand human situations. We are men and we are moral agents before we are scientists, and the place of science in human life must be discussed in **words**. This is why it is and always will be more important to know about Shakespeare than to know about any scientist . . . .  
(34)

As Brian Appleyard has pointed out, Murdoch contends that all knowledge "is subordinate to language and the highest form of language is literature" (158). Thus she concludes The Sovereignty of Good by arguing that "[f]ar from being a playful diversion of the human race, art is the place of its most fundamental insight, and the centre to which the most uncertain steps of metaphysics must constantly return" (73).

By foregrounding language and the ways language can be employed for the purposes of art, Bradley discloses The Black Prince's true subject. Shakespeare, he continues in his discourse on Hamlet, speaks "in the first person and yet at the pinnacle of artifice" (199); he transmutes "the crisis of his own identity into the very central stuff of his art" (200). This bold assertion may or may not be pertinent to Hamlet, but it provides a vital clue to The Black Prince. Through the artifice of Bradley's first-person narration, Murdoch makes the crisis of her own artistic identity the dominant issue in her text. She examines the very assumptions about literature on which The Sovereignty of Good rests. The Black Prince is less concerned with the art work itself--as final product--than with the process by which it is created. The text turns its gaze inward, simultaneously painting a canvas

and questioning its veracity. It brings the frame into the picture in order to disclose their interdependence and to ask how reliable the picture can be if it is inescapably shaped by the frame.

The novel focuses both on its own form and on the external world, thus combining the virtues of Murdoch's open and closed modes. It displays its closed aspect in several ways. First, its plot comprises two dominant strands: Bradley's struggle to become a creative artist, which is presented as a modern version of a Greek myth--Marsyas' musical competition with the god Apollo; and his affair with Julian, which parallels the plot of Strauss's Der Rosenkavalier and alludes heavily to Hamlet.<sup>11</sup> Second, the text provides a metacommentary on its own form by using several framing devices (Loxias' opening and closing statements, characters' postscripts, Bradley's addresses to Loxias) and by dramatizing the conflict between Arnold Baffin's and Bradley Pearson's theories of art.

The Black Prince reveals its open aspect by including various elements that attest to the haphazardness of human life, thus defying the novel's carefully plotted structure. The wretched lives of Francis and Priscilla, the two characters who disrupt the order in which Bradley tries to keep his own life, point to the suffering that his elegant view of art occludes. Their inarticulate presence forces him to face the dark side of human existence to which his penchant for artistic harmony blinds him. In short, they undermine the order



of art with the disorder of life. Thus when Bradley finally recognizes the ubiquity of human suffering he also grasps its challenge to art: "I know that human life is horrible. I know that it is utterly unlike art . . . Always a world of fear and horror lies but a millimetre away. Any man, even the greatest, can be broken in a moment and has no refuge" (19).

The Black Prince reveals its concern with perspective through the frames that enclose it. The story itself is preceded by two forewords (the editor's and Bradley's) and is followed by six postscripts--Bradley's, the principal characters', and the editor's. Loxias, the novel's editor, offers the opening and closing statements that frame the novel as a whole: "I have reserved for myself the last word of all, the final assessment or summing up" (10). Yet Loxias adopts no omniscient standpoint; although he exposes the solipsism of the postscript writers, he refuses to adjudicate among their different versions of the story. He may be the godhead to whom Bradley pays obeisance, but he finds himself unable to appraise the tale. He "would with better grace appear as Bradley's fool than as his judge" (10), he avers in his foreword. And in his postscript, noting that he had looked forward to writing "a long essay, criticizing and drawing morals . . . to having the last word" (412), he finds that he has "little to say" (412). His judicious perspective, disclosed through his rejection of a hierarchical view of the arts, undermines the egotistical readings of the other char-

acters, but he no more clarifies the tale than they do.

The postscripts of the remaining **dramatis personae**--Christian, Rachel, Francis, and Julian--are unreliable. As Peter Conradi and Elizabeth Dipple have argued, their postscripts indict these characters as bad critics, as readers who interpret what they see according to the lineaments of their private fantasies. Each challenges Bradley's account by seeing her- or himself as the tale's focal point: Rachel and Christian claim that Bradley loved them; Francis (a homosexual) avers that Bradley loved Arnold; Julian, now a writer herself, treats Bradley's account "as literature" (408), as "the invention of another mind" (408). Accusing Bradley of imposing the imaginary net of his desires onto the real contours of the world, the postscript writers reveal that they have fallen prey to the same temptation.

Nonetheless, their readings are disturbing. Although their more extravagant claims can be dismissed, the text partially bears out their suggestions that Bradley is (or was) deranged. Despite their own unreliability, they focus on those elements of the story that Bradley wishes to gloss over, thus pointing to the ambiguities in his own account. Christian and Rachel, for example, claim that Bradley is so deluded that he cannot reliably describe what has befallen him. Bradley himself acknowledges his penchant for fantasy (15-16); values introspection over thought "about people" (49); claims, in response to accusations that he is imagining things, that he "'live[s] in [his] head'" (116); loses all

sense of time (230, 233); forgets various appointments (192, 249); describes himself as "a mad person" (282); and finally, obliterates from his mind a series of conversations that threaten his perception of events (358). Furthermore, he is associated with Don Quixote (94, 372) and is at one time or another accused by every character of being utterly out of touch with reality. As Arnold puts it: "[W]hat you are saying describes nothing which could possibly have happened in the real world" (280).

Francis's claim that Bradley is a repressed homosexual is still more suggestive. He avers that the real love affair is between Arnold and Bradley, arguing that Julian is merely a substitute for the true love-object. His analysis meshes with much of what Bradley reveals about himself. Francis sees Arnold as Bradley's **alter ego** (399); Bradley describes him as "an emanation of myself, a strayed and alien **alter ego**" (186). Francis claims that they love one another; Bradley notes that Arnold flirts with him (186), and Arnold sees himself as "wooing" Bradley (174). Rachel, in turn, speaking of them both, claims that "the real drama is between you and him" (179). Bradley's refusal to consider the possible implications of this drama and his rebuttals of Francis's claim only lend it greater weight. Arnold, he defensively admits, "was (but of course not in Marloe's sense) the most important man in my life" (186). He even tries to silence Francis in his absence: "My mother filled me with exasperation and shame but I loved her. (Be quiet Francis Marloe.)" (15).

The novel's postscripts thus play an ambiguous role. On the one hand, they disclose the unreliability of the readings that are inscribed in the text. On the other hand, while being themselves unreliable, they point to various elements of the story that others wish to conceal. Loxias refuses to judge the disparate accounts and thus undermines them all. Moreover, refusing to offer a definitive account himself, he implies that no such account is possible. In a novel about perception and interpretation, true vision appears to be unattainable. All accounts contradict one another, and none is privileged. Like Hamlet, the Chinese box of words to which The Black Prince repeatedly alludes, the novel turns in on itself, revealing no kernel of truth but simply more and more layers of ambiguous meaning.

The postscript writers deride Bradley's interpretation of his own story. They fail, however, to discern the nuances in his narrative; in particular, they do not distinguish between his two personae. For Bradley offers a double perspective on his tale; he recounts his story as though he were reliving his experiences but interrupts it with the maturer reflections of the humbled artist. He announces at the outset that he will "inhabit [his] past self and, for the ordinary purposes of story-telling, speak only with the apprehensions of that time" (11). The tale will unfold as though its outcome is unknown to its narrator, and his benighted viewpoint will be unreliable. He will "judge people, inadequately, perhaps even unjustly, as [he] then judged them, and not

in the light of any later wisdom" (11). But the misapprehensions of this narrative persona are challenged when, at key points in the text, Bradley does speak in a different voice, one that both criticizes his past conduct and reflects on the discrepancy between his former perceptions and present beliefs.

These two perspectives prove difficult to disentangle. At first blush it seems that Murdoch is contrasting an early naiveté and egotism with a later wisdom and selflessness. In this view, which Elizabeth Dipple offers, the novel is a kind of **Bildungsroman**. Experience chastens the foolish, misguided narrator who sharpens his moral sensibility and acquires wisdom. His two narrating personae are in a hierarchical relation to one another; the mature Bradley challenges the reliability of his earlier deluded self. As Dipple argues, the ostensible writer of The Black Prince is the Bradley whom Apollo has humbled, and it is this self-critical writer whom we should trust.

Dipple's belief in a clean disjunction between Bradley's two selves is as questionable, however, as other critics' belief that the postscripts, being unreliable, offer only inadmissible evidence. Bradley, in fact, though he does not spare his old self, which he convicts of blindness, egotism, and cruelty, remains unreliable to the end. He is less inclined to fantasy, less solipsistic, to be sure. What he has learned at Apollo's hands has enabled him to direct a stern gaze at himself and thus to write a searching, provocative

work. Yet even in his apparently "reliable" postscript he can assert that "it is psychologically impossible for a man of my temperament to lie in a moment of crisis" (388). This is a remarkable statement--itself either a blatant falsehood or a further self-delusion--for not only does Bradley lie at several moments of crisis but the whole narrative also hinges on the two lies he tells to Julian. Thus there is no radical discontinuity between his personae, and his interpretation of events remains suspect to the end.

The Black Prince's central conflict is between Bradley and Arnold. They act out this conflict intellectually, through debates about the nature of art that disclose their opposed views of literature, and emotionally, through their mutual incomprehension of one another's actions.

Bradley and Arnold are "demonic men" (31), **alter egos** who are locked in a battle that Arnold fears could lead them to "'destroy each other'" (173). This battle between the Self and its Other, between Bradley's Apollonian sensibility and Arnold's Dionysian temperament, is so bound up with competitiveness and jealousy that neither character's judgements of the other are dependable. Thus although many of their actions mirror one other, they both fail to see the parallels between them. Arnold, for example, falls in love with Christian and believes that their relationship will rejuvenate his writing. In a letter to Bradley he writes: "I feel sure, by the way, that I've been **completely transformed** as a writer. These things connect, they must do" (253). But Arnold's

letter strikes no chord in Bradley's breast. He sees it only as a "curious missive" (255), the contents of which are about as interesting as those of a "laundry bill" (255). Yet he has earlier interpreted his relationship with Julian in the same terms, seeing his love for her and his literary vocation as intimately linked: "The same agency had sent me both these things, not to compete but to complete. I would soon be writing and I would write well" (212). Arnold sees no similarity in the two cases either. He is aghast at Bradley's passion for his daughter, calling it "a defilement" (337) and Bradley a "filthy lustful old man" (283). Bradley, unable to accept Arnold's criticisms in relation to himself, duplicates them in relation to Roger and Marigold, whom he sees as "wicked, an old man and a young girl . . . pawing each other . . ." (104).

The main dispute between Bradley and Arnold, however, is literary. It is distinctly reminiscent of the celebrated debate between Henry James and H. G. Wells, whose respective positions, David Lodge argues, continue to polarize English novelists in this century.<sup>12</sup> Bradley's Apollonian defense of art corresponds both to Murdoch's view of the crystalline and to James's precise delineation of the craft of fiction. Arnold's Dionysian defence of art, in turn, recalls Murdoch's account of the journalistic and Wells's loose sketch of the uses of fiction. Through the struggle between Bradley (an "artist") and Arnold (a "journalist"), Murdoch dramatizes the tension between her respect for the written eloquence of

James and her predilection for the slapdash immediacy of Wells. In The Black Prince this tension explodes in an act of symbolic violence, which parallels that perpetrated by Wells against James. His bitter parody of James in Boon, which for James was "like the collapse of a bridge which made communication possible" (Edel 262), is akin to Bradley's destruction of Arnold's books, which also kills any hope of a reconciliation between them.

Bradley worships at the shrine of art. Having devoted his life to the search for an artistic ideal, he seeks to perfect his literary craft. He waits for divine inspiration to take him in its grip and avers that he hates "an intemperate flux of words" (18). In art every detail must have a **raison d'être**, must be fused into the work's wider pattern. Mere social observation is insufficient; if the imagination fails to transform what it sees then one cannot speak of artistic creation. Thus Bradley dismisses Arnold's concern with the **minutiae** of social life as irrelevant to art: "'Why pile up a jumble of 'details'? When you start really imagining something you have to forget the details anyhow, they just get in the way. Art isn't the reproduction of oddments out of life'" (49). Later he paraphrases "Against Dryness": "'Vague romantic myth isn't art either. Art is imagination. Imagination changes, fuses. Without imagination you have stupid details on one side and empty dreams on the other.'" (50). This statement, which combines Murdoch's distinction between fantasy (false art) and imagination (true art), with



her distinction between the journalistic ("stupid details") and the crystalline ("empty dreams"), reveals his closeness to Murdoch's own thought.

Bradley's observation, with its clear echoes of James's "The Younger Generation," clarifies his conception of art. Art does not imitate life, it transforms it. Art illuminates life by passing it through the crucible of the imagination. But even imagination, when not controlled by attention to craft, will fail to create works of aesthetic importance: "The power of imagination only condescends to lesser men if they are prepared to work, and work consists very often of simply refusing all formulations which have not achieved the density, the special state of fusion, which is the unmistakable mark of art" (146). Thus Arnold's refusal to work on his writing makes him nothing more than a "talented journalist" (51).<sup>13</sup>

Bradley's Jamesian view of the novel is nowhere made more clear than in the following comparison between himself and Arnold:

I think I objected to him most because he was such a **gabbler**. He wrote very carelessly of course. But the gabble was not just casual and slipshod, it was an aspect of what one might call his "metaphysic". Arnold was always trying, as it were, to take over the world by emptying himself over it like scented bath water. This wide catholic imperialism was quite alien to my own much more exacting idea of art as the condensing and refining of a conception almost to nothing. I have always felt that art is an aspect of the good life, and so correspondingly difficult, whereas Arnold, I regret to say, regarded art as "fun". (186-87)

Arnold, the Dionysian, is simply not serious enough about art.<sup>14</sup> Treating it as a source of amusement and play, he fails to see that it is a vocation with a responsibility to moral truth. Art, Bradley avers, "is the struggle to be, in a particular sort of way, virtuous" (189).

Arnold's work and views primarily come to us via Bradley's biased perception of them. But Arnold, who concedes some of Bradley's criticisms, reveals the limitations of his interlocutor's high-minded theory. Whereas Arnold is inquisitive about the world, Bradley lives inside his own psyche. Whereas Arnold is curious, open-minded, interested in others, Bradley is egotistical, neurotic, and little aware of any reality outside himself. Arnold urges that the imagination be constrained by the nature of the world. As Wells tried to do with James, he attempts to deflate what he sees as Bradley's pomposity in order to suggest to him that his pure vision leaves him blind to much of reality's richness. Bradley is "an agonizer" who "romanticize[s] art" (50); he should "be humbler, let cheerfulness break in!" (50).

Arnold, reminding one of Wells in his irreverent approach to writing, what James called his "cheek," sees art as fun. In contrast to Bradley, who suffers for his art, he enjoys his work: "For me writing is a natural product of *joie de vivre*" (172).<sup>15</sup> Moreover, he senses that Bradley's exalted conception of art has resulted in a sharp disjunction between his theory and his practice. He himself acknowledges that he is too prolific and recognizes his flaws, but he sees too the

smugness behind Bradley's carefully articulated standpoint:

"An alternative would be to do what you do. Finish nothing, publish nothing, nourish a continual grudge against the world, and live with an unrealized idea of perfection which makes you feel superior to those who try and fail" (172).

Bradley's addresses to Apollo, in which he pays tribute to his muse, metafictionally analyse the problems of literary form. His entire *oeuvre* is "a communication addressed to you" (79), he tells Loxias. A mysterious figure who cannot decide whether he is a clown, harlequin, or impresario (10), Loxias is the text's dedicatee and is "in more than one way responsible for the work that follows" (9), an ambiguous claim whose meanings unfold with the tale. As Bradley tells his story Loxias is revealed to be Apollo, through whom the story has come into being. Seeking artistic perfection, Bradley (Marsyas) has matched wits with the god of art, who has defeated him and punished him for his hubris. Having been humbled, he accepts the limitations of mortality and is rewarded with the gift of creativity that enables him to write his book before Apollo exacts his final price--death. Apollo, the god of art who "inspired and made possible" (19) Bradley's novel, is the embodiment of artistic perfection. He represents the ideal that Bradley realizes is beyond his reach. Thus his defeat at Apollo's hands is paradoxically a victory, for he grasps that the limitations of human understanding ensure that art will always be imperfect, and it is this realization that enables him to write.

In his tribute to Apollo Bradley meditates not only on his personal inadequacies but also on the weaknesses of his chosen form. As an accompaniment to his narrative, he includes a metacommentary on its subject and genesis: "My book is about art. It is also, in its humble way, a work of art: an 'art object', as the jargon has it; and may perhaps be permitted, now and then, to cast a look upon itself" (80). Bradley insists that art "is the telling of truth, and is the only available method for the telling of certain truths" (80). Yet he senses that his difficulty in telling the truth goes beyond his personal limitations as a writer, that it is a problem of form. In particular, he is obsessed with the perennial conflict between the contingent nature of reality and the patterned order of art. Consider, for example, the difficulty he has in getting his narrative under way:

It might be most dramatically effective to begin the tale at the moment when Arnold Baffin rang me up and said, 'Bradley, could you come round here please, I think that I have just killed my wife.' A deeper pattern however suggests Francis Marloe as the first speaker, the page or house-maid (these images would appeal to him) who, some half an hour before Arnold's momentous telephone call, initiates the action. For the news which Francis brought me forms the frame, or counterpoint, or outward packaging of what happened then and later in the drama of Arnold Baffin. There are indeed many places where I could start. I might start with Rachel's tears, or Priscilla's. There is much shedding of tears in this story. In a complex explanation any order seems arbitrary. Where after all does anything begin? That three of the four starting points I have mentioned were causally independent of each other suggests speculations, doubtless of the most irrational kind, upon the mystery of human fate. (21)

Aware of his story's complexity, Bradley realizes that it has no self-evident point of origin. Faced with the problem of how to begin, he adopts the postmodernist strategy of incorporating his problem into the text. His opening paragraph establishes a self-reflexive tone that hints both at his formal concerns and also at the roles his characters will play. Focusing on the question of narrative style, he alerts his readers to the different elements of his story, each of which seems equally relevant. How is he to decide what is significant, especially when he is aware that to focus on one of these is to imply that the others are somehow less worthy of attention? He resolves this problem by telling his own story but revealing how his concern with it led him to marginalize Rachel, Priscilla, and Francis. By speaking here of Rachel's and Priscilla's tears, by referring to Francis as a possible first speaker, he points to the stories that through his act of suppression will remain untold. But at the same time, he skilfully hints at the roles they will play in his story: Arnold's will be dramatic, Francis's will be incidental, Rachel's and Priscilla's will be tragic.

At the same time, he explicitly introduces the concept of the frame. Thus he makes it clear that his narrative will examine the problem of perception and interpretation, the problem of attaining a true, unmediated vision of reality. Suggesting at the outset that human life is inexplicable, he hints that his story may fail to illuminate its subject. Aware that the patterns he discerns in events are at least

partially arbitrary, that his story depends, as do all narratives, on authorial subjectivity, he points to the frame through which his own tale will be told.

Bradley's greatest fear is that art distorts life. Although he does not desire the "slice-of-life" art offered by Arnold, he wants art to disclose truths about reality. Yet art, because it shapes and transforms, seeks patterns and order, risks concealing the horror of reality beneath a smooth patina of mellifluous words. The great art that is created by writers who are "near to gods" (81) simplifies life to its essence, but when mortals attempt the same they only distort it:

How can one describe a human being 'justly'? How can one describe oneself? With what an air of false coy humility, with what an assumed confiding simplicity one sets about it! 'I am a puritan' and so on. Faugh! How can these statements not be false? Even 'I am tall' has a context. How the angels must laugh and sigh . . . Emotions cloud the view, and so far from isolating the particular, draw generality and even theory in their train. When I write of Arnold my pen shakes with resentment, love, remorse, and fear. It is as if I were building a barrier against him composed of words, hiding myself behind a mound of words. We defend ourselves by descriptions and tame the world by generalizing. (81-82)

Bradley's problem is deeper than his inability to control his passions. Knowledge is contextual, he implies; there is no objective standard, no impartial viewpoint that would enable him to perceive another human being justly. We can escape neither the nets of language nor those of cultural concepts and theories. Our minds are full of preconceptions, images that are "not neutral apparitions but already saturated with

judgement, lurid with it" (192). Thus Bradley, like Hugo in Under the Net, fears that the world's irreducible particularity eludes our grasp and that language may effectively be a machine for the making of falsehoods. Acting as barriers to self-analysis and communication, words may offer a consoling picture of reality rather than a hard-edged, truthful one. This is the real danger of an obsession with artistic form. According to Bradley art is the struggle to become virtuous. Thus when he claims that the good man, "[p]referring truth to form . . . is not constantly at work upon the facade of his appearance" (124), he is articulating his view of art as well.

Bradley does not, however, oppose truth and form. He is alert, rather, to the dangers of focussing exclusively on the latter. Art, he avers, "is truth" (11) but "is a vain and hollow show, a toy of gross illusion, unless it points beyond itself and moves ever whither it points" (392). His own concern with form stems from his desire to find the best way to render truth, yet when Apollo humbles him he realizes that perfect form is a chimera, for vision of the unsullied truth is the prerogative of the gods. Thus he criticizes his initial obsession with ideal form and concludes that "[t]he world is, in reality, all outside, all inside" (391). Murdoch, poised behind her unreliable narrator, tells his story in such a way that picture and frame blur together, leaving the impression that they are inseparable. In this context Conradi's claim that a common-sense Hegelian position is

central to Murdoch's thought seems apposite: "'Nothing is absolutely immediate in the absolute sense that it is in no way mediated; and nothing is mediated in the absolute sense that it is in no way immediate'" (49-50).

Bradley's story remains in a profound sense ambiguous. The postscripts may be exposed as self-serving pieces of false criticism, but they foreground elements of his text that Bradley occludes, troubling his own interpretation of it. We may think that Bradley did not kill Arnold but this alters little, for the text is not an intellectual whodunnit, but a book about the ambiguities of art and life. The text's two central relationships (Bradley's with Julian and Arnold) are contrasted with the enigma at its heart--the murder of Arnold. But whereas light can be thrown on the murder mystery, the mystery of human consciousness and human relationships stays hidden in the dark. Enmeshed in self-deceit and confusion, it proves to be art's real challenge.

It is this challenge that Bradley finally takes up. His desire for access to a perspective vouchsafed only to the gods is quashed. Apollo throws his life into disarray and forces him to recognize the disorder of the contingent world. Thus Bradley tempers his puritanical theory with Arnold's open-minded practice. Bradley's theories point to a view of art that Murdoch holds dear, but he must learn to apprehend those aspects of life that Arnold understands so well. In The Black Prince, one of her most carefully crafted novels, Murdoch combines the Baffinesque with the Pearsonian. Pit-



ting the discipline of silence against that of creation, imagination against observation, the closed against the open, she situates herself in the space born of their conflict, and produces a text that pays tribute to the tension from which her own art springs.

The Black Prince testifies to the need for art, whatever its inadequacies. Murdoch suggests that although life may be ineffable, may be "utterly unlike" (19) art, it is nevertheless art that illuminates life most powerfully. As the mature Bradley puts it: "Only art explains, and that cannot itself be explained. We and art are made for each other, and where that human bond fails human life fails" (15). Speech remains divine for Murdoch, and its highest form is still to be discovered in the obliquity of art. In Bradley's Jamesian view, art does not announce truth, but sidles up to it. Murdoch, discussing The Black Prince, writes: "[S]peech is falsehood and art is falsehood and yet there is a religious way, as it were, to the divine which rests in these things" (Bigsby 229). It is through words shaped to serve the commands of art that we are redeemed.

## V

Iris Murdoch has argued that art is better able to illuminate life than any other human pursuit. In The Sovereignty of Good she writes: "For both the collective and the individual salvation of the human race, art is doubtless more

important than philosophy, and literature most important of all" (76). In the same book she speaks of art's ability to perceive "what is really the case" (38), and in The Fire and the Sun she refers to its disclosure of "the really real" (78). These statements imply the possibility of unmediated perception, of access to reality's **ding-an-sich**, of grasping things as they really are. But Murdoch's fiction undermines this confident expectation. Novels such as Under the Net, The Unicorn, and The Black Prince are all written out of a desire for unmediated vision, yet they reveal its unattainability. Even Under the Net, one of Murdoch's most optimistic works, concludes with a mystery that cannot be explained.

Murdoch's refusal to succumb to despair over the unattainability of perfect vision stands in marked contrast to the position upheld by B. S. Johnson. Whereas Johnson tries on the whole to limit fiction's scope, to control both the author's visionary power and the reader's active imagination, Murdoch uses the novel to explore human creativity. Despite her nostalgia for a "general truth" (1987 113) about humankind, she accepts that the truths established by fiction are partial. Her various fusions of the journalistic with the crystalline--the formlessness and ineffability of life with the order and eloquence of art--disclose her attempt to extend the contemporary English novel's range. Like Angus Wilson's work, Murdoch's novels show not only her allegiance to the representational and communicative strengths of traditional realism but also her sensitivity to the self-reflexive

and sceptical insights of contemporary experimentalism.

The resultant tension between old and new novelistic forms, as also between the desire for reliable knowledge and the fear that it is out of reach, permeates Murdoch's work. In The Black Prince, Bradley makes an interesting claim: "What does he fear? is usually the key to the artist's mind" (82). Asked this question in an interview, Murdoch responded as follows: "I think I'm afraid of somehow finding out that it doesn't really matter how you behave, that morality is just a superficial phenomenon" (Haffenden 203). And in The Sovereignty of Good she acknowledges that her faith in the possibility of truth may be just a myth. Yet in the same book she reminds us that Plato referred to his own theories as myths, as metaphors for truths that are darkly glimpsed. It is only the gods, she implies, who have perfect vision. In Acastos: Two Platonic Dialogues it is Socrates, Plato's mentor, who articulates this sagacious viewpoint:

It may be that human beings can only achieve a second best, that second best is our best . . . Perhaps not only art but all our highest speculations, the highest achievements of our spirit are second best. Homer is imperfect. Science is imperfect. Any high thinking of which we are capable is faulty. Not everything connects, my dear Plato. We are not gods. What you call the whole truth is only for them. So our truth must include, must **embrace** the idea of the second best, that all our thought will be incomplete and all our art tainted by selfishness. This doesn't mean there is no difference between the good and the bad in what we achieve. And it doesn't mean not trying. It means trying in a humble modest truthful spirit. **This** is our truth. (62)

0 If art, like life itself, is about the pilgrimage from appearance to reality then the artist is enjoined to resist the temptations of fantasy (appearance) in order to bear witness to truth (reality). But Murdoch acknowledges that this attempt is doomed to fail. Although we fight to keep them apart, appearance and reality constantly blur together. It is the struggle to distinguish between them, in the full knowledge that this can never finally be done, that is the artist's task. Knowledge is gained, Murdoch implies, by undertaking the pilgrimage, not by reaching the destination.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Murdoch's distinction between open and closed modes is similar to her distinction between journalistic and crystal-line forms. I discuss these below.

<sup>2</sup> See his review-essay, "Canonizing Iris Murdoch."

<sup>3</sup> David Lodge makes a similar point in The Modes of Modern Writing. Attempting to develop a poetics of the novel, he argues that the literary form usually taken as a model for criticism is the lyric poem and that analysis is oriented to its explication. Any poetics of the novel, he contends, must free itself from this bias.

<sup>4</sup> In Acastos: Two Platonic Dialogues Socrates chides Plato for despising art's power to console, claiming that "we should not be too hard on ourselves for being comforted by art" (63).

<sup>5</sup> In an interview with W. K. Rose, Murdoch describes her writing as alternating "between a sort of closed novel, where my own obsessional feeling about the novel is very strong and draws it closely together, and an open novel, where there are more accidental and separate and free characters. I would like to write the second kind." Later she makes this point more emphatically:

I feel that I want to drive my writing in the other direction, that I would like to drive it back towards a much simpler kind of realism. I would like to be thought of as a realistic writer, in the sense in which good English novelists have been realists in the past. (73)

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, J. B. Vickery's "The Dilemmas of Language: Sartre's La Nausée and Iris Murdoch's Under the Net"; A. S. Byatt's Degrees of Freedom; and William Hall's "The Third Way: The Novels of Iris Murdoch."

<sup>7</sup> See his "A House Fit For Free Characters: The Novels of Iris Murdoch."

<sup>8</sup> In The Sovereignty of Good Murdoch has this to say of "readers": "The consumer of art has an analogous task to its producer: to be disciplined enough to see as much reality in the work as the artist has succeeded in putting into it, and not to 'use it as magic'" (64). The Unicorn's internal readers are censured because they make little attempt to see the "reality" of Hannah, preferring instead to read her through the magical stories in which her husband has enmeshed her.

<sup>9</sup> Of all the characters in the novel only Effingham and Marian maintain a steady contact with the world beyond Gaze.

ceive ironical replies that distance them from the pattern.

<sup>10</sup> I am not suggesting that Murdoch denies the existence of an external, independent reality. Murdoch's entire position rests on belief in such a reality, which she urges us to respect. I am arguing, rather, that she desires us to "join the world as it really is" (Sovereignty 93) but admits that this is impossible because we have no unmediated view of it. Reality **exists** objectively, for Murdoch, but we cannot **know** it objectively.

<sup>11</sup> For a full discussion of the novel's use of Hamlet see Richard Todd's Iris Murdoch: The Shakespearean Interest.

<sup>12</sup> See The Modes of Modern Writing.

<sup>13</sup> Wells indeed considered himself a journalist. In his last letter to James he wrote: "I had rather be called a journalist than an artist, that is the essence of it . . ." (Edel 264).

<sup>14</sup> Bradley's assessment of Arnold's work bears a close resemblance to James's view of Wells's novels. James describes Wells's novelistic technique as the turning out of "his mind and its contents upon us by any free familiar gesture and as from a high window forever open . . ." (Edel 190). Bradley's description of his own work recalls Wells's parody of James's writing in Boon: "His vast paragraphs sweat and struggle; they could not sweat and elbow and struggle more if God Himself was the processional meaning to which they sought to come. And all for tales of nothingness . . . It is a magnificent but painful hippopotamus resolved at any cost, even at the cost of its dignity, upon picking up a pea which has got into a corner of its den."

<sup>15</sup> See Edel, pp. 104 and 122.

## I

There is no real importance, declares Angus Wilson in The Wild Garden, to the "distinction between real and imagined" (136). He does not "care for exact realism" (137), he maintains, noting that without the fusion of reality and fantasy he "could not produce a novel" (137). Indeed, if forced to choose between fantasy and reality he "should consider the 'real' as the less essential" (137). These comments by a writer renowned for his sardonic cameos of post-war English life, his gift for mimicry, and his novels of manners point to a side of Wilson's work that some readers have preferred to ignore.

The unwillingness to acknowledge Wilson's experimental side is understandable, for when he published his first two volumes of short stories, The Wrong Set (1949) and Such Darling Dodos (1951), he was clearly in the vanguard of the literary reaction against modernism. In "The Revolution in British Reading" (1951) he identified two strands of post-war English fiction: the nostalgic novels of writers such as Elizabeth Bowen, Angela Thirkell, and Nancy Mitford; the novels of pure form associated with writers such as William Sansom, Henry Green, and P. H. Newby. Referring to the former, Wilson noted that Evelyn Waugh "gives a few more sharp thrusts into the festering wounds of the old ruling classes" (49). His own work, he supposed, followed in Waugh's wake.

It is perhaps a tribute to the success with which Wilson

explored Waugh's domain that critics neglected the experimental aspects of his later work for some time. Recently, however, they have acknowledged that Wilson is more than just a social realist. Jay Halio sees him as both a neo-traditional writer and an experimenter who has refused to repeat himself. Peter Faulkner concurs, arguing that although Wilson is primarily a moralist, he has searched for new fictional forms throughout his career. Malcolm Bradbury, in turn, suggests that Wilson has allied himself with the tradition of nineteenth-century realism but has also sought to amend and expand it. And Kerry McSweeney notes that Wilson broke free from the novel of manners mould by exploring alienating devices, parody, and pastiche.

Wilson claims that he did not reject experimental novels *per se*. He contends, rather, that as a neophyte writer he believed there was still much to be learned from older forms --particularly from the novels of Dickens and Dostoevsky. He was convinced, furthermore, that avant-garde writers paid insufficient attention to the dense texture of human life, that they failed to evoke social reality. In Wilson's opinion the modernists and their epigoni had abstracted the novel from society and had weakened it as a form. Thus in 1951 he argued that "some elements of social realism must return to the novel if it is going to be reintegrated into modern life" (52). Seven years later, however, he was aware of the dangers inherent in the reaction against modernism being championed by himself, C. P. Snow, and Kingsley Amis.



Speaking of the "revival of traditional, nineteenth century forms" (1958 44) he observed:

I belong to this reaction myself and I believe it has been a valuable one that has revitalized and restored the novel form. Orthodoxy of the social novel, however, would be as deplorable as the orthodoxy of Bloomsbury. (44)

Wilson has been fighting something of a rearguard action ever since, frequently clarifying the nature of his objections to modernism and his espousal of realism. In The Wild Garden, for example, he explains that he does not use devices such as extensive sub-plots "out of any partisan commitment to the 'traditional' English novel or out of any belief that a novel should contain a wide variety of 'real life'" (32). Nor does he have any patience with "the ghastly qualities of social realism" (Biles 50); his neo-traditionalism "has nothing to do with remaining absolutely imbedded in this detestation for experiment" (51).

Although these strong statements show that Wilson should not now be mistaken for a **confrere** of Snow's or Amis's, this was less apparent thirty years ago. When he began writing, his hostility to modernism, in particular to its Bloomsbury variant, was marked. In 1950 he was invited to do a talk on the BBC's Third Programme. In "Sense and Sensibility in Recent Writing," he assaulted the already beleaguered Bloomsbury citadel through an attack on Woolf. Skilfully parodying her style, he argued that because Woolf was mired in her own privileged class, she displayed a limited social range that

seriously vitiated her work. Her experimental techniques, moreover, had undermined the novel's traditional form, unnaturally driving it in the direction of poetry. In 1954 he compared Woolf unfavourably to Lawrence, arguing that her attempt to break the bounds of the traditional novel was "an escape into formlessness and into a narrowing vision," which culminated in "a new and artificial form" (1983 129).

During the nineteen sixties, however, as Wilson began to extend his own imaginative range, he re-evaluated his assessment of Woolf. In the article "If It's New and Modish is it Good?" (1961) he explained that his attack on Woolf had been a "reaction against her influence" (1983 134). He would now hesitate "to attack Virginia Woolf and the Bloomsbury school at all" (134), for he feared that the social novel, trailing moral values such as responsibility, health, and maturity behind it, was exerting a tyranny stronger "than the coterie dogmatisms of Bloomsbury" (134). He argued that the novel should be judged on aesthetic grounds, not on ethical grounds. Thus it was to the aesthetic qualities of Woolf's writing that he increasingly gave his respect so that by 1978 he was calling her "the master of twentieth-century narrative technique" (1983 175) and was regretting his former impudence:

My attack . . . allowed me (mistakenly) to associate myself with the battle for a return to the traditional novel then being waged by C. P. Snow and his followers. It was not the traditional novel I sought to defend but Dickens and Dostoevsky, which was quite another point. (175)

Woolf's greatest weakness was her inattention "to man's relation to society" (Biles 50), her narrow, class-bound conception of reality. Wilson remains critical of this weakness; for him the English novel's strength lies in its firm commitment to the representation of society. The social dimension was neglected by the modernists, he argues, and none of their considerable achievements can "fully atone for the frivolity of ignoring man as a social being, for treating personal relationships and subjective sensations in a social void" (1983 131). But his own early work, which tried to portray human beings in their social relations, was not intended to imply a rejection of experimentation--it hinted, rather, that nineteenth-century forms still had much to offer.

Distinguishing two strains in the nineteenth-century novel, those of George Eliot and Charles Dickens, Wilson maintains that his allegiance was primarily to the latter. Although he admires Eliot's evocation of social density and her moral realism, it is to the expressionist, theatrical qualities of Dickens's writing that he is drawn. He argues, moreover, that the latter's style and techniques are particularly relevant to the contemporary novel. In an interview with Betsy Draine he claims that Dickens is a peculiarly modern novelist; as the father of the "expressionist, theatrical novel" (271) he "leads into Joyce and to contemporary possibilities for the novel" (272). Thus Wilson identifies two twentieth-century novelistic traditions--the Joycean and

the Jamesian--just as he discerns two nineteenth-century strains--those of Eliot and Dickens.

Wilson admires two aspects of Dickens's work in particular: his ability to evoke the social totality by fusing a dominant plot-line with numerous sub-plots and his sense of theatre. In trying to emulate Dickens, Wilson desires "the theatrical flair--an opera going on upstage with ballets behind--and the capacity to endow the stage with scenery, to give movement across both the main opera and the little ballets also" (Draine 272). His own work, he notes, is full of characters "do[ing] their little 'bits' all the time, behind the narrative" (273). Wilson's imagery (stage, scenery, opera, little ballets) suggests how important theatre is in his writing. He has often referred to a grand guignol side of his personality, and he is no doubt partly drawn to the expressionistic qualities of Dickens's work. But there is surely a deeper reason for his affinity with Dickens. Like Dickens, Wilson has a more alien view of reality than George Eliot. He is closely attuned both to the presence of evil, which he depicts in his novels through distinctly malicious or sadistic characters, and to the dramatic nature of social reality, which is often characterized by staging, mimicry, parody, and role-playing. As is evident in the pastiche of No Laughing Matter, Wilson sees reality as theatrical, grotesque, distorted. It is, he avers, "something much more fantastic than the social-realistic surface" (Faulkner 216).

Wilson's turn to more experimental forms does not entail

a rejection of what he describes as his moral and social preoccupations (1983 134). Throughout his career he has contended that the novel should focus on human beings as seen through their social relationships, and he has never eschewed this principal tenet of his artistic creed. In "The Future of the English Novel" (1954) he argues that modern fiction's "richest promise" (1983 127) lies in "the social context of the contemporary English novel, in its relation to the changed social structure of today" (127); in "Evil in the English Novel" (1962) he sees the English novel's goal as "the struggle to maintain this quality of felt life, this packed, dense world of manners, while somehow finding a place for transcendental values" (1983 19); in "The Dilemma of the Contemporary Novelist" (1967) he suggests that English writers are at their best when they "try to render homage to man as he is in society, not when he is abstracted" (1983 248); and in an interview with Jack Biles in 1979 he reaffirms his view "that character is the single most important thing in the novel" (61).

Wilson's experimentation reveals his growing apprehension of the limitations of the traditional novel and his fear that it was becoming journalistic. He was aware of this danger as early as 1958, noting in "Diversity and Depth" that just "as the novel of sensibility could degenerate into a poor subject for poetry so the social novel may be a vehicle for statements better and more economically made in the form of intelligent sociological articles" (1983 132). In "The

Dilemma of the Contemporary Novelist" he amplifies this argument. He urges novelists to reject "the idea that fact is somehow a virtue" (1983 240) because journalistic and documentary writing have "nothing whatsoever to do with the novel" (240), which, "if it is anything at all, is the deification of fancy, of imagination" (240). The novel is "the most hopeful form of communication in the present age," for it discloses that "the so-called real world, that the world of fact, is not all that there is" (241).

Wilson's distinction between documentary novels and poetic novels, which parallels Iris Murdoch's distinction between the journalistic and crystalline modes, is clarified in The Wild Garden. He refers to a "confusion between novel writing and sociology" (139), arguing that too much of the "'real'" in a novel suggests "some exhaustion of the creative imagination" (139).<sup>1</sup> But he also argues, echoing his early criticisms of Woolf, that the novel cannot be purely aesthetic. The novel is "a mixed form" (148), he avers, which fuses imagination and observation, fantasy and reality, into "a concentrated vision" (149). Like Murdoch, Wilson resists the blandishments both of pure form and of an insufficiently shaped content, maintaining that the novel's greatest strength lies in its ability to walk the fine line between them. Consider this statement from "The Dilemma of the Contemporary Novelist" (1967):

I do not believe that the novel is pure art in the way that painting or sculpture are; it is not the same kind of thing. The element of humanity is es-

sential in the novel. The novel is not just journalism, it is not a hotchpotch to fry any old ideas you happen to have in, it is still not, as James and Flaubert would have liked to consider it, a kind of pure work of art; it deals with human beings and with human emotions; it is the projection of another human being's feelings about the humanity around him and cannot be a purely formal thing in the sense that abstract art is. (1983 243)

Paraphrased slightly, Wilson's claim that the novel discloses that "the so-called real world . . . is not all that there is" (1983 241) summarizes his own literary career, for both Wilson's novels and his criticism increasingly show that although he believes the social novel is important, it is not all that there is. Thus in "Depth and Diversity" he argues that the reaction against experiment has gone too far; he hopes that it will prove to be "only a temporary rejection of over-exploited devices still rich in promise" (1983 132). In "If it's Modish and New is it Good?," he contends that the Leavisian emphasis on literature's moral qualities has overshadowed its visionary aspects. Although he himself favours "plots and stories," he is disturbed by "the suggestion that this is the only way in which novels can be written" (137). Indeed, the entrenchment of this view has led to a severance of intellectual ties with Europe and to a "self-satisfied insular attitude which reaches occasional peaks of clownishness in Kingsley Amis's attacks on 'abroad'" (137). For Wilson such parochialism is debilitating because the English can neither afford such insularity nor can they rely solely on ethical values. The "meaning of novel making" lies in the search for "a point of fusion between . . . childhood vision

and . . . mature judgement" (1983 138).

Wilson's conviction that the novel will survive if it discovers new forms is central to his rebuttal of the "death-of-the-novel" thesis. He maintains that although the novel's richest possibilities still lie in its portrayals of human beings, new modes of presenting them are essential. If fiction must compete with the visual media it should do so by exploring its own narrative possibilities, not by returning to realism. Traditional novels have "gone soggy and treacly on us" (1983 244); there is an absence "of any real communication" because the relationship between text and reader "is too smooth, and it does threaten death to the form itself" (245). Thus contemporary novelists should take as their starting point the work of experimental writers such as Flaubert, James, Woolf, and Joyce.

According to Wilson the English novel "pivots--and this is its glory--around a humanistic concept of the world" (247). Nonetheless, it must be open to artistic innovations if it wishes to ensure the vitality of its humanism. The post-war reaction against experiment, which in part sought to defend humanistic values, was misguided, Wilson suggests, for it mistakenly confused experimental forms with decadence. Post-war realists "tended to think that formal experiment in writing was in itself somehow connected with a decadent **haute bourgeoisie**" (246). Modernism was thus rejected on social and ideological rather than formal grounds. The resultant traditionalism is to be regretted; it has cut England off



from Europe and has led to a vitiating insularity.

Wilson concludes that the English novel is far from moribund. Its two primary strengths lie in its commitment to the evocation of social density--depth and diversity--and in its propensity for nourishing eccentricity. Misfits such as Ivy Compton-Burnett, Henry Green, John Berger, and Christine Brooke-Rose keep the novel alive, he argues, because they reveal some of the novel's more marginalized possibilities and by doing so challenge other writers to re-examine their own assumptions about the form. He urges us to acknowledge that any tradition that fails to place a novel as original as Tristram Shandy close to its centre is a biased one. For Wilson the English novel has much to contribute to literature, in particular "our strong sense of man in his social environment," but this contribution will have a significant impact "only if we are willing to break out of formal bounds" (250).

## II

Hemlock and After (1952), Angus Wilson's first novel, scrutinizes the weaknesses of his own humanistic beliefs. Writing in The Wild Garden of the surrogate families with whom he spent much of the nineteen forties, Wilson notes that they "became the centre of my attack upon the deficiencies of a liberal socialism to which I still give my own moral and cultural allegiance" (47). His use of the word "attack" is

pertinent, for Wilson's forceful criticisms of humanism might lead one to assume that he holds it in contempt. Referring to the novel's bitter tone, C. B. Cox points out that Wilson is a deeply pessimistic writer; his humanism, Cox suggests, lies not in his faith in the innate goodness of human nature but in his refusal to submit to despair.

Wilson's pessimistic worldview stands in marked contrast to, and is meant as a criticism of, pre-war humanism, which he perceives as overly optimistic. As several critics have noted, Hemlock and After's criticisms of liberalism should be seen in the context of the post-war period, for the novel specifically examines a loss of faith in humanist values that was occasioned by their failure both to account for and to withstand the horrors of the Second World War. Thus Wilson links the Vardon Hall debacle to "one of those periodic worsenings of the world situation, which . . . crack the uneasy paste of hope and optimism of which so much confidence is compounded" (146-147) and which highlight "the sense of individual impotence" (147). He also establishes a connection between Bernard Sands's apprehension of evil in individual people and its "wider, historical applications" (108). It is "perhaps from these little stagnant pools," Bernard muses, "that the mists and vapours arise . . . like Hitler" (108).

Hemlock and After owes something of its narrative technique to Emile Zola, about whom Wilson had just published a brief book. Wilson's description of his own style, which re-

veals the similarities between himself and Zola, throws light on the form of his first novel:

I think what I want to do . . . is to amass various reactions to life, strong reactions, to amass various distortions and caricatures, scenes, pictures, and to bombard my readers with these things, having previously, I hope, put them into as strict a formal pattern in the sense of a designed novel as I possibly can. (Bradbury 120)

Although it is a reasonably short, compact book, Hemlock and After displays a broad social canvas. It abounds with minor characters and numerous small sub-plots. Bombarding his readers with little vignettes of social life and a wealth of naturalistic detail, Wilson maintains control of his material by relying almost exclusively on an authorial omniscience that makes liberal use of irony. Because he handles his characters and scenes with economy, they neither excessively add to the text's length nor distract from its central concerns. Comprising three books, each of which concludes on a note of despair- the Leicester Square incident, the Vardon Hall disaster, and Bernard's death--and an "Epilogue," the novel unfolds the story of Bernard Sands's moral collapse.

Wilson has justifiably gained a reputation as a novelist who has confronted the changing face of post-war England, and in Hemlock and After he relates his examination of humanism's deficiencies to the country's political situation. As Averil Gardner puts it:

Nineteen fifty-one was . . . the last year in office of the Labour government voted in in 1945; thus the novel's opposition of left-oriented liberalism (Wil-

son's own inclination) and entrenched 'traditional' authority is backed by historical fact: 1951 as the last flowering of that pre-war Fabian hopefulness of which Bernard and Ella were a part. (39)

Bernard's neighbours regard his Vardon Hall scheme--a government funded retreat for writers--as "the latest symbol of the war they [are] waging against a changing world" (19). As is so often the case in Wilson's work, those who cling to a nostalgic view of the past and who refuse to face social change are openly satirized. When two minor characters discuss England's degeneration, for example, the omniscient narrator comments: "Mrs. Wrigley could not truthfully remember the very glorious past against which Mrs. Crawley set the declining morals of to-day, but she suspected with good reason that Mrs. Crawley could not either" (38-39). Wilson has little faith, however, in the political alternatives to a self-defeating nostalgia. He gives short shrift both to the right-wing authoritarianism represented by James and Sonia and to the radical socialism espoused by Louie Randall. Even Alan Craddock's socialist liberalism, with which Bernard largely agrees, is portrayed as priggish and cold-hearted. It is in relation to this rejection of established political positions that Hemlock and After assesses the flaws in the apparently all-embracing creed of humanism.

Most of Wilson's central protagonists are intelligent figures who try to comprehend themselves by rigorously examining their motives. Wilson is impatient of "simple, naive people," he explains, "because they haven't faced up to the

main responsibility of civilized man--that of facing up to what he is and to the Freudian motivations of his actions" (1985 44). Hemlock and After dramatizes the undoing of Bernard Sands's internal world when he discovers, after a lifetime of self-deception, that his values are corrupt at the source.

Sands is a successful novelist who has carved a niche for himself in the cloistered world of English letters, but who prides himself on his refusal to compromise what he regards fondly as his "anarchic humanism" (11). Unwilling to adopt the public persona he feels is expected of him, he declines to "act the great Panjandrum, the Grand Old Man of Letters" (15). He perceives himself as a Socratic figure who has earned the public's respect "for his eternal questioning of their best-loved 'truths'" (9). Thus although he has won through to a position of considerable authority and prestige, he sees himself as something of an outsider. He delights in the disappointment he imagines his critics will feel "at his out-moded libertarian management" (14) of Vardon Hall, for he will tolerate no "neo-authoritarianism" and no "dogmatic spiritual values" (14). A self-confessed liberal humanist, he remains sceptical of the pieties of his age and displays little desire to assert the authority that his public stature accords him.

Sands's smugness is unjustified, however. Although he is often insightful, he is both supercilious and complacent. He explains how "satisfied" with himself he is three times in

the first paragraph alone. Pleased with the success of his Vardon Hall initiative, with his critical acceptance by public and critics, and with his "proved strength and independence" (9), he praises himself for remaining a "Grand Enfant Terrible" who can induce the public "to take from him exactly the pill they did not like, and take it without the sugar of whimsy" (9). Thus he finds it "very gratifying" to "have the State eating out of his hand" (11). Although he occasionally doubts his abilities, this is "not a mistrust he intend[s] others to share" (9).

Sands's arrogance is compounded by his self-deception. Unable critically to assess his own flaws, he is in many ways something of an adolescent whose pride in his non-conformism conceals a juvenile desire to enjoy the pleasures of fame while avoiding its attendant responsibilities. Furthermore, he is blind to the extent of his failure with his children and his wife, whom he is also deceiving about his recently discovered homosexuality. He is unable to make contact with the neurasthenic Ella, to whose terrors he is "completely without a key" (13), and he little comprehends his children, both of whom resent him. For James, Bernard's entire scheme, with its purportedly laudable aims, is "typical of his endless self-deception" (21).

Sands's self-confidence--his certainty about the essential rightness of his values and actions--symbolizes that optimistic brand of humanism which Hemlock and After questions. Bernard's naive view of the benevolent nature of reality is

gradually undermined. Undergoing a painful process of self-discovery, he is forced to confront the ambiguous nature of his motives, which he had assumed to be above reproach, and to accept the presence of evil in a world he had hitherto conceived as benign. Realizing that he has been living in a haze of self-deception, both his cherished humanism and his erstwhile confidence in himself crumble, leaving him morally paralysed.

Sands's apprehension of evil in the world comes through several characters who seem to him to embody it: the homosexual theatre producer, Sherman Winter; the procuress, Mrs. Curry; and the Edwardian dandy, Hubert Rose. Although at first he avoids thinking about what these characters symbolize, attributing the uneasiness they elicit in him to nervous anxiety (14), social awkwardness (25), and the onset of a new novel (53), he eventually admits that the truth lies deeper. These figures, particularly Mrs. Curry, whom Bernard sees as "a sprawling waste of energy in malice for its own sake," as "a natural destroyer, pitted against life itself" (13-14), represent a malevolence against which he fears his humanistic values can offer no bulwark.

Despite his growing doubts about their efficacy, Sands attempts to hold on to these values but is devastated when he convicts himself of the evil he has observed in others. Waiting for his former lover, Terence, at Leicester Square, he witnesses a young homosexual's arrest by the police and is dismayed by his own response:

[I]t was neither compassion nor fear that had frozen Bernard. He could only remember the intense, the violent excitement that he had felt when he saw the hopeless terror in the young man's face, the tension with which he had watched for the disintegration of a once confident human being. He had been ready to join the hounds in the kill then. It was only when he had turned to the detective that his sadistic excitement had faded, leaving him with normal disgust. But what had brought him to his senses, he asked himself, and, to his horror, the only answer he could find was that in the detective's attitude of somewhat officious but routine duty there was no response to his own hunter's thrill. Truly, he thought, he was not at one with those who exercised proper authority. A humanist, it would seem, was more at home with the wielders of the knout and the rubber truncheon.

(109)

This is an important passage in the novel, but we should note that it entails a small sleight of hand. At one stroke Wilson moves from the particular to the universal by linking a personal flaw of Bernard's--his sadistic impulses--with a general flaw in humanism as a whole. But the text fails to establish this connection; it is merely asserted. Wilson clearly wishes to suggest that liberal humanism's view of the personality is overly optimistic, that it is blind to men's and women's darker drives. It is one thing to argue that we need a less sanguine view of the human personality, however, and another to suggest that it is characterized by evil impulses. Sands's many limitations reveal some of humanism's deficiencies, to be sure, but his personal response to sadism cannot be presented as true of humanism in general.

This loss of self-confidence symbolizes Wilson's rejection of a pre-war humanism that he finds arrogant and smug. Bernard has practised what Wilson sees as the "final



hypocrisy of the educated and worldly" (1963 30); he has indulged in a self-concealment that has deceived "a habit of rigorous self-inquiry and a trained observation of the shape of the lives of other people" (30). When he grasps the discrepancy between the dark side of his character and his self-satisfied belief in his own benevolence, he loses faith in his ideals.

Bernard's uncertainty about his values is counterpointed by the assurance of his wife, Ella, and the civil servant, Charles Murley. Their calm acceptance of power and their preparedness to wield it stand in marked contrast to his self-absorption. Bernard is obsessed with power; he fears not only that it corrupts but also that its exercise leads to unacceptable suffering. Murley has little patience with Bernard's soul-searching. He tells Sands that he is deluding himself, that his anarchic sympathies only show that he wants "the pleasures of authority without any of its penalties" (106). Although this incisive observation exposes Bernard's refusal to accept responsibilities and hints at his adolescence, it fails to dispel his doubts. For Bernard, Charles's self-confidence is disquieting. Charles acknowledges that those in power occasionally misuse it, but he avers that what upsets Bernard is only "the simple and proper use of authority" (105), a view that Bernard rejects. He remains convinced that Charles's assurance betokens an indifference to the unintended, and often horrific, consequences to which the exercise of authority may lead. Charles's complacency, he

concludes, leaves him blind both to the world's "second-rate failures" (108) and to its deeper evils.

Bernard's uneasiness about authority is central to the text. After the Leicester Square incident his lack of faith in his own ability to act, which derives from his distrust of his own motives, is compounded by his questioning of distinctions between right and wrong, distinctions on which authority rests. Initially, we are told, Sands's humanism "was not the less violently held because he had lately begun to doubt whether it was a totally adequate answer" (55). But as the novel unfolds, the strength of his convictions wanes. Whereas his sister Isobel "was as certain at sixty as she had been at twenty, he at fifty-seven was once more as uncertain as at seventeen" (73). Thus when Louie Randall asks him to chair a peace-meeting Bernard declines, remarking that "'the others know so much to be true which I'm fairly certain isn't'" (76) and explaining that although he agrees with their goals he is unsure of their methods. This uncertainty is later clarified in a discussion with Ella about gardening. Doubting that her clematis is "worth saving," Bernard asks his wife whether she is not tempted to give it "'a further push on its way to the rubbish heap?'" (125):

'No,' she answered at last, 'I don't think so, Bernard. Gardening always seems to mean keeping things alive and getting them to grow. Perhaps I'm not ruthless enough.'

'With weeds?' he asked in his old Socratic quiz-zical manner.

'Well, only because they stop the right things from growing.'

'You're very sure about the right things,' he

commented. (125)

Whereas Bernard questions received values, Ella accepts them. Moreover, although Bernard is tantalised by the thrill of destruction that he experienced at Leicester Square, this kind of thrill does not touch Ella. When he asks her whether she never "get[s] a kick" when her "precious gentians" (125) die, her practical retort discloses her inability to grasp the implications of the question. Sensing this, Bernard shrinks away from his wife, calling her approach--and thus linking it to Murley's--"the proper exercise of authority" (126).

This contrast between Bernard, on the one hand, and Ella and Charles, on the other, lies at the heart of the novel's portrayal of the conflict between thought and action. Consider, for example, Ella's and Bernard's different responses to his dilemma:

'There's an awful lot that wants doing, Bernard,' she added.

'A lot of thinking,' Bernard commented.

'A lot of action, I should have supposed,' his wife said . . . . (213)

Bernard's reflective spirit helps him to grasp some of humanism's central weaknesses but prevents him from acting; Ella's predisposition to act allows her to do some good but results in various unintended and ambiguous consequences.

Sands's realization that there is a kinship between his deepest desires and those of the sadists and oppressors cripples him. Forced to scrutinize the motives behind his appar-

ently humane ideals, he finds that they are shot through with dark impulses. Thus he turns his greatest public triumph, the opening of Vardon Hall, into personal disaster. Having asserted that he will not disclose his personal misgivings (9), he now delivers a garbled speech in which he publicly abases himself. In the "threads of evil" (148) that have been infecting his mind he sees "but the reflection of his own guilt, of his newly discovered hypocrisy, his long-suppressed lusts" (148). Against this self-condemnation he can raise no protest:

[H]e thought himself alone, the coward who had refused to face the dual nature of all human action, whose resplendent, eccentric cloak of broadminded, humane, individual conduct had fallen to pieces under the glaring neon searchlight of that single sordid test of his humanity in Leicester Square. He had failed the test and must take the consequences. (148-49)

Having prided himself on the worthiness of his aspirations, shielding himself from the ambiguities inherent in human behaviour, he now realizes that he has deceived himself and can see only his duplicity and selfishness. Thinking of James and Elizabeth, he perceives "the loneliness of [their] childhood" (189); re-examining his relationships with his lovers, he finds "no kindness in his teasing exposure of Eric's ignorance, or in his witty rebukes of Terence's vulgarity" (189); thinking of Leicester Square, he is conscious only of the fear on the arrested man's face and of "his own answering shudder of pleasure" (189). Unable to disentangle laudable motives from sadistic drives and convicting himself

of complicity with evil, Bernard feels his "tattered humanism" to be "compounded through and through with alien motives and decisions" (219). Thus he desires only to "smash the images of love and kindness before which he had worshipped so long in self-deceived, conventional homage" (190).

Bernard's impotence stems from his demoralization. He circumvents Hubert's planned paedophilic seduction of a young girl but describes this "limited action" (217) as the only one to which he has any right. He understands Hubert's despair all too well, telling him that he wants to "limit its field of devastation" (205) but that he has no desire to condemn Hubert. He realizes, quite simply, that he has no way of knowing whether or not he would act as Hubert does if he were in the same situation. On a solitary walk, he refuses to intervene when he comes across a weasel killing a rabbit, reflecting that "the rabbit, like Hubert's small girl victim, had too little appeal to his paederastic taste to make its suffering a test of the true source of his humane ideals" (190). When Hubert challenges him on precisely this point, Bernard, admitting that he knows his own motives are unfathomable, replies with tragic candour:

'I make you a present of the failure of humanism, if it consoles you to believe that my despair makes yours less,' Bernard answered. 'They are, in fact, two despairs and they can help neither of us. Nor, for that matter,' he added, 'do they say anything about what other men may do with the same things--other humanists or,' and he looked around the room, 'other disciples of negation.' (204)

It is here that Hemlock and After draws back from an all

out identification of Bernard's flawed ideals and those of humanism in general. Whereas earlier the novel implied an explicit link between Bernard's complicity with sadism and humanism's collapse, Wilson now suggests that such an identification cannot be complete.

In keeping with the difficulty of its subject, the novel ends on an ambiguous note. James and Sonia's intolerant pragmatism is ironized as heavily as Louie Randall's political extremism, and the common-sense position represented by Charles and Ella is seen to be as little satisfactory as Bernard's paralysis. Ella's desire to right wrongs and to punish the guilty has some positive consequences but also several unforeseen and negative ones. The guilty are jailed, and Eric is freed from his mother's influence, but the ripple caused by Ella's actions does not stop there. Mrs. Wrigley is shattered by the news of her son's imprisonment; Hubert commits suicide; Mrs. Curry and Ron Wrigley flourish in jail, making contacts that help them pursue their criminal activities when they are released. When her brother, whom she despises, suggests that Bernard "knew men and women too well to believe that shutting them up was going to cure the world's evils," Ella, who "had been thinking with anxiety of this view . . . dismissed it finally from her mind" (231). But her anxiety haunts her. Later, questioning herself, she admits that "doing doesn't last, even if one knows what one's doing, which one usually doesn't" (246).<sup>2</sup>

In Murdoch's Under the Net, arguing that there is no key

to the riddle of human existence, Hugo emphatically tells Jake that the "truth lies in blundering on" (228). Like Jake, though in a less abstract context, Bernard has trouble adopting this view. He distrusts both his own motives, refusing to accept their partial impurity, and the proper exercise of authority, fearing its possibly harmful unintended consequences. He refuses to act because he has convicted himself of an internal evil before which he feels impotent and because he is aware of an external evil before which he suspects authority is equally impotent. His scepticism and his conscience thus result in a debilitating paralysis--a refusal to act because by doing so one runs the risk of blundering. Wilson has elsewhere described this kind of stultification as "a disease, but a necessary disease, of civilized people" (Bradbury 1977 121).

Bernard's disease kills him. He discovers in his own heart the hemlock that poisons him, telling Bill that he must "travel light" because he "ha[s] it all against [him]-self" (186).<sup>3</sup> His death implies that for Wilson there is no solution to the dilemmas faced by the post-war humanist, and it is here that Wilson's pessimism comes to the fore. What follows hemlock is deeply ambiguous: either Bernard's helplessness, a form of secular quietism that bows before "the possible collapse of everything" (205); or Ella's activism, a use of vested authority in which "such a lot of wicked things get mixed up in the good one does" (235). Bernard's death, in short, does not just allow Wilson to

complete the parallel with the life of Socrates, nor does it simply provide a way of avoiding closure; it hints, rather, that Bernard's dilemmas must remain unresolved, because they continue to confront every thinking post-war humanist.

Hemlock and After examines liberalism's weaknesses and implicitly contrasts Wilson's self-doubting humanism with the confident variety represented by E. M. Forster. But although Wilson is acutely aware of liberalism's flaws, he has repeatedly emphasized his allegiance both to liberal humanism and to its embodiment in the realist novel. Nevertheless, his understanding of humanism's limitations--in particular his belief that life is more mysterious, grotesque, and dark than humanism suggests--has led him to extend his fictional range. In The Wild Garden Wilson denies that he has any exclusive commitment to realism and stresses how important fantasy is to his writing. Paraphrasing Sands's assessment of humanism slightly, one could say that Wilson believes that realism is less than a fully adequate answer to the problem of literary representation. His attempt to find a more comprehensive and imaginative solution to this problem than that offered by straightforward realism finds its most powerful expression in No Laughing Matter, unquestionably his **magnum opus**.



## III

At an anti-Fascist rally in 1937 Herr Birnbaum, famous author of children's stories, is disappointed to hear that John Galsworthy will not be present. When Margaret Mathews, a successful writer herself, informs him that Galsworthy "wasn't a very good novelist" (370), Birnbaum concedes the point: "No, I suppose not. But then the English novel is not an aesthetic novel, it is a social novel. The Forsyte Saga has great importance as the mirror of the British high bourgeoisie" (370). Birnbaum's willingness to overlook the English novel's artistic defects and his faith in its capacity to reflect social life are not, however, shared by Angus Wilson. No Laughing Matter, the provisional title of which was Laughing Mirrors, undermines the naive realist position that Birnbaum espouses by both utilizing and parodying social realist techniques. Moreover, challenging the easy distinction between art's social and aesthetic aspects, Wilson fuses the breadth of nineteenth-century fiction with the artifice of twentieth-century fiction in a brave attempt to synthesize the burgher novel and the art-novel.

Like Galsworthy's epic, Wilson's novel is a family saga. And while there are similarities between the two texts--which signal Wilson's respect for the burgher novel--it is through the differences between them that No Laughing Matter reveals its critical revision of The Forsyte Saga. In her book, A Theory of Parody, Linda Hutcheon warns us not to regard parody as primarily imitation for the purpose of ridicule. Pa-

raphrasing a sentence from John Fowles's The Collector, she argues that parody, particularly in its twentieth-century forms, is often characterized by a "combination of respectful homage and ironically thumbed nose" (33). Parody, Hutcheon notes, creates difference within similarity; it allows modern artists to respond to the past by reworking it, recoding it in new forms. Thus for Hutcheon parody operates "as a method of inscribing continuity while permitting critical distance" (20).

Hutcheon's view of parody offers a good starting point for analysis of No Laughing Matter, which, like Fowles's The French Lieutenant's Woman, both subverts an older tradition and acknowledges its strengths. Thus what initially seem to be sporadic references to Galsworthy's novel turn out to follow a clear pattern. Throughout the novel The Forsyte Saga is associated with the resolutely middle-brow Pascoes, Sukey and Hugh. The insular English world portrayed by Galsworthy is their world, and in it they wish to remain.<sup>4</sup> Sukey, for example, disparages Margaret's ironic style of writing, arguing that, unlike Galsworthy and Hugh Walpole, she "'make[s] things more depressing than they really are'" (186). When Hugh and Sukey cannot decide whether or not to put up the Jewish refugee, Frau Liebermann, Sukey approves her husband's desire to escape into the comforting *milieu* of his book: "That's right, dear . . . . You bury yourself in that awful old Soames. Why should you be worried with all this in the summer holidays?" (298).

The Pascoes' refusal to confront the encroachments of the wider world is heavily ironized, however. Frau Liebermann punctures the self-satisfied balloon in which they live, telling them that the English lion is all words and no claws (346-47). Sukey's war-time broadcasts, which depict "the good old days" (395) are, as Billy Pop pithily points out, "muck" (396). Finally, Sukey's private pact with God backfires cruelly. Accepting that England must enter the war, she offers her eldest two sons as a sacrifice, asking only that the youngest, P. S., be spared. But whereas all survive the Second World War, P. S. is killed during the division of Palestine between Israel and Jordan in 1948. His death in another international crisis shows how defenceless English insularity is against the depredations of twentieth-century history. Thus Sukey's nostalgic desire to hold on to a world that has passed away returns to haunt and condemn her.<sup>5</sup> And when England belatedly tries to reassert its status as a world power in the Suez ~~débâcle~~ of 1956, the response from those present to Sukey's hysterical reaction summarizes the inadequacy of her parochial worldview: "the present crisis was no time for such ghosts, perhaps, in fact, it was just that sort of living in the past that had brought England to her present humiliations" (437).

The gradual dissolution of the Mathews family--like that of the Coldridge household in Lessing's The Four-Gated City--points to those large-scale disruptions of public life that have led to the collapse of Sukey's private world. No

Laughing Matter depicts the loss of continuity between past and present, the break-up of family life, and the fading of communal values in both the public and the private spheres; it concludes with death and exile. Its subversion of the family saga discloses Wilson's belief that the burgher epic belongs to a quickly disappearing past. It is the past, however, that conditions a gradually emergent present, whose culture and literary forms are both continuous and discontinuous with it. Thus the text's formal innovations--a protean narrator, pastiches of various dramatic forms, characters' self-conscious role-playing, and multiple points of view--question the accuracy with which the social novel of the past represented reality. Herr Birnbaum's touching faith in its mirroring abilities is undermined, for Wilson implies that if art reflects life it does so with distorted mirrors.<sup>6</sup>

No Laughing Matter is a double-voiced text that examines both literature and history. But it does not treat these as separate phenomena, viewing history as an external set of events on which literature may offer commentary. Rather, it discloses its awareness of history's textual nature, of the extent to which history is shaped through the discourses that articulate it. For Wilson literature and history are inseparable; they imply and co-create one another. Literature is both a discourse that can be historically located (it belongs to a time that has fashioned it) and a discourse that locates history (it helps to fashion our knowledge and interpretation of it). No Laughing Matter brilliantly avoids the trap of

portraying history as the "background" against which the novel's action unfolds. History and literature are fused in a **tour-de-force** that boldly asserts their reliance on a shared intertextual space.

Except for those who experience them directly, those numerous discrete moments that ultimately comprise history come to us in textual form. The act that transmits knowledge of history is at one and the same time an interpretative act. It is fitting, then, as Jean Sudrann has argued, that No Laughing Matter begins less with a historical "moment" than with a complex discourse about the different ways that it could be recorded and passed on. The novel's opening words refer to the cinematic representation of the Exhibition at which the Mathews family is present when the novel begins: "All through that year the kinemas [sic] showed scenes from the Exhibition on Gaumont Graphic or Pathe Pictorial . . . ." (11). Those who are not present catch "quick jerky glimpses" (11) of celluloid's reproduction of a world--the Wild West--that is itself an imaginative (and largely mythical) reconstruction of the past. But can the past, whether that of the Wild West or that of Edwardian Kensington, be caught? The Mathews "might so easily have been frozen and stored away in the files of the National Film Institute" (11), where they would have been available to other interpreters, figures such as "the costume designer, the lover of moments of good cinema, or the searcher for social types" (11). Although no mechanical means of reproduction were present, they could not

in any case have equalled language's power to evoke the scene's nuances and complexity:<sup>7</sup>

But there was no such camera poised in waiting. And the loss in recall is probably not very great, since the jerky Colonel-Bogey-accompanied life of an old film news strip would ill serve to dissolve the limbs into that delicious, sunbathed, pleasure-sated rhythm which alone could bring back the exact feel of that far-off afternoon. In any case, what no recording machine yet invented could have preserved was the pioneer happiness, the primitive dream that for some minutes gave to that volatile, edged and edgy family a union of happy carefree intimacy that it had scarcely known before and was never to know again. (11-12)

In direct contrast with the chosen modes of sociologists ("searcher for social types") and documentary film-makers or photo-journalists ("old film news strip") Wilson luxuriates in a deliberately baroque, Joycean style. But if he thus implies that language's sinuousness allows the writer to evoke reality more deeply than the camera permits its operator to do, he does not suggest that it can finally capture the essence of reality. On the contrary, the novel is from the outset just as much in dialogue with itself as with the media against which it competes: photography, cinema, television, journalism, sociology. If No Laughing Matter begins by hinting that literature has strengths that other forms of discourse lack, then it devotes the rest of its considerable length to exploring this claim. In doing so it discloses the aesthetic and epistemological weaknesses of social realist forms, whether they be literary or cinematic.

No Laughing Matter, multiple-voiced, carnivalesque, and

parodic, is a fundamentally unstable text. Its pessimistic "Condition of England" themes are paralleled by its formal disruptions of narrative continuity. Neil McEwan, citing Raymond Williams's work on the link between the stability of narrative voice and the stability of community, suggests that the novel's kaleidoscopic style evokes the cultural disintegration that its content depicts. Malcolm Bradbury, in turn, argues that critics who see Wilson primarily as a humanist must confront the novel's distortions of reality, its grotesquerie, and its multiple viewpoints, particularly those of its protean narrator, who often adopts a singularly odd moral stance. For this narrator leaps among the pages in a variety of guises--omniscient, perplexed, ironical, tender--offering us contradictory perspectives that cannot be subsumed under a controlling voice. He asserts, questions, and reflects; disappears at some moments and reappears at others; is at once serious and playful, calm and histrionic. His refusal to be pinned down, his evident pleasure in language's ambiguities and richness, all point to his awareness of the world's imperspicuity. As Wilson himself has said: "I'm very well aware that, yes, this is my reality but there are twenty-four other realities going on just within one hundred yards away" (Halio 1985 64).

That No Laughing Matter will be concerned with these other realities is made clear in "Book One." The conflict between alternative modes of representation and the introduction of the questioning narrator is followed by an account of

the vastly different daydreams that the Exhibition provokes in each of the family members. This account allows Wilson to introduce his cast members and to begin characterizing them. At the same time, by focussing on each of his characters' fantasies he hints at their predilection for role-playing, for escaping from reality into worlds of their own invention, thus raising one of the text's central concerns: although reality and fantasy may intertwine in complex ways, blurring the line between them, a too-willing immersion in the latter may result in a crippling evasion of the former.<sup>8</sup>

All of the Mathews children use fantasy to cope with the intolerable pressures of living with their mercurial, irresponsible, at times vicious parents, Clara and Billy Pop. The novel implies that this is a valid form of self-defence. But it asks whether this defence may not become debilitating, resulting in an avoidance of reality that precludes confrontation and resolution. Sukey, for example, creates an imaginary pastoral world for herself as a child (48; 74) but never breaks out of it. When she last appears in the novel she is telling her grandson that Hugh is content because "he's got his old Forsytes on television" (446) and telling God a story about the time she "was suddenly taken short" (447). Marcus, in contrast, makes the transition from fantasy to reality. Even as a terrorized, terrified little boy he seems aware of the distinctions between the two domains, reflecting that "until he could build his own world, the familiar ugliness of 52 must be his plasticene" (50). Later, confronted



by fascism, he courageously accepts that the "easy moral rules" by which he has lived as an aesthete cannot apply when " 'nice' people reveal . . . the obscenities of their minds and wills" (291). Thus he undergoes a political education, gets caught up in the fight against fascism, and at the end of the novel is running a successful business on cooperative lines.

Wilson, who delights in multiple resonances, links this issue of personal evasion for the purposes of psychic survival to a wider question: does fiction itself, which creates imaginary worlds, face reality, or does it make reality bearable by recasting it in duplicitous artistic forms? Fiction, he has claimed, "is a kind of magic and trickery--a confidence trick, trying to make people believe something is true that isn't" (Halio 1985 42). Novels "are lies, novelists disreputable people in their basic nature" (Wilson 1963 146).

No Laughing Matter sounds this theme early. In her daydream Margaret, who will become a major novelist, imagines herself transmuting her experience of the day into literary form. But fearing failure and disapproval, she retreats behind the mask of an authorial persona, Margaret Carmichael. Thus the act of literary creation involves a double displacement; experience is reinterpreted as fiction, and then responsibility for it is transferred: "There, now it was someone else, and Aunt Mouse and all other mice could jeer as much as they wished, it would not touch her" (18). Displacement leads to protection. Margaret keeps reality itself at

bay by recasting it in words and seeks to avoid adverse criticisms by denying her responsibility for the creative act. This form of self-protection is emphasized again and again. Later in the novel, for example, when woken by her parents' quarrelling, she dispels her "childhood terror" by once again resorting to the creation of fiction: "Slowly, practisedly she relaxed by means of the familiar stringing together of words" (52).

The novel traces Margaret's literary career from its childhood beginnings to its adult successes. Revealing that her urge to write originates in a desire to escape the tensions of quotidian life, that writing encourages a displacement of unhealthy emotions, the text remains ambivalent about this displacement. Because she avoids them, the conflicts in Margaret's life become the very wellspring of her creativity, nourishing her literary imagination. Yet her failure to come to terms with her bitterness may also partially have poisoned her talent at the source, for she fears she cannot go beyond her harshly ironic mode of writing. In several respects her development parallels Wilson's own, surely not a coincidence. Known at first for her skilled social satires, Margaret sees their limitations and searches for more meaningful literary forms.<sup>9</sup> Thus the pleasure she takes in employing irony is tinged with self-criticism: "And yet, and yet, by ironically placing so carefully it somehow failed to capture the contradictory whole" (78). Towards the end of the novel, pondering the ways her career has been influenced by her childhood,

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Margaret emphasizes her distance from those first artistic gropings:

Of course it was all there in the early Carmichaels, this tension, this smallness, this snake coiled in upon itself ready to hiss--and it was just that hissing in those early stories that, for all the critics' praises, she couldn't bear. . . . For she had spent more than a quarter of a century since then trying to adapt the tongue to poetry, to attune the ear to deeper music than mere mimicry. (411)

Enveloping Margaret's words, No Laughing Matter stands as a testament to Wilson's own adaptation of the tongue to this deeper form of music.

Margaret's concern that her ironic realism cannot do justice to the complex nature of reality is but a small cog in the massive machinery of No Laughing Matter, which is geared to investigating how human beings shape reality into stories in order to make sense of it. Every character in the novel is a story-teller. Through story-telling, characters endow their lives with form and structure. Perceiving themselves in terms of fictional patterns, they are enabled to exert control over their lives. But although Wilson acknowledges that this necessary self-invention entails evasion as well as interpretation--indeed he suggests that these are complementary--he does not undermine his characters' "petits récits" by placing them within an authorial "grand récit." There is no controlling discourse in this text. It suggests, rather, that our knowledge of reality is compounded of interlocking, often contradictory, accounts of it, which cannot be resolved into a consensual view.

The different accounts of Sukey's wedding provide a good illustration of No Laughing Matter's multiple perspectives. In the first place, Wilson offers no account of the wedding itself; there is no purportedly neutral description against which others' versions may be compared. The wedding is presented through Margaret's transmutation of it into fiction. Although we are lulled into accepting her account--partly because it depends on an ironic reversal that results in her self-criticism--its initial significance lies in its exposure of Mathews' snobbery. In short, by focussing on Margaret's rejection of her family, it attests to her development as a person and a writer. But later in the novel, when her story is contested by two of its principal real-life protagonists, Marcus and Sukey, it takes on a wider resonance. Sukey avers that "the whole thing was complete nonsense" (186). And Marcus tearfully tells Jack that whereas Margaret had him "enjoying his winged arabesques and pas de chat" he was in fact "flitting from one sordid old man to another trying to sell [his] bum" (200).

Both Marcus and Sukey call Margaret's literary account into question, challenging its veracity on the grounds of empirical truth. But although their alternative descriptions partly undermine Margaret's story, Wilson's subtle point lies elsewhere. He suggests, *contra* Herr Birnbaum, that art does not imitate the world. Sukey's ignorant dismissal of her sister's work leads Hugh solemnly to reflect that "if one knew a lot of these writers, even chaps like Galsworthy or

Hugh Walpole, one would be surprised how they'd twisted facts'" (186). Jack, a more sophisticated reader, tells Marcus that his objections are misplaced, that, once created, artefacts become autonomous and must be judged according to internal criteria: "'A work of art is a work of art'" (199). But Wilson is defending neither the deliberate distortion of reality nor a thoroughgoing aestheticism; he is implying that because our knowledge of reality is mediated by our concepts, it remains partial and imperfect. Significantly, therefore, he offers no perspective other than those of the characters' themselves. There is no Archimedean point from which their competing accounts could be assessed. Rather, it is these accounts, these different interpretations, that constitute reality. Thus as soon as Sukey and Marcus reject Margaret's story they begin telling their own. Sukey's auditor is prompted to tell her that **she** "'should have been the writer'" (186), and Marcus's "tension and anger appeared to have vanished as he became absorbed in telling his experience" (203). Literature, be it oral or written, high-brow or low-brow, has the power to protect (Sukey) or heal (Marcus). Above all, it has a crucial role to play in the ways that we co-create our reality. No Laughing Matter discloses how human history is bequeathed to us in narrative forms that are woven out of the diverse "petits récits" of its interpreters.

Wilson begins his novel at a carefully chosen point in time. Whereas the text's other "Books" are dated, "Book One" is simply entitled "Before the War." Starting his narrative

at an exhibition that mythologizes the American West, he also situates it in a historical era, the Edwardian, about which the English are equally nostalgic. Wilson, moreover, is fully aware of D. H. Lawrence's and Virginia Woolf's judgments that the old world ended during this period. His narrator's omniscient observation that the Mathews family was never again to know the happiness of that sunny Edwardian day thus chimes with the novel's examination of England's wider historical decline. His characters' imaginary searchings for Eldorado--itself a fabled place--will fail just as surely as the security and confidence of pre-war England will be decimated by international crises and domestic conflicts.

Things are rarely what they seem in No Laughing Matter. The day at the exhibition ends in the quarrels and acrimony that typify the Mathews' real relations, thus hinting at the inevitable dissolution of their family. But this dissolution is presaged by another. When the children visit the exhibition's hall of laughing mirrors they are shocked at how their images are distorted, in particular, at how the mirrors seem to reverse their features, stretching them into shapes that contradict their normal appearances. But are their everyday visages, their self-presentations to the world, accurate analogues of who they are, or do the angled mirrors' lop-sided images reveal their deeper selves? Do seemingly straightforward reflections lie while distorted refractions tell the truth, implying that the unitary self is an illusion?

The suggestion that the self is protean, malleable, and

internally contradictory accords with No Laughing Matter's multiple perspectives on reality. Through internal fantasies the novel discloses both the discrepancy between private and public selves and the difference between characters' self-concepts and how they are perceived by others. Through the hall of laughing mirrors it suggests that the personality may be markedly different (Other) from the ways it appears to itself and to others. But it is through the text's extended theatrical metaphor, its focus on its characters's extraordinary gifts for mimicry and role-playing, that it shows how the self, a veritable shape-changer, cannot be pinned down.

If No Laughing Matter's characters are inveterate storytellers, forever fictionalizing their experiences so as to understand them, they are also born actors. For Wilson the world is a stage. His novel's dedication is followed by an introduction to its "Principal Players," "Supporting Roles," and "Additional Cast." Not only does the text contain five plays--each parodying the dramas of the historical period in which they occur--but the characters also frequently behave as though they were performing on stage. And when the play within the novel is combined with its characters' awareness of their double roles, the shifts in perspective achieved by this version of **Verfremdungseffekt** are as exhilarating as they are bewildering. For example, the childrens' first attempt to break away from their parents is written as a drama, "The Family Sunday Play." They both act in this play and, in Brechtian fashion, break the dramatic illusion by commenting



self-reflexively on the action and on their roles within it. Rupert observes to the imaginary audience--the text's readers in fact--that he's " 'had one feeble line since the curtain went up'" (95). Quentin calls out " 'Second Act, beginners please'" (97), at the start of Act Two, and Marcus, readying himself for the stage, observes: " 'We're on'" (97). And while the play ends in mutual recriminations, Rupert charging the Victorian age with " 'hypocrisy'" (116) and Quentin seeing it as " 'the failure of a class'" (122), Marcus comments on the inadequacy of the literary form being parodied: " 'I really must apologise for the language used this afternoon but you can't slice life up without making some sort of indecent mess'" (114).

The five parodies within the novel serve various functions: they foreground the novel's own fictional nature, revealing it to be a cultural artefact that is participating in our ongoing reconstructions of history; they show, because they exaggerate their defining characteristics, how earlier literary forms have differed in their interpretations of the past, thus calling their veracity into question; by juxtaposing these various forms within the text's wider framework, they problematize the concept of representation in general, including this particular novel's attempt at it; finally, they allow Wilson repeatedly to emphasise his conviction that life resembles a vast, often grotesque, drama in which all are implicated. Thus Sudrann is surely right when he claims that these dramatic parodies disclose "the variety of ways in

which contemporary art defines the contemporary scene" (Halio 1985 133). Refusing to oppose historical "events" to the discourses that "surround" them, Wilson shows how event and discourse meld; he suggests, in short, that history can only be known through its textual articulations and that literature is one of the major interpretative discourses through which we so articulate it.<sup>10</sup>

No Laughing Matter's theatricality is also kept to the fore by the children's persistent role-playing. Most important here is The Game, the other major way by which reality is transmuted into fiction--the first is story-telling--for the purpose of survival. The Game, which allows the children to displace their negative emotions towards their parents by mimicking them, is discovered by accident. After Marcus has been beaten by Clara, Rupert tries to comfort him by parodying their father. To his surprise, Marcus chimes in with a perfect imitation of their mother. Delighted with "their new found game" (35), all the siblings start to vent their anger and frustrations by indulging in a series of cruel parodies of their guardians. But like all of the novel's pastiches, which seem so amusing on the surface, The Game is no laughing matter. Born of Rupert's and Marcus's "need to relieve their pent up shame, distress and anger in histrionics, to heal their hurts with mimicry's homeopathic sting, and no doubt as well to indulge some sexual urges" (131), The Game turns into a far more serious activity. It becomes the means by which the victims turn the tables on their tormentors, transforming

themselves from the judged into the judging, as game blurs into trial. Quentin's lengthy defence of the trial's procedure stands as a **mise-en-abyme** for Wilson's own parodic tactics in No Laughing Matter:

Was the man or the woman able to be another also the most suited to defend that other's interest? Yes, for simulation, whatever its motive, demands identification. But was he or she sufficiently detached to be able to offer a defence intelligible to others as defending counsel should, without the confusions and blurs of subjective statement? Yes, for simulation and mimicry also demand observation: in them compassion is tinged by mockery or mockery by compassion, and identification is distanced by the demands of technique. But could this simple mixture of opposites which mimicry requires, of affection with distaste, of respect with contempt, of love with hatred--be justly defined as a sort of reasoned apology? Yes, if passed through the tempering fire of Mr. Justice Scales (Quentin). The rules established, the Game could now proceed.  
(132)

This account of The Game discloses its overdetermined origins and its complexity. The Game functions both as a metaphor for No Laughing Matter as a whole and as a way of exploring its characters' personalities. Quentin's observation that mimicry requires a degree of empathy, that mockery and compassion may be complementary rather than contradictory, perfectly describes the novel's parodic mode. Wilson engages in what Hutcheon calls "critical revision" (1985 15); combining homage with thumbed nose ("respect with contempt"), he appropriates the past for the purposes of the present. By mimicking old forms parodically he reveals both his distance from them and his understanding that they stand just behind current literary articulations.

The Game enacts this truth on a thematic level, for it also applies to the childrens' relations with their parents. The scene prior to the trial concludes with Rupert, speaking for his siblings, delivering a clear message to Billy Pop's retreating back: "'O, for God's sake get out of our lives'" (130). The trial will show how impossible a demand this is. The parents live on in the children; the past can be displaced, transformed even, but it cannot be severed.

The Game offers a release from emotional tensions by providing the young Mathews with the imaginative means to articulate their grievances and resolve their frustrations. But the transition from playful game to serious trial has ambiguous and disturbing implications. Quentin's realization that empathy requires identification allows Wilson to hint that although the children delight in parodying their elders, they are unaware of the affinity between themselves and the figures they ridicule. The Game gives us insights both into the characters whom the children play and, by hinting that the children partake of the very traits they wish to lampoon, into the players themselves. The parents live on in their progeny not primarily through the caricatures of them that continue after their deaths but because their influence remains long after they recede from the novel's pages.

The intellectual Quentin, who grasps that present and past are interconnected, that they implicate one another, senses this ambiguity. Noting that their elders are "'all we know of the past'" (142), he had hoped to condemn them not

only as "two generations" but also as "a system and class in decay" (142). He sees beyond this, however, and turns his judge's scrutiny on himself and his siblings, arguing that "the most rotten part of this rotten set-up is us" (143). The younger generation is reproducing the behaviour of their elders, is fighting "the same old wars, the same tedious pointless battles that have shaken this family to its decaying roots ever since [he] can remember" (145). But Quentin's call for cooperation is lost amid Marcus's hysteria and Rupert's calm announcement that he is striking out on his own. The past continues to spill over into the present, indicating that Rupert's earlier despairing cry remains the articulation of a desire that cannot be fulfilled.

In keeping with its multiple-voiced, parodic mode, the novel's attitude to the past is ambivalent. Although Wilson ironizes Granny Mathews--played by the equally old-fashioned Sukey--for her desire to remain in the past, he emphasizes that the childrens' desire to escape the past is equally unrealistic. The Game and the invention of private imaginary worlds permit the young Mathews to evade the past; these fantasies do not encourage them to confront it. Granny Mathews, for all her nostalgia, grasps this:

I suppose, really, growing up is when you can first see that life's all one thing, that however silly you have been in the past it's all part of you, you can't refuse it. There, I can't express what I mean. But I remember that when I was your age I used to suffer agonies of embarrassment thinking of the silly things I'd said as a child. And then suddenly one day I saw that it was all part of my life, I couldn't turn my back on any of it. I

think that's when I grew up.' (106)

Billy Pop paraphrases this as "having a sense of the past" (106). Granny Mathews's limited understanding of what she has herself said allows Wilson to ironize her, but the point is a serious one. Having a sense of the past does not mean nostalgically looking through old photograph albums (Margaret) nor through old dressing up boxes (Marcus-- pp. 106-139), even though doing so leads the adult Gladys, Sukey, and Margaret to realise--in chorus--the truth of Granny Mathews' earlier assertion: "Now we shall never get away from 52'" (277). It means grasping that the different ways in which the past has been interpreted and understood condition current perceptions of reality. No Laughing Matter agonizes over historical events and historical knowledge, focusing on different representations of the past--political, dramatic, novelistic, artistic--because it is by examining human structurations of the past that we are enabled better to comprehend those of the present. Thus whereas The Game played by the young Mathews leads to displacement and evasion, the game played by Wilson in No Laughing Matter allows him to expose this and to criticize it through his own confrontation of the literary forms of the past. Just as the Mathews' Game is both comic and tragic, so Wilson's is both lightheartedly humorous and deadly earnest.

This paradox, that by being playful literature may examine reality seriously, is the paradox at the heart of No Laughing Matter. The novel reveals that although mimicry,

role-playing, and fantasy partly constitute reality and may to a large degree be unavoidable, they may also prevent us from coming to grips with it. There are times, the text implies, when humour and playfulness are inappropriate responses and reveal an inability to face reality.

No Laughing Matter thus displays an ambivalent attitude both to its own stylistic reliance on comedy and pastiche and to its characters' use of caricature and burlesque for the purpose of survival. But Wilson's awareness of the limitations of the ludic elements in his text presents him with an awkward problem. He must find a way not only to control its linguistic exuberance and multiple perspectives but also to establish a critical distance from its characters' escapes into private fantasy and public pantomime. For the novel's heteroglossic richness makes it unstable; the text threatens to elude its creator's control.

Malcolm Bradbury argues that this has happened. Noting the multiplicity of the text's language, which "comes at you from everywhere" (1985 152), he suggests that Wilson fails to find an adequate balance between the novel's two halves. The first part is marked by "the ebullient creative energy that makes parody," whereas the second part is characterized by "the mimetic sympathy that makes the sense of life" (153). He contends that Wilson's failure to fuse these two stylistic tendencies, for all the novel's brilliance, results in an "equivocal form" that remains unsatisfactory.

Bradbury's comments are suggestive, but he downplays the

significance of Wilson's increasing narrative control as the novel draws to a close. For Wilson deliberately slows down the novel's pace and, gradually eliminating all elements of parody and humour, clarifies his sense of their weaknesses both as narrative strategies and as modes of behaviour. Thus in "Book 3," which is the novel's centrepiece, Wilson focuses at length on the years that lead to the Second World War in order to show how defenceless play-acting, comedy, and fantasy are against the depredations of history.

At key moments in "Book 3" both public and private historical events disrupt and undermine the text's earlier lightheartedness. Sukey is confronted by Frau Liebermann, the Jewish refugee, and is thus forced to reflect on her own (and England's) isolationist stance; Quentin slowly grasps the extent of Soviet purges and gradually abandons socialism; Marcus, whose lover, Jack, is Jewish, is appalled by his first-hand experience of fascism and begins to sense the inadequacy of his formerly resolute aestheticism; Clara and Billy Pop are killed in a Baedeker raid; Rupert and Margaret participate in anti-Fascist rallies; and Gladys is caught up in a business swindle that has an important symbolic meaning as well as direct consequences for her personal life.

With consummate linguistic skill Wilson links Gladys's unwitting dispossession of the Ahrendts--an event enacted in the private realm--with the signing of the Munich Pact in 1937--a public event--which was to result in the Holocaust. He does this by relating both events to the novel's theatri-



cal metaphor. Having inadvertently robbed the Ahrendts, Gladys is taken to court. Her trial, unlike *The Game's* parodic one, is deadly serious. Margaret vainly hopes that her sister will be able to avert disaster by indulging in some humourous tomfoolery, reflecting that Gladys will "surely seek to buy [the judge] off with a somersault or a false nose" (392). The time for comedy and play-acting is long past, however; Gladys is summarily sentenced to four years' imprisonment. Outside the courthouse not one of the Mathews can "bear the prolongation of any family play" (392). But Gladys's personal drama is paralleled by a public one--the signing of the Munich Pact. This "parody" of "the advertised panaceas" (394) for the troubled world situation represents the conclusion to a historical charade that will result in a five-year conflagration. Fittingly, Munich comes "to most of the Mathews brothers and sisters as a horrible, long-awaited, too predictable curtain to an exhausting play" (393).

With Gladys's imprisonment and the advent of war, the novel's ludic elements, its humour, games, and parodies, gradually disappear, leaving the novel's final two "Books" distinctly sombre in tone. Thus "Book 3" ends with "Pop and Motor," the dramatic parody in which Clara and Billy Pop are killed, and it concludes the novel's theatrical pastiches. *The Game*, in turn, is last played in 1946 when the younger Mathews, together in one scene for the final time, meet to clean up the family house, which is being sold. This symbo-

lic dissolution of the family is paralleled by the quarrel with which the scene ends. Once more adopting the mantle of Mr. Justice Scales, Quentin rounds in anger on his brothers and sisters, chastizing them for forgiving their parents and thus allowing them to make "a quick getaway" (423). Ridiculing his siblings' complacent belief that the influence of the past can be dissolved by nostalgic laughter, he convicts them all of seeking to displace their pain rather than to confront it. As though validating Quentin's point, Wilson concludes the scene with acrimonious feelings on all sides, revealing that whereas the Mathews can unite in order to parody their childhood, they remain emotionally cut off from one another as adults in the real world.

By novel's end the family house--a symbol of cultural rootedness--has been sold and the Mathews family--a symbol of national continuity and vitality has disintegrated. Granny Mathews, Mouse, Clara, and Billy Pop are long dead; Regan the cook has been sent to her own family, whom she barely knows; Sukey and Hugh live in a world of nostalgic memories; Rupert, in the twilight of his acting career, is requested to parody the roles he once played with passion; Quentin, once a great

idealist, turns into a professional cynic before he dies; and Margaret, Marcus, and Gladys live abroad in self-imposed exile. It is Rupert who best expresses the cultural dislocation that the novel's last two "Books" depict: "I suppose this chap I'm to play is the waste stuff that gets left over when any system, any old order breaks up" (442).

In a superb ending, Wilson fuses his concern to depict England's decline with his belief that knowledge of reality is subjective and comes to us through interpretative acts. Marcus, the former aesthete and art collector, is now living in Morocco as a successful businessman. But although he has turned his back on the real England, he finds a mythical England most helpful for the purposes of commerce. Recycling images from England's glorious history--which is as fabricated as the Edwardian daydream with which the novel begins--his perfume company, Plantagenet, evokes a noble past in order to promote sales. As Marcus explains: "Everyone said the English and Americans would want a French name, but I risked Plantaganet and it worked. All those old queens in wimples made such wonderful advertisements" (461-62). In No Laughing Matter history repeats itself not as farce but as pastiche.

Although the novel's conclusion shows that economic imperatives have superseded cultural values, Wilson, perhaps

unable to resist a final joke, lightens the atmosphere by once more focusing on the thin line between private fantasy and genuine knowledge. Overhearing a quarrel between Marcus and Margaret, various members of Marcus's household try to make sense of it, to interpret it, by narrativising it:

In the house the voices raised, the quarrel of M'sieu Marcus and his sister, were a source of eager speculation. Omar, who was a slave of desires, thought that they had quarrelled over lust for one of the young people--who could say which? Abdullah thought that Marcus had been disciplining his sister's unwomanly ways. Old M'Barek ben Ibrahim declared that the sight of the young people had made them both ashamed of their unnatural infertility. Openly Hassan agreed with this seemly solution, but to himself he gave a more modern answer. (463)

The "modern answer" in which Hassan, Marcus's lover, wishes to believe is as wrong as all the other explanations. Unable to understand why Marcus, who has bequeathed the perfume factory to him, desires to run it on cooperative lines, Hassan hopes that Marcus is being persuaded to abandon his ideas and to adopt the values of Miracle Germany and Time Magazine that Hassan admires: "high wages, but also seemly ambition, high profits, and determined management" (464). At one stroke, Wilson combines his thematic focus on England's decline with his formal interest in the dependence of knowledge on interpretative acts that follow narrative patterns. The text may expose the Edwardian search for Eldorado as a self-defeating myth that leads only to exile, but to the end

it maintains its faith in the important role that narratives play in that never-to-be-completed search. Thus the novel ends as it began, focussing self-reflexively on the complex nature of narrative itself.

The gradual elimination of the text's playful aspects discloses Wilson's awareness of the limits of both comedy and nostalgia. Foregoing the pleasures of humour, he focuses not only on his characters' penchant for histrionics and fantasy but also on his own text's indulgence in comedy and pastiche. Thus when the novel ironizes those figures who do not permit the real world to undermine their intricate fantasy lives-- Clara, Billy Pop, Rupert, Sukey--and exposes the inadequacy of their inveterate play-acting, Wilson distances himself from those who distance themselves from reality. At the same time, No Laughing Matter's disclosure that role-playing and humour are double-edged, that they may help people either to face or to evade reality, has important consequences for the novel's own stylistic mode. Aware that readers could think that his very funny text itself evades reality--just as it hints many of its characters do--Wilson takes great care to clarify his use of burlesque and to defend the seriousness of his enterprise.

Quentin's justification of The Game's satiric mode is an important part of this defence. The novel's title furnishes another clue; it warns us not to allow the text's humour to distract us from its questioning of humour's limits. But Wilson really establishes the seriousness with which he regards his use of parody in two key scenes: Marcus's response to the unmotivated parodies of a pseudo-painter and Herr Birnbaum's speech at the anti-Fascist rally in 1937.

Although it is short, the scene in which Marcus refuses to acknowledge the validity of inferior art is important, for its implications extend far beyond the episode itself. Jack and he, both art collectors, are shown a series of paintings by a fellow homosexual. Out of solidarity, Jack feels constrained to admire them; Marcus, however, makes no attempt to conceal his true feelings. When the painter explains that his imitations of other styles are meant to be ironic, Marcus brushes him off:

'To begin with, all this stuff is entirely derivative--faces from Munch, buildings from Chirico and what you call irony of Rouault is just bad, imitation Rouault. Personally if you were another Munch or Chirico I shouldn't care a fuck because I'm not interested in a lot of modish illustrations to dream books. But your trouble is that you can't paint. You're simply not competent to do what in any case, I think, would be a waste of a real painter's time. It's as bad as that.' (385)

Apart from the painter's lack of skill, his canvases are bad, according to Marcus, because their ironic treatment of other works is **only** derivative--they contribute nothing new. For Marcus, and clearly for Wilson too, this kind of unmotivated parody is to be rejected because its relation to the art that precedes it is parasitic, not symbiotic. By clarifying how parodic art may be false art, Wilson subtly asks us to see that his own parodic art is of a different kind altogether.

The scene has a wider resonance, however. For when Jack, finding Marcus's uncompromising stance unacceptable, accuses him of behaving disgracefully, Marcus rounds on him in anger: "I've got one thing I know about--painting . . . It's the only thing I've got and I'm not going to tell lies about it for any purpose whatsoever" (385). Marcus's faith

about it is linguistically linked with Herr Birnbaum's attack (which has just been presented) on the lies that are being spread by the Nazi propagandists.

Three of the Mathews—Rupert, Margaret, and Quentin—are present at the anti-Fascist rally. In keeping with his contextual presentation of reality, Wilson describes their reactions to one another's speeches rather than the speeches themselves. Each of the Mathews, convinced that only their contributions are meaningful, deplores the speeches of their siblings. Margaret considers that Rupert makes "a fool of himself" with his "adolescent's anthology" (377); Quentin is horrified with both of them: "Margaret and 'the irony of history that will defeat Hitler,' Rupert and Shelley--God help us!" (377); and Rupert, in turn, concerned with "the appalling delivery of all the others" concludes that "dear, unhappy Mag should never be allowed to speak in public" (379). Permitting these alternative perceptions of the rally to co-exist in an uneasy tension, Wilson discloses his sense of reality's complexity. At the same time, he hints at his belief in art's catholic nature, which enables it to reveal truth in such a multiplicity of ways. Whereas none of the Mathews can appreciate the talents of the others, Wilson, ironizing them all, reveals that each of their different contributions to the fight against Fascism is equally valid.

But it is the boorish Herr Birnbaum, the initial butt of the text's self-reflexive joke about the English novel, who really understands what is at stake. His grasp of Fascism's debasement of language and his impassioned plea for resistance to this perversion of it are central to a novel whose very subject is language itself:

I have lived all my life for the language of my country, the German language . . . . But to find the right language, the right words in our great tongue, has been a hard life time's task. And now with the coming of our Fuhrer, I have known two hells. The one - smaller. This hell alone is for me and for the other German artists who must leave Germany or remain silent. We must speak as I am now doing in a half tongue, in a language that is not our own . . . . The other hell is deep and very black. To know that the language I have tried to use to give the children life of the mind is being used today, perverted, strangled, to bring to the children of my country a real and permanent death--the death of their spirit . . . . (379-80)

As a writer of stories for children, Birnbaum understands the power of language; he knows it may either enchant in order to illuminate or beguile in order to deceive. Through Birnbaum, Wilson clearly articulates his awareness of language's potentially ambiguous and duplicitous nature.<sup>11</sup>

This articulation forces the reader to confront, once again, the text's own use of language. No Laughing Matter, suggesting that human beings structure reality through language, foregrounds its own language as it examines the competing discourses employed by others. Believing that knowledge is textual and that different literary forms contribute to and condition our comprehension of past and present, Wilson points to his own text's participation in this work and reveals his awareness of it as a cultural intervention. No Laughing Matter both ironizes and applauds Birnbaum's earlier claim that the English novel primarily mirrors social life. Its length, social detail, historical scope, and nuanced characterizations pay homage to the realist tradition; its protean narrator, multiple perspectives, parodies and pastiches, and highly-wrought language subvert that tradition.

Thus the novel both utilizes realist techniques and parodies



them, both "mirrors" English social life and exposes the distorted nature of its "reflections." In short, No Laughing Matter is at once an old-fashioned burgher and a contemporary art-novel. Wilson, making full use of a paradox in which he delights--that through play one can be serious, that through lies one can tell truth--constructs a dazzling narrative that both pays tribute to and ironizes established art forms. As he has himself said: "For me a novel is a very serious matter which is a game--another paradox. I don't see the point in a novel if it isn't a romp, but it is also the most serious romp I can think of" (Barfoot 290).

#### IV

In his discussion of As If By Magic, the novel that Wilson published after No Laughing Matter, Peter Faulkner observes that the text invites the reader to differentiate alternative kinds of magic. No Laughing Matter, in turn, as the anti-Fascist rally makes clear, asks us to discriminate among different uses of language and, in particular, among different literary discourses. Foregrounding its own status as a literary artefact, the novel presents itself as a self-conscious commentary on both the art forms of the past and the state of fiction in the present.

Wilson's heavy reliance on pastiche in No Laughing Matter should not be interpreted as indicative of disrespect for the literary forms thus treated. On the contrary, the text's parodic mode signals both an admiration for traditional forms and a desire for critical distance from them. As Hutcheon argues, contemporary parody appropriates established forms of

Thus when Neil McEwan observes that Iris Murdoch and Angus Wilson both "consciously maintain creative relations with the nineteenth-century novel" (63), he points to the high esteem in which they hold the fiction of the past. McEwan suggests that because Wilson's story-telling abilities are tinged with "the scepticism of the modernists" (74), his narratives both allude to and subvert realist fiction--he "makes the history of the Novel serve his history" (73).

Wilson's experimental mode can only be understood, in short, when it is seen that his faith in the realist novel's traditional strengths is qualified by his grasp of its major weaknesses. Insufficient attention to "man's relation to society" (Biles 77), Woolf's greatest flaw, results in an art of abstraction; insufficient attention to the creative imagination, the neo-realists' greatest flaw, results in a "confusion between novel writing and sociology" (Wilson 1963 139). As he has so often made clear, Wilson rejects what he sees as a needless and debilitating distinction between "realist" and "experimental" fictional forms. Fusing his desire to evoke social texture and density with his commitment to explore the novel's formal and artistic possibilities, his own innovative work, written out of a profoundly contemporary sensibility, reveals how such distinctions can be broken down. It is precisely because he seeks to avoid this false dichotomy that he refuses to choose between fantasy and reality and claims that without their fusion he could not write novels at all. He describes his way of writing thus:

I use traditional techniques and modern techniques . . . . I work in and out from the world as it is supposed to be, the documented world as we know it, as people say, (though it seems to me a strange

world of expressionism and so on, but increasingly I've felt free to do these things and not mind what people say. (Faulkner 191)

This desire to combine fantasy and reality, which springs from Wilson's conviction that the world is ultimately inexplicable, illustrates why he regards the novel as "a mixed form" (1963 148) that combines what is observed (the social) with what is imagined (the aesthetic) in an attempt to offer "a momentary unified vision of life" (1963 149).

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> There are several similarities between Murdoch's and Wilson's views of the novel. Both distinguish between fantasy and reality and between sociological and imaginative fictional modes. Both are humanists who believe that "character" is central to the novel. Murdoch is more suspicious of fantasy, however, than Wilson is. In "Against Dryness" she urges resistance to "the simplified fantasy-myth" (20), whereas Wilson, in The Wild Garden, stresses that he has no desire to choose between fantasy and reality. Wilson reveals how much he differs from Murdoch on this point in "The Novelist and the Narrator," in which he says of her: "[She] grows in stature as her fancy is less at odds with her discipline of thought" (1983 256).

<sup>2</sup> Wilson allows an interesting role-reversal here. At the beginning of the novel Ella's retreat from public life is attributed to her mental illness, which originates in her fear of evil (48-49). By novel's end, however, Ella has dismissed her fears and is able to act decisively in the public realm. Bernard, in contrast, begins by playing a public role with confidence but gradually retreats into helpless solitude as his awareness of evil grows. Wilson is equally sceptical about both of their attempts at public good works.

<sup>3</sup> This is a reference to the philosophy of Fielding in E. M. Forster's A Passage to India. Several critics have argued that this allusion shows that Wilson rejects Forster's rather self-satisfied brand of liberal humanism. See Cox (Halio 1985) and Wogatzky. Although the criticism of Forster is only implied in Hemlock, Wilson has since made clear how distant he feels from Forster. In his interview with Betsy Draine he says: "Forster has receded from me as a figure. I find Howard's End intolerable now. And the terrible patronage in his work so offends me" (282).

<sup>4</sup> In 1956 Wilson wrote a brief article on The Forsyte Saga. Arguing that few critics--"foreign professors and students" (1983 149) excepted--still accorded Galsworthy's novel a place in "the great tradition" (149), he admitted that he had re-read it for the third time "with no respect and precious little pleasure" (149). He concluded that the world evoked and implicitly supported by Galsworthy "is a dead cosy world through which an icy wind whistles, and however we may criticise Mrs Woolf's generation, we must respect them for their shunning of it" (152). In a 1972 interview with Frederick P. W. McDowell, Wilson describes No Laughing Matter as "an anti-Forsyte Saga insofar as it suggests that the family is not always a unit which is helpful to the individual" (290).

<sup>5</sup> Ironically, even P. S., her beloved youngest son, can

sense the irrelevance of Sukey's nostalgic story-telling. When Sukey tries to evoke his childhood for him, P. S. rudely interrupts her: "'Mummy! Mummy!' P. S. shouted, 'Do shut up! Who wants to recall that old stuff now?'" (322).

<sup>6</sup> No Laughing Matter uses a variety of alienating techniques to great effect. Bertolt Brecht, an early master of defamiliarizing devices, writes *à propos* reflectionist views of art: "If art reflects life, it does so with special mirrors" (Eagleton 1976 49).

<sup>7</sup> In his essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" Walter Benjamin argues that "that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art" (1978 221). He goes on to claim that "the technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition" (221). No Laughing Matter almost overtly seeks to recover this lost aura through the power of the written word. The novel's emphasis on cinema's limitations, its faith in the power of fiction, and its attempt to establish continuity with the literary traditions of the past all disclose Wilson's understanding that the contemporary writer must confront the challenge of film, and his belief that the novel is well-equipped to do so.

<sup>8</sup> In his interview with McDowell, Wilson says of the young Mathews:

I also wanted to show the degree to which the weapons they used (in this case, particularly, clowning and farce and laughter, hence No Laughing Matter) became both necessary defences for them against the cruelty of their parents, and limiting forces and ironies when later as men and women they wished to develop. (290)

<sup>9</sup> In 1976 Wilson told C. C. Barfoot that because ironic realism had become something of a "dead end" (284) for him, he began to experiment "much more in manner, in form of narration," thus producing "lots of fireworks, lots of fantasy" (284).

<sup>10</sup> Wilson has often remarked that his central characters are highly self-conscious and literary. In No Laughing Matter, however, characters are so steeped in literary culture that they often behave as though they perceived themselves as figures in novels. Thus when an early girlfriend of Quentin's tells him that his response to news of her pregnancy made her feel that he'd "'learnt [it] from a Victorian novel'" (162), he admits that he "'did feel a bit of a hero of a three decker novel!'" (163). Although Quentin is being ironized in this scene, it discloses just how central Wilson believes literature is to our interpretations of reality.

11 I have hinted throughout that No Laughing Matter enacts Lyotard's theory that reality cannot be interpreted by any single metanarrative. It is important to emphasize, however, that whereas Lyotard celebrates the dissolution of metanarratives, Wilson, like many other writers, is disturbed by the consequences. The fight against Fascism and the focus on the plight of the Jewish refugees are crucial in this text because they clarify Wilson's belief that although reality cannot fully be encompassed by language(s), it cannot be reduced to language alone. Given No Laughing Matter's clear portrayal of the dangers inherent in treating reality as a "game" or a "play," I have little doubt that Wilson would applaud Seyla Benhabib's powerful rejoinder to Lyotard:

The polytheism of language games either assumes that culture and society are harmonious wholes, or that the struggles within them are plays only. But there are times when philosophy cannot afford to be a 'gay science,' for reality itself becomes deadly serious. To deny that the play of language games may not turn into a matter of life and death, and that the intellectual cannot remain the priest of many gods but must take a stance, is cynical.  
(1984 124)

## I

"Most people have lost the nostalgia for the lost narrative," declares Lyotard, adding that "[i]t in no way follows that they are reduced to barbarity" (41). Arguing that "the grand narrative has lost its credibility" (37), he asserts that the postmodern age, which accepts that knowledge can no longer be legitimated by speculative theories, is characterized by a distrust of authority. In contrast with scientific discourses, narrative knowledge does not attempt to legitimate its own practices. Rather, it believes that to speak is to play and, moreover, that one does not necessarily "play . . . in order to win" (10).

Lyotard's valorization of narrative knowledge at the expense of scientific knowledge derives from his scepticism about unifying and totalizing systems of thought. More precisely, he rejects epistemological foundationalism. The pragmatist philosopher, Richard Rorty, although he disagrees with Lyotard on certain points, has clarified the nature of this rejection in Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature. Epistemology, he argues, depends on the metaphor of the mirror, which implies that the world can be objectively "reflected" onto the human mind. According to Rorty, however, reality cannot be apprehended except through socially determined human perceptions and structures of thought--there is no access to the world as it is "in-itself," no point from which it can be dispassionately surveyed and objectively described. The concept of epistemological veracity, he suggests, "is a product of viewing knowledge as an assemblage of representations--a view of knowledge which . . . was a product of the

seventeenth century. Averring that the paradigm of "man as mirror" has been discredited, Rorty urges us to accept the resultant plurality of vocabularies, none of which is inherently more suited to the phenomena it discusses than any other. Because discourses do not grasp "truth" but disclose "the potential infinity of vocabularies in which the world can be described" (367), our purpose should be "to keep the conversation [of mankind] going rather than to find objective truth" (377).<sup>1</sup>

Lyotard and Rorty perceive a close link between the dissolution of metanarratives and a wider legitimation crisis in contemporary society, which is primarily one of authority. As my first chapter showed, because many writers and critics implicitly agree with this position, they analyse post-war English culture in relation to a general sense of social disarray. Thus Robert Hewison notes that the contributors to Declaration perceived English culture to be on the verge of collapse. Historian Arthur Marwick, corroborating Hewison's point, reveals the complexity of the situation by showing that although belief in social crisis was prevalent, explanations of it, which depended on political allegiances, were diverse.<sup>2</sup> And Bryan Appleyard sets the tone for The Pleasures of Peace, his analysis of the arts in post-war Britain, by beginning with a quote from The Times leader of May 1945: "The liberalism and **laissez-faire** of the nineteenth century are gone beyond recall" (3). Later in his book he writes of the post-war crisis of humanism in language that immediately recalls Lyotard's focus on the disappearance of metanarratives: "Amid all the activity, all the changes, the thread



of some key plot had been lost" (141).

It is this loss of a central thread in human affairs that leads Lyotard and Rorty to conclude that what we are left with is a variety of competing accounts of the world. Barthes' claim that literature, a crucial set of discourses about the world, is reduced to "the problematics of language" (82) melds with Lyotard's claim that society falls within "a pragmatics of language particles" (xxiv). Barthes contends that literature should foreground the operations of language in order to show that depictions of reality are historically produced interpretations (not "reflections") of it. Lyotard implies that the postmodern age, which is characterized by "incredulity toward metanarratives" (xxiv), takes Barthes' premise for granted and openly celebrates the heterogeneous and mutually incommensurable language games through which human beings attempt to make sense of reality.<sup>3</sup>

Rorty, Lyotard, and Barthes perceive language and narrative knowledge to be of pre-eminent importance. They suggest that because global explanations are untenable and no longer have the power to convince, the analysis of how language permits us to make meanings through narrative forms becomes a central issue. Wittgenstein tells us that language sets the limits of our understanding; theorists of fiction and history argue that the ways in which we organize language into narrative forms condition our knowledge of the world in much the same way. According to Allen Thiher, for example, many contemporary novelists "write not as if the world existed for literature to mirror it, but rather as if literature, as a

language game, could offer various grammars for ordering the world or worlds" (112). Hayden White, in turn, argues that history "is made sense of in the same way that the poet or novelist tries to make sense of it" (98); by fictionalizing the past, historians exploit "the metaphorical similarities between sets of real events and the conventional structures of our fictions" (91). Thus Wallace Martin declares that fictions and narratives are "fundamental to mass culture, social behavior, and our conceptions of our lives" (189).

## II

When Charles Sugnet explains that post-war English experimental writers are "astray, interestingly astray, practising the fallen and doubtful art of fiction without help from Aquinas or Augustine or any other Father" (Burns 1981 13), he points to the same loss of authority as that referred to by Lyotard and Rorty. When Eva Figes avers that the old reassurances can no longer comfort us and suggests that writers should make their readers "aware that a statement is being made, and that they are not being offered the gospel according to Saint Anybody" (Gordon 114), she clarifies Sugnet's meaning. Arguing that fiction has no privileged access to "the real," she stresses that novelists should foreground the linguistically mediated, hence partial, nature of narrative knowledge.

Bryan Johnson, Doris Lessing, John Berger, Iris Murdoch, and Angus Wilson are all in different ways concerned with the

power of language and the nature of narrative. The novels of each of these writers reveal a self-reflexive awareness of language as a meaning-making system that does not so much depict or capture the essence of reality as constitute our understanding of it. As a result, their texts display ambivalent feelings toward language: on the one hand, faith in its ability to generate meaning, to interpret, and to communicate; on the other hand, fear of its propensity to be ambiguous, to misinterpret, to beguile. This ambivalence, which is inscribed within the texts themselves, becomes a central feature of the novels these authors write. Thus the act of literary creation that gives rise to the texts, implying belief in the possibility of meaningful communication, is paradoxically questioned by those same texts, which frequently hint at the dubiety of their own use of both language and literary form. Johnson, none too subtly, announces that fiction falsifies reality, is "pure lying" (1987 170). Lessing's Anna Wulf fears that her thin words are "a parody of meaning" (480). Berger's Janos Lavin declares: "'Words lie. My brush does not'" (105). The Black Prince's Bradley Pearson asks whether language is able to convey genuine knowledge; can "the spirit that sees the truth," he wonders, "also speak it?" (349). And Margaret Mathews, in No Laughing Matter, wrestles with language, weaving it into fictive shapes but grasping that "these imposed patterns falsify" (194).

The novels discussed in this thesis foreground their own use of languages and novelistic forms so as minutely to examine the multiple ways in which the world is apprehended and

constituted by different discourses. As Christopher Bigsby argues in "The Uneasy Middleground of British Fiction," they are aware of "the suspect nature of language, the manipulative power of art, the fragility of character, the dubious nature of historicism, the relativity of value and perception, and the collapse of the absolute" (Bradbury 1980).

Johnson's central premise is that because reality is chaotic and formless, the imposition of narrative form on human experience entails falsification. In Albert Angelo and Christie Malry, temporarily breaking free of his theory, he wrote two novels that, instead of railing against fictional mendacity, illuminatingly explored its nature. Nevertheless, although these metafictional works acknowledge the necessity of form--which they explore by subverting it--Johnson never openly disavowed his theory, and See the Old Lady Decently indicates that he was once again returning to his distinction between the autobiographical "novel" (truth) and the invented "fiction" (falsehood).

Johnson's theory represents a dead end for the contemporary writer. His suspicion of language's duplicitous nature and his fear that artistic form confers meaning on a senseless world constantly threaten to paralyze him. Moreover, the theory is misguided, as Judith Mackrell notes:

[A]n opposing case could be made for the collapsing of such antitheses which would see language, form, and fiction, not as gratuitous or arbitrary impositions on a fundamentally chaotic reality, but rather as aspects of the way in which man necessarily structures his experience. (44)

Echoing those theorists who argue that narrative forms do not

correspond to reality but are the central modes by which we try to comprehend it, Mackrell suggests that Johnson's novels are weakened by his refusal to see that art crucially contributes to the ways we make sense of the world. Eva Figs, in her obituary of Johnson, concurs. Claiming that he "worked himself into a **cul-de-sac**" (71), she concludes as follows: "I think Bryan lost touch with an essential, greater truth--that the only way to tell the truth is by lying, and **that** is the real starting point of meaningful fiction" (71).

These objections to Johnson's views have been theoretically articulated by Patricia Waugh in her book Metafiction. Suggesting that postmodernist fiction rejects common-sense perceptions of reality and focuses instead on "the linguistic context of the literary text" (87), she argues that to describe an object-domain is also to create it. Awareness of the resultant creation/description paradox leads critics to offer three theories of the ontological status of literary fiction: first, the "falsity" theory, which contends that because fiction tries and fails to correspond to reality, it lies; second, the "non-referentiality" theory, which argues that literature can be neither true nor false because it does not imitate reality but belongs to a different order of discourse altogether; third, the "alternative worlds" theory, which suggests that literature does not describe the "real" world but creates other possible worlds. Maintaining that the falsity theory is epistemologically naive, Waugh argues that it cripples Johnson's work. Johnson, she claims, obsessed with an idealized notion of "truth," sought to find a

language that could perfectly render the autobiographical "facts" of his own life; when the attempt to control language failed, he turned to extreme metafictional subversions of the conventional novel form. He believed, Waugh contends, "in the supremacy of the self and the incapacity of language to express that self" (99).

Waugh explains that because metafictional literature does not see itself as a mode of discourse that imitates the world, it investigates the various ways through which fiction tries to apprehend reality: "Metafictional texts explore the notion of 'alternative worlds' by accepting and flaunting the creation/description paradox, and thus expose how the construction of contexts is also the construction of different universes of discourse" (90). Doreen Maitre, who has examined the alternative worlds theory in her book Literature and Possible Worlds, agrees with Waugh but includes non-metafictional novels in her analysis. There is a reciprocal relationship between the "actual world" and the possible worlds of fiction, she maintains. We learn about reality and adjust our perceptions of it by reading fiction, which discloses that "the actual world is not completely intelligible, that it is constantly and incessantly open to revision and that all certainties are ephemeral" (17). Mimetic theories of literature, she concludes, are seriously flawed:

Works of art, rather than imitating the world as it **is**, imitate the world as it might or could be--but this is to give a rather attenuated or even distorted use to the term "imitate"; for possible non-actual worlds do not so much **represent** what is, as **present** what could be **for the first time**. In fact the superimposition of the fictional world on the actual world **creates** new meaning for the actual world . . .  
(118-19)

In this non-mimetic view of fiction, with its clear echoes of the Russian Formalist and Barthesian emphases on defamiliarization, novels are seen to approach reality obliquely, offering us non-correspondential truths about the world through the power of invention.

John Berger's novels, which largely explore the nature of history and the possibility of political activism in the wake of the Marxist metanarrative's dissolution, utilize the alternative worlds theory. In A Painter of Our Time Lavin stresses that Cubism has invalidated the unitary perspective (169), and in G. the narrator claims that no story can claim to offer a definitive account of what it describes (133). Interpretations of society, Berger suggests, are contextual, partial, and multivalent. Thus when he quotes Octavio Paz in G. ("Our century is a huge cauldron in which all historical eras are boiling and mingling" (101)), he alerts us to his awareness that linear and monological accounts of culture and society are inadequate. In G. the metaphor for the unfolding of history is not one of development but one of dispersion--the twentieth century has witnessed the scattering of peoples over the world, and the subsequent proliferation of their discourses now constitutes our heteroglossic understanding of it.

Berger's deep respect for Marxism does not prevent him from questioning its claim to be a master code. Indeed, at times Marxism appears to have been a borrowed code that enabled him to articulate his utopian aspirations but that can no longer contain his polymathic concerns. Thus although

Berger's work continues to be informed by Marxist insights and preoccupations, he refuses all totalizing frameworks. In both theme and structure G. resists the single integrated perspective. Dedicated to the "Women's Liberation" movement, it shows how women have been "fixed" by the patriarchal gaze and its language in order to argue that because language determines our understanding of reality, linguistic contestation is political. Thus when the novel ends with the symbolic destruction of a colonizing nation's public language--the burning of its newspaper office--it reveals Berger's desire to give voice to the hitherto marginalized discourses of oppressed groups and his concomitant refusal to adjudicate among them.

Berger's Lavin, articulating his utopian aspirations, echoes Lenin when he describes himself as an "engineer of the soul" (59). In "A Small Personal Voice" Doris Lessing makes the same allusion, referring to the writer as an architect of the soul. Like Berger, however, she has re-examined her socialist beliefs and has found herself questioning them. Through Anna Wulf--a fictional double, surrogate, and "other" self--The Golden Notebook enacts her farewell to Marxism as a world ethic. G. claims not to "believe . . . in the great causes" (241); Tommy tells Anna that "'no one really believes all the big things are any use'" (503). For Lessing this crisis of belief is a crisis of politics, in which she no longer has any faith. As she told C. J. Driver:

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tile; I can't see any difference any more. I feel I've been through a hall of mirrors and come out the other side--that's how I regard my political days. I must have been mad--I'm not just talking about being a Communist; I mean thinking that politics "comes up with answers to social problems, which it manifestly doesn't do. When does it ever? (20)

In The Golden Notebook nostalgia for the past is dismissed as self-defeating nihilism, whereas optimism about the future is portrayed as self-deceiving fancifulness. Although the novel describes a quest for lost wholeness, for the recovery of integrity, it discloses that the fractured personality, a metonym for the fragmented nature of contemporary experience, cannot fully be healed. Anna realizes that those who remain "cracked across" and "split" are "keeping themselves open for something" (460). Paradoxically, therefore, personal integrity is recovered or preserved by staying broken (refusing to "block off").

The consequences of this insight have proved fruitful for Lessing's development as a writer. Grasping the limitations of traditional realism, she has released herself into a wider scope, which allows her either to alternate among or to fuse together realism, fantasy, science fiction, apocalypse, and myth in a series of works that testify to her refusal to be restricted to any single novelistic mode. For Lessing the hard-edged certainties of a narrow-minded rationalism need constantly to be questioned because they neither completely account for nor exhaust the nature of reality. Experimental novels, she implies, moving freely among a rich diversity of imaginative realms, not only extend our sense of what is real but also contribute to our sense of what is possible.

Berger's and Lessing's novels attempt to work through the consequences for art and politics of a post-war loss of faith in the dream of a socialist utopia. Iris Murdoch, in turn, is more concerned with the failure of liberal humanism. Although she refuses to offer simplistic reasons for its gradual breakdown, she nevertheless notes that there has been a general "loss of confidence in a single human world" (Biles 304). The novel, she argues, which used to be written within a shared social framework, is well-suited to cope with the multiple perspectives through which we now view reality, for it "can be practically anything"; it "is so versatile you can do virtually anything you like with [it]" (305). Noting that there has recently been "a lot of experiment" (305) that has freed writers from the modernist legacy, she suggests, nonetheless, that the contemporary novelist "can't go back" behind modernism: "One's consciousness is different; I mean our whole narrative technique is something completely different from that of Dickens" (306).

Like the other novelists discussed in this thesis, but undoubtedly with a more detailed philosophical grasp of what is at stake, Murdoch acknowledges the centrality of language to human cognitions of the world. The contemporary writer cannot unselfconsciously return to traditional realist modes precisely because s/he is aware both that consciousness is dependent on language and that narrative technique creates reality at the same time that it describes it. For Murdoch, however, the impossibility of escaping language's nets is not

a cause for despair. As Bryan Appleyard argues, taking language as her point of departure, she treats man "as the irreducible given"--who can only be known in and through the discourses about him--not as "the last term in an analytical series" (159). The mystery and unknowability of humanity are thus as exhilarating to Murdoch as are the rich and unbounded tongues through which we gain knowledge of it. Appleyard puts it as follows: "The Murdoch man is not merely complex, he is infinite as is language itself" (159).

Murdoch's focus on language melds with her interest in form. Fearful of the consolations of form, of aesthetic patternings of reality that conceal its amorphous character, she creates texts that exhibit a tension between order and chaos. Her oscillation between and occasional fusion of crystalline (closed) and journalistic (open) fictional modes enables her to avoid replacing the muddle of life with the tidiness of art. The "good artist," Murdoch maintains, "builds indeterminism into his determinism" (Bigsby and Ziegler 214).

For Murdoch the earnestness of art does not preclude humour; however, although art may be playful, "its play is serious" (Fire 84). This insight lies at the heart of Angus Wilson's work. In The Wild Garden he claimed that "[n]ovels are lies, novelists disreputable people in their basic nature" (146). All fiction, he told Michael Millgate, "is a kind of magic and trickery--a confidence trick, trying to make people believe something is true that isn't" (Halio 1985 42). The novelist, he continues, "is trying to convince the

reader that he is seeing society as a whole" (42).

Wilson's desire to achieve a comprehensive social vision in his works has led him to stretch the realist novel that he continues to admire into new shapes. No Laughing Matter, his most complex novel, subverts realist forms in two key ways: first, it qualifies its own attempt to encompass social totality by undermining the model of the family saga on which it is itself based; second, by exposing its own tricksterish frame, it discloses its awareness of itself as a literary artefact that, by creating the **illusion** of social representation, participates in our ongoing interpretations of culture and society. Moreover, the various alienating devices that Wilson employs--parody, pastiche, plays within the novel--indicate his belief that reality is far stranger than surface realism allows. As Malcolm Bradbury has noted, Wilson has "recognized a world in which the grotesque, the fantastic and the estranged can explore more fully than detailed documentary observation ever can" (153)

Wilson's grasp of the multiple ways that reality can be perceived leads to a redoubtably catholic conception of art. In The Wild Garden he described the novel as a "mixed form" that must combine an aesthetic appeal with an evocation of social density (148). For Wilson, as for Murdoch, the novel must point beyond itself; it orients itself toward and refers to a society outside itself, although it is aware of its own contribution, as a socially embedded cultural practice, to whatever knowledge of society we have. The novel is social

and aesthetic, creative and descriptive, self-referential and other-referential. For Wilson, if on the one hand the novel attempts to portray reality, to produce what he calls a "fictive truth" (Halio 1985 65) that is at least partially correspondential, then on the other hand it attempts to create art, to aspire to the beauty of "a string quartet" (65).

### III

Edwin Froulish, the experimental novelist in John Wain's Hurry on Down, has patience with neither plot nor title. An extract from his "Work in Progress," a temporary "title" that alludes to Joyce, reads as follows: "Clout bell, shout well, pell-mell about a tout, get the hell out. About nowt. Court log wart hog bought a dog" (57). The local English master's glasses may justifiably "sparkle . . . with fury" (57) at being subjected to this drivel. For Wain Ulysses represents a **cul-de-sac**; the "experimental novel," he avers, "died with Joyce" (Rabinovitz 8).

As we have seen, B. S. Johnson holds the opposite view. Joyce, he argues, is fiction's Einstein, and Ulysses the revolutionary work that utterly transformed the novel genre. According to Johnson, no serious novelist can ignore Joyce's challenge to the traditional novel; the contemporary writer's task is to begin where Joyce left off. Not only does this mean that s/he should explore the inner workings of the mind but also that, in doing so, s/he should consciously seek out

new novelistic forms and techniques--in short, should experiment.

In their different ways, Berger, Lessing, Murdoch, and Wilson avoid the either/or choice presented to them by Wain and Johnson. Producing self-reflexive fictions that disclose both their knowledge that literature is artifice and their belief that it should point beyond itself, they combine key features of the novel's two dominant traditions: the realism identified by Ian Watt and the self-consciousness referred to by Robert Alter. For if Watt argues that the novel's narrative mode "follows the procedures adopted by philosophical realism in its attempt to ascertain and report the truth" (31), then Alter sees the novel as a genre that is "less closely linked with the solid assurances and material views of bourgeois society than some observers have imagined, and more an intimate expression in innovative form of the restless self-questioning that has characterized so much of modern intellectual culture" (xv).

As the novelists discussed in this thesis have shown, these two approaches to the novel are not mutually exclusive; they may, in fact, be complementary. Accepting that human beings construct their knowledge of reality through a variety of fictional forms, Lessing, Berger, Murdoch, and Wilson produce texts that examine both the world and other representations of it at the same time. Whether or not this renders their work postmodernist remains a moot point. If, as Hutcheon argues, postmodernist art attempts "a re-evaluation

of and a dialogue with the past in the light of the present" (19), which "does not deny the **existence** of the past" but questions "whether we can ever **know** that past other than through its textualized remains" (20), then the novels dealt with here can be called postmodernist. My own concern, however, is to show that, however we label them, they represent a variety of ways to go beyond modernism and that their work renders inoperable a rigid distinction between tradition and experiment.

Angus Wilson is exemplary in this regard. Initially associated with the Movement rejection of experimentation, he quickly distanced himself from the ensuing parochialism and, demonstrating that realist concerns could be fused with innovative techniques, drew on established literary models so as to recast them into new forms. Thus it is hardly surprising that he should explicitly reject the misleading dichotomy promoted by writers such as Johnson and Wain. Reviewing Leon Edel's The Psychological Novel, Wilson speaks of "the tedious and false distinction of 'experimental' and 'traditional' novels which has befogged discussion up to now" (Faulkner 54).

Other novelists have recently echoed these sentiments. Gabriel Josipovici suggests that we should think not of "experimental" and "non-experimental" writing but of "successful and unsuccessful solutions to problems" (1983 178). Giles Gordon, in turn, writes as follows: "Why shouldn't anyone of sensibility who enjoys new fiction respond with pleasure to



the best work of Michael Moorcock **and** William Trevor, Fay Weldon **and** Robert Nye, Brigid Brophy **and** Angus Wilson, John Fowles **and** J. G. Ballard, Doris Lessing **and** Anthony Powell" ("State" 1978 40). But the best expression of how far behind a new generation of novelists has left this debate comes from one of its leading lights--Ian McEwan:

The formal experimentation of the late Sixties and early Seventies came to nothing largely because the stuff was inaccessible and too often unrewarding--no pleasure in the text. And there can surely be no more mileage to be had from demonstrating yet again through self-enclosed 'fictions' that reality is words and words are lies. There is no need to be strangled by that particular loop--the artifice of fiction can be taken for granted. Experimentation in its broadest and most viable sense should have less to do with formal factors like busting up your syntax and scrambling your page order, and more to do with content--the representation of states of mind and the society that forms them. ("State" 1978 51)

Taking the artifice of literature and the linguistic nature of our knowledge of reality for granted, McEwan, like so many of his confrères, rejects the "radical" experimentation of writers such as Johnson, Christine Brooke-Rose, and Alan Burns as debilitating. It is the novelists who have worked the middle-ground between traditional and experimental forms, breaking down the barriers between them, who offer neophyte writers scope for originality, for "making it new" again and again. Berger, Lessing, Murdoch, and Wilson should probably be seen as "models" for a whole generation of self-reflexive novelists such as McEwan, Julian Barnes, Peter Ackroyd, Clive Sinclair, and Graham Swift. If this is the

case it can only be hinted at here, for it would require another thesis, necessarily postponed for now, to argue it more persuasively.

Notes

<sup>1</sup> For Lyotard the word "postmodern" designates a general social crisis that is felt most acutely in human disciplines of thought, which can no longer offer authoritative accounts of the world. Thus he begins his book by explaining that he will place "the transformations which, since the end of the nineteenth century, have altered the game rules for science, literature, and the arts" in the "context of the crisis of narratives" (xxiii).

Although I find Lyotard's and Rorty's descriptions of our predicament persuasive, I believe we do well to heed Frank Kermode's warning, in The Sense of an Ending, that the notion of crisis--the idea that one's own time represents the cataclysmic end-point of history itself--is central to human beings' concepts of the world. We perceive our own cultural situation, Kermode argues, in an extraordinary relation both to past and to future: "We think of our own crisis as pre-eminent, more worrying, more interesting than other crises" (94).

<sup>2</sup> In his concluding chapter, revealingly entitled "The Confusions of History," Marwick quotes from Isaac Kramnick's Is Britain Dying? as follows:

The conventional left in Britain and elsewhere sees a crisis and assigns the blame to bankers, managers, and the class system. The right in Britain and elsewhere . . . sees a crisis and indicts unions, socialism, and intellectuals. The radical left also sees a crisis, but one that undermines the entire social order of capitalist Britain. (274)

<sup>3</sup> Thus Lyotard writes:

It is therefore impossible to judge the existence or validity of narrative knowledge on the basis of scientific knowledge and vice versa: the relevant criteria are different. All we can do is gaze in wonderment at the diversity of discursive species, just as we do at the diversity of plant or animal species. (26)

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