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DOMINIC HEAD



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Chapter 1

The State and the Novel

The name that comes most readily to mind in a consideration of the state and the novel is George Orwell. His two most famous political fables, *Animal Farm: A Fairy Story* (1945) and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), have proved hugely significant in the post-war world, influencing many subsequent literary dystopias, and also supplementing our use of language. Terms like 'Big Brother', 'doublethink' and 'unperson' from *Nineteen Eighty-Four* have become part of the contemporary political lexicon. It is also possible to see the cautionary note of these novels as establishing a liberal world-view, based on a deep scepticism of political extremes that helps fashion 'a new lineage of liberal and socially attentive writing' that is dominant in British fiction in the 1950s and beyond.¹

The mood of Orwell's fables, however, might now seem backward—rather than forward-looking in some respects. At the level of prophecy, it is true, the repudiation of the corrupt mechanics of the communist state implicit in both *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* chimes with the Cold War mood, which is dominant in Western society through into the 1980s. But in terms of gestation, both works have an eye to the past, and particularly to Orwell's disillusioning experiences fighting for the revolutionary POUM (Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista) militia in the Spanish Civil War.² The immediate resonance of both books in Britain, moreover, was dependent upon the post-war experience of austerity, where shortages, rationing, and government control and bureaucracy made (in particular) the confinement of 'Airstrip One', Orwell's depiction of London in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, seem a faintly plausible extension of reality. In the 1950s, however, with the end of rationing, and a developing consumer boom, a new public mood emerged. This survey takes 1950 as a dividing line that separates the war and its aftermath from the distinctive nature of post-war society, governed by new economic and social energies. If the work of Orwell helps define this historical divide, however, there is little sense that fiction writers subscribed to the general celebration of prosperity. Post-1950 novelists, in fact, were not easily persuaded that the work of social rebuilding was always benign or coherent.

The blueprint for post-war social policy was contained in Sir William Beveridge's review of social security, *Social Insurance and Allied Services* (1942),

popularly known as ‘The Beveridge Report’. Beveridge’s plan was for a comprehensive welfare programme, premised on the expectation of full employment, and involving a universal national insurance scheme, and a national health service. It was a social vision that caught the public mood. Astonishing as it may now seem for a political document, the Beveridge Report became a bestseller, with more than 600,000 copies sold.³ The enthusiasm for this political vision indicates a popular mandate for its implementation, and Beveridge’s plan helped fashion the emergence of the welfare state after 1945. Clement Attlee’s Labour government of 1945–51 put in place the central planks of the new society, redesigned to offer insurance for all citizens against the risks of unemployment, sickness, and disability. The National Health Service, instituted in 1948, was the most celebrated initiative of this phase of social restructuring, but the keynote feature of the new political scene was an economic policy designed to embrace common ownership and full employment. By the early 1950s, a consensus in British politics – in the sense of an approach to policy that was broadly shared by the Labour Party and the Conservatives – had emerged, embracing full employment, the welfare state, and state intervention in industry. In this period, ‘the vocabulary . . . of modern capitalism and social democracy’ was defined, a lexicon which signified a consensus (within government, at least) about domestic policy.⁴ The historical judgement of this period is generally one that celebrates an achievement deemed to be considerable, given the impoverishment of Britain during the war, and the huge financial burden of fighting it.⁵

The Post-War Wilderness

The mood of post-war optimism was built partly on hope, of course, and this hopeful projection is not reproduced in the novel. This should give little cause for surprise, since the task of serious fiction is not to collude with the prevailing popular view, but rather to offer an alternative perspective, to locate those areas that might generate a sense of concern about history and society. In 1950, serious writers were already finding fault with the celebratory mood associated with a new beginning. In *The World My Wilderness* (1950), for instance, Rose Macaulay establishes a critical view on the project of social reconstruction, choosing to place emphasis on a breakdown of the social order, suggesting that this is also a psychological problem. Resisting the popular patriotic mood of a nation victorious in war, and steeling itself to the task of rebuilding its infrastructure, Macaulay offers an independent external view at the beginning of her novel. This is the perspective of a French character Madame Michel, ‘a good anglophobe’,

who feels the British, lacking 'literature, culture, language and manners', flatter themselves as the liberators of the French (it is the French and the Americans who did the liberating, she thinks). England, she believes, 'always came well out of every war, losing neither lives nor money' (pp. 9, 13).⁶ The novel does not endorse this economic analysis, but seeks to identify the sense of crisis – cultural as well as material – that popular patriotism can easily conceal.

Macaulay focuses on the seventeen-year-old Barbary, whose divorced parents decide she will come to live in London in 1946, having spent the war years in occupied France, associating with the Maquis (the French Resistance). Haunted by her betrayal of her stepfather (a collaborator), she is unable to adjust to the peacetime goal of rebuilding a 'civilised' society, a concept that Macaulay, in any case, holds up for interrogation. Absconding from her studies at the Slade School of Art, the 'barbarian' Barbary finds her 'wilderness' in the bombsites of London, associating with spivs, deserters, and thieves. She feels she belongs to these ruins (p. 181), and Macaulay stresses that this visible collapse of civilization signifies also an inner dearth that is both spiritual and intellectual. The frequent quotation from T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* keeps this link in view, but the most arresting association is made by the appearance of a deranged clergyman, preaching about Hell in a bombed-out church, convinced he is burning in hell-fire for his sins, having been trapped in his own church when it was bombed in 1940 (pp. 166–8).

Macaulay is seriously posing the question that passes through the mind of Barbary's half-brother Richie: whether or not Western culture has 'had its day' (p. 152). The post-war cultural initiative becomes an object of satire when one character quips that the 'Third Programme' might be used in a prison punishment cell (p. 73). The 'punishment' is that of the state-sponsored attempt to inculcate an appreciation of High Art: the BBC began broadcasting its highbrow Third Programme in 1946, projecting it as an educative and civilizing force, though its small audience – it had a one per cent share of listeners in 1949 – indicates failure in this regard.⁷ Macaulay's implication is that misdirected social rebuilding may fail to attract the necessary popular support. When Richie walks across the ruins that comprise Barbary's wilderness in the final chapter he witnesses an archaeological dig in progress, transforming the area from a delinquents' refuge to a site of historical interest: 'civilised intelligence was at work among the ruins', it is suggested (p. 252). But a sense of pointlessness overcomes Richie, who turns from 'the shells of churches' which 'gaped like lost myths' whilst 'the jungle pressed in on them, seeking to cover them up' (p. 245). The emptiness that Macaulay evokes embraces both existing social structures, such as conventional family life, and the obvious alternatives, particularly the Bohemian

self-expression of Barbary's mother Helen. When it is revealed that Barbary's real father was a Spanish painter that Helen had met one summer (rather than her London barrister husband), the disconcerting theme of the uncertain origin – discomfiting to the very idea of national pride – becomes central. This effect is cogently reinforced by the sense of futility that mars the archaeological dig, where 'the wilderness' is imagined to be slipping away from trowels and measuring rods, seeking instead 'the primeval chaos' that precedes human habitation (p. 253).

A novel that is less apocalyptic in its style, though scarcely less negative in its implications, is William Cooper's *Scenes From Provincial Life* (1950). Fifty years after its publication, *Scenes From Provincial Life* seems a modest and unambitious work, in the manner of an unassuming autobiographical first novel (though in fact 'William Cooper' had previously published novels under his real name, H. S. Hoff). It was, however, very influential, 'a seminal influence' on novelists of his generation according to John Braine; Malcolm Bradbury, too, claimed to have found belief in himself as a writer through Cooper's example of a kind of ordinary reflectiveness.⁸ Bradbury's celebration of Cooper's method of producing 'a book about how dense, substantial, and complex life is, taken on its ordinary terms' fits well with Cooper's avowed project:⁹ he affiliated himself clearly with the realism lobby in the realism-versus-experimentalism debate that emerged in the 1950s.¹⁰ The full effect of the novel, however, hinges on a particular brand of quiet self-consciousness that delivers a subtle, but ultimately depressing verdict on the possibilities of 'ordinary' life.

The setting is the key to this. The tribulations of the four main protagonists in love and career are set against the backdrop of the threat of Nazism, since the principal action occurs in 1939 before war has been declared. The central characters have a plan to flee to the US to escape the totalitarian state that may result from the continuing appeasement of Hitler. As a consequence, there is a mood of 'dissolution' in which private miseries seem to match the impending collapse of Europe (p. 87). Later, however, narrator Joe Lunn casts doubt on his tendency to equate private and public 'disintegration', claiming that the link rings false (p. 149). And, of course, it rings false for the reader, too, since this is a comic novel that catches a mood of qualified post-war optimism far more than it embraces the nihilistic abandonment of England that is proposed. Lunn's various rural idylls (he spends weekends at a country cottage with the girlfriend he refuses to marry) convey an attachment to place that belies his stated intention to emigrate. In this way Cooper manages to play two contexts off against each other: historical hindsight renders anodyne the pessimism of 1939.

This double-focus is an integral part of the novel's effect, and it serves to place attention on preoccupations more pressing for a post-war audience,

such as the changing nature of social and sexual relations, and the apparent dullness of provincial existence. Joe Lunn's boredom with his life as a schoolmaster in an anonymous provincial town (based on Leicester) is offset only by his writing. He has published three novels at the outset, and has completed a fourth that he considers to be superior. The persona of the narrator is infused with a conviction of this vocation, but since this self-belief is sustained by the desire to escape, a fundamental paradox structures the work. If the book's originality lies in 'the particular kind of ordinary life, the particular culture' it evokes, then Cooper succeeds in embracing and celebrating the way of living that dissatisfies Lunn, but only through the device of Lunn's involvement with the object of his dissatisfaction.¹¹ It is a formal paradox that explains the novel's peculiar tension. In the final chapter, entitled 'Provincial Life-Histories', Lunn presents us with a list of the characters, all of which have married beyond the action of the novel. This dismissive gesture implies the essential predictability and conformity of provincial existence. At the same time, Lunn refuses to reveal his own life history, and, by virtue of this omission, he conjures up the escape he had wanted. But the omission is also a form of exile that leaves Lunn excluded from the propitious comic ending, and that makes the withdrawal of the author-figure seem artificial, even whilst it is necessary for the desired effect.

This kind of paradoxical gesture suggests an uncertainty about the solidity of the social world, and about the role of the novelist in commenting upon it. It is a hesitancy that strikes a dissonant chord in the context of national reconstruction (where the tasks ahead might seem self-evident); yet this anxiety about the role of the novel in the national narrative is expressed in a number of quarters – Pamela Hansford Johnson's novel *The Humbler Creation* (1959) is another example of this wariness. Superficially, *The Humbler Creation* may seem a distinctly old-fashioned novel to readers at the end of the twentieth century. The dilemma faced by the clergyman-protagonist Maurice Fisher, a dilemma of marital fidelity, and moral responsibility, arising principally from his Kensington parishioners' propensity to gossip, seems to belong to an entirely different social era. The stable third-person narrative style, untroubled by its omniscient reach, bespeaks a certainty about the contract between author and reader, and the shared assumption that a transparent narrator can mediate between world and text in a straightforward manner.

The stable realism this implies, however, is here being conscientiously asserted, as part of a broader reaction against the modernist legacy. Yet in its topical content, the novel demonstrates an uncertainty about the reach of realism – or, perhaps, an acknowledgement of its need to adapt – in the face of the incipient break-up of key elements of social consensus. The moral

focus is the perceived need to be truthful; this is emphasized in the relatively trivial matter of a road traffic offence, an episode in which Hansford Johnson uses the realist contract to push her modest social code. A general loss of spiritual faith, and the perceived social irrelevance of the Christian church are governing concerns in *The Humbler Creation*; but the fact of a predominantly secular society is really a ‘given’ for novelists in the entire post-war period, so this ‘crisis’ seems anachronistic, even for 1959.

The novel is also forward-looking in a number of ways, however. The concern about delinquency, and about violent crime, specifically the crime of sexually assaulting children (committed by one of Fisher’s young parishioners) – issues that remain prominent into the twenty-first century – demonstrates a continuity through the period that is not always recognized. Hansford Johnson also broaches tentatively some of the period’s primary concerns. The issue of re-evaluating sexual identity, for instance, is broached by the gay couple Peter and Lou for whom Fisher acquires some sympathy (p. 141). The shadow of the atomic bomb, which becomes so prominent in the fiction of the 1980s, also obtrudes, making one character feel that her own problems are negligible (p. 231). There is even, in this Caucasian fictional world, a brief acknowledgement of multicultural London in the respectful description of a patient and dignified Indian woman, walking with a perambulator (p. 118).

It is the novel’s title, however, that most aptly conveys its intriguing duality, simultaneously anachronistic and contemporary. The ‘humbler creation’ denotes, in the hymn from which the phrase is taken, humankind beneath the angels (p. 146), and it resurfaces in Maurice Fisher’s final reflections, when he has resigned himself, for the sake of decorum, to a loveless marriage and to giving up the woman he loves. Comparing himself with a sixteenth-century martyr, burnt at the stake, Fisher realizes that he is ‘so much more obviously of the humbler creation’ than this martyr, who is reputed to have managed a heroic gesture at the moment of death (p. 315). Fisher recognizes his human frailty, and also the relative unimportance of the dilemma that has preoccupied him (and the novel). Hansford Johnson is tacitly announcing the irrelevance of her portentous Christian imagery, and promoting a new breed of protagonist, whose concerns may be trivial in comparison with the heroic gestures of earlier literature. In this conclusion she is actually embracing two of the elements that are sometimes seen as the bane of the post-war British novelist: the limited scope of the novel, and the uncertainty about character and motivation that accompanies it. But since that sense of limitation and uncertainty stems from the state of the nation the novel discovers, then these formal limits are also an integral aspect of this realist vision; and this formula is representative of a dominant strand in post-war writing.

The Testing of Liberal Humanism

The post-Christian morality of *The Humbler Creation* suggests a philosophical perspective very much in tune with Peter Conradi's description of liberal humanism, glossed, in his account of Angus Wilson, as 'a disparate bundle of belief and unbelief'. This liberal humanism

was momentarily forced into illusory coherence after the last war. The space it defended was anti-Marxist, post-Christian, anti-capitalist, socially progressive. It proposed a political alternative to cold war extremes, and, in the teeth of the experience of Hitler, tested belief in goodness and progress.¹²

For Hansford Johnson, of course, that testing of belief in goodness and progress is also a testing of the liberal philosophy itself. The same is true of the novels written by Angus Wilson in the 1950s in which the adequacy and integrity of liberal humanism is subjected to continuous critical scrutiny. Wilson ponders the nature of English society and culture, and tacitly asks whether or not liberalism will prove adequate as a moral centre for the new social formation.

Hemlock and After (1952) is set prior to the defeat, in 1951, of the Labour government that had instituted the Welfare State, and a debate implicitly provoked by Wilson is how far the 'modified socialism' (p. 83) of the post-war state might support the cultural life: at the outset esteemed novelist Bernard Sands has secured a government grant to help set up his centre for talented young writers at Vardon Hall. This project, however, becomes a test of Sands and his personal humanist vision, rather than a deliberation about policy. It is precisely the 'illusory coherence' of liberal humanism that Wilson sets out to expose, without quite relinquishing it as the preferred moral stance. This is the paradox that orders his writing, and the crucial question in an assessment of Wilson is whether or not the contradictions that embarrass his characters result in structural flaws in the novels themselves.

In the case of *Hemlock and After* it is important to distinguish between the novelist's project, and the career of his protagonist, so that the contradictory elements of Sands's humanism – an odd combination of moral wisdom and vindictiveness – need not be seen to issue from Wilson's narratorial point of view. To the extent that this perspective is *tainted* by the confusion, the qualification still applies: the significant point is that Wilson cultivates this sense of dissonance as part of his art. Admittedly, there is, apparently, a troubling association between Sands's homosexuality and his personal dissolution, a link that looks repressive (I discuss this more fully in my chapter on gender and sexual identity). But Wilson's concern transcends the question of

sexual identity, and produces a controlled confrontation between a moral, or humanist, or realist emphasis on social solidity, and a less stable investigation of psychological indeterminacy. The ambiguous form that results is less flawed and more innovative than is sometimes acknowledged.

Wilson's ostensible purpose is to present a test of humanism, and the resolution lies in the business of making novels, for the work of Sands the novelist is shown to comprise a beneficent social contribution that overshadows the personal dissolution. This positive implication is not clear-cut, however. Indeed, Sands's humanism is destroyed by a new Dostoevskyan awareness of the doubleness of all human motivation, including his own, and he dies without recovering from this spiritual devastation. Neither is there hope in the continuation of his personal projects or convictions;¹³ but the implications of Sands's work, it is suggested, may prove more enduring. Here the vocation of writing is central to a more constructive perception of 'testing'. Reviews of Sands's most recent novel celebrate 'a wider view of life' and a 'testimony to the endurance of the human spirit' (p. 14). The transcendence this suggests is precisely that which his sister Isobel condemns, finding in his later novels a 'quietism' with 'an almost unreal religious quality' (p. 72).

Sands's last act, however, is to write to Isobel affirming his convictions 'to be on the side of the oppressed, the weak and the misfits', even though 'we shall not see anything of what we wish come in our lifetime' (p. 220). Despite his disillusionment, he retains (like his creator) the broad humanist stance that his reviewers praise, and this persisting faith in a kind of 'long revolution' forms the positive term in his ambivalent identity. This sense of indeterminacy, which may not fully answer the charge of 'quietism', is reinforced by the parallel with Socrates implied in the title. Socrates was forced to drink hemlock for corrupting the youth of Athens; Sands's 'hemlock' is the self-knowledge that destroys him, his realization of his moral wavering. What comes 'after' is uncertain, but faith is placed in the continuity of Sands's social vision. If one evaluates the achievement of Wilson in a similar light – and clearly the self-doubt that inspires the creation of Sands invites us to do so – it may be significant that the testing of liberal humanism in *Hemlock and After* remains a pertinent ethical topic fifty years on.

The task that remains, however, is to ascertain the degree of purchase that a liberal philosophy can achieve in a world that is increasingly illiberal. This concern underpins Bernard Bergonzi's discussion of the 'moral preoccupations' of Angus Wilson's first three novels, in which Wilson emerges as 'a distinguished practitioner' in a tradition of English fiction, 'whose brightest luminary is George Eliot', and in which 'the novel is seen as the vehicle for a particular liberal ideology, where characters are secure in their

freedom to refine on their motives, truly to understand each other and, above all, themselves.¹⁴ For Bergonzi, this tradition is ‘beginning to look trivial’ in the work of ‘a mid-twentieth-century representative’, given ‘the larger context of the history of our times’:

It is in the centripetal nature of its preoccupations that English culture can look parochial and irrelevant to outsiders. For writers who have known, and often still live in, a world where torture and deportation, the arbitrary exercise of unlimited power and the familiarity of casual violence are part of daily experience, the dilemmas of the English liberal are likely to seem a little fine drawn.¹⁵

This objection raises a larger doubt about the moral justification of the novel *per se*, since the serious novel is a form of expression that always traces or invites a link between personal conviction and the broader public sphere. The real issue may be the (relatively) undramatic nature of social life in post-war England, which has not provoked the intense kinds of novelistic discourse that one associates with unstable or extreme political systems, such as have obtained in South America or South Africa.

In any case, if Wilson belongs to a peculiarly English novel-writing tradition of self-discovery, he also embodies the dismantling and transformation of this tradition, especially as it is found in the limited liberalism of E. M. Forster.¹⁶ The trajectory of this development is discernible in Wilson’s second novel, *Anglo-Saxon Attitudes* (1956), a work of transition, in which the predicament of its main character Gerald Middleton is revealed as being less important than the novel’s structure initially suggests. Extending the model established in *Hemlock and After*, Wilson makes the dilemmas of another English liberal speak to the larger problems of nationhood.

Middleton, a history professor in his sixties, and a scholar of great but unfulfilled promise, faces a dual challenge: to confront his failures in both the professional and domestic spheres.¹⁷ Gerald’s great personal failure was to have continued an affair without ever making the break with his apparently progressive (but actually domineering) wife. A different pattern of deception haunts Gerald’s professional life. This originates in an archaeological dig in 1912, where a phallic wooden fertility figure – a pagan idol – was planted in the grave of a seventh-century Christian bishop. The historical implications of the hoax (inspired by the Piltdown man scandal) are enormous, since it suggests that the accepted version of the Conversion of Britain to Christianity may be flawed. Middleton has had an intimation of the hoax, but has concealed the knowledge for forty years, partly to protect the reputation of his mentor Lionel Stokesay, father of the perpetrator of the hoax. As Middleton uncovers the truth of the scandal, so does his professional star rise until, at the end of the novel, he accepts the Chair of the History

Association. He has become equally clear-headed about his dealings with his family, accepting now the limits to his influence and to the affection he can hope for.

This apparent resolution of Middleton's dilemmas is significantly undercut, however. As he departs for a flight for Mexico, and a working holiday over the Christmas vacation, the popular novelist Clarissa Crane voices a dismissive summary of his underachieving life, concluding 'one could say that Gerald Middleton had taken life a bit too easily' (p. 336). This stands as a fair commentary on Middleton's limitations. Indeed, the significance of his new vitality is qualified in several ways. First, there is a sense that his personal problems, partly of his own making, are only significant to the site of unearned luxury that he inhabits. His evident wealth has come from the family firm, a steel-construction business which he has nothing to do with, and which is now in the charge of his eldest son. Before his recommitment, the depressed and unfulfilled Middleton expends most of his energy on his art collection, an effort of displacement matched by his inability to concentrate seriously on any interaction with women – for much of the novel his responses to women are determined by his assessment of their sexual attractiveness. These are curiously unlikeable characteristics, given the liberal tradition from which Wilson emerges, and in which 'characters are secure in their freedom to refine on their motives', as Bergonzi suggests. The nature of Gerald Middleton's 'freedom' is subject to critical scrutiny, making his sluggish moral responses all the more inadequate. We are presented with an anachronism: the man of independent means, not fully responsive to his context; but that seems to be Wilson's conscious purpose, indicating that the novel makes a partial break with the liberal tradition, presenting a central character who must reinvent himself, as best he can, whilst seeking a path through the muddle of English identity.

Wilson's early novels are largely confined to the middle-class and upper-middle-class echelons of society; but he is also interested in the dismantling of these categories of class (as the next chapter demonstrates). This is an integral part of his impetus to push at his own ideological boundaries. Wilson's liberal project, with its recognition of social change, seems particularly worth defending when it is compared with less socially responsive writing. Anthony Powell's twelve-novel sequence *A Dance to the Music of Time* (1951–75), for example, stands in marked contrast, and this is surprising on the face of it, since one might expect this project to deliver a substantial fictional treatment of the state of the nation. The sequence begins in 1921, though the entire enterprise embraces two world wars, and contains episodes that span the period 1914–71. By virtue of its historical coverage, and on account of the quarter-century of composition, Powell's cycle would seem a major contribution to the literature of English social life, tracing the implications

of twentieth-century history through to the contemporary period. In fact, *A Dance to the Music of Time* fails in this regard, setting itself the more limited comic goal of delineating the quirks of human character. It is precisely in this projection of a comic mood that eludes social change that Powell's sequence now seems irredeemably anachronistic.

The governing motif of the dance is introduced in the first volume *A Question of Upbringing* (1951) through the reflections of narrator Nicholas Jenkins, concerning the Poussin painting that gives the sequence its name. Jenkins's recollection of the painting suggests that the dancers (the dancers are the seasons personified in Poussin's conception) are controlled by the dance, and he imagines them disappearing and reappearing as Time progresses (p. 6). Powell's narrative method, in which the paths of his various characters cross repeatedly, emulates this impression, but the 'dance' that governs them through the decades does not convincingly imitate a broad social fabric binding the characters together; rather, this governing motif underscores the restricted range of Powell's fictional world, confined to 'the English professional, upper-middle and upper classes' in which it appears 'everyone knows everyone else'.¹⁸ In this sense, the sequence limits its range to a stratum of society that becomes increasingly insignificant, in demographic terms, through the period of composition and beyond.¹⁹

Powell thus recreates a social world of greater relevance to England in the 1920s or 1930s, and this renders his comic vision out of kilter with the prevailing social mood. This discrepancy is particularly marked in the portrayal of Kenneth Widmerpool, Powell's great comic creation, the egregiously ambitious *arriviste* whose successive advances in status (he is eventually made a Life Peer [*Temporary Kings* (1973), p. 43]) never guarantee his acceptance in the upper social echelons, where he remains the 'freak' or 'odddity' he had seemed at school (*A Question of Upbringing*, pp. 125–6). Thus, even if Widmerpool is successfully realized as 'the most stupendous cad in English literature',²⁰ his conception as a comic grotesque hinges on repudiating the kind of self-advancement, or questioning of fixed social categories that is usually a focus of egalitarian celebration in post-war society.

Widmerpool becomes the vehicle for some pointed satirical observations in the final volume, *Hearing Secret Harmonies* (1975). Here (in 1968) he is installed as the Chancellor of a 'newish' university (p. 48), and has made efforts to associate himself with the student movement and the counter-culture (p. 42). He joins forces with a cult, having retired to his mother's former house to run a centre for dissident youth, and finally dies in 1971, dispossessed, after a series of humiliating episodes (p. 245). In this novel Widmerpool's insatiable quest for power and status latches on to the new social movements of the 1960s, with the inevitable consequence that these are tainted by his lack of integrity. Powell's conservative comic mood, in

alliance with the social status quo, is here revealed more directly than elsewhere in the sequence. The static conservative overview of Powell indicates that alternative fictional strategies were needed to register adequately the implications of the new social movements.

The Sixties and Social Revolution

The decade in which post-war social change is felt to have been concentrated is the 1960s. This is certainly a simplification, but it does help pinpoint some of the more dramatic changes that may have been longer in the making. For example, one of the key social changes of the 1960s is the emergence of ‘youth culture’. The sense of a newly empowered sector of society is conveyed principally by the new spending power of young people, and the emergence of mainstream youth-related cultural forms, especially pop music, that quickly become significant components of the economy. This sea change in age perception results in the emergence of important individuals – intellectuals as well as entertainers – who are fifteen or twenty years younger than they might have been hitherto.²¹ This change even had an effect on the public perception of the novelist: the received wisdom that novelists produce their best work after the age of forty is challenged by the new trend of youthful achievers. Shena Mackay is perhaps the most obvious example of this, celebrated as a glamorous young novelist in the early 1960s when, she recalls, ‘all books by young persons were treated in the papers as dispatches from front-line Swinging London’.²²

The most memorable fictional treatment of youth culture in the 1960s, however, puts a very different construction on the changing balance of power. In *A Clockwork Orange* (1962) Anthony Burgess isolates the tribal, antisocial elements of youth culture in a dystopian fable of violence as leisure. Alex, fifteen at the outset, the gang-leader whose drug- and music-inspired ‘ultra-violence’ embraces murder and rape, narrates the novel. The teenage patois or ‘nasdat talk’ (p. 126) spoken by the gang members (the ‘droogs’) is a mannerism designed to exclude adults, a point underscored when the predatory Alex encounters two ten-year-old girls in a record store and discovers their idiom is different to his (p. 37). The ‘nasdat’ vocabulary combines influences to produce what Blake Morrison calls a ‘Russo-Anglo-American patois’, an international form that implies that the adolescent male impulse towards aggressive behaviour transcends national boundaries.²³

Though problematic, *A Clockwork Orange* is, in fact, a highly moral work. The unreformed Alex, having spent two years in a conventional prison, is put through a two-week ‘Reclamation Treatment’ (p. 75), a programme of conditioning, enhanced by drugs, that makes the patient sick at the thought

of violence. He is thus 'reformed', not through moral choice, but only insofar as his mind will not allow him to pursue his violent urges (p. 99). He becomes that unnatural thing, 'a clockwork orange' (p. 100) acting without volition. Alex becomes a pawn in the struggle between two political systems, and is subsequently de-programmed so that he can return to a life of gang violence. He is finally redeemed, not by state intervention, but by the arrival of maturity, which he glimpses, appropriately, in the twenty-first (and final) chapter, which anticipates his eventual adulthood. (At this point he is just eighteen [p. 146], though the structure of twenty-one chapters seems significant – in the early 1960s, of course, twenty-one was the age generally reckoned to mark the point of accession to mature adulthood.)²⁴ Showing signs of paternal feeling, and of material acquisitiveness, Alex has lost interest in the cult of violent excess.

The conclusion that the novel offers is that youthful excess is a necessary phase in the process of growing up, though this is an uncomfortable and reluctant conclusion given the novel's evocation of violence, and the clear warning about a society that produces a cult of youth.²⁵ Burgess's more pressing anxiety, however, has to do with the unpredictable function of art and the aesthetic response, and the concern that the responses of the young do not make for a considered set of cultural values. Alex is a devotee of classical music, for whom Beethoven inspires extreme expressions of violence. This moral crisis about art, illustrated by the Nazi appropriation of high culture, is investigated most fully through the role of the author in the novel. This is the writer F. Alexander, originally a victim of one of Alex's attacks (his wife, raped and beaten, eventually dies), who (a 'bleeding heart' liberal) later champions the cause of the brainwashed Alex, until he realizes his true identity. This author, who stands for Burgess in some ways, has written a book called *A Clockwork Orange*, which seems to be a plea for the organic development of humanity, and a rejection of the dehumanization of the machine world (p. 124). Burgess is, effectively, demonstrating the unsatisfactory nature of the moral position he feels obliged to take. If to permit the expression of humanity is to tolerate the antisocial expression of youth power, this might also be to allow the rapists into your own home, into the writer's own inner sanctum.²⁶

Burgess asserts the novelist's prerogative to a long-term philosophical view of a social trend that is nevertheless extremely significant and irreversible. In Arthur Marwick's view, British youth subculture generated 'highly liberating patterns of behaviour and forms of self-presentation'. From this perspective, the new credibility of the young is a productive social change, an integral aspect of the 'cultural revolution' identified with the 'long sixties' from 1958–74. For Marwick, then, the new youth phenomenon had established its positive contribution only shortly after the publication of *A Clockwork*

Orange: this is the kind of social commentary that stands in direct contrast to the implications of Burgess's novel.²⁷

The 1960s phenomenon that has fuelled the greatest controversy is hippy culture. The hippy dream of reintegrating society with nature, if naive, produced a positive long-term intellectual legacy, since it lies behind many subsequent reworkings of the relationship between humanity and the rest of nature. However, the hippy promotion of drugs to expand consciousness, and to expedite the achievement of social harmony, has attracted much disapprobation. Here social historians and novelists are commonly in agreement.²⁸ Hippy idealism, linked with drug experimentation and an unfocused dabbling in Eastern mysticism, is gently punctured in Esther Freud's *Hideous Kinky* (1992), where the child narrator's view generates an implicit criticism of her feckless mother's pursuit of adventure in Morocco. Freud employs an oblique method to show that the trappings of the West cannot easily be divested, as when the narrator and her elder sister are recalling the pleasures of Mars bars and mashed potato while their mother sleeps in with her African lover (p. 83).

Two assumptions about the 'long sixties' in particular have attracted the critical eye of the novelist: first, the notion that sexual permissiveness led to 'a new frankness, openness, and indeed honesty in personal relations and modes of expression'; and, second, the claim that 'the challenge to established authorities and hierarchies' has led to a fruitful process of subversion, supplanting (especially) 'the authority of the white, the upper and middle class, the husband, the father, and the male generally'.²⁹ Were either of these assumptions beyond question, the satirical thrust of Malcolm Bradbury's *The History Man* (1975) would have been entirely misdirected. As it is, *The History Man* is one of the most important satires of post-war manners.

There is also an element of reflective self-consciousness in Bradbury's novel, flagged up by a minor character, a university lecturer in English who, ten years previously, had written two novels filled 'with moral scruple'. Since that time he has been silent, as if 'there was no more moral scruple and concern, no new substance to be spun' (p. 204). Bradbury's response to this parlous state is to write a savage satire of university life (set in 1972), demonstrating how a particular constellation of social and historical forces produces an amoral society, cut adrift by the 'freedoms' of the 1960s, and misled by the dogmatic convictions which paradoxically follow.

Bradbury's great comic grotesque is Howard Kirk, the trendy sociology lecturer at a fashionable campus university, whose Marxist convictions about the plot of history run counter to his own egotistical, and libidinous desires. He has written a book about the myth of bourgeois individualism, impugning bourgeois capitalism for its false projection of a personal morality (p. 91).

The convictions of Kirk thus place him in opposition to the liberal moral tradition, associated especially with Angus Wilson in the post-war era, but a liberalism with which Bradbury also has an affinity. The amoral Kirk is a development of Bernard Froelich from Bradbury's earlier novel *Stepping Westward* (1965), a character who seeks to control and manipulate others. His intellectual hypocrisy is revealed most emphatically in the clash with George Carmody, a student he has persecuted for holding the 'wrong' ideas about sociology. Carmody's position (which is clearly also Bradbury's) is that 'the superstructure is a damned sight more important than the substructure' and that 'culture's a value, not an inert descriptive term'. Kirk's vulgar Marxism, in which the economic base determines all cultural phenomena, enables him to dismiss Carmody's thought as 'incompatible with sociological analysis' (p. 138). Bradbury's condemnation in Kirk of what, a generation later, came to be known as 'political correctness' is made telling by its echo of the 'one-system world' projected by Fascism. One character describes Fascism as another 'sociological construct' that is opposed to 'contingency or pluralism or liberalism' (p. 158).

Kirk is a vulgar Marxist, and it should be recognized that Western Marxism, as an intellectual tool for understanding capitalism, is a far more complex phenomenon. The role of culture in the superstructure, for example, is usually seen to be characterized by a degree of autonomy in Marxist criticism; economic determinism is invariably dismissed as a blunt tool.³⁰ Bradbury, then, presents Kirk as a convenient caricature, but he does so in order to align himself with the forces of contingency, pluralism, and liberalism in this debate, and in an attempt to exercise the creative autonomy of the novelist's art.

The picture that emerges of England in the 1970s, however, is less clear-cut than the caricature suggests. Howard and Barbara Kirk, the swinging couple with the open marriage, are representative figures, having been transformed by the 'revolution of rising expectations' concerning sex, class, and work which the 1960s brought forth (p. 24). This promise of liberation has ossified into the hard Leftism that the novel vilifies, a world-view that is an early sign of the end of consensus politics. In a seminar discussion the unfortunate Carmody is taken to task, by one of Kirk's more compliant students, for his conception of 'a society as a consensus which bad people from outside set out to upset'. The novel is unable to endorse either position in this dispute: if an intransigent radicalism is satirized, its very existence marks the eclipse of the traditional consensus view to which it stands opposed (p. 133). If Howard Kirk epitomizes a pseudo-intellectualism that has 'substituted trends for morals and commitments' (p. 32), the representativeness of the Kirks suggests that the failure is a general one. Their shared 1950s background of 'vestigial Christianity and inherited social deference' represents

a lost social world in which ethics was privileged over politics (p. 23). In Bradbury's conception of 1972, politics has displaced ethics, a reversal that calls the adequacy of the novelist's intervention into question. It is in tacit acknowledgement of this apparent impasse that Bradbury's reclusive and 'depressed-looking' lecturer, the erstwhile novelist of moral scruple, has been silent for a decade (p. 204).

Set a year later, Piers Paul Read's *A Married Man* (1979) raises similar doubts about the ethical efficacy of fiction in a story of political and social collapse that embraces the 1973–4 winter of strikes, and the ensuing February election. In an intriguing process of mapping the personal on to the political, Read's novel treats the mid-life crisis of forty-year-old barrister John Strickland as the litmus test for a more general social malaise, embracing the corrupting effects of the legal and political systems. The crisis for Strickland is brought on by the chance selection of Tolstoy's novella 'The Death of Ivan Ilych' as a holiday read. Reflecting on the public's lack of taste for fiction, since it no longer affects people's lives, Strickland very soon has his secure identity entirely shaken up by Tolstoy's tale. Crucially, Strickland's epiphanic encounter with fiction is rooted in his profound identification with 'his fellow-lawyer, Ivan Ilych', whose fear of death sparks in Strickland a comparable intimation of mortality, and the kind of professional and sexual re-evaluation commonly associated with the male menopause (pp. 18–22). The overt irony of Strickland's Tolstoy-induced crisis, in an age when fiction is not seen as a cultural form capable of direct intervention, is well managed. Read is also seeking to resurrect this function of the novel by flagging up its role in the cultivation of the empathic response, and, as a consequence of this, in the construction of ethical conduct.

There is no sense in this novel, however, of social revolution – of the overturning of traditional hierarchies, or of a more open and honest epoch in personal relationships. Pursuing a new career as a politician, with a resuscitated socialist vision, and chasing a mistress, too, Strickland is successful in these aims, the visible signs of his masculine ego asserting itself. He is elected as Labour member for Hackney and Haringay in the 1974 election, and conducts an affair with Paula Gerrard, daughter of a wealthy banker. His association with Paula, however, is severed when he realizes that she has planned the murder of his wife Clare. He decides, finally, to give priority to his family commitments, and resolves that he will not be standing in the autumn election (the second of 1974).

It is easy to detect in Read's novel the moral parable of a man who neglects his domestic duties, and who loses his life partner before coming to his senses. This dimension is complicated, however, by the political parallel, which serves to devalue Strickland's rediscovered political commitments as another attribute of his personal crisis. He comes to doubt his convictions,

wondering if his wife had been right that his political ambitions were the product of vanity and not idealism (pp. 242, 254). Here the personal and the political begin to diverge. Strickland certainly raises a number of issues that are central to the uncertain identity of socialism in the early 1970s and beyond. He wishes to challenge social inequality, but in the spirit of (Tory) Disraeli's one nation (p. 121); he wants a pragmatic policy of partial nationalization (p. 187); and, in general, he promotes a distinctly modern form of socialism based on 'enlightened self-interest' (p. 94). These convictions are made compatible with his celebration of the achievements of welfare-state socialism in the post-war years (p. 51), and an increasing unease that the benefits of the State are being 'expropriated and exploited' by a 'new bourgeoisie' which, for example, finds ways of monopolizing the best comprehensive schools (p. 150). In all of this there is a calm, retrospective summation of the claims of socialism, set against the fears of Left extremism that were prominent throughout the 1970s.

The conflict that eventually emerges between the personal and the political is perhaps best described as a tension between the 'case-by-case' pragmatism that Strickland acquires from his legal training, and a contrary desire for general principles of ethical behaviour. Indeed, Strickland's crisis is set in motion, in one sense, by the professional failure of the opening scene, where, to save himself some time, he wrongly advises an innocent man to plead guilty. Rather than the anticipated suspended sentence, six months' imprisonment results. Having been drawn into a criminal lifestyle, this unfortunate character (in the pay of Paula Gerrard) is later to murder Strickland's wife. The element of parable is, again, striking: the man who neglects the needs of others will reap what he sows. What the novel is really pushing towards is a combination of such a general ethical principle – respect for the other's needs – with the kind of flexible, negotiated politics that might (for example) produce a case-by-case assessment in the policy of nationalization. Read's implicit message is that such a combination is necessary for the proper unification of private and public realms, even though it seems impossible in a secular world bereft of moral principle, but governed by simplistic political sloganeering. Only the novel, Read suggests, supplies a way of holding the contrary impulses together in a meaningful tension.

The Post-Consensus Novel

A general loss of faith in post-war consensus politics became manifest in the 1970s, although this had been brewing for over a decade. During the period 1950–1970, despite the consumer boom, Britain lost its prosperous standing as a world power, and became one of Europe's less significant states. This is a

relative matter since the British economy continued to grow, but not quickly enough to keep pace with its European competitors. Economic recession – for example in the midst of the oil crisis of 1973–4 – compounded matters, as did a worsening of industrial relations through the 1970s.³¹ The agreement between political parties about the post-war style of government, with its commitment to state intervention, a managed economy, and a conciliatory approach to industrial relations, was ready to collapse.

The election of Margaret Thatcher as Prime Minister in 1979 signalled the definite end of the post-war consensus. The policies of Thatcherism attacked consensus politics on every front: her government stood for privatization and a free-market economy, and for the reform of trade union law. Backed by an authoritarian approach to resisting groups, and a monetarist squeeze on inflation, the Thatcher government ‘redefined’ British politics just as the point of impasse had been reached. It is, consequently, possible to overstate the importance of Thatcherism as a political philosophy, since the state of the nation, as well as developing global trends, facilitated its success. Nevertheless, the changes to British society and culture were dramatic, generating a spirit of either adventurous entrepreneurship or deplorable avarice, depending on your point of view. Novelists tended to take the latter view, lamenting the imminent collapse of the welfare state, and a new era of inequality and social division.

Martin Amis’s *Money* (1984), set in 1981–2, is a transatlantic satire of the emerging Reagan–Thatcher era and its mood of acquisitiveness. The protagonist’s name, John Self, proclaims the intention to make him representative of the period. He shuttles between London and New York in the process of making a movie, and leading a hedonistic lifestyle on apparently inexhaustible funds. Self is a gross figure, ‘addicted to the twentieth century’ (p. 91), and most particularly to alcohol, pornography, and his own misogynistic world-view. The defining aspect of the urban junk culture he inhabits is its vicious triumvirate of money–power–sex, the commodification of sexual relations along patriarchal lines, which also characterizes the culture more generally. This dehumanization is attached to the cities that fashion Self’s high-octane lifestyle. London, which in summertime is ‘unlovely’, an ‘old man with bad breath’ (p. 85), is a place of population density and psychological confusion, where the ongoing division of houses into smaller dwellings is replicated in the inhabitants who ‘are doubling also, dividing, splitting’ (p. 63). American cities, meanwhile, are credited by one character with ‘the worst, the biggest, the most desperate ratshit slums in the civilized world’ (p. 115).

Self is an apolitical figure, yet he is perceptive enough to carry the satirical load in his realization (gleaned from the tabloids) that unemployment is producing ‘social crack-up in the torched slums’, that ‘inner cities crackle

with the money chaos' (p. 66). The satire is directed at the condition of England principally, and specifically at the context of the 1981 inner-city riots (p. 155), which began in Brixton, but soon spread to other cities;³² but this political critique implies an alternative, that things need not be so, and signals the element of the book that takes it beyond an earnest satire, with a fixed anchor.

Insofar as *Money* is able to establish a moral position, this is achieved through the merging of Self and Amis, a process which involves the occasional projection of the writer's sensibility on to his vile creation, making him seem imprisoned and unable to realize the potential within: Self is an addict of the urban money culture from which he sometimes longs to escape (p. 123).

A very different fictional strategy, but no less inventive, is pursued by Margaret Drabble. At first glance the seriousness of *The Radiant Way* (1987), her most important political novel, can seem puzzlingly forced or artificial. In D. J. Taylor's reading, for example, Drabble's 'deliberate refraction of the national consciousness' can be read off from the list of topics that her characters discuss, producing 'an inventory rather than a piece of art'. Taylor is making a general complaint about the political fiction of the 1980s, based on his impression that it was newspaper headlines, rather than the observation of real life, that supplied the inspiration.³³

Drabble, certainly, is intrigued by the media representation of political life; but this is a substantive theme in her fiction, and so something more than an indication of sterile research. But Taylor's real charge stems from the 'stylisation' which 'was endemic to nearly every area of 1980s analysis'; with the consequence that novelists, like everyone else, betrayed a tenuous 'grip on political reality'.³⁴ If there is something stilted in *The Radiant Way*, perhaps this can be explained, following Taylor, as a product of a broader cultural drift towards surface explanations. However, a more convincing reason for the constrained earnestness of Drabble's novel may be the tension between the drive towards a panoramic social inclusiveness and the narrower focus on the middle-class lives of the three central female characters. Often with the novel, this kind of structural tension is productive rather than debilitating; and this is particularly true of *The Radiant Way*.

Despite the situation of (relative) privilege that all three protagonists share, their experiences allow the novel to range from middle- to working-class concerns (and to register the weakening of this distinction), and to encompass North and South. The novel treats major themes – poverty, education, crime, and punishment – as well as more sharply focused topics: the break-up of the traditional nuclear family; the violence of modern society; the problem of psychological disorder; and the possible consequences of satellite broadcasting. This is a vision of post-war society in which hopes and

aspirations are partially fulfilled, only to be deflated or devalued through the perceived social disintegration of the 1980s.

Liz Headleand, Alix Bowen, and Esther Breuer meet at Cambridge in the 1950s, forming an enduring bond of friendship. Their careers emerge in a new mood of national optimism, ‘the brave new world of Welfare State and County Scholarships, of equality for women’. The fate of these characters, the narrator informs us, ‘should . . . be in some sense at least exemplary’ (p. 88). Anticipating their university years the three articulate their aspirations:

‘I would like,’ said Liz, . . . ‘to make sense of things. To understand.’ By things, she meant herself. Or she thought she meant herself. ‘I would like,’ said Alix, ‘to change things.’ By things, she did not mean herself. Or thought she did not mean herself. ‘You reach too high,’ said Esther. ‘I wish to acquire interesting information. That is all.’ (p. 85)

The narrator leaves Esther’s more modest ambitions unmolested, but ironically undercuts the confused naivety of both Liz and Alix, in ways that prefigure their experiences. Liz, the successful psychotherapist with premises in Harley Street, has the most to lose at the outset, and indeed loses her husband, her stepchildren (technically), and her house. The circumstances of these losses provide an index of political change in a novel in which personal bonds and actions are inevitably conditioned by political affiliation and commitment. Her husband, Charles Headleand, is presented as a turncoat in all aspects of his life. Formerly a maker of ‘punchy social-conscience documentaries’, he has enjoyed a rise ‘through managerial and executive posts’, and is to abandon Liz, as the 1980s commence, for Lady Henrietta Latchett, who ‘closely resembled the dead wood to which, as a younger man, he had taken the axe’ (p. 118). Liz, the psychotherapist with the repressed history of childhood abuse, is shown to be ill-equipped to ‘make sense of things’, including herself.

For Alix Bowen, too, the 1980s bring disillusionment. Her work teaching English language and literature to female prisoners is undermined by her failure to change materially the lives of her pupils. Although poor, she and her husband Brian – the working man turned novelist and lecturer in Adult education (p. 105) – seem to represent a strong ideological pact. Alix, however, comes to feel that she has been fighting ‘the wrong battle’ (p. 337), that the socialist vision has been defeated, and this affirms the narrator’s arch premonition that her desire to change the world may be made opaque by a change in herself.

Only Esther, pursuing ‘interesting information’ in her career as art historian, seems to fulfil her ambitions. There are disillusionments for her as well, but in her relatively modest aspirations to be a brilliant lecturer with