'She finds a metaphor for her condition without defining it': Ann Quin and the British "Experimental" Novel of the Sixties

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Material Abstract

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PhD Thesis
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Literary historians have positioned British experimental prose of the mid-century – that of Ann Quin, Christine Brooke-Rose, Brigid Brophy, B.S. Johnson, Alan Burns and others – as an adjunct to debates surrounding the post-war re-emergence of realism. Critical responses to anxieties about the situation of the novel at mid-century (linked to a wider crisis of identity in post-war Britain), in surveys by Lodge, Bergonzi and Bradbury, tend to set up an opposition between a detached, obscure and aloof experimentalism (belatedly and exhaustedly modern, overshadowed by Joyce and Beckett) and a liberal and more humane, indigenous tradition of realist fiction. Contemporary surveys have largely reiterated this dichotomy by avoiding rigorous engagement with the specific formal techniques of this mid-century experimentalist writing, and have therefore failed to engage with its complex and often hidden legacies.

This study turns to the work of the neglected British writer, Ann Quin, as a focal point for an exploration of the experimental tendency within the fiction of the sixties. More broadly, it attempts to investigate the literary sixties as an important flashpoint in debates surrounding the role of the novel within British culture.

Focusing, in equal measure, upon the close reading of Quin's corpus, and the wider task of situating Quin within her many literary, intellectual and cultural contexts, this study seeks to position Quin within a "hidden" tradition of experimental writing in Britain. And, not only as an legatee of Joyce and Beckett, but also of a coterie of lesser-known (or "minor") later modernists, such as Patrick Hamilton, Elizabeth Bowen and Henry Green. This study also seeks to trace British experimental writing's under-theorised relationship with British postmodern writing.

Through the reassessment of the troubled fate of British experiment writing, this study also attempts to make a timely intervention within current debates about the forms and functions of fiction in Britain: the role of the novel in culture, for example, the issues of canonicity and concerns about the nurturing of innovative writing in Britain.

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Statement of Copyright

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Quinology: A Prologue

> Avoiding Ernest Hemingway, I detour instead towards Ann Quin. Disliking Hemingway, I detour instead towards Ann Quin. Avoiding Stein, I detour instead towards Ann Quin. Disliking Stein, I detour instead towards Ann Quin. Feeling Beckett is too obvious a point of reference, I detour instead towards Ann Quin. Despite ongoing rumours of a B.S. Johnson revival, I feel our attention could be more usefully directed towards Ann Quin.[1]

Why Ann Quin? Why expend a doctoral thesis' worth of work and words upon an irrevocably "minor" writer, whose star ascended briefly with the publication of her "promising" first novel, *Berg* (1964), but sunk, more-or-less without trace following her suicide in 1973, and, since then, has been glimpsed only on the lists of not-for-profit publishers of experimental fiction, or in the furthest, most esoteric corners of the literary blogosphere, or as something of a *cause célèbre* amongst only the most iconoclastically-minded literary critics of the mainstream press?

If, as Franco Moretti has argued, the 'history of the world is the slaughterhouse of the world… and of literature'[2] then why attempt to pluck Quin, in particular, out of what Frank Kermode calls the 'historical oubliette'[3] to which neglected novelists are consigned? And how, exactly, can the troubled fate of her literary legacy illuminate our contemporary situation? Today, to speak of an experimental novel, much less the possibility of a literary avant-garde, seems like a rather quaint anachronism, a literary Sealed Knot of an old culture war. An anti-tradition tradition of tradition-breaking is always dependent upon its other – the formal, structural and linguistic conventions of a unified tradition, which could no longer be said to govern a postmodern discourse that has been characterised by its "dispersal" and "dissemiNation". Moreover, the binaristic categorisations of formalist models of literary history, Deconstruction has taught us, conceal a hidden hierarchical structure of domination, which the critical strategy of refocusing attention upon the "minor" only serves to reiterate. Thus, the term "experimental" can only ever be a negative definition. Our Adornian paranoia

[1] Stewart Home, *69 Things to Do with a Dead Princess* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2003), 169.
[2] Franco Moretti, "The Slaughterhouse of Literature," *Modern Language Quarterly* 61, no. 1 (2000): 207.
[3] Frank Kermode, *Forms of Attention* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 6.

about recuperation, re-assimilation and commodification, together with later claims about the avant-garde's willing collusion with the culture industry, have undermined the very notion of such a space existing "beyond culture". To attempt to speculate upon an alternative version of literary history, then, is surely to indulge in counterfactuals which, in the attempt to "right" historical "wrongs", tend to reassert the very machinations of canonicity that they would seek to dispute.

The canon debates and reclamation projects of the eighties and nineties sought to interrogate the notion of literary value and to re-assess the ways in which it is bestowed upon works of art, attempting to challenge both the prejudice of the academy and the verdict of the market by integrating the "great unread" back into the canon. But despite their apparently inclusive intent, increasingly it is being acknowledged that in merely replacing one set of value judgements with another, such projects failed to challenge canonical perceptions of literary history. John Guillory, via Pierre Bourdieu's hugely influential work on cultural capital,[4] argues that canon reclamation projects fundamentally misconceive of the problem of canonicity. Attempts at canon revision, argues Guillory, rest upon a reductive 'hypothesis of exclusion'[5] that occludes the more urgent project of a thoroughgoing examination of the conditions of canonical practice within institutions.

Clearly, then, there are myriad pressing political and aesthetic issues at stake in this process of reclaiming "lost" authors: the possibility of reshaping hitherto unchallenged canonical perceptions of the post-war novel, the viability of creating a contemporary critical context for these works and the ethical challenges presented by authorial representation – those associated with the attempt to speak *on behalf* not only of times past but of an author more often noted, if noted at all, for the personal tragedy of her biography than for the value of her literary output. Moreover, all too often the apparent ethical impulse behind the attempt to elevate those "unjustly" forgotten by literary history might well belie the rather less ethically sound critical prospecting of new fields of enquiry and the claiming and naming of territories. The attempt to shine a critical torch upon those forgotten corners of literary history is a project embarked upon, ostensibly, in the service of intellectual generosity and curiosity. However, in practice, it can often be anything but.

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[4] First articulated in Bourdieu's essay "The Forms of Capital," in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, ed. J. Richardson (New York, NY: Greenwood, 1986), 241-258.
[5] John Guillory, *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), vii.

And why choose Quin rather than, say, Alan Burns or Brigid Brophy or Eva Figes or Robert Nye or any other of the cadre of British experimental novelists of the sixties who, much to the chagrin of many literary critics of the period, had their wicked way with the ancient and venerable form of the English novel – only to quickly recede from view, despite the era being one so often associated within the popular imagination with the toppling of traditions and the overturning of norms. After all, argues Moretti, the rehabilitation of neglected literary figures amounts, in essence, to a simple numbers game: 'Reducing the unreads from 99.5 to 99.0 per cent is no change at all'.[6] 'Who cares about Ann Quin?' asks *Guardian* literary critic, Lee Rourke, in a recent profile.[7] More appositely: why should we?

'[T]he majority of books', Moretti writes, 'disappear forever'.[8] Some, however, re-emerge in untimely fashion. In his magisterial study of canonicity, *Forms of Attention* (1985), Kermode argues that it is not the "immanent value" of a work of art that ensures its canonic survival, but the forms of critical attention we bring to it. And in this way, writes Kermode, 'those unusual objects which vanish from the "canon"' are sometimes recovered.[9] They come to be critically re-framed by changing historical circumstances and thereby to be studied and appreciated in new ways via the

> reappraisal of a past thought to have been undervalued by intervening generations, each partially blinded [in the de Man sense] by its own prejudices – each, that is, mistaking its custom for nature and its opinion for knowledge.[10]

In recent years, Quin and her colleagues have looked to be on the verge of having their moment. The debates surrounding the "end of postmodernism" have finally provoked a postmodern approach to literary history, one sceptical of orthodoxies, of fixed positions and periodisations. The master narrative of twentieth-century British fiction is being reappraised. There is a new acknowledgement that insofar as such a model ever could anywhere, the one that bisects the twentieth century more-or-less down the middle, that divides its paper assets between the categories of modernism

[6] Moretti, "Slaughterhouse," 209.
[7] Lee Rourke, "Who cares about Ann Quin?" *The Guardian*, May 8, 2007, accessed July 28, 2012, http://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2007/may/08/whocaresaboutannquin.
[8] Moretti, "Slaughterhouse," 207.
[9] Kermode, *Forms of Attention*, xiii.
[10] Ibid., 71.

and postmodernism and leaves that bit in the middle, that bit that doesn't quite fit, to languish in what Lyndsey Stonebridge and Marina Mackay have memorably called the 'back bedroom of literary scholarship',[11] has never comfortably applied in Britain. And as the role of the novel is renegotiated, the question *where do we come from?* – to borrow Paul Gauguin's catechism – is being asked just as urgently as *where are we going?* The narrativisations, genealogies and dynasties of British twentieth-century literary history are beginning to be recast, and the mid-century's 'critically awkward phase of twentieth-century writing'[12] has emerged as a key battleground.

With the waning of the postmodern project, the dialectical opposition between modernism and postmodernism is being remapped. There has been much speculation upon possible successors to postmodernism. In answer to the question "what happens next?" Stephen Burn has proposed 'post-postmodernism',[13] Garry Potter and José López, 'critical realism',[14] Nicolas Bourriaud, 'altermodernism'[15] and Mikhail Epstein has theorised a return to the concepts of modernity with the prefix *trans-*.[16] Others have attempted to articulate alternatives: for example, Bruno Latour's 'non-modernism',[17] or Timothy S. Murphy's 'amodernism'.[18] Elsewhere, the reassessment of modernist legacies has become the focus of many accounts. The hitherto widely accepted story of British twentieth-century fictional writing, in which modernism is succeeded by the post-war re-emergence of realism, which is, in turn, superannuated by postmodernism, is being reappraised. As Laura Marcus writes:

> The "realisms" of many mid-twentieth-century writers and beyond are beginning to look not only more interesting and more complex, but closer to the "modernisms" that they are conventionally held to have displaced.[19]

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[11] Ibid.
[12] Lyndsey Stonebridge and Marina MacKay, eds., "Introduction," *Fiction After Modernism: The Novel at Mid-Century* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 1.
[13] Stephen Burn, *Jonathan Franzen at the End of Postmodernism* (London: Continuum: 2008).
[14] José López and Garry Potter, eds., *After Postmodernism: An Introduction to Critical Realism* (London: Continuum, 2005).
[15] Nicholas Bourriaud, ed., *Altermodern: Tate Triennial* (London: Tate Publishing, 2009).
[16] Mikhail Epstein, *After the Future: The Paradoxes of Postmodernism and Contemporary Russian Culture* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995).
[17] Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).
[18] Timothy S. Murphy, *Wising Up the Marks: The Amodern William Burroughs* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997).
[19] Laura Marcus, "The Legacies of Modernism," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Modernist Novel*, ed. Morag Shiach (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007), 82.

Now, after the end of postmodernism, as the early years of the twenty-first century categorically fail to deliver anything like the extraordinary flowering of artistic energies that emerged during the first decades of the twentieth, writers and critics (and publishers, with all the entrepreneurial spirit of the original Moderns) are beginning to reinvest anew in modernism's achievements. Recent critical perspectives have sought to dispute what Marjorie Perloff calls 'straw man modernism',[20] a caricature which, in Britain, comprised an elite company of Bloomsbury intellectuals presided over by T.S. Eliot, desperately clinging to their 'reactionary "grand narratives" of social and psychic order'.[21] That stereotype of modernism as a toothless old crone comfortably installed, decades before, at the centre of Establishment good taste and none-too-threatening when busied with manifesting fevered daydreams of some prelapsarian Edwardian past – but all too susceptible to fifth columnist tendencies – although not easily shifted, finally seems to be ebbing away. The 'great divide' between high art and mass culture that had been employed to distinguish modernist discourse against its "anything goes" successor is being reappraised, with new critical interest in pulp modernism, late modernism, intermodernism, low modernism, middlebrow modernism and modernism's engagement with the popular.[22] These new accounts have sought to attest to the political and aesthetic diversity of a plurality and continuity of *modernisms*.

Contemporary writers too have increasingly returned to modernist novels as, Marcus writes, 'spaces in and through which questions of art, life and value can be reposed and reconfigured'.[23] Novels like Ian McEwan's *Atonement* (2001), Alan Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty* (2004) and Zadie Smith's *On Beauty* (2005) (and, one might add, Sarah Waters' *The Nightwatch* [2006]), Marcus argues, give the

[20] Marjorie Perloff, *Radical Artifice: Writing Poetry in the Age of Media* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2004), 243n.
[21] Peter Nicholls, *Modernisms: A Literary Guide* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995), vii.
[22] The categorisation and periodisation of modernism has of late been renegotiated and reassessed in books including Tyrus Miller's *Late Modernism: Politics, Fiction, and the Arts Between the World Wars* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999), which seeks to explore the influence of mass culture upon the late modernism of the interwar years, Kristen Bluemel's *Intermodernism: Literary Culture in Mid-twentieth-century Britain* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), which focuses upon the specificity of modernism between the two world wars. Similarly, Marina Mackay's *Modernism and World War II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) seeks to attest to the significance of a modernist phase situated after modernism is generally assumed to have ended and Alissa G. Karl's *Modernism and the Marketplace* (London: Routledge, 2009) challenges existing preconceptions about the ambivalent relationship between modernist art and commercial cultures.
[23] Marcus, "Legacies," 94.

realist flesh of plot, character and setting to the skeleton of a modernist inheritance (Virginia Woolf, Henry James, E.M. Forster and Henry Green respectively) in order to pose ethical questions about the redemptive power of art in a commodified world and to articulate a bedraggled, knowing and hard-won humanism. Even Ian McEwan, who notoriously declared against the 'dead hand of modernism'[24] – quite as if, the novelist China Miéville has quipped, 'the dominant literary mode in post-war England was Steinian experimentation or some Albion Oulipo'[25] – has written a modernist novel, if only, in *Atonement*, to rewrite modernism for its dereliction of duty and ethical failings.

McEwan's misgivings sound the tenor of the reinvention of modernism, twenty-first-century-style. Despite this new willingness to re-engage with its legacies, modernism has tended to be critically rehabilitated on the very same terms as the old prejudices. This is a modernism without the menaces, shorn of the dandified aestheticism that is still, even now, frequently thought to belie a questionable politics and a moral compass gone awry. Jed Esty's influential account of late modernism in his *A Shrinking Island* (2004), for example, seeks to refocus critical attention upon an area of literary history that has suffered neglect, he argues, due to an 'intuitive belief'[26] amongst the critical establishment that the now pervasive declinist thesis about twentieth-century English letters 'can be correlated to or even explained'[27] by the collapse of British imperial power. 'Yet few would argue that geopolitical power corresponds in a predictable way to literary creativity',[28] he rightly comments. But by tethering the scope and the preoccupations of the novel to shrinking Britain's post-imperial anxieties, Esty's attempt to attest to the vitality and the continuity of modernist literary practice in Britain after an artificial twilight imposed by the strictures of periodisation becomes a kind of literary re-nationalisation project, wherein the rehabilitation of neglected late modern tendencies comes at the expense of submerging its cosmopolitanism, the persistence of its innovative impulse, the

[24] Zadie Smith, "Interview with Ian McEwan," *The Believer* 26 (August 2005), accessed July 25, 2011 http://www.believermag.com/issues/200508/?read=interview_mcewan.
[25] China Miéville, "The Future of the Novel," *The Guardian*, August 21, 2012, accessed August 22, 2012, http://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/aug/21/china-mieville-the-future-of-the-novel.
[26] Jed Esty, *A Shrinking Island: Modernism and National Culture in England* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), 1.
[27] Ibid.
[28] Ibid.

ways in which its interests continued to lay far beyond the encroaching boundaries of an empire.

The late modernism of, for example, Henry Green, Elizabeth Bowen, William Sansom, Rayner Heppenstall, Elizabeth Taylor, Ivy Compton Burnett and others, a tendency which stretched well into the fifties and beyond, even as it registered Britain's new diminished context did so in ways that signal not the terminus of modernist forms of knowledge and expression, but their transformation and renewal. Esty's conceptualisation of "the late modern" as an older generation of literary modernists (Woolf, Eliot, E.M. Forster and Mary Butts) 'caught in the act of becoming minor'[29] – which itself draws upon Hugh Kenner's earlier lament for a 'sinking island' after the demise of literary modernism[30] – is in fact only one aspect of British modernism's myriad legacies. And by focusing exclusively upon it as the official coda to the official story of the modernist project in Britain, Esty's hugely influential account has elevated a revision of modernism which domesticates that most undomesticatable of art. Far from disturbing the critical intuitions it seeks to question, *A Shrinking Island* actually succeeds in reasserting the metaphysical relationship posited between literature and "the national" in Britain: for example, the assumption that literary innovation in Britain is somehow inextricably wed to cultural degeneration and the identification of the new with a creeping cosmopolitanism that threatens to contaminate the local produce.

For others, however, modernism is being returned to as an unfinished project, as a fundamental turning point that British culture, ostrich-like as ever, seems to have missed. More recently, a rather different re-engagement with the idea of literary modernism has begun to emerge; one that seeks not to re-inscribe the recognisable tropes of modernism as a periodised aesthetic movement, or as an ever-looser aggregate of formal and linguistic conventions, but to invest anew in more diffuse – and more slippery – concepts of literary modernity. To ignore the avant-garde, writes novelist and critic Tom McCarthy, whose own burgeoning literary success is testament to a renewed appetite for innovation, 'is the equivalent of ignoring Darwin.'[31] 'Are we ready for a new generation of experimental fiction?' asks Rourke,

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[29] Ibid.
[30] Hugh Kenner, *A Sinking Island: The Modern English Writers* (New York, NY: Knopf, 1988).
[31] James Purdon, "Tom McCarthy: 'To ignore the avant garde is akin to ignoring Darwin'," *The Observer*, August 1, 2010, accessed February 14, 2011, http://www.theguardian.com/books/2010/aug/01/tom-mccarthy-c-james-purdon.

'I certainly am'.[32] So, too, is Gabriel Josipovici, whose *kulturpessimismus* polemic, *What Ever Happened to Modernism?* (2010) condemns the buttoned-up Englishry of a literary scene perceived as dreary and anecdotal, unable to distinguish between reality and *l'effet de réel*, its fictions notable only for their authors' skill in 'concealing the joints'.[33] The blame for the impoverishment of contemporary writing is, for Josipovici, to be laid with a blinkered English literary establishment that has consistently misunderstood the modernist project, and thereby supressed its legacies:

> Modernism needs to be understood in a completely different way, as the coming into awareness by art of its precarious status and responsibilities, and therefore as something that will, from now on, always be with us.[34]

A more thoroughgoing definition of the characteristics of Josipovici's own "great tradition" – which spans roughly from Sophocles to Alain Robbe-Grillet – is rather difficult to locate. However, his calls for a kind of writing that knows its limits, that recognises what Josipovici calls its 'arbitrariness', and, in this way, might discover what it is that makes it meaningful, why it *matters*, speaks very directly to our contemporary moment.

The legator of this emergent contemporary sensibility is less the poet-fencer Baudelaire and more the dog-tired Samuel Beckett, the emblematic figure of the writer who is 'weary of puny exploits, weary of pretending to be able, of being able, of doing a little better the same old thing, of going a little further along a dreary road'.[35] This is a modernism denuded of its metaphysical ambitions, stripped of all pretentions about literature's truth-telling capacity. In an era of simulacrum-anxiety, such a sensibility proposes a mode of writing that is, as Beckett famously declares, *necessary* but not *sufficient*. And it suggests that literary innovation and experimentation are the means by which literature might grasp the nettle of its new provisional and yet autonomous role within culture. McCarthy finds in the figure of Melville's Bartleby an appropriate avatar for the age. His review of David Foster

[32] Lee Rourke, "The return of British avant garde fiction," *The Guardian*, July 14, 2008, accessed October 27, 2009, http://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2008/jul/14/post27.
[33] Gabriel Josipovici, *What Ever Happened to Modernism?* (London: Yale University Press, 2010), 11.
[34] Ibid.
[35] Samuel Beckett, "Three Dialogues," in Samuel Beckett, *Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment*, ed. Ruby Cohn (London: John Calder, 1983), 142.

Wallace's posthumously-published unfinished final novel, *The Pale King*, situates the late American novelist as a legatee of this new sensibility. The 'melancholy impasse' of the novel, writes McCarthy, inheres in the writer who, like Bartleby, 'cannot will himself to complete the act of writing':[36]

> This is the inheritance that Wallace earnestly, and perhaps fatally, grappled with. The outcome was as brilliant as it was sad – and the battle is the right one to engage in.[37]

In recent years, Quin's literary peer, the British experimental novelist B.S. Johnson, for his dogged, even belligerent, commitment to fictional innovation, has emerged as an unlikely anti-hero of this new sensibility. The attempt to rehabilitate Johnson, who, coincidentally, took his own life the same year as Quin, in 1973, has both within the academy and beyond become something of a cottage industry. There is a growing field of Johnson studies and the writer, who was once the self-styled *bête noire* of the literary establishment, has gained the patronage of the great and the good of contemporary British letters, including his biographer, Jonathan Coe, alongside Zadie Smith, Will Self, Hari Kunzru and Scarlett Thomas, amongst others. Picador have republished the lion's share of his novels, and accompanying critical commentaries have appeared, including the essay collection *Re-reading B. S. Johnson* (2007), edited by Glyn White and Philip Tew, and Philip Tew's monograph, *B. S. Johnson: A Critical Reading* (2001). Since his suicide, Johnson had been infrequently anthologised and occasionally name-checked as, Glyn White writes, 'emblematic of a period representative of the spirit of protest against the status quo in British fiction in the sixties and early 1970s'.[38] In recent years, however, he has become iconic.

Does the rediscovery of Johnson, then, signal a renewed and rigorous critical engagement with the experimental novel that might release him and his peers from their 'historical oubliette' and begin to demolish fossilised assumptions about experimental writing in Britain? The signs are no. Coe, in the introduction to his

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[36] Tom McCarthy, "David Foster Wallace: The Last Audit," *New York Times*, April 14, 2011, accessed July 3, 2011, http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/17/books/review/book-review-the-pale-king-by-david-foster-wallace.html.
[37] Ibid.
[38] Glyn White, *Reading the Graphic Surface: The Presence of the Book in Prose Fiction* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), 84.

critically-acclaimed literary biography, *Like a Fiery Elephant: The Story of B.S. Johnson* (2004), acknowledges the apparent paradox of a 'novelist who loves (traditional) novels writing the biography of a novelist who seemed to hate them'.[39] In the end, it is, Coe decides – demonstrating the unquestioning and incoherent reverence towards the metaphysical value of the novel form that is characteristic of a certain strain of British literary criticism – Johnson's faith in the novel, as the 'heretic who is closer to God than the regular, unquestioning churchgoer',[40] that reconciles the biographer to his subject. Johnson's technique, Coe comments, challenges 'our most fundamental beliefs' in the 'moral integrity of "fiction"' and the 'usefulness of storytelling' and, as such, these 'literary heresies' vigorously attest to the value of novels. [41] But they do not, apparently, attest to the value of literary experimentation in and of itself, which, for Coe, has a 'quality of QED'[42]. What makes Johnson 'one of [Coe's] greatest literary heroes' is the 'humanity that shines through even his most rigorous experiments'.[43] Here, again, are those old assumptions. "Humanity" and "experimentation", for Coe, are strictly mutually exclusive qualities. Johnson is deserving of rehabilitation on account of his residual humanism *in spite of* his apparently abhorrent creed for the ways in which his experimental effects fail to effectively conceal his warm, realist heart. Even the biography's own tentative literary experimentation – its fragmentary form, which might suggest that Coe concurs with Johnson's claim that 'life is chaotic, fluid, random; it leaves myriads of ends untied untidily'[44] – is undercut by a coda that seeks to tie up those loose ends, that attempts to explain the 'something inexplicable' about Johnson's suicide. His experimental impulse is for Coe Johnson's fatal flaw, one *in spite of which* Johnson is to be recovered. Working against the grain of Johnson's own critical and fictional writing, then, Coe radically revises Johnson's life and work in order to reassert the old polarities and prejudices about experimental writing in Britain.

The twenty-first-century modernist impulse has begun to yield novels such as McCarthy's *C* (2010) and Will Self's *Umbrella* (2012), for example, which have been breathlessly praised as a kind of modernism *après la lettre*. Upon the publication of Self's novel, the author confessed that despite his previous excursions into the

[39] Jonathan Coe, *Like a Fiery Elephant: The Story of B.S. Johnson* (London: Picador, 2004), 7.
[40] Ibid., 454.
[41] Ibid.
[42] Ibid., 452.
[43] Ibid., 7.
[44] Ibid., 153.

demotic and the grotesque, he'd really always been a closet modernist.[45] *Umbrella*, he explains, with its four hundred pages of unbroken stream-of-consciousness prose, is the book he wanted to write all along. Self's belated coming out is a measure of the extent to which the prejudices that were rife amongst modernism's first- and second-generation legatees – C. P. Snow, Kingsley Amis, the Movement poets et al. – had persisted well into the closing decades of the twentieth century. As late as 1992, John Carey's *The Intellectuals and the Masses* conspiracy-theorised about the Modern's apparent systematic and pre-meditated attack on mass culture.[46] McCarthy's novels, meanwhile, assert the impossibility of evading the towering legacies of modernism, soaked as they are in allusions to Freud's the Wolfman, Alain Robbe-Grillet's *Jealousy*, Robert Musil's *The Man Without Qualities*, Futurism, Dadaism and Oulipo, for example. However, about the twenty-first-century modernism of Self and of McCarthy there is something of the Sealed Knot. For all their declarations and their (self-consciously) modernist effects, these are not modernist novels as such – and how could they be? – but novels *about* modernism. They might eschew McEwan et al.'s traditionalist frame of reference, swapping Woolf and Eliot for a fuller engagement with European high modernism and the avant-garde, but their "modernist novels" remain re-inscriptions of modernism. Ones that adopt its pre-existing codes, tropes and conventions for the sake of nostalgia – which, it bears repeating, doth not modernism make. The troubled category of literary modernism, ever loose to the point of unwieldy, now seems to mean simply a better class (that is, borrowed from the *isms* of the European avant-garde) of literary allusion. All too often, it is employed merely as a signifier of solidity, of seriousness, of authenticity or of difficulty.

For Josipovici, what has been crucially ignored by British book culture are the ways in which modernism represents the 'coming into awareness by art of its precarious status and responsibilities' and will therefore 'from now on, always be with us'.[47] The problem is that, to a certain extent, it always *has*. The by now ritualised disavowal of the new in British fiction by Josipovici, McCarthy and co. tends to rely upon the same bowdlerised version of literary history as their sworn

[45] Will Self, "Modernism and Me," *The Guardian*, August 3, 2012, accessed August 5, 2012, http://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/aug/03/will-self-modernism-and-me.
[46] John Carey, *The Intellectuals and the Masses: Pride and Prejudice Among the Literary Intelligentsia, 1880-1939* (London: Faber, 1992).
[47] Josipovici, *Modernism*, 11.

adversaries. And by merely reiterating the "unjust" lore of literary history, they cast the experimental writer as a piously lachrymose figure, burdened by the "tragic flaw" of their 'potentially fatal' inheritance, engaged in a foolhardy yet heroic defence of an ailing art form – not to mention the problematic ways in which they tend to reiterate traditional associations between artistic outsiderdom and suicidal tendencies, quite as if unbearable emotional disturbance is naturally, even rightly, the price exacted for uncommon artistic creativity. Moreover, their romantic vision of the wearied writer, with its connotations of duty and commitment, resonates rather uncannily with the Eliot-Leavis orthodoxy's creed of the moral aesthetic.

Like Stewart Home, then, from whose self-consciously Quin-citing novel, *69 Things to Do with a Dead Princess* (2002), the epigraph to this section is borrowed, in this thesis I turn to Quin in order to broaden the critical focus beyond Johnson, whose elevation as the tragic icon of British experimental writing – the exception that proves the rule of British literary history – has tended to preclude the more rigorous and thorough engagement with this tendency. Equally, within critical accounts of the legacies of modernist experiment, Beckett has tended to overshadow his lesser-known counterparts upon whom, by attempting to carve out a literary and cultural context for Quin in this study, I want to refocus attention. Hence, notably he too makes only a fleeting appearance here.

But, besides this, and more importantly, by detouring towards Quin I will attempt to make a timely intervention in current debates about the forms and functions of fiction. Dominic Head has proposed that the 'perennial debate about the health of the novel in Britain'[48] has been sustained by the blind spots in twentieth-century literary history, that twenty-first-century British fiction lacks an anxiety of influence, an historical awareness of its own precedents. Without a 'proper sense of historical continuity',[49] Head writes, the British contemporary novel has been left to 'wither on the vine'[50]. This study, via the reassessment of Quin's fictional oeuvre, will seek to refocus critical attention upon a period of fictional innovation in the sixties which, despite the recent attempts to reshuffle literary history, has largely remained consigned to that 'back bedroom'. Whilst the thirties, forties and fifties have in recent years been subject to renewed critical attention, the splendid isolation of the

[48] Dominic Head, *The State of the Novel: Britain and Beyond* (London: Blackwell, 2008), 11.
[49] Ibid.
[50] Ibid., 12.

innovative writing of the sixties has remained broadly unrelieved. Picador, Dalkey Archive Press and Carcanet have republished significant numbers of these novels. But accompanying critical commentaries have often sought to place them within an already-constituted canon, without recognising fully the ways in which such writing challenges established canonical premises. Thus the British experimental novel has remained an aberrant appendage tacked onto the master narrative of literary history. By returning to the sixties, to re-examine their cultural and intellectual climate, this study will attempt to investigate the historical forces that have precipitated its marginalisation and seek to attest to its significance: for the ways in which by developing and modifying the achievements of modernism, whilst self-consciously warning against the easy consolations of postmodernism, the novels of this tendency speculate upon a "hidden" history of the development of the novel in the late twentieth century and beyond.

Against the recent critical elevation of these aesthetically and theoretically problematic historical revisions and reinventions of modernism, this study will attempt to develop an alternative account of the legacies of modernism and modernist experimentation. I have argued that as surety of the mode's moral and aesthetic integrity, in response to pre-existing claims about its "decadence", critics and authors have sought to assert a meek and mild version of modernism, or else situate it as in the main a spiritually and geographically exilic phenomenon which, in its dotage, via an older generation of modernist writers, returned "home" and went gently into the good night, before being categorically snuffed out by World War II. By exploring its influence upon Quin, in part this study will attempt to recast the story of British modernism. Against, on the one hand, Josipovici, McCarthy et al.'s elegies for modernism as the great lost cause of twentieth-century literary history and, on the other, those accounts that, as the aforementioned commentators rightly point out, persistently neglect the on-going influence of a vital and innovative mode of modernist literary practice in Britain, I will explore the ways in which Quin and others engage with, navigate and transform the legacies of modernism. This study will attempt to situate Quin in relation to a lineage of the late-modern, after-modern, not-quite-post-modern writers, such as Elizabeth Bowen, Henry Green, William Sansom, Rayner Heppenstall, Muriel Spark, Iris Murdoch and others who occupy a peculiar literary no man's land between, on the one hand, what is perceived as a tenor of late modernism thought to be too quirky to categorise or merely the outlying death throes

of modernism proper and, on the other, an even more critically "awkward" mode of fifties and sixties writing in which authors like Spark and Murdoch have tended to be situated as the – albeit brilliantly singular – adjuncts to a dominant mode of post-war realism. And in this way, a different picture of the experimental writer will emerge: not as a tragically out-of-time and fatally outlying figure, whose dissembling of the novel form parallels the dissembling of their self, a kind of human sacrifice to the effort in vain to *make art count*. But one working within an – albeit often "hidden" – tradition who sought not to martyr themselves for their art, but who was driven by the rich, generative possibilities of an art that was necessary but not sufficient, a literature not of exhaustion, to use the term popularised during the time in an eponymous essay by the American writer, John Barth, but as Barth's less remembered amendment to his earlier article has it, a 'literature of replenishment'.[51]

This study's methodology will attempt to draw together the critical practices of close reading and narratological analysis with the exploration of cultural, intellectual and literary history. And as such, it represents not only a kind of apologia for Quin, but also for a *way of criticism*: an approach to the literary object of study that seeks to re-integrate textual analysis, with theoretical engagement, with the exploration of historical contexts. On the one hand, by re-stitching and re-situating Quin's work back into its cultural contexts, I seek to circumvent the theoretical approach of the literary criticism that was pre-dominant within the academy after the importation of continental theory in the mid-to-late seventies – and to which literary critics still frequently make recourse when attempting to engage with "difficult" or "unreadable" experimental texts: where the literary work is "grafted on" as a textual exemplar of the theoretical insights of Deleuze, of Derrida, or of Levinas, for example. By situating experimental writing as mere grist to the mill of "Theory" this ahistorical approach neglects to account for the ways in which the work of fiction participates reciprocally in the contexts within which it was (and continues to be) written and read and, in this way, simply serves to reiterate the old misconceptions about the "marginality" of experimental writing. And by overburdening the literary work with obligations to the theory, this approach enacts a kind of critical confirmation bias, which consistently draws the text towards the theory and not the theory towards the text, at the expense of fully and sensitively engaging with the formal and aesthetic

[51] John Barth, "The Literature of Replenishment," in *The Friday Book: Essays and Other Non-Fiction* (London: John Hopkins University Press, 1984), 193.

dimensions of fiction. Moreover, it asserts an implicit hierarchy of knowledge which privileges theory over fiction, and in which it invariably falls to the theory to assimilate the fiction into the cultural master text. And in doing so, these critical accounts fail to acknowledge how the novel tradition, with its complex mediations between referential and aesthetic functions, is an inherently sceptical mode that is 'from the very first self-conscious'[52]. More specifically, such accounts fail to recognise the ways in which theoretical practice, especially in Britain, given the liberal temper of Britain's intellectual tradition, has long been the domain of the novel. Iris Murdoch notes, in her 1961 essay "Against Dryness", that prose fiction has taken on the tasks of philosophy as the 'guide and the mirror of its age'.[53] These theory-heavy accounts neglect the ways in which throughout its history the novel in Britain has been employed to intuit and work through systems of knowledge that elsewhere would belong to other fields of culture.

On the other hand, my methodology is a response to the more recent critical approaches of the explicitly political new historicism and cultural materialism of the eighties (seen in the work of Stephen Greenblatt, Louis Montrose, Peter Stallybrass, Alan Sinfield and Catherine Belsey, for example) and the more socially-preoccupied "new new historicism" (of, for example, Joy Wiltenberg, Frances E. Doran and Ann Jensen Adams) that superseded it during the nineties. Itself a reaction to the predominance of theory, these approaches sought variously to refocus critical attention upon the ordinary, the familiar, the low – that which de Certeau influentially designates as 'the everyday'[54] – by employing a rubric of objects and practices and privileging anecdotes over schemata. This critical tendency has precipitated a rash of readings peculiarly preoccupied with, for example, luggage, coins, mirrors and furniture, deploying these goods as an optic through which to gain access to their cotemporal context. But – leaving aside the critiques of their lack of historical rigor and disciplinary specialism that this school of literary criticism has met with, and the objection sustained by Marxist thinkers to their lack of attention to the material conditions in which these objects were produced and therefore the class tensions

[52] Patricia Waugh, "Postmodern Fiction and the Rise of Critical Theory," in *A Companion to the British and Irish Novel 1945-2000*, ed. B.W. Schaffer (London: Blackwell, 2011), 93.
[53] Iris Murdoch, "Against Dryness," in *The Novel Today: Contemporary Writers on Modern Fiction*, ed. Malcolm Bradbury (London: Fontana, 1977), 23.
[54] Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988).

they embody[55] – in their efforts to dismantle cultural hierarchy these accounts tend to flatten out the history of cultural practices and representations. And in doing so, the novel becomes just one more historical phenomenon amongst many, its singularity, and the complex mediations between the novel and the social world, submerged.

The question remains: why Quin? As a literary figure of the sixties, I argue, her credentials were unimpeachable. Chapter One of this study records her myriad connections and affiliations amongst the great and the good of British, European and American countercultural and avant-garde scenes. But, more importantly, Quin's novelistic oeuvre seems to lend itself to the remapping of the literary sixties, stretching, as it does, from the British noir, Patrick Hamilton-esque fiction of the absurd of *Berg* (1964), her well-received debut, to the supremely "texty", avant-pop, *Tripticks* (1971), a Burroughsian romp through the furthest reaches of mediatised man, via the late modernist and *nouveau roman* inflected *Three* (1966), a self-conscious mediation upon the nature of fiction and *Passages* (1969), a Durrellian journey-without-maps that presses the possibilities of liberation. As a bridge across the no-man's land of mid-century fiction, from the world of Woolf and Lawrence, to that of William Burroughs and Kathy Acker, and from the preoccupations of the Angry Young Men, to those of the *nouveaux romanciers*, in this study, Quin's scant corpus provides a focal point around which to corral the writing, the thought and the events of the sixties. This study returns to these four novels, together with around a dozen short stories and occasional pieces,[56] to explore their resonances with the work of both fellow experimental novelists such as Christine Brooke-Rose, Brigid Brophy and Alan Burns, and with those more mainstream writers of the sixties whose literary-historical fate has been luckier: Lessing, Muriel Spark, Iris Murdoch, John Fowles and Lawrence Durrell, amongst others. I also look across the channel, to examine the influence upon Quin of the Sadeian tradition of French writing and the *nouveau roman*, both of which are frequently pinpointed as likely progenitors for Quin's work but the complexities of these lines of transmission between French and British writing and, I argue, the *reciprocal* nature of this relationship, seldom

[55] For a précis of the recent debates surrounding the political efficacy of these approaches see Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt, *Practicing New Historicism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001) and John Brannigan, *New Historicism and Cultural Materialism* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1998), amongst others.

[56] Appendix I provides a bibliography of Quin's works.

interrogated. Rooting further into the back bedroom of British fiction, I attempt to develop a literary lineage for the experimental writing of the mid-century amongst the work of Elizabeth Bowen, William Sansom, Henry Green, Ivy Compton Burnett and others and attest to the existence of a native version of experiment which draws sustenance from modernism but persists long after its generally agreed-upon terminus: the literary watershed of World War II.

From the close readings of these texts and their literary contexts, my discussion branches out to examine the work of Quin and her coterie in dialogue both with their social world and with the thought of the period. Within this study, I want to reorient the problematic relation between the novel and history, which perceives a necessary connection between the luminosity of the events of history and the value of artistic representation, which has tended to govern existing literary-historical accounts of twentieth-century fiction. Eschewing an approach that is more attuned to the vagaries of historical periodisation, location and positioning than to the practice of writing itself – and with the caveat that adversity and dissonance are surely the meat and bread of artistic energies – I want to more rigorously interrogate the ways in which the novels of the period attempted to navigate the pressing questions raised by the history and the thought of the period: those of truth, identity, gender, contingency, faith and meaning.

Quin the Sorceress: A Biographical Disclaimer

She was striking, pale, brilliant red lipstick on full lips, jet black hair about her shoulders in a black page boy, sharp, Irish features and the body of a voluptuous young model. I don't know what her story was with Bob, but at a picnic in a green square with eight or nine guests she took the can of beer in her hand and from about four feet away on the grass, hurled it at him. Her aim was off, and it struck Michael Hamburger instead. I can still hear Hamburger's high, thin voice, incredulous, asking, "What did I do?"[1]

She can be, variously, the expected demure young lady, or else the barstool swinging drunken broad. It doesn't really seem to matter that much to her. She is an age hard to determine. Very young, quite probably, five or six, in her own mind, but also markedly old, looking down on it, whatever, some other persons or circumstances, from that abstract wiseness.[2]

Bob was reading with Ted Hughes and, I think Auden at that grand theatre by the Thames, Festival Hall, during that season's poetry festival. Ann and I for some reason came late… The reading had begun and… [w]e were asked not to push into the hall until applause signalled that one of the poets had concluded and another was about to begin. There were huge nickel chrome cuspidors filled with sand, of a kind that mostly harboured cigarette butts but were originally spittoons. As the foyer's leather doors, studded with brass nails, closed leaving us alone, Ann suddenly hoisted herself up on one of these spittoons, lifted her dress and "went to the bathroom." I looked away – afraid we were going to be hauled off to the Tower. The applause broke out before anyone else joined us and we pushed into the hall to hear Bob read. As I glanced back, I saw two long turds sitting in the sand.[3]

[1] Mark Jay Mirsky, "Creeley," *Conjunctions*, April 5, 2005, accessed September 9, 2013, http://www.conjunctions.com/creeleytribute.htm
[2] Robert Creeley, "Mabel, A Story," *Mabel, A Story & Other Prose* (London: Marion Boyars, 1976), 119.
[3] Mark Jay Mirsky, *Creeley*.

As the anecdotes above attest, Ann Quin presents the very juiciest of biographical subjects. In the profiles of her that appeared within the literary press at the time, one can almost detect the lascivious licking of literary journalists' stiff upper lips when confronted with this "Miss Quin" with her shapely legs and her propensity for candid self-reflection upon her peripatetic lifestyle, unconventional relationships, prolific drug use and episodic mental illness. To paraphrase her contemporary Christine Brooke-Rose's wittily furious essay "Illiterations": to be an experimental author is one thing, but to be British, and not only British but a woman, and not only a woman, but working class, is quite another.[4] For Brooke-Rose, the three words *experimental woman writer* presented three difficulties, a *trilemma*. Quin, however, confronted rather more.

Ann Quin was born in Brighton in 1936, the only daughter of unmarried parents – her mother, Ann Reid, a Scot and her father, Nicholas Montague, a sometime opera singer, Irish – who separated soon after she was born. A non-Catholic, she was educated for eight years at the Convent of the Blessed Sacrament, East Sussex, a period she recounts in the memoir "Leaving School – XI", where, she writes, her mother hoped she might 'be brought up 'a lady'.[5] In the event, Quin was more interested, she comments, in speculating upon 'the colour of Mademoiselle's bloomers', 'what the nuns wore in bed' and whether 'they stripped completely for a bath' than learning 'the coal fields… [t]he Corn Law… [a]mo, amas, amat [and] "Ode to a Nightingale" off by heart.'[6] That said, convent school seems to have bestowed upon Quin a fervent adolescent religiosity, although one, typically, more imaginatively attuned to Sadeian notions of natural depravity and transcendence through suffering than the dogmas of divine purity: 'A ritualistic culture that gave me a conscience. A death wish and a sense of sin. Also a great lust to find out, experience what evil really was.'[7] The cosmography of Catholic doctrine had a powerful influence upon Quin's burgeoning metaphysical imagination. She certainly had no truck with heaven and hell but identified deeply with the idea of Limbo, that border land of the afterlife reserved for those who die without sin but whose original sin has not been baptised away, where souls are suspended in

[4] Christine Brooke-Rose, "Illiterations," *Stories, Theories and Things* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 250.
[5] Quin, Ann. "Leaving School – XI." *London Magazine* 4 (July 1966), 63.
[6] Ibid., 64
[7] Ibid., 63

oblivion, debarred both from the punishments of hell and the eternal existence with God in heaven. 'Not being baptized, that was where my soul, uncleansed from Original Sin, would end up, I believed in that then', she writes.[8] In both writing and in life Quin was to occupy this liminal region, a place beyond the quotidian, but from whence it is impossible to ascend. She is, perhaps, the chronicler *par excellence* of the non-place of earthly oblivion. Her fictions measure, and then press in vain against, the boundaries of the mundane world. They are peopled with locked-in characters making fruitless attempts to ward off the void of immanence by, for example, constructing elaborate oedipal plots of self-mastery (*Berg*), building cathedrals of bourgeois materialism (*Three*), attempting to invoke divine madness (*Passages*), or committing existential crimes of passion (*Tripticks*) who are finally consigned to an oblivion that is inexorable, inescapable, that simply revolves in perpetuity. *Berg* abandons its protagonist to bed-sitting extinction, the admonishments of his unwillingly-taken Jocasta ringing in his ears. We leave Ruth and Leonard, the protagonists of *Three*, to the death-in-life of middle-class mediocrity with its cover blown. *Passages* is a quest that is finally without an object but equally '[n]o country we can return to'.[9] *Tripticks* closes with its aphasiac protagonist no longer even able to voice his protest.

Quin was a woman of the sixties who eschewed both of the dual feminine roles – the equally oppressive options of becoming a domestic maven and thereby sacrificing one's wider aspirations or of becoming a career-oriented professional in the male-dominated world of work – that those of her gender found themselves so impossibly torn between during the era. The first she was categorically unpredisposed to, and the second, as a non-university educated working class woman, was out of reach. She, as was so often her wont, chose a third: that of the "gonzo" novelist, creating her own biographical picaresque of writing, journeying and free-loving across Europe and America, living hand to mouth by the grace and favour of her publisher's advances, Arts Council grants and university fellowships.

Few British writers of the period were so "tuned in" to the countercultural demi-monde of the sixties in both Britain and America. Quin was part of a remarkable stable of authors published, or more properly, patronised, in the old-fashioned sense of providing financial support on the *never never* that was only ever

[8] Ibid., 63.
[9] Ann Quin, *Passages* (Champaign, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 2003), 112.

loosely related to sales, and a vaguer kind of emotional nurturing, intellectual sympathy and cultural steering, by John Calder and Marion Boyars of the celebrated publishing house, Calder and Boyars. During the sixties their list included translated classics by Chekov, Goethe and Zola alongside banned books by American writers like Henry Miller and William Burroughs, the "new novels" of *nouveaux romanciers* like Alain Robbe-Grillet, Nathalie Sarraute, Marguerite Duras and Claude Simon, the work of other European writers and playwrights like Heinrich Böll, Eugene Ionesco and Peter Weiss, experimental novels by British writers such as Alan Burns, Eva Tucker and R.C. Kennedy and the work of Samuel Beckett. Theirs was a list so singular and so audaciously experimental, that amongst the literary press it inspired the epithet "Calderism" used to denote pejoratively a high literary style of "wilful" difficulty and "ostentatious" avant-gardism.[10] Calder himself remains indelibly associated with the cultural ferment of the sixties for his founding of the Society for the Defence of Literature and the Arts in 1968 in response to a late sixties backlash against permissiveness and his defence in the obscenity trials of Alexander Trocchi's *Cain's Book* in 1964 and of Hubert Selby Jr.'s *Last Exit to Brooklyn* in 1968, which were to become flashpoints in sixties debates about permissiveness. Her links within the world of film are equally unimpeachable. *Berg* was optioned and considered by producers and directors including Roman Polanski, Robert Altman and Richard Lester (who directed the Beatles films *A Hard Day's Night* and *Help!* as well sixties comedies like *The Bed-Sitting Room*).[11]

Quin also, rarely amongst the British writers of the period – with the significant exception of Alexander Trocchi, in whose freewheeling footsteps she followed – made the transition to America. Though she appears to have been somewhat less keen at first on Americans themselves, calling them, in one of her many letters back to her publishers, 'Yankee Apple Icecream people' whose 'lives [are] like gobbled gum with the teeth marks showing' and who 'even have a schedule (skedule!) for

[10] An early review of Quin's debut novel comments: 'There is action in *Berg*, but it is a farrago, a quintessence of Calderism… The headlong prose, the ending-at-the-beginning, the whole arch apparatus of the over-serious, derives, one supposes, from Beckett et al. The insubstantiality and wordy portentousness are the writer's own.' In John Fuller, review of *Berg*, by Ann Quin, *New Statesman*, January 8, 1965, 48. Calder himself referred to the criticism in a letter to Quin, quipping: 'You are obviously a lot of psychobeats that have lost their quintessence.' In Letter, John Calder to Ann Quin, May 11, 1965, box 52, folder 2-5, Calder & Boyars mss., Lilly Library, Indiana University.

[11] *Berg* did eventually appear, in a rather less starry adaptation, as *Killing Dad* or *How to Love Your Mother,* directed by Michael Austin and starring Richard E. Grant, Julie Walters and Denholm Eliot, in 1990.

suffering',[12] Quin, writes her friend Paddy Kitchen, 'immersed herself in aspects of America with relish'[13]. She was even enlisted, as part of a short-lived gig with the *Scotsman*, to report back on her exploits Stateside as a Joan Didion-style "gonzo" journalist.[14] In 1965, on the strength of *Berg*, and recommended by her then lover, the American poet, Robert Creeley, whom she had met on his book tour in London the year before,[15] Quin was awarded the D.H. Lawrence Fellowship by the University of New Mexico, of which she was the first female recipient. That same year, proposed by Creeley and her (rather unlikely) alleged former lover, the British writer and fascist sympathiser, most famous for his 1927 novel, *Tarka the Otter*, Henry Williamson,[16] she was awarded the Harkness Fellowship for most promising Commonwealth writer under thirty. Arriving in Placitas, New Mexico, in the spring of 1965, where she cohabited with Creeley and his wife, Bobbie, Quin plunged herself into the alternative living scene, and mixed with the great and the good of American poetry, forming romantic relationships first with Creeley, one of the founding fathers of the Black Mountain school, and later with Robert Sward, who taught at the prestigious Iowa Writer's workshop.[17] She stayed two years, leaving New Mexico for San Francisco, California in late 1965, where she took a flat in Sausalito overlooking the Golden Gate Bridge and near to where Alan Watts, author of hippy bible, *The Way of Zen* (1957), had moored his houseboat.[18] Later, she moved to Iowa where Sward, her then boyfriend, taught at the University of Iowa's prestigious Writer's Workshop. She and Sward returned to England in mid-1967, but returned to the Americas in April 1968, where she stayed first in Mexico City with the editor of countercultural literary magazine, *El Corno Emplumando*, Meg Randall, then in San Miguel, and then with the American writer, Robert Cohen, with whom Sward and

[12] Letter, Ann Quin to John Calder, February 19, 1966, box 52, folder 2-5, Calder & Boyars mss., Lilly Library, Indiana University.
[13] Paddy Kitchen, "Catherine Wheel," *London Magazine* 36 (June 1979), 51.
[14] Only one such column was to appear in the end. "Land of Enchantment" comprised Quin's reflections upon the lives of Native Americans living in New Mexico. Ann Quin, "Land of Enchantment," *Scotsman*, July 17, 1965, box 52, folder 2-5, Calder & Boyars mss., Lilly Library, Indiana University.
[15] Ekbert Faas and Maria Trombacco, *Robert Creeley: A Biography* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2011), 302-303.
[16] John Hall, "The Mighty Quin," *Arts Guardian*, April 29, 1972, 9.
[17] Ibid., 305.
[18] Letter, Ann Quin to Marion Boyars, November 6, 1965, box 52, folder 2-5, Calder & Boyars mss., Lilly Library, Indiana University.

Quin collaborated,[19] before returning to England without Sward, after their relationship ended.[20]

Although her published oeuvre comprises novels, that is, extended works of narrative fiction – notwithstanding her wicked way with notions of narrative linearity and causality which, I argue, demand a timely expansion in our thinking of what such a category might mean – Quin wrote poetry throughout her life, and tended to refer to herself as a poet, rather than a novelist. As "Leaving Home – XI" recounts, it was with poetry that she enjoyed her first literary success, winning a 10s. prize for a sonnet entitled "The Lost Seagull".[21] The critical reception of Quin's novels in Britain, like those of her experimentalist peers like Johnson, Brooke-Rose and Brophy, was marked by hostility towards the audacity of her reworking of the ancient and venerable tradition of the novel form. With Quin, critics reserved their ire for her novels' admixture of the techniques of fictional narrative with the language of poetry; her prose is infused with the ambiguity, indeterminacy and rhythms that are, traditionally, the domain of that which is enshrined as the poetic. In their approach to Quin's writing, literary critics, preferring their novels to be novels and their poems to be poems, tend to invoke the critical paradox that appears again and again in the press cuttings devoted to – but, by no means devotional towards – the innovative writing of the period: where literary experimentation is perceived, at once, as an insolent neologism *and* a time-worn anachronism. For Daniel Stern, reviewing *Three*, Quin's novel is 'what used to be called "experimental"'.[22] It is an unwelcome literary throwback, which belongs '[s]omewhere back in the dim mists of B.F.M.F. (Before Ford Madox Ford)'.[23] That is, back when 'someone decided that what the modern novel needed to give it new vitality was an infusion of the materials of poetry'.[24] Her 'digressive […] unfortunate [and] almost arbitrary experimentalism' speaks with the poetic, 'old-fashioned tongue' of the historical avant-garde.[25] But in America, where Quin was inducted into the post-Beat poetry scene of New Mexico and California,

[19] Letter, Ann Quin to Marion Boyars, April 17, 1968, box 52, folder 2-5, Calder & Boyars mss., Lilly Library, Indiana University.
[20] Letter, Marion Boyars to Ann Quin, May 23, 1969, box 52, folder 2-5, Calder & Boyars mss., Lilly Library, Indiana University.
[21] Ann Quin, "Leaving School – XI." *London Magazine* 4 (July 1966), 65
[22] Daniel Stern, "What Became of S?" review of *Three*, by Ann Quin, *New York Times Book Review*, October 9, 1966, 66.
[23] Ibid.
[24] Ibid.
[25] Ibid.

shacking up with Robert Creeley and his wife in Placitas, and mixing with local poets including Larry Goodall, Bill Dodd and Neil Nelson with whom she drove across the mesa to attend the Berkeley Poetry Congress of 1965 (which Creeley attended with his wife),[26] Quin's writing was to find a kind of home in exile amongst what became known, after Donald Allen's 1960 anthology of the same name, as the New American Poetry, which drew together the poets of the Black Mountain School – of which Creeley, her lover, was a leading figure – the New York School and the San Francisco Renaissance. Sward, reviewing his then lover, counts her alongside Sorrentino, Philip Whalen and Harold Fleming, as 'poets at novels' and recognises the boon that poetic endeavour within the novel form presents to the poet-novelist in terms of its 'varying shades of attention, duration […] and the building or setting-forth of people-place interactions of some size and complexity.'[27] In fact, for Sward, Quin was less a poet and more a sorceress after Jules Michelet, the well-spring of uncontainable and rebellious poetic energies who disrupts official discourse.

But despite these credentials that attest to Quin's neglected significance as a key literary figure of the sixties – the ways in which, for example, she bridges the divide between European and American avant-garde traditions of writing and her uncommon status as a female, working-class, experimental writer – still, I am leery about tackling her life here by way of the conventional exercise in setting it as the immediate context for her writing. The definitive mode of the Barthesian critical dogma that insists upon the textual dispossession of the author, upon the careful and thorough bisection of writer and work might, more-or-less, have lapsed, but with Quin, it seems ethical to invoke it. For in the drawing together of the life and the work, the very attributes that make Quin such a singular and significant biographical subject threaten the eclipse of the singularity and significance of the fiction. Writing from female-ness, from working-class-ness and, especially, from madness, have all similarly and all too often been related, associated with romantic notions about artlessness, "emotionality" and a lack of control. Both affirmatively and negatively, this critical approach to writing from these – and other – margins tends to subsume the discrimination, organisation, craft and, indeed, graft that is the necessarily intentional scaffold of so-called creative "genius", burying these hard-earned skills of the trade under magical talk of savant intuition and the tapping of muses. For many

[26] Ekbert Faas and Maria Trombacco, *Robert Creeley*, 305.
[27] Robert Sward, "Poets at Novels," review of *Three,* by Ann Quin, *Poetry* 112, no. 5 (August 1968), 353.

critics, the vision of Quin as an autodidact, an outsider novelist, even a literary idiot savant, whose abilities can be credited to her careful genning up on the backlist during her lunch breaks whilst she worked as a secretary at the publisher Hutchinson's prior to the publication of her first novel, has been a seductive one. But the elevation to the status of icon of the writer as some quasi-mystical vessel for lyric inspiration from the beyond tends to result, on the one hand, in the usurping by a cult of personality of the work itself as the rightful focus of criticism; on the other, it produces the somewhat paradoxical disappearance of the writer as the rightful author of their own work, the detached locus of meaning, agency and control. Invoking the troubled legacies of Sylvia Plath here feels almost unavoidable. Perhaps more so than any other literary figure, the American writer's work – along with her posthumous dignity – has all but receded beneath a biographical clamour. Most recently, this year, the fiftieth anniversary of her death, in a review of two new biographies of Plath by Andrew Wilson and Cary Rollyson, the critic Terry Castle has written vituperatively of the 'unsavory… ongoing interest in Plath's story' and the 'inflaming conflict and scandal' surrounding her biography.[28]

The American writer Joyce Carol Oates has coined the term "pathography" to denote the kind of exposing biographical attention that has been brought to bear upon subjects like Robert Frost, Sylvia Plath and John Berryman, amongst many others.[29] As 'hagiography's diminished and often prurient twin', the pathographer attempts to support claims for the cultural significance of their subject not by focussing upon their creative achievements, or the important ways in which the story of their lives and the story of the era dovetail, but by chronicling the scandalous and seamy underbelly of their lives, posing the question, writes Oates: 'How did such a distinguished body of work emerge from so undistinguished a life?'[30] The pathography's emphasis lies not with accomplishment or a life well-lived, but on '"failed promise" if not outright "tragedy"':[31]

[28] Terry Castle, "The Unbearable," *New York Review of Books*, July 11, 2013, accessed July 20, 2013, http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2013/jul/11/sylvia-plath-the-unbearable/.
[29] Joyce Carol Oates, "Adventures in Abandonment," review of *Jean Stafford: A Biography*, by David Roberts, *New York Times*, August 28, 1988, accessed October 13, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/1988/08/28/books/adventures-in-abandonment.html.
[30] Ibid.
[31] Ibid.

> Its motifs are dysfunction and disaster, illnesses and pratfalls, failed marriages and failed careers, alcoholism and breakdowns and outrageous conduct. [32]

Perhaps the most notorious, most intimate and arguably most astonishingly unethical of this ilk is Diane Wood Middlebrook's titular biography of the American poet, Anne Sexton, which draws upon Sexton's medical records and more than 300 audiotapes of therapy sessions released by her psychiatrist, Dr. Martin T. Orne with the permission of Sexton's literary executor, her daughter, Linda Gray Sexton.[33]

Sexton herself famously declared in the *New York Times* in 1969: 'I hold back nothing'[34]. And indeed Quin's own psychiatrists in 1970 wrote to Marion Boyars to request copies of her books, perhaps hoping to find therein the kind of brutally frank novelistic self-exposure that might solve the riddle of Quin's psychic distress. Since their mid-century heyday, the relative "truth" of these poets' "confessions" has occupied both their pathographers and critics alike. But it would be a critical blunder to look, like Quin's clinicians, to the writing to extrapolate the life. Certainly, Quin's work might be called auto-biographical; it is deeply intimate, wickedly indecorous and, like the confessional poets with whom Sexton is affiliated, explores a gamut of provocative themes which in those tranquilised times were generally considered best swept under the carpet: infidelity, sadomasochism, childhood neglect and mental illness. Like them, Quin was concerned with the discovery and the expression of an authentic, private self. However, she was by no means convinced about the abilities of language to uncover and lyrically express this self, and she remained deeply sceptical about what this psychological liberation might provide.

Quin, who suffered frequent and extirpative bouts of mental illness and, like so many of these pathographical subjects, died young, at thirty-seven, and by her own hand, drowning off the coast of Brighton in the summer of 1973, left behind a cache of four published novels, several more that remain wholly or partially unpublished or unfinished and around a dozen short stories to be stashed in the furthest corners of twentieth-century literary history.[35] She too would certainly present a ripe enough subject for the pathographer. Kitchen, in a 1979 essay chronicling their friendship prior to the publication of Quin's debut novel *Berg* in the

[32] Ibid.
[33] Dianne Middlebrook, *Anne Sexton: A Biography* (New York, NY: Vintage, 1992).
[34] Quoted by Robert Philips in *The Confessional Poets* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press), 76.
[35] See Appendix I for a Quin bibliography.

late fifties, recalls Quin's early 'depressions'. She suffered her first psychic breakdown whilst working as a waitress in the Cornish fishing village of Mevagissey, of which she wrote:

> I collapsed one morning… I lay in bed for days, weeks, unable to face the sun. If I went out into the garden, I dug holes and lay in them weeping. I woke up in the middle of the night screaming, convinced my tears were rivers of blood.[36]

Quin consulted a psychiatrist who, writes Kitchen, 'found Ann's wild imaginings way beyond her scope',[37] and decided that '[t]he loneliness of going over the edge was worse than the absurdity of coping with day to day living'.[38] But by the end of the sixties the delicate balance between these two poles had shifted. In 1969 she used an Arts Council grant she had been awarded for her third novel, *Passages* (1969), to fund her own extended journey across Ireland, Denmark, Norway and Sweden, where she was apprehended by police as she lay naked in a snowdrift and brought back to London by her publisher, Marion Boyars.[39] This was, she writes to Kitchen, 'a fantastic and most disturbing… crisis in my life':

> If it hadn't been for a few guardians several weeks ago I might well have been in the Cassel [the Surrey mental health hospital] or some such place undergoing various 'shock' treatments to 'rehabilitate' me back to this insane society. Ah well, so I live, I hope, I love, and feel much like a five year old child.[40]

Her worries about the possibility of undergoing electro-convulsive therapy were well-founded. She did, in the end, undergo the treatment in Sweden and also in London upon returning, where she sought 'space/stillness in which to gather strength'.[41] Following the publication of *Tripticks,* during the writing of which she had supported herself by waitressing in Notting Hill, Quin upped sticks again to

[36] Ann Quin, "Leaving School – XI," *London Magazine* 4 (July 1966), 67.
[37] Paddy Kitchen, "Catherine Wheel," *London Magazine* 36 (June 1979), 62
[38] Quin, "Leaving School – XI," 68.
[39] Robert Buckeye, *Re:Quin* (Champaign, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 2013), 8.
[40] Ann Quin, quoted in Kitchen, "Catherine Wheel," 56.
[41] Ibid.

Switzerland, where she suffered another psychic breakdown and an attack of aphasia, whereupon she spent a month in a London hospital unable to speak.[42] In what follows, I explore how the idea of speechlessness was to become central to her oeuvre.

The 'voyage out' was like this for Quin; travels on the map and travels in the mind were inextricably linked – as she depicts in fiction in her earlier novel, *Passages* – and venturing too far off the edge of the latter would result in a reluctant homecoming. In *The Unmapped Country*, Quin's final unpublished novel, which was written circa 1973 and remained unpublished at the time of her death, she draws upon her experiences of mental illness and of psychiatric institutions. Notably, this is the most broadly realist of her works and, like Ken Kesey's *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1962) or Kate Millett's later novel, *A Loony-Bin Trip* (1990), is a trenchant critique of mainstream psychiatric care set in a Foucauldian world of regimentation, medication and infantilisation. Protagonist Sandra is a rebellious internee who has been sequestered there for 'losing control'[43] and who resolutely refuses to *drink the kool aid*. She disputes her diagnosis, flushes the pills down the toilet, runs rings around her psychiatrists and attempts to resist the babying, invasive care of the nurses:

> "Sandra do her peepees now. Sandra do her two-twos now…Put on that coat Sandra. Put that book down when I'm talking to you… Don't go in for petting with men Sandra it leads to other things. Sandra do you hear me…?"
> Yes I hear you all my mothers and fathers will you ever stop? Stop.[44]

Quin's intimate and affectionate correspondence with her publisher, Boyars, missives typewritten often on the backs of envelopes and postcards from far-flung locales all sealed with her spiky, anarchic signature, provide a kind of graphological chronicle of her psychic debilitation. Her first, tentative letters prior to the publication of *Berg* are thoroughly fifties-formal and altogether business-like, but are quickly superseded by type-written dispatches from exotic locations that giddily describe new romances, places and experiences, interspersed with frequent and self-

[42] Buckeye, *Re:Quin*, 8.
[43] Unpublished manuscript, Ann Quin, "The Unmapped Country," box 52, folder 2-5, Calder & Boyars mss., Lilly Library, Indiana University.
[44] Ibid.

consciously brazen requests for speculative advances upon unwritten books and eager enquiries about the placement of stories in magazines like *Vogue*, *Penthouse* and *Harper's and Queen* and the selling of foreign rights. But in the final years of Quin's life there is a marked change in tone. The audacious buoyancy and bedraggled optimism of her earlier letters is replaced by gloomy lassitude. The letters are a handwritten, almost illegible scrawl now; they even more frequently ask for further advances upon books that have still not appeared and relate a much diminished life spent in the main caring for her ill, elderly mother. However, there were bright spots in her final years. She was galvanised by a period of study at a further education college in Surbiton and in the autumn of 1973 was due to take up a place on the University of East Anglia's prestigious creative writing course, taught by Malcolm Bradbury and Angus Wilson, whose first intake, in 1970, had comprised as its sole student one Ian McEwan. But in late August she waded out to sea just east of the Palace Pier in Brighton and her body was washed up the next day west along the coast at Shoreham Harbour.

On the Difference Between Waving and Drowning

Drowning is the quintessentially female way of death. With its symbolic associations of engulfment, disintegration and dissolution, in art and literature since at least the time of the ancient Greeks, the trope has been employed to depict woman's anguished subsumption by the "dark waters" which themselves correspond elementally to the fluidity, irrationality and flux associated with female consciousness. Typifying the sublime in nature, water is edgy, at once seductive and threatening, and with it artists and writers have sought to metaphorise the ambivalence of the overflowing feminine. 'You can never bathe in the same river twice,' goes Heraclitus's proverb. Water is a force of life, identified with birth and sustenance, with the womb and the enveloping of the maternal body. As any school-level literature student will eagerly identify, in previous, more censorious times, sex was frequently coded via water. Swimming, they know all too well, always stands for the female protagonist's sexual awakening. But water is also a force of destruction, representing the unbridled and mysterious power of nature, identified with

irrationality and the threat of annihilation and death, it is the engulfing abyss that overcomes the human.

And in this way, the lethal immersion and dissolution of the female self has been employed to portray the tragic resolution of her impossible predicament. Adrift in the masculine world of rationality and reason, female drowning is a ritualised sacrifice, it represents symbolically the return of the woman from whence she came. For drowning is a form of self-consumption, the means by which women can vanish without a trace, without a ripple. In these depictions, by drowning the woman scarcely *commits* suicide at all, but *allows* herself to drown to death. It connotes the feminine surrender of self-sacrifice rather than self-murder. Indeed, as a "passive" form of self-immolation, as Olive Anderson explains, during the nineteenth century amongst women drowning was the preferred method of killing oneself; via the death certificate euphemism "found drowned" the victim and her family were able to evade both the social stigma and the legal ramifications of suicide.[45]

The best-known example of female drowning in literature is perhaps *Hamlet*'s Ophelia, whom Elaine Showalter, in her landmark study *The Female Malady,* identifies as the archetypal figure of the literary madwoman.[46] By the nineteenth century, the trope of the drowned woman is almost inescapable, seen in, for example, the women Romantic poets' invocations of Sappho, the Pre-Raphaelite paintings of George Frederic Watts and John Everett Millias, the popular sculpture *Shipwrecked Woman and Child* by Edward A Brackett, and in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening,* in George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss*, Stephen Crane's *Maggie: A Girl of the Street* and in the novels of Dickens who, Barbara T. Gates notes, 'presented a phalanx of fallen women moving towards the Thames'[47].

Drowning is a potent and recurring metaphor throughout Quin's work. It appears in cross-gendered form in *Berg*'s protagonist's haplessly Oedipal attempts to drown his father-surrogate. We infer it to have been the fate of S. in *Three* who is missing presumed to have drowned and who, her diaries reveal, like her nineteenth-century predecessors, chooses drowning as a way of death for its ambiguity and blamelessness: 'How easy for a body to drift out, caught up in a current, and never

[45] Olive Anderson, *Suicide in Victorian and Edwardian England* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987), 43.
[46] Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture, 1930-1980* (London: Penguin, 1987), 11.
[47] Barbara Gates, *Victorian Suicide: Mad Crimes and Sad Histories* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), 135

be discovered, or for anyone to ever be certain'.[48] It would be a grave mistake, however, to read Quin's body of work, albeit one so thoroughly powered by the death drive, as a kind of extended suicide note in which she repeatedly foreshadows in fiction the taking of her own life by drowning in 1973. To do so would not only be to literalise the metaphor, to make the undergraduate assumption that the fiction somehow patterns the life, but to fundamentally misunderstand it. For Quin, as for her nineteenth century forebears, the metaphor of drowning operates in more complicated ways. It represents not simply the desire for death but also, and at once, the potential for living: the final rapprochement of the duelling forces of Eros and Thanatos which for Quin are always inextricably bound together. The possibility, that is, of transgressing human limits, of accessing a register of experience characterised by freedom and formlessness, the falling away of everything except the innermost self, and thereby the sweet relief from the inexorably reflexive dilemma of human self-consciousness.

For R.D. Laing, the figurehead of the antipsychiatry movement of the sixties, an important context in which the work of Quin is read within this thesis, madness is 'the oldest voyage in the world.'[49] In his writing, Laing frequently turns to the images of the sea and sea-faring to metaphorise his notion of madness as rebirth, a water-bound "journey" into the depths of the self through which one might return renewed and with a greater and more authentic form of "sanity". '[M]adness', Laing writes, 'need not be all breakdown. It may also be breakthrough. It is potentially liberation and renewal as well as enslavement and existential death'.[50] So, '[t]hat sea forever starting and re-starting'[51] is where 'everything begins again' and the means by which, as Paul Valéry writes in 'The Graveyard by the Sea', we escape from and are 'hurled back to living',[52] souls restored:

> One sees the old and the familiar in a new and strange way. Often as though for the first time. One's old moorings are lost. One goes back in time.[53]

[48] Ann Quin, *Three* (Champaign, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 2003), 139.
[49] R.D. Laing, *The Politics of Experience* (London: Penguin, 1984), 149.
[50] Ibid., 110.
[51] Ibid., 41.
[52] Paul Valéry, "The Graveyard by the Sea," in *Selected Writings*, trans. C. Day Lewis (New York, NY: New Directions, 1950), 49.
[53] Laing, *Politics of* Experience, 148-9.

In the fiction of the sixties and seventies, Laing's myth of descent becomes a new kind of monomyth, which was drawn upon, alongside earlier nineteenth-century depictions of health-giving madness in novels like Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* an Charlotte Perkins Gilmore's *The Yellow Wallpaper*, especially by the proto-feminist and feminist writing of the period. It patterns stories in which a hero embarks upon a quest to claim decisive victory over a hostile and indecipherable world, but contrary to the hero's journey described by Joseph Campbell, in the novels of the period that world is not of the supernatural realm but our own, and what Campbell calls the 'belly of the whale', the very nadir of this unknown world, is located within the mind. Examples include Maggie's moral and spiritual struggles within the "sea of love" in Margaret Drabble's *The Waterfall* (1977), Iris Murdoch's *The Sea, The Sea*, which chronicles the watery rebirth of its protagonist Charles Arrowby, the images of diving into and re-emerging out of the depths of the unconscious in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* (1972), Marian's fears of dissolution in *The Edible Woman* (1969) and the submarine underworld of elemental nature that is juxtaposed against the domestic sphere in Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping* (1980). It is present also in the poetry of the period, such as the lone female underwater explorer of Adrienne Rich's poem, "Diving into the Wreck" (1973), in Sylvia Plath's myriad images of baptism and ritual cleansing, and, indeed the motif of drowning, 'the kindest way to die', in her novel, *The Bell Jar*.

In Lessing's *The Golden Notebook*, drowning functions in similar ways. Protagonist Anna is suspended in that hypnogogic state between sleep and wakefulness: 'all the time I was conscious of lying on the bed, and conscious of sleeping, and thinking extraordinarily clearly… I was myself, yet knowing what I thought and dreamed'.[54] She becomes conscious of another self overlooking the bed 'a personality apart from the Anna who lay asleep'.[55] As she 'lay[s] on the surface of the dream-water… ready to give in… wanting to go down into the black depths under her',[56] the figure attempts to prevent her surrender to disintegration, to draw her back, admonishing her: '"Anna, you are betraying everything you believe in; you are sunk in subjectivity, yourself, your own needs."'[57] This is surely the Communist Anna of the red notebook, the rational, reason-orientated, socially-engaged self. Anna (the

[54] Lessing, *The Golden Notebook*, 476.
[55] Ibid.
[56] Ibid.
[57] Ibid.

woman) however, longs for the freedom and formlessness of total immersion in the depths: 'the Anna who wants to slip under the dark water would not answer'.[58] The psychic disintegration that is signified by Anna's watery vision is, in the end, productive and rejuvenating. For Lessing, as for Laing, of whom she was a keen follower during the period, breakdown is a kind of transcendental initiation, the ego-loss it entails a necessary antidote to society's psychosis and the cure for the self that has taken refuge from a hostile world in solipsism. The journey into madness effects the opening up of the self and thereby the possibility of forging healthy intersubjective relations with others and the happy truce between the internal and external worlds.

But unlike the work of Lessing, the disintegration of the self in Quin's novels never results in the benign resurrection of the happy and unified consciousness. Drowning, for Quin, represents the possibility of transcendence that can only ever remain as such. For this state of bliss lies on the friable edge, in fact, just beyond the edge of experience, just prior to or concomitant with the self-annihilation of death, which is the end of all experience. In this way drowning, for the ways in which it represents a kind of bliss, of *jouissance*, even, that can never be reached, is perhaps the central trope of Quin's oeuvre. These are novels which task their protagonists with navigating the supremely delicious and supremely dangerous risk of transgressing society's prohibitions, sexually, psychically and socially pushing against the Name of the Father, to explore the limits of reason, rationality and sanity. But crucially their liberation projects are never realised and, moreover, the very possibility of achieving these promised freedoms is consistently called into question.

For the ways in which her novels attempt to articulate the experience of limits, Quin's work could be said to have affiliations with a long tradition of French thinking about the concept of *écriture* that has manifested variously in the Sadeian eroticism of Georges Bataille's *The Story of the Eye* (1928) and *Madame Edwarda* (1941), in *The Story of O* (1954) by the pseudonymous author, Pauline Réage (Anne Desclos), in Antonin Artaud's 'Theatre of Cruelty' of the thirties and in Maurice Blanchot's radical reinvention of literary language (theorised most notably in his *The Space of Literature* (1955) and fictionally explored in his "*récits*" and elsewhere). This lineage was preoccupied by the pursuit of experience towards (and beyond) its very limits,

[58] Ibid.

the attainment of a state of transcendence that requires the inevitable extinction of the human; the 'assent to life even in death' as Bataille defines it. Refuting Freud's theorisation of the typology of Eros and Thanatos as duelling forces that compete for domination of the instincts, within this French tradition of writing, the two converge in pursuit of the transgression of the limits of the human, towards a state of transcendence which, paradoxically, in the achievement of the *fulfilment* of the human entails the inevitable *extinction* of it. In her brilliant study of the Sadeian tendencies of Bataille, Réage, et al., "The Pornographic Imagination" (1967), Susan Sontag, following Roland Barthes' earlier essay, "The Metaphor of the Eye" (1963), argues that through the unwitting, involuntary arousal produced by 'obscenity' and 'perversity', the kind of French writing that was perceived within the cultures of Anglo-American moralism as that of "dirty books" was capable of suspending the reader's consciousness and thereby of delivering the reader to an affective domain of productive uncertainty and of feeling that precedes cognition, reason and culture.[59] In this way, Sontag argues, the erotic is profoundly – and potentially, highly productively – disruptive. Certainly, this tradition of thought, which theorised an oppositional space within "deep consciousness" and speculated upon the ways in which language, as an agent of the dominant order, might be turned against itself in order to access this realm, surfaces again in the sixties and its aftermath, with Deleuze and Guattari's conceptualisation of the 'body without organs' and, relatedly, *écriture feminine*'s understanding of 'writing with the body', which I discuss with relation to Quin's novel *Three* later in this study. Elaborating upon the insights of the symbolist poet, Stéphane Mallarmé, and especially influenced by his essay "Mystery in Literature" (1896), in which he advocates a kind of anti-realist writing that is capable of *conveying* (but crucially not *revealing*) what he calls the 'something occult in men's hearts,[60] these writers and thinkers understand writing as a vehicle of sublimity, transcendence, in Bataille's terms, 'sovereignty'. Via a mode of corporeal, affectively embodied writing, they sought variously to develop a form of expressionist rendition that was not subject to the constraints of discursivity, inter-personal communication, or the ideological construction of individual selfhood. By encouraging us, as Cixous puts it, to 'hear before comprehension', their works

[59] Susan Sontag, "The Pornographic Imagination," in Georges Bataille, *Story of the Eye*, trans. J. Neugroschal (London: Penguin, 1967), 83-84.
[60] Stéphane Mallarmé, "Mystery in Literature," in *Mallarmé: Selected Prose Poems, Essays & Letters*, trans. Bradford Cook (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1956) 30.

privilege the *matter* over the *meaning* of sense-making, the sensuous pleasures of the text over Kantian aesthetic judgement, Nietzschean rapture over realist readability, the bodily and the mysterious over the rational and the knowable. And in doing so this tradition confronts the quintessential impasse of so-called "experimental" writing, posing myriad questions surrounding the hermeneutic issues of readability, decipherability and the availability of meaning: How might we read texts such as these? Are we capable of the work of interpretation that they task us with? Moreover, are the objects of discovery of such a quest capable of being communicated? And if we are not or they are not, then what can the role of writing *be*? The writers of this lineage tend to circumvent these issues via the invention of a phenomenology of reading and of writing that seeks to reaffirm the capabilities both of language to convey authentic truths and of a kind of ideal reader to be open, receptive – in Cixous' words 'non-resistant' – to them. But, crucially, Quin is by no means so convinced.

Unlike the French lineage with which her work resonates, Quin's oeuvre holds in delicate, anxious tension a commitment to an intimately expressive mode that sought a private language with which to capture the *différance* of individual experience and a no less deeply felt preoccupation with finding a means by which to communicate those experiences, with *being understood*. In "Leaving School", she writes of her reaction to receiving the galleys of *Berg*:

> The dream had been realised, but reading what I had written seemed someone else's dream. A kind of involuntary commitment. And like Camus I became aware that, 'There is in me an anarchy, a frightful disorder. Creating costs me a thousand deaths, for it involves an order and my whole being rebels against order. But without it I would die scattered.'[61]

And in this way, despite their uncanny resonances with her extra-textual fate, Quin's fictions are not so much *proleptic* as *analeptic* in orientation.

So many of her characters are troubled by the affliction of belatedness, that peculiarly paradoxical sense of temporality designated by Freud and later elaborated by Lacan and Derrida, in which the future is experienced as earlier than the past,

[61] Quin, Ann. "Leaving School – XI," *London Magazine* 4 (July 1966), 68.

and the past as later than the future. Therefore experience can only be apprehended *après coup* and, in becoming meaningful, is depleted of its presence. Lacan's account of the situation of the decentred, barred human subject, ceaselessly chasing, pursuing, their originary loss across the chains of signification, describes the 'retroversion effect' that is operant upon the self. The language that structures the world both precedes those who speak it and is made meaningful only in the terms that accede it. And therefore the self can recognise itself only by projecting its past into the future:

> the subject becomes at each stage what he was before and announces himself – he will have been – only in the future perfect tense. [I]n this "rear-view", all that the subject can be certain of is the anticipated image coming to meet him that he catches of himself in the mirror.[62]

Similarly, for Derrida the present can never be entirely present, immediate or comprehensible. His famous designation of the future anterior in *Of Grammatology* describes a temporal modality governed by a retrospective logic in which '[t]rue time… is what has been', where the endlessly-deferred present is merely a future memory of *what will have happened*.[63]

Quin's protagonists arrive too late at life. We find them mired in Orphic predicaments, contemplating their hapless and unwitting former selves and trying to recover what they can of those unexperienced presents – or even just to articulate their loss – furnished only with the insubstantial tools of language and their unreliable memories, which, in any case, cannot recover the presence of the past, *how it really was* or *how it really felt*. They grapple with the Sartrean quandary, elucidated in his novel *Nausea*, wherein the nature of living is profoundly opposed to the nature of fiction. Fiction's false promise of retrospection distorts the nature of real experience by retrospectively imposing a narrative order upon that experience. The unnamed narrator of *Passages*, for example, attempts to recall a party she previously attended, but finds that the event, dissociatively experienced at the time, recedes even further under the attention of memory:

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[62] Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. A. Sheridan (New York, NY: Norton, 1977), 306.
[63] Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Spivak (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1976), 67.

> What did I see, for when the scene reappears it merges with a dream, fallen back into slowly, connected yet not connected in parts. So what I saw then was as much a voyeur's sense. And since it has become heightened. Succession of images controlled by choice. I chose then to remain outside. Later I entered, allowed other entries. In that room a series of pictures thrown on the walls, ceiling, floor, some upsidedown. Only afterwards I could see things. More so now in specific detail.[64]

Or S., the third wheel of *Three*:

> Times when vowing I shall remember this now, which are never so real as those flashes – a door unexpectedly opens upon an unfamiliar scene, until gradually certain landmarks are retrieved. Nostalgia almost experienced at the time, the knowledge in that moment of something never going to be exactly the same again. The image frozen. As standing in a lift going neither up nor down.[65]

Brigid Brophy has a neat and typically Rabelaisian image for this human quandary. Humans, she comments, cruise the waters of life like whales, their 'jaws wide to snow-plough in the present tense, the plankton of experience', then 'excrete re-hashed into a continuous narrative in the past tense… You eat; you excrete; but you never catch your cells in the act of creating themselves out of your food… No more can you detect your personality and its decisions in the course of being created by your experience. You know only that you ingest the present tense and excrete it as a narrative in the past.'[66] For Brooke-Rose (after Lacan) in *Thru,* the car rear view mirror, or 'retrovisor', the 'blueish rectangle that reflects the rear before you'[67] designates the subject's position between a past that lies behind and a future into which the images of the past are projected.

Novels are like this too. Peter Brooks, in his synthesis of Freud and narratological theory, *Reading for the Plot* (1984), in which he explores the curious

[64] Ann Quin, *Passages* (Champaign: Dalkey Archive Press, 2003), 24.
[65] Ann Quin, *Three* (Champaign: Dalkey Archive Press, 2003), 66.
[66] Brigid Brophy, *In Transit: a herio-cyclic novel* (London: Penguin, 1969), 13.
[67] Christine Brooke-Rose, "Thru," in *The Christine Brooke-Rose Omnibus* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2006), 669.

temporal logic operant upon the reading of narratives, describes narrative desire as 'the arousal that creates the narratable as a condition of tumescence, appetency, ambition, quest, and gives narrative a forward-looking intention' whilst plot is 'a postponement in the discharge that leads back to the inanimate':

> If the past is to be read as present, it is a curious present that we know to be past in relation to a future we know to be already in place, already in wait for us to reach it. Perhaps we would do better to speak of the *anticipation of retrospection* as our chief tool in making sense of narrative, the master trope of its strange logic.[68]

Quin, like Brophy and Brooke-Rose, metafictionally employs the self-metaphorising capacities of fiction for the ways in which novelistic writing's innate pastness mimics the belatedness of human experience: the disjunction between the past events and the narrative present mirrors life's own asynchronicity. Self-consciously, her novels chronicle the struggle in vain to recover the pure presence of experience, that which Derrida calls the 'metaphysics of presence', through the attempt in language to find a singular lexicon with which we can, at best, only metaphorise it. And by pressing the logic of the liberation project of the sixties in fiction, Quin's work raises broader questions about whether the self can be known, whether it can ever be rendered in words and, moreover, if it can, then whether that written self is ever capable of being communicated. Fully engaged and in dialogue with the radical thought of the period, her characteristically ambivalent novels nonetheless provide an exploration and throroughgoing critique of the moral hypocrisies, antiquated norms and impossible dreams of a decade that was, she reveals, certainly not as "right on" as all that.

[68] Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (Boston, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 23, his italics.

Introduction: The Novel and the Sixties

Whilst the "cultural revolution" of the sixties remains much contested, the image of a radical and transformative decade, an era decadent and Dionysian, characterised by radical politics, youthful rebellion and sexual permissiveness, has become a heady myth of origins for contemporary culture.

> [F]or all the importance of the Twenties and the Thirties, the years of the two World Wars, and the grim, destructive Eighties, the Sixties seem to stand in the centre of it all, sucking in the influences of the past, creating the touchstones of the future.[1]

The legacies of the global convulsions of the high sixties remain, over forty years later, open to debate. In the last major speech of his 2007 presidential campaign, and with the anniversary of *les événements* just around the corner, French candidate Nicolas Sarkozy, echoing an earlier declaration by British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, pledged to 'liquidate' the 'heritage of May '68… once and for all'.[2] The myth of the sixties is one that many, from across the political spectrum, are eager to demolish. The utopian thinking of that legendary decade has been demystified variously as that of a bunch of hopeless long-hairs with an ill-thought-out pipe dream of standing "beyond culture"; or a despatch from the misspent youth of a culture that now rather regrets its juvenilia; or that of a baby boomer generation that *should have* and *did not* and, worse, is directly to account for the rise of neo-conservatism; or a mere fairytale that seeks to console us with the redemptive possibilities of radical resistance whilst tacitly affirming the status quo.

Of course, there would be neither a May '68, nor even an April '71, in Britain. Countercultural rabble-rouser, Jeff Nuttall, prefaced his semi-autobiographical account of the 'nuclear generation', *Bomb Culture* (1968), with the words:

> [T]he plain obvious fact is that between the autumn of '67 when I completed this manuscript, and the summer of '68 when I am writing this preface,

[1] Jonathon Green, *All Dressed Up: The Sixties and the Counterculture* (London: Pimlico, 1998), xiii.
[2] Nicolas Sarkozy, "Speech at Bercy" (speech, Paris, 29 April, 2007), http://sites.univ-provence.fr/veronis/Discours_2007/transcript.php?n=Sarkozy&p=2007-04-2.

> young people under various pretexts made war on their elders, and their elders made war on them. The war continues.[3]

But he is vamping a "revolution" that would never quite arrive. Throughout the decade, the Left remained frustrated by its inability to gather popular support, or to gestate a significant student movement. In marked contrast to the political ferment of Paris, San Francisco, New York, Berlin and Amsterdam – and the anti-colonial wars and revolutions in the Third World that, as Frederic Jameson points out in his important essay "Periodizing the Sixties",[4] lit the touch paper on their Western counterparts – and with the significant exception of the conflict in Northern Ireland, only in recent years beginning to be framed by historians in terms of broader civil rights global movements, the high sixties in Britain never reached a peak of revolutionary ferment. The counterculture in Britain had great difficulty gaining dialectical purchase on a culture that was, the American poet and critic Kenneth Rexroth argues, a 'special case':

> British society assimilates all things – the ceremonies of the monarchy, the country house orgies of high life, the stodgy Communist Party of Great Britain. Today the Teddy Boys are middle-aged; the Angries lunch in the Reform Club; and even Mods and Rockers, no longer young, have been digested by a homogenous and homogenizing society… The subculture of secession in Great Britain is a kind of Fabian anarchism, slowly penetrating all structures of the society by metastasis… Can you imagine an American president making the very influential American anarchist, critic, poet, psychiatrist, urbanist and educator, Paul Goodman, a knight like Sir Herbert Read, or Bob Dylan an M.B.E. like John Lennon?[5]

The broader social and political impact of the utopian thinking of the decade beyond (and even amongst) a minority of (upper-middle-class) turned-on initiates, and its effect, in real terms, upon the social relationships and personal freedoms of

3 Jeff Nuttall, *Bomb Culture* (London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1968), 7.
4 Frederic Jameson, "Periodizing the Sixties" in *The Sixties Without Apology*, ed. Sohnya Sayres et al. (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minneapolis Press: 1984), 178-215.
5 Kenneth Rexroth, "The Second Post-War, the Second Interbellum, the Permanent War Generation," in *The Alternative Society: Essays from the Other World* (New York, NY: Herder & Herder, 1970), 109.

ordinary people have remained open to debate. Recent accounts of the period from historians like Arthur Marwick (*The Sixties* [1998]) and Dominic Sandbrook (*Never Had It So Good* [2005] and *White Heat* [2006]) have sought to palliate the myth of the sixties. They dispute the significance of the loose-to-the-point-of-unwieldy complex of radical politics, alternative society movements, experimental artistic practices and counterpublic anti-institutions conceptualised by Theodor Roszak as "the counterculture",[6] arguing that it was not the counterculture's "great refusal", but its willingness to collude with or be co-opted by the mainstream that permeated and transformed culture.

As it had done for Marx in the nineteenth century, Britain in the sixties became a likely case study for Frankfurt School theorisations of the culture industry. Catalysed by the explosion of mass communications technologies and the emergence of an unprecedented cultural pluralism underwritten by rising affluence in the years following World War II, a mature and well-established popular culture (which had arrived comparatively early in Britain in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries), rapidly assimilated (or appropriated) the experimental energies of the counterculture's avant-garde cultural practice, to ferment an innovative and freewheeling mainstream milieu. The revolution in Britain was to be, George Melly proposed with the title of his study of pop in the sixties, a 'revolt into style'.[7] And, as Jenny Diski, in her autobiographical memoir of the decade, writes (with the modesty that is characteristic of those rare sixties survivors who both remember the period and *were really there*): 'In truth the only thing that is absolutely certain is that the music was better.'[8]

But still, the period remains indelibly associated with a rule-breaking, convention-flouting spirit of rebelliousness. Even Marwick, for whom the counterculture amounts to the 'Great Marxisant Fallacy', admits that 'things would never be quite the same again'.[9] But whether viewed as a golden age or an era of moral and cultural decline, this new dawn did not, apparently, extend to the British novel. Although the decade opened with the Lady Chatterley obscenity trial, which was to become totemic of the libertarian energies of the period – but did not

[6] Theodore Roszak, *The Making of a Counter Culture: Reflections on the Technocratic Society & Its Youthful Opposition* (London: Faber & Faber, 1970).
[7] George Melly, *Revolt Into Style: The Pop Arts in the 50s and 60s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).
[8] Jenny Diski, *The Sixties* (London: Profile Books, 2010), 3.
[9] Arthur Marwick, *The Sixties: Cultural Revolution in Britain, France, Italy and the United States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 140.

necessarily, as we shall see, signal British culture's belated reconciliation with literary modernism – the novel was perceived as 'not much changed'; Marwick writes that 'for literary innovation, it was necessary to go to the theatre.'[10] Whilst drama found its feet as an audacious, oppositional force under the tutelage of "Sir Larry" at the newly-founded National Theatre, and found an outspoken, contumacious patron in theatre critic and dramaturge, Kenneth "Peacock" Tynan, Ginsberg packed out the Royal Albert Hall with experimental poetry and boom-time hit the New Wave of British cinema. And yet, in the declinist narratives that – even as London swung – were so pervasive within the national discourse, literary culture tends to figure as the terminally-moribund gatekeeper of what became known as the "stagnant society".

The impact of sixties radicalism upon the literature of the period in America is easily evinced: from the Romantic free-expressionism of the Beat Movement, to the radical politics of Amiri Baraka, to the picaresque-psychedelia hippy narratives of Ken Kesey's Merry Pranksters and Tom Wolfe, to the Mennippean satires of Kurt Vonnegut, to the cabbalistic paranoia of Thomas Pynchon and William Gaddis. Literary figures – perhaps most notably Kesey, alongside elder statesman, Beat poet Allen Ginsberg – became the spiritual ringleaders of the wildly disparate groups and movements that comprise the counterculture of the sixties. In fact, perhaps when applied to America, the very epithet "countercultural literature" is a misnomer; it could well be argued that the subversive sensibility that characterises the American writing of the period is just another iteration of the dissident tradition that is central to an American canon which has its roots in the Transcendentalism of Emerson, Hawthorne and Thoreau. Equally in France, for example, literature was very conspicuously allied with the claims of the '68ers. Discourse was everything and everything was discourse: the revolution would be linguistic. For the radical forms of resistance that coalesced under the name of post-structuralism – including Situationism's critique of the mass media spectacle of advanced capitalism, Tel Quel's political interrogation of the sign system and Julia Kristeva and Hélène Cixous' conceptualisation of the disruptive and deconstructive force of *l'écriture féminine* – debates about literary language were central to the *événements* of revolutionary ferment in France. In search of something similar in Britain we might perhaps look to obvious candidates like Beat, junky and countercultural leader-in-

[10] Arthur Marwick, *British Society Since 1945: The Penguin Social History of Britain* (London: Penguin, 2003) 137.

exile, Alexander Trocchi, or perhaps to the existentialist-manqué, Colin Wilson, but we would be hard-pressed to construct a similar native countercultural anti-tradition of tradition-breaking in Britain. In Britain, the literary-historical fate of fiction's own experimental tendency during the decade – that of Ann Quin, B.S. Johnson, Christine Brooke-Rose, Brigid Brophy and Alan Burns, amongst others – was to become a Shandyean digression in the master narrative of British literary history. In what follows, I will explore why it is that at a time when British culture was apparently on the up and up, the novel was perceived as on its uppers. Positioned as the last man standing of an older and more conservative order, in accounts of the period, literary fiction is perceived to be lost in the long shadows of literary modernism, trapped within an insurmountable paradox wherein innovation meant degeneration and progress meant tradition and still unable to find its bearings in the post-war world.

The Curious Death of the Novel

During the period, what became known as the "death of the novel" controversy amongst literary critics and writers such as Roland Barthes, Gore Vidal, John Barth, Tom Wolfe, Leslie Fiedler, George Steiner and Italo Calvino sought to interrogate the prevailing sense, amongst whose earliest proponents was José Ortega y Gasset in his *Decline of the Novel* (1925), that the novel as an appropriate mode of expression was now defunct having been swamped by the events of recent history, its effects "used up" by modernism and its privileged position within the culture now superseded by the new mass arts of television, film and the mass media. In grand self-conscious style, the American writer Ronald Sukenick entitled his 1969 fictional meditation upon the quandary of the novelist and of novelistic writing during the period, "The Death of the Novel". Commentators borrowed Ortega y Gasset's metaphor of the novel as a 'vast but finite quarry'[11] to conceive of the form as a pool of limited resources which had been fruitfully and not-so-fruitfully spent by the radical innovations of the first decades of the twentieth century. 'It is erroneous to think of the novel… as an endless field capable of rendering ever new forms,' Ortega y

[11] José Ortega y Gasset, "Notes on the Novel," in *The Dehumanisation of Art and Other Writings on Art and Culture* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1956), 54.

Gasset argues in "Notes on the Novel", 'present-day writers face the fact that only narrow and concealed veins are left them.'[12] Malcolm Bradbury appears to concur, arguing that

> what the extraordinary achievement of that international and compelling tendency has seemed to imply was nothing less than the Death of the Novel – the death, that is, of the novel in its traditional form as the burgher epic, the novel of social reality, moral assessment, direct representation of life and history.[13]

During the sixties, the challenge from literary modernism was held to account for, at best, prophesising about and, at worst, colluding with the collapse of an ancient and venerable tradition of liberal humanist thought. The movement – or rather, the loose agglomeration of artistic practices – we now know – or rather, even after its (disputed) centenary, still remain in the process of constructing and reconstructing – as "modernism" was only then, at some decades' distance, beginning to be periodised by literary historians. The 'huge and various collective phenomenon' that Graham Hough identifies as a 'revolution in the literature of the English language' had 'not yet acquired a name'.[14] 'Somebody should write a history of the word "modern"', writes Frank Kermode in the mid-sixties.[15] Then, as now, the epithet was prone to slippage, its meaning elusive; the "modern period", the "moderns" and "modernism" were used interchangeably to denote both a historical period and a supra-historical mode, characterised as both innovative and traditionalist, humanist and fascist, arcane and colloquial and, under the auspices of New Criticism, frequently employed to ring-fence value judgements about literature. And within these belated attempts to take stock of the literary situation of the first half of the century, in works such as Stephen Spenders *The Struggle of the Modern* (1963), Hough's *Image and Experience: Studies in a Literary Revolution* (1960), "What was Modernism?" by Harry Levin and Kermode's "Modernisms" (1968), the insistence on "newness" and "novelty", which – alongside a complex, often

[12] Ibid., 54.
[13] Malcolm Bradbury, "The Novel No Longer Novel," in *No, Not Bloomsbury* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1987), 89.
[14] Graham Hough, "A Literary Revolution," in *Image and Experience: Reflections on a Literary Revolution* (London: Duckworth, 1960), 4-8.
[15] Frank Kermode, "Modernisms," in *Continuities* (London: Routedge & Kegan Paul, 1968), 27.

paradoxical, appeal to tradition – had characterised both modernist self-perception and critics' early, tentative definitions of "the modern" was replaced by a view shared amongst critics that modernism in Britain had drawn the novel to its aesthetic, political and ethical limits. Cyril Connolly lamented that 'Flaubert, Henry James, Proust, Joyce and Virginia Woolf have finished off the novel. Now all will have to be re-invented as if from the beginning'.[16] Henry Green, although himself an admirer of the work of Céline, Kafka and Joyce admitted that they were 'like cats which have licked the plate clean. You've got to dream up another dish if you're to be a writer.'[17]

In the sixties, on-going debates about the health (or otherwise) of the novel were linked to broader concerns surrounding a crisis of identity in post-war Britain. Britain emerged from World War II a victorious but, in military, economic and geo-political terms, much diminished nation. Accounts of the period frequently identify a "return to realism" as the dominant trend amongst mid-century writing, postulating that during the post-war years, novelists returned to a tradition of realistic writing to supply a stable, communal and indigenous system of values and beliefs and to re-inscribe and reaffirm the rational and empirical values of "Englishness". Bradbury glosses the conventional accounts of post-war British fiction thus:

> From the beginning of the century to the end of the thirties there was a high season of British fiction, dominated by major and innovative figures. The war broke the sequence, and British fiction drew away not only from the modernist experiment but from the significant developments in fiction taking place elsewhere, looking instead back to nineteenth- or eighteenth-century sources, returning to the novel of Bennett and Galsworthy, Dickens and George Eliot, seeking to reconstruct a pre-modern tradition. In the process the traditional preoccupations of British fiction, with class and morality, reasserted themselves, in part as a mode of documentation in a changing Britain, in part as a return to native and provincial artistic sources.[18]

[16] Cyril Connolly, *The Unquiet Grave* (London: Hamilton, 1972), 21.
[17] Henry Green, quoted in Terry Southern, "The Art of Fiction XXII: Henry Green" (interview), *Paris Review* 19 (Summer 1958), accessed July 23, 2012, http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/4800/the-art-of-fiction-no-22-henry-green.
[18] Malcolm Bradbury, *No, Not Bloomsbury* (London: Arena, 1989), 99.

Critical responses to anxieties about the "situation of the novel" in vast critical surveys by academic *éminences grises* such as Bradbury, Bernard Bergonzi and David Lodge amongst others have tended to situate the experimental prose of the sixties as an adjunct to debates surrounding the British novel's so-called "return". Accounts like Bradbury's *Possibilities: Essays on the State of the Novel* (1973), Bergonzi's *The Situation of the Novel* (1970) and Lodge's "The Novelist at the Crossroads" (1969), even whilst actively seeking to refute or at least problematise it, have tended to reiterate implicitly what Bradbury calls the 'critical folklore'[19] of British post-war fiction by employing a methodological approach that sustains a facile (and inaccurate) polarity between "realist" and "experimentalist" strategies of representation. Moreover, in their attempts to shore up the novel against portents of its imminent demise by establishing a coherent identity for it, these accounts rush to generically define a form which had historically broken all of the generic rules and whose emergence was itself concomitant with the birth of the genre system. Drawing upon Ian Watt's thesis about "formal realism" from his seminal work *The Rise of the Novel* (1956), together with F.R. Leavis' earlier concept of "significant form", these accounts tend to reaffirm existing preconceptions about the synonymity of the realist *genre* and the novel *form*, assumptions that have, I argue, continued to inform the ways in which we conceive of the practice of fictional writing in Britain.[20]

Novelist at the Crossroads?

The sixties was an age with a seemingly unquenchable thirst for novelty, as Leslie Hornby, aka quintessential sixties icon, Twiggy, puts it, 'anything modern was wonderful, and anything old was terrible… everything up to date, up to the minute, brand new and streamlined and contemporary – that's what everything has to be…'[21] For Christopher Booker, in his denunciation of the decade, *The Neophiliacs* (1969), which focussed upon the sixties' passion for change, this 'keeping pace with

[19] Ibid., 99.
[20] Mark Spilka later notes, in his account of *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*'s 1977 Brown University conference on the state of fiction studies, how Ian Watt's account of the 'blend of realism and individualism by which the novel rose' was to set the terms by which its 'ongoing stake in the nature of value of personal life might best be defended.' In Mark Spilka, "'Still Towards a Poetics of Fiction?' No – And Then Again Yes," in *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 18, no. 3 (Spring 1985): 204.
[21] Twiggy, *Twiggy: An Autobiography* (London: Granada, 1976), 27.

pace' amounted to a collective myth of pseudo-vitality that actually worked to occlude the political realities of the period:

> The element of black frenzy which had characterised the years up to 1963, the desparate attempts of the nuclear disarmers, the satirists, the playwrights, that 'what's wrong with Britain' journalists, to force themselves into reality on a tide of sensation, had given way to a kind of fairy world where nothing seemed to matter any longer. The frenzy was still there, as we have seen from the pop world. But whereas the 'explosion into reality' of that former age – the Labour Party Conference in 1960, the mass arrest of the Committee of 100, the Profumo Affair, even the Orpington by-election had been shattering and potent, like the surfacing of a poisonous boil – now, in 1964 they seemed simply like the popping of harmless, brightly coloured bubbles.[22]

In literature, however, the synonymy between the idea of "the modern" and of "the contemporary" had lapsed. As Stephen Spender's *The Struggle of the Modern* faithfully records, the modern was now very much on the back foot. Frederick R. Karl, in the introduction to his *A Reader's Guide to the Contemporary English Novel* (1962), writes: 'The contemporary novel is clearly no longer "modern".'[23] Modernism's rarefied airs and introspective attitudes seemed wholly unsuited to a brave new world of affluence, mass culture, technology and the Welfare State. Many new writers coming up in the fifties reacted against a discredited, prematurely institutionalised and belatedly periodised version of modernism which, for them meant Bloomsbury: genteel, arcane, elitist, obscurantist and politically questionable. The novelist Kingsley Amis was perhaps the most strident in his declamations of the avant-garde bogeyman:

> The idea about experiment being the life-blood of the English novel is one that dies hard. "Experiment", in this context, boils down pretty regularly to "obtruded oddity", whether in construction – multiple viewpoints and such – or in style; it is not felt that adventurousness in subject matter or attitude or tone

[22] Christopher Booker, *The Neophiliacs: The Revolution in English Life in the Fifties and Sixties* (London: Pimlico, 1992), 65.
[23] Frederick R. Karl, *A Reader's Guide to the Contemporary English Novel* (New York, NY: Noonday, 1962), 4.

> really counts. Shift from one scene to the next in mid-sentence, cut down on verbs or definite articles, and you are putting yourself right up in the forefront, at any rate in the eyes of those who were reared on Joyce and Virginia Woolf…[24]

The new, "contemporary" style which (largely for the purposes of a press hungry for a literary revival that might fill the vacuum left by the war) coalesced under the banners of "the Movement" and later the "Angry Young Men" is seen, for example, in John Wain's *Hurry on Down* (1953), Amis' *Lucky Jim* (1954), John Braine's *Room at the Top* (1957), in *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1958) by Alan Sillitoe*,* in *Scenes from Provincial Life* (1951) by William Cooper and in *Jill* (1946) by Philip Larkin. It was rational, empirical and *funny*, it prized an appeal to the "common reader" and a clear, unadorned and rollicking style over what was perceived as the rarefied introspection of what had gone before. Rather than attempting to mine the limits of experience, it set its sights upon the assuredly knowable world, mocking the old bases of tradition, pricking the pieties of the establishment and railing against the persistence of class privilege and social inequality. This was a new, upwardly mobile literature whose authors and avatars – Amis' Jim Dixon, Wain's Charles Lumley and Sillitoe's Arthur Seaton, for example – were making their way (or making the existential choice not to) in the "age of affluence". Their rallying call was, as John Wain described his policy upon his seasonable succession of Europhile man of letters, John Lehmann, as editor of the BBC's *Third Programme*, 'consolidation'.[25] These writers' self-conscious iconoclasm, their anti-modernism and anti-cosmopolitanism, their emphasis upon "verbal hygiene" and the continuity of a great English tradition evince a literature in the process of "digging in". These characteristics of the writing of the time are also related to a partial re-emergence of the political concerns of the thirties, although without that decade's emphasis upon Marx.

This, comments Bradbury, was the 'irreversible situation' within the literary scene of the period: 'to move against [modernism] is to move back'.[26] Amis admits

[24] Kingsley Amis, *Spectator*, May 2, 1955, 565, cited in Rubin Rabinovitz, *The Reaction Against Experiment in the English Novel, 1950-1960* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1967), 40-1.
[25] John Wain, *Sprightly Running: Part of an Autobiography* (London, Macmillan, 1963), 205.
[26] Malcolm Bradbury, *Possibilities: Essays on the State of the Novel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), 170.

that he and his cadre were 'reactionaries rather than rebels. We were trying to get back, let's say, to the pre-Joycean tradition'.[27] And after the incredible cultural and historical transformations of the twentieth century thus far, such a manoeuvre, writes Bradbury, amounted to a 'peculiarly nasty subterfuge'. The British, he continues, were

> writing novels as if there was no predicament at all. Their writers, the critics claimed, were refusing experiment, the strains and pains of form and perception; they were reinstating materialist and liberal realism, avoiding the meaning of Beckett, Joyce, Virginia Woolf and reaching to Wells, Bennett, even back to Henry Fielding. They restored an anciently liberal and humane universe; they celebrated their own provincialism.[28]

Rubin Rabinovitz, in his 1967 study of this tendency, *The Reaction Against Experiment in the British Novel*, which, as Stonebridge and MacKay argue, 'was to set the terms for readings of the immediate post-war novel for over a decade',[29] sums up the realist temper of the period:

> The critical mood in England has produced a climate in which traditional novels can flourish and anything out of the ordinary is given the denigratory label 'experiment' and neglected … [T]he successful novelist in England becomes, too quickly, a part of the London literary establishment. … All too often he uses his position as a critic to endorse the type of fiction he himself is writing and to attack those whose approach is different.[30]

Insisting that the 'thesis that the English novel has, since the war, taken a separate and self-isolating path is itself becoming a mystifying falsity'[31] (Bradbury) and that the 'picture… of an incorrigibly insular England defending an obsolete

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[27] Kingsley Amis, quoted in Michael Barber, "The Art of Fiction LIX: Kingsley Amis" (interview), *Paris Review* 64 (Winter 1975), 46.
[28] Bradbury, *Possibilities*, 170.
[29] Lyndsey Stonebridge and Marina MacKay, "Introduction," *British Fiction After Modernism: The Novel at Mid-Century* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 5.
[30] Rabinovitz, *The Reaction Against Experiment*, 168-70.
[31] Bradbury, *Possibilities*, 173.

realism against the life-giving invasions of fabulation' is an 'oversimplification'[32] (Lodge), Bradbury and Lodge argue that this 'folkloristic view'[33] is one imposed upon British fiction from without by American critics like Karl and Rabinovitz, as well as James Gindin in his *Postwar British Fiction: New Accents and Attitudes* (1962). However, even whilst they tentatively attest to a 'rising mood of experiment and textual enquiry'within the British novel during the period,[34] these accounts still affirm traditional assumptions about the givenness of the relationship between the English literary mind-set and realistic writing. In his account, Lodge comments that 'there is a good deal of evidence that the English literary mind is peculiarly committed to realism, and resistant to non-realistic literary modes to an extent that might be described as prejudice'.[35] He famously imagines the novelist standing 'at the crossroads' between the central thoroughfare of realistic writing and the side alley of experiment:

> The situation of the novelist today may be compared to a man standing at a crossroads. The road on which he stands (I am thinking primarily of the English novelist) is the realistic novel, the compromise between fictional and empirical modes. In the 'fifties there was a strong feeling that this was the main road, the central tradition, of the English novel, coming down through the Victorians and Edwardians, temporarily diverted by modernist experimentalism, but subsequently restored (by Orwell, Isherwood, Greene, Waugh, Powell, Angus Wilson, C.P. Snow, Amis, Sillitoe, Wain, etc., etc.) to its true course.[36]

These accounts, then, tend to be dominated by a realist-experimentalist dichotomy, which sets up an opposition between a detached, obscure, aloof experimentalism, perceived as belatedly and exhaustedly modern and overshadowed by the legacies of Joyce and Beckett and a liberal and more humane, indigenous tradition of realist writing. Critical engagement with an emergent experimental tendency – typified in the novels of Johnson, Ann Quin, Christine

[32] David Lodge, "The Novelist at the Crossroads," in *The Novel Today*, ed. Malcolm Bradbury (London: Fontana, 1978), 90.
[33] Bradbury, *No, Not Bloomsbury*, 99.
[34] Ibid., 111.
[35] Lodge, "Crossroads," 88.
[36] Ibid., 100.

Brooke-Rose, Brigid Brophy, amongst others, but also present in their more "mainstream" counterparts such as Muriel Spark, Doris Lessing, Iris Murdoch, John Fowles and William Golding – tends to be ancillary to debates about the appropriateness of the realist mode to give form to social and cultural change and its ability to produce panoramic fictions that might heal the rifts caused by these transformations. Experiment has fared little better in subsequent accounts, allied with a period of literary history that expatriate Frederick Bowers, in his contribution to a special issue of *Granta* entitled "The End of the English Novel", scorns for 'its conformity, its traditional sameness, and its realistically rendered provincialism', caricaturing it as 'local, quaint and self-consciously xenophobic',[37] or perceived as a derivative and untimely rear-guard avant-garde.

The more recent accounts of twentieth-century history that appeared as part of a rash of *fin-de-siècle* literary stock-taking around the turn of the millennium seem content to rehearse the old realist-experimentalist divide, to pitch the experimental novel against its realist counterpart and find the former lacking – in popular success, in a tenable politics, in aesthetic achievement – and dismiss it to the peripheries of literary history. Against the dominant realist mode – both then and now – the vague, slippery epithet "experimental" is generally deployed by critics to euphemise aestheticised dandyism, or a moral compass gone awry. Andrzej Gąsiorek's *Post-War Fiction: Realism and After* (1995) is a rare example of a recent account of post-war British fiction which remain unbeholden to this "great divide" (Stonebridge and MacKay's *Fiction After Modernism* [2007] and Randall Stevenson's *The Last of England?* [2004] are others). In his preface, Gąsiorek declares his interest in those 'writers whose works deliberately fall somewhere between what Barthes calls the *scriptible* and the *lisible*, and which try to reconceptualise realism rather than reject it outright'.[38] He suggests that the 'distinctions between "realist" and "experimental" or between "traditional" and "innovative"' are now 'so irrelevant to the post-war period that they should be scrapped altogether.'[39]

The persistence of these distinctions is perplexing, especially given the myriad ways in which literary postmodernism has sought to challenge and transform our very understanding of what constitutes realistic narrative. The fabulation, self-

[37] Frederick Bowers, "An Irrelevant Parochialism," *Granta* 3 (Spring 1980), 151.
[38] Andrzej Gąsiorek, *Post-War British Fiction: Realism and After* (London: Edward Arnold, 1995), 4.
[39] Ibid.

reflexivity, fantastic narratives, magic, and latterly, hysterical realism that emerged from the broad church of British postmodernism all, in different ways, sought to wed an ethical commitment to the real with an embrace of the new opportunities offered by formal and linguistic innovation: to offer a voice to those previously debarred from realist discourse, for example, to re-assimilate forgotten histories, to bring together the traditionally warring factions of critical theory and creative writing and to confront what Kermode calls the 'horror of contingency'[40] that realist discourse, by its very nature, seeks to order, smooth over, make meaningful. Brian Richardson, in his audacious re-evaluation of modern British literary history, "Remapping the Present", argues that this admixture of realistic expression and fictional innovation, which constitutes an 'ingenious [attempt] to conjoin the otherwise opposed poetics of realism and postmodernism' as "postmodernism realism"', may well turn out to be a 'substantial and distinctively British contribution to the development of fiction'.[41]

Similarly, the novelist and critic A.S. Byatt, in a 1979 essay addressing the intersection between "realist" and "experimentalist" modes of writing, "People in Paper Houses", astutely identifies a 'curiously symbiotic relationship between old realism and new experiment'. For Byatt, unlike Lodge, British fiction's realist legacies are not perceived as a heritage too weighty to cast off, but a richly generative point of departure for new and innovative writing. Drawing the two poles together, in her essay she explores the ways in which the realist tradition and the experimental impulse work together contrapuntally in productive tension within the novels of John Fowles, Wilson, Murdoch and Lessing. She advocates a mode of 'self-conscious moral realism', which constitutes

> an awareness of the difficulty of "realism" combined with a strong moral attachment to its values, a formal need to comment on their fictiveness combined with a strong sense of the value of a habitable imagined world, a sense that models, literature and "the tradition" are ambiguous and

[40] Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), 135.
[41] Brian Richardson, "Remapping the Present: The Master Narrative of Modern Literary History and the Lost Forms of Twentieth Century Fiction," *Twentieth Century Literature* 43. no. 3(Autumn 2007), 299.

> problematic goods combined with a profound nostalgia for, rather than rejection of, the great works of the past. [42]

So, if, contrary to the critical accounts of the period of Amis, Rabinovitz and others, a significant feature of British post-war fiction could be said to be the ways in which realism and experimentation have rubbed along together very productively, then why is it that this time-worn polarity continues to be reiterated?

The problem seems to lie with the ways in which the British mid-century novel has been negatively defined against postmodernism by subsequent literary critics. Efforts to hail a literary renaissance spearheaded by Martin Amis, Ian McEwan and Salman Rushdie in Britain in the eighties have tended to emphasise the post-consensus novel's radical break with the post-war period. The 'end of the English novel', editor Bill Buford's introduction to *Granta*'s special issue assured, signalled not the death knell of the form, but the beginnings of a *British* novel:

> The fiction of today is… testimony to an invasion of outsiders, using a language larger than the culture. Today the imagination resides along the peripheries; it is spoken through a minority discourse, with the dominant tongue re-appropriated, re-commanded, and importantly reinvigorated.[43]

Although the appropriateness of this new nomenclature for the emergent devolved and postcolonial identities of the British fiction of the time is debatable – and indeed this issue of categorisation remains largely unresolved – this particular iteration of the perennial debate illustrates the persistence of the peculiar relationship between literary tradition and national culture in Britain. Laura Marcus and Peter Nicholls write that the 'troubled relation of internationalist perspectives to nationalist ones' is 'another version' of the 'tension between change and continuity'.[44] By the seventies and eighties the idea of a 'Great Tradition' had become associated with conservatism, empiricism, insularity, even philistinism and xenophobia. Literary historians' attempts to periodise British postmodernism have tended to reassert this

[42] A.S. Byatt, "People in Paper Houses: Attitudes to 'Realism' and 'Experiment' in English Post-War Fiction," in *Passions of the Mind: Selected Writings* (New York, NY: Knopf, 2012), 181.
[43] Bill Buford, "The End of the English Novel," *Granta* 3 (Spring 1980), 16.
[44] Laura Marcus and Peter Nicholls, eds. "Introduction," *The Cambridge History of Twentieth-Century English Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), i.

'troubled relation', heralding an innovative, newly cosmopolitan, theory-savvy British contemporary novel at the expense of acknowledging the continuity and influence of home-grown traditions of writing and of thought.

Endeavouring to overturn the conventional perception of a British literary establishment where critical theory is perceived as a pernicious form of Gallic 'literary rabies',[45] critics have sought to emphasise British postmodernism's importation and keen assimilation of the structuralist and post-structuralist agenda from continental Europe and America. The hybridity, textual self-referentiality and formal and linguistic innovation of the British contemporary novel has been credited to the theories of fiction developed by Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida and Julia Kristeva, amongst others. If literary genealogies locate novelistic progenitors for the British postmodern novel, they tend to come from the French *nouveau roman* – writers like Michel Butor, Nathalie Sarraute and particularly Alain Robbe Grillet – who were themselves as much engaged in novel theory as they were in practice. The 'baton of innovation', as Randall Stevenson puts it, 'sometimes has to be carried by another team before the British outfit can continue its own rather erratic course down the tracks of literary history'.[46]

What scant critical attention the British experimental novel of the sixties has received has tended to be reserved in the main for the writers Christine Brooke-Rose and J.G. Ballard. As fictional explorations of the tenets of critical theory that are underpinned by the very theoretical architecture that presses the mode of their interpretation, Brooke-Rose's "crictions" are a gift to theoretically-minded critics. The multinational, multilingual cosmopolitanism of her biography seems to have legitimated Brooke-Rose amongst a British critical establishment which, on the one hand, is still mired in self-conscious philistinism and knee-jerkedly hostile towards "experimental writing" and "French theory", and, on the other, is all too keen to disavow what is perceived as the paucity and theoretical ignorance of British narrative fiction. Ballard, meanwhile, within British writing has become the exception that proves the rule. The British experimental writer and sixties provocateur died in 2009 having acquired the status of a prophetic and (rather unlikely) much-loved national treasure in no small part due to his novels' generic unplaceability, his long-

[45] Randall Stevenson, 'No Experiments Please, We're British: Postmodernism and Contemporary Fiction in Britain,' in *Postmodernism and Contemporary Fiction in Britain*, ed. E. Smyth (London: Batsford, 1991), 23.
[46] Ibid., 31.

standing affiliation with Science Fiction delivering his oeuvre from the strict protocols that govern the writing and the reading of “literary” fiction in Britain, and his late-period move into the mainstream, apparently serving to legitimate it.

So, was the fiction of the sixties simply more of the same milk bar messiahs and upwardly mobile lucky Jims, rebelling against tradition and yet somehow doing so in very disappointingly and unambitiously traditional novels? Did the writers of the period really believe, as Amis famously commented in relation to the planned expansion of higher education in 1960, that ‘more would mean worse’? And how broadly were these views shared and manifested within fiction? Does our vision of mid-century writing as one in which the novel collapsed back into middle-of-the-road social realism provide a substantive picture of the fiction of the period? If such a picture of British writing is accurate, then why is it that the literature of this “right little tight little island” did not also get swept up in the myriad transformations of this most transformative of decades? And if the received narrative is wanting, then why does the literary history of the sixties continue to be written up in terms of its quietude?

In what follows, via the work of Quin, this study will attempt to present an alternative picture of the fiction of the sixties, which attests to the existence of outward-looking but indigenous traditions of experiment that have been neglected within existing accounts of literary history that tend to focus upon the so-called inward turn of modernism, or the turning inside-out of fictional conventions of postmodernism, or the insider-outsider, Empire Writes Back double perspectives of the post-colonial. The task of positioning anew a kind of inveterately self-conscious writing that was itself so caught up and implicated within the period’s debates about the novel’s role in culture cannot be a relatively simple matter of the careful and nuanced welding of text and context. Scene-setting is going to be lengthy. The introduction to this study will attempt to sustain the interrelated parallel stories of, on the one hand, those cultural, intellectual and historical forces that governed the reception and the perception of experimental writing and, on the other, those from whence the British experimental novel emerged. And by considering how the experimental novel was conceived of, and how it conceived of itself, I will attempt to re-think these novels’ complicated and under-theorised relationship to literature and culture and begin – I hope – to attest to their literary and cultural significance.

I begin by looking prior to the sixties, to trace the historiographic debates and negotiations of British literary identity in the period immediately following World War

II. This introduction will provide an extended commentary upon a tradition of thinking about the role of the novel in culture. Firstly, I will examine the ways in which in the era's debates surrounding the "stagnant society" and the "two cultures" the novel was implicated as a key part in the etiological puzzle of "what's wrong with Britain". Noting how such a contrivance is itself indicative less of the novel's part in the country's "scumbled" national life and more of the continuing centrality of the novel to the ways in which Britain conceived of (and metaphysically re-visioned) itself during the period, this study will then move on to trace the persistence of Arnoldian thinking during the period, culminating in the nascent school of English Cultural Studies. I will examine the significance of the ways in which the declinist thesis that dominated conceptions of British nationhood during the twentieth century has been yoked to the fortunes of the novel, the effects of the predominance of preoccupations with historical and stylistic positioning, periodisation and categorisation within British literary criticism and the (continuing) implications for the reception of innovative fiction in Britain of a lingering Leavisism that situates art as a guide to the "good life". This chapter will investigate how, in spite of portents of its imminent demise, the novel continued to be mobilised by an anxious culture to fulfil its traditional obligations as the liberal humanist form *par excellence*. In the final chapter of this study, on Quin's *Tripticks*, I pick up the threads of the story of British *Kulturkritik* again to consider and reassess the ways in which a largely forgotten indigenous tendency of countercultural writing during the sixties drew upon a lineage from the visual arts to attempt to re-envision and articulate an alternative role for the novel in Britain.

Whilst thinkers from other disciplines enlisted the novel to help "warm through" their metaphysics, amongst literary intellectuals themselves, faith in the Leavis-Eliot orthodoxy had lapsed. I will examine the *cris de conscience* felt throughout the liberal literary intelligentsia in the aftermath of wartime and their profound uncertainties about the role the novel could now play within a culture whose deepest and most foundational truths – those that the novel was perceived to embody and to elevate – were felt to have been denuded. This sense that it was not just the world that had changed but also our very means of apprehending it was linked to a crisis of representation amongst a generation of novelists who sought to reconcile their writerly responsibility of finding new ways to articulate the new circumstances of selfhood, truth and experience within the parameters of a form that

was felt to belong to a previous, kinder age and within a political climate that was felt to threaten the very existence of the novelist and novelistic writing. My introduction will examine how, like Quin, the writers of the period sought ways out of their quandary by employing fictional narrative – the sceptical art *par excellence* of a sceptical age – as a self-metaphorising form to at once mimic ironically the ways in which we attempt to make sense of our lives through narrativisation and to radically extend the limits of narrative, in order to better capture human life in its fullness, and thereby, in turn, broaden the remit of human experience itself. Finally, I return to the novel of the fifties to reassess the work of Amis, Wain, Braine et al. and, in the light of this closer and more nuanced picture of the complicated contexts of mid-century fiction, to take another look at the "return to realism" which seems to have become the critical blind-spot of twentieth-century literary history. Reassessing its effects, and finding that undoubtedly it too registered the uncertainties of the period – that the novels of the fifties constitute less a *return* to, and more a perplexed and alienated *transformation* of, the traditional ways in which we understand ourselves – I question the notion that the epithet could be accurately applied to even the novels most inextricably associated with the "return to realism".

A 'Stagnant Society'?

Even as the sixties began to swing, a sense of *kulturpessimismus* was so pervasive amongst commentators it had, as David Reynolds comments, become cliché.[47] The absence of Britain's very own "economic miracle", together with the belated and reluctant acknowledgement of its diminished imperial status after Suez and the Cuban Missile Crisis, produced a sense of profound anxiety about the state of the nation. The Suez Crisis of 1956 was the moment when, as Eric Hobsbawm notes, the 'international decline of Britain became so evident that not even the highly developed national faculty for voluntary blindness could conceal it'. But only amongst the most dyed-in-the-wool upper-class colonials was the handing back of India in 1947, after 200 years of colonial involvement, framed in terms of the impact of the loss of empire upon the national psyche. More widely, and across the political

[47] David Reynolds, *Britannia Overruled: British Policy & World Power in the 20th Century* (London: Longman, 1991) 233.

spectrum, the “granting” (as it was pitched at the time) of independence to Britain’s former colonies was perceived as a final act of imperial benevolence; the proper and decent end to an empire-building project driven by the blood and sweat of Victorian moralism. The Commonwealth, for now, still remained, as Labour M.P. Maurice Edelman argued, ‘one of the great progressive manifestations in the history of mankind’.[48]

Off the record, however, Britain had had little choice but to end its extremely costly involvement with India; the end of the Raj was ushered in on terms dictated by the Anglo-American loan which brought Britain back from the brink of bankruptcy. When, in 1956, President Eisenhower granted Britain a much-needed IMF loan on the condition that Britain must subsequently effect a ceasefire in Egypt and withdraw from the region, the recognition that the British lion’s roar was now merely a whimper could no longer be confined to the corridors of power. As Prime Minister Anthony Eden commented in a memorandum, the humiliation of Suez ‘has not so much changed our fortunes as revealed realities’.[49] Britain was finally forced to recognise that it had ceded its place on the world stage to the United States and to the Soviet Union, the newly-minted superpowers who, each hovering over the big red button, were now engaged in a pact of mutually-assured destruction, a Cold War that would last almost half a century.

This was the beginning of the Anglo-American “special relationship”. Harold Macmillan, unwilling to sacrifice Britain’s national sovereignty for membership of the nascent EEC alongside “the Six”, chose instead to ally Britain with the United States in a relationship of dependence that he likened at the time to that of the Greeks and the Romans. The Suez adventure had unveiled not only Britain’s fallen geopolitical status but also its economic weakness. The two were inextricably linked; Britain no longer boasted the industrial muscle that had underwritten its empire-building project. Divested of its colonial dependents, Britain was now itself dependent on the grace and favour of more powerful nations. In 1963, Harold Wilson made his election pledge to forge a new Britain ‘in the white heat of the technological revolution’, but there were widespread concerns that Britain was to be left behind by this third industrial revolution whilst nascent superpowers like America, Japan and Germany, with its economic miracle, strode ahead.

[48] United Kingdom. Hansard Parliamentary Debates, June 6, 1962, vol. 661, cc. 484-608.
[49] PREM 11/1138, Eden memorandum, December 28, 1956.

The end of rationing in 1954 had marked the beginnings of a consumer boom and what would come to be known as the Age of Affluence. As 'affluence came hurrying on the heels of penury',[50] the 'new England' that J.B. Priestley had anticipated in his 1933 *English Journey*, that had been stalled by World War II and its aftershocks, was finally beginning to emerge. As the writer Wayland Young notes in a 1956 issue of *Encounter*:

> Since George Orwell published *The Road to Wigan Pier* in 1936, Wigan has changed from barefoot malnutrition to nylon and television, from hollow idleness to flush contentment. The landscape is the same all right, but as soon as the figures come on you are clean out of Orwell-land.[51]

Full employment and rising wages brought about a 'social revolution' in which prosperity was not only confined to the upper echelons of the middle classes but was enjoyed throughout the class system. But whilst at home, Britons enjoyed the plentiful bounties of full employment, affordable consumer durables and the welfare state, amongst commentators there was widespread anxiety about Britain's new positioning upon a radically altered world stage. Worries about British economic competitiveness abroad – encompassing concerns about the relative sluggishness of Britain's post-war economic recovery, the influx of cheap American imports and the decline of the British manufacturing industry – were rife and, in fact, had been throughout an apparent age of plenty. As Lawrence Black and Hugh Pemberton point out, the fact that Harold Macmillan's famous 1957 declaration that Britons had 'never had it so good' had been appended by the remark that '…what is beginning to worry some of us is "Is it too good to be true?" or perhaps I should say "Is it too good to last?"', is seldom remembered.[52]

Declinism in the sixties was by no means politically partisan. Whilst narratives of decline were mobilised by a perplexed and anxious Right in the service of "one nation" conservatism and imperial nostalgia, they gained currency too on a fragmented and disillusioned Left. High hopes that the end of the war would bring to

[50]Harry Hopkins, *The New Look: A Social History of the Forties and Fifties in Britain*, (London: Secker and Warburg, 1964), 309.
[51] Wayland Young, "This New England: Return to Wigan Pier," *Encounter* 6 (June 1956): 5.
[52] Lawrence Black and Hugh Pemberton, eds., *An Affluent Society? Britain's Post-War "Golden Age" Revisited* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), 2.

fruition the social democratic project of political reform, centralised economic planning and social engineering – a project that had been tentatively begun in the revolutionary fervour of the thirties and delayed by the outbreak of war – had been dashed by the failure of successive Conservative and Labour governments to deliver on the promises of the Beveridge Report of 1942. Subsequently, the "spirit of '45" which Ken Loach celebrates in his recent, eponymous film was felt to be something of a wash out. The sense of national unity forged in the air raid shelters and ration queues had fostered hopes of a new start for Britain. Exhausted Britons, however, were by no means keen to extend the heroic efforts and drastic measures of wartime. The recovery of hearths and homes could only ever be too lethargic for a population eager to enjoy the hard-won pleasures of peace. Despite the claims about the egalitarianism of the social democratic post-war consensus, the promise of social mobility and equality of opportunity remained a distant dream for the many and a mixed blessing for the few, upwardly-mobile avatars of welfare capitalism, who found themselves displaced in a society that remained riven by class conflict. The playwright Dennis Potter described the guilt-ridden, anxious plight of the scholarship boy in an essay entitled "Base Ingratitude?" in the *New Statesman* in 1958. The working-class undergraduate, Potter writes, 'cannot stomach the two languages that divide up the year, the torn loyalties and perpetual adjustments, the huge chasm between the classes'.[53]

'We are revolutionaries', lamented J.B. Priestley in the same publication in 1949, 'who have not swept away anything':

> We are Tories loudly denouncing taxes and regulations chiefly invented by Tory Ministers. We are Socialists busy creating peers and cheering pretty princesses. We are dreary self-righteous people with a passion for gin, tobacco, gambling and ballet. We are a nation of Sabbath-keepers who do not go to church. We toil to keep ourselves alive, with three tea-breaks, a five-day week and Wednesday afternoons off for the match. We spend so much time arguing about food we have no time to cook it properly. We spend fourpence on our culture, and several million pounds a year advertising it. We get free spectacles and false teeth and, for lack of hospital beds, may die in a

[53] Dennis Potter, 'Base Ingratitude?' *New Statesman*, May 3, 1958, 562.

> ditch. We have probably the best children and dullest adults in Europe. We are a Socialist-Monarchy that is really the last monument of Liberalism.[54]

Later in this thesis, I explore the ways in which Quin chronicles this tawdry and quietly desperate milieu with grim fascination in *Berg* and in *Three*. England, she writes, was a place 'where [she] could no longer belong'.[55] 'So much time', she laments in her unfinished novel, *Ghostworm*, 'spent in a country where hearing it meant just another day of voices commenting Cold [*sic*] today yes but not as cold as yesterday.'[56] She, like fellow English discontent Lawrence Durrell, wore heavily those 'cultural swaddling clothes'[57] which he calls 'the English death'. In his novel *The Black Book* (1959), Durrell seeks to shine the light under the 'phantasmagoria' of Englishry and anatomise the 'problems… of the anglo-saxon psyche' [*sic*]:

> Toward evening, when I walk down the row of suburban houses, watching the blinds lowered to salute the day's death, with no companion but that municipal donkey the postman, I find myself in a world of illusion whose furniture *can* only be ghosts. In the lounge the veterans sit like Stonehenge under the diffuse light of the lamps. Old women stuck like clumps of cactus in their chairs. *The Times* is spread out over the dead, like washing hung out on bushes to dry. Footsteps and voices alike trodden out in the dusty carpets; and the faint Aeolian sofas appealing to the statues. Night. The clock whirrs inside its greenhouse of glass, and the Japanese fans breathe a soft vegetable decay into the room. There is nothing to do, nothing to be done.[58]

Similarly, Martha Quest, in Doris Lessing's 1969 novel, *The Four-Gated City*, the fifth and final part of her "Children of Violence" cycle set in fifties Britain, arrives in a time-lagged and ruined London that is positively Patrick Hamilton-esque in its meanness and decrepitude; damp-to-the-bones and efflorescent with mould, the Thames runs

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[54] J.B. Priestley, *New Statesman* (July 1949), quoted in Robert Hewison, *In Anger: Culture in the Cold War 1945-1960* (London: Methuen, 1988), 4.
[55] Unpublished manuscript, Ann Quin, *Ghostworm*, box 52, folder 2-5, Calder & Boyars mss., Lilly Library, Indiana University.
[56] Ibid.
[57] Lawrence Durrell, *The Black Book* (London: Faber, 1972), 18.
[58] Durrell, *The Black Book*, 37.

with effluent and the sky is 'low [and] weeping'[59]. Here the press are convinced that Britain is being driven to rack and ruin by the 'grip of red-handed socialists'; Martha cannot 'pick up a newspaper or listen to the radio without feeling as if she were in the middle of the Russian revolution, or something not far from it in cataclysmic thoroughness'.[60] But in fact 'nothing much had changed' in this country;[61] she finds a milieu dilapidated and seedy, 'something not far off conditions described in books about the thirties'.[62] The Britain of *The Four Gated City* is one hopped up on its own myth and staunchly refusing to confront a sobering reality. A country deluding itself with the perceived threat of socialism, preoccupied with the reds under the bed, and wilfully ignoring the low-down state of the nation:

> [T]his was a country absorbed in myth, doped and dozing and dreaming, because if there was one common fact or factor underlying everything else, it was that nothing was as it was described – as if a spirit of rhetoric (because of the war?) had infected everything, made it impossible for any fact to be seen straight.[63]

The revelation of Stalin's war crimes in a "secret" speech by the Leader of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, Nikita Kruschev, in 1956, which brought allegations of a cover-up by the British Communist Party, and the Party's official endorsement of Russian intervention in the Hungarian Uprising of that year, caused a crisis of conscience amongst the British Left. Thousands denounced Marxism and almost one-fifth were driven to revoke their membership of the Party. The socialist movement in Britain was left wracked and in tatters and wholly disillusioned with party politics.

Perry Anderson and Tom Nairn, the figureheads of one faction of the British Left, which regrouped around the new *New Left Review*, shared this sense of crisis, but argued that existing accounts had focused on elaborating a diagnosis and had neglected to articulate the real and more complex causes of British decline. Furthermore, they proposed that this analytical blind spot and lack of historical

[59] Doris Lessing, *The Four-Gated City* (London: Panther, 1972), 28.
[60] Ibid., 25.
[61] Ibid.
[62] Ibid., 24.
[63] Ibid., 26

consciousness was endemic to British national culture and was, in turn, a crucial factor in the Left's malaise. In a series of essays published in the *New Left Review* over the course of the sixties, they developed what became known as the Anderson-Nairn thesis on British decline. According to them, the 'idiosyncratic' development of British society had produced an 'elastic and all-embracing hegemonic order' which, never challenged from below, had held a 'tranquil and unchallenged sovereignty' over a stultifying national culture.[64] An incomplete bourgeois revolution had not only failed to displace the agrarian ruling elite, but had transformed them into a powerful capitalist class. The industrial revolution had served only to allow an aspirational bourgeoisie to assimilate into the old aristocracy to form a new ruling bloc which was never under any real threat from an embryonic proletariat for whom 'Marxism came too late'.[65] This alliance was consolidated by imperialism and, uniquely amongst its European neighbours, had not been rocked by defeat or occupation throughout the twentieth century's two world wars.

Britain's economic difficulties, its struggles to confront a diminished post-imperial future and concerns about the moribund condition of the Left inspired national soul-searching. The national discourse during the period was dominated by narratives of decline. Amongst a raft of best-selling declinist disquisitions during the period were Michael Shank's Penguin special, *The Stagnant Society* (1961), Anthony Sampson's *Anatomy of Britain* (1962), *British Economic Policy Since the War* (1958) by Andrew Shonfield, Anthony Hartley's *A State of England* (1963), Nicholas Davenport's *The Split Society* (1964). In the run up to the 1964 general election, Penguin published a series of books entitled *What's Wrong with Britain* – including Eric Wigham's *What's Wrong with the Unions?* (1961) and *What's Wrong with British Industry?* (1964) by Rev Malik. Commentators debated the "suicide of the nation" – often even whilst attempting to distance themselves from the "state of the nation" mania – in an eponymous issue of "Encounter" edited by Arthur Koestler in 1963.

[64] Perry Anderson, "Origins of the Present Crisis," in *English Questions* (London: Verso, 1992), 30.
[65] Ibid., 23.

The 'Scumbled' National Life

Commentators suspected that Britain's economic problem was a mere token of a deeper and more intractable malaise; a spiritual crisis whose origins lay in the most fundamental assumptions of British society. As Koestler writes in his introduction:

> We hold… that psychological factors and cultural attitudes are at the root of the economic evils – *not* the loss of Empire, *not* the huge sums we must spend on armaments, *not* the misfortune that the steam engine was invented by an Englishman. "We are at the moment dying by the mind," wrote Ian Nairn, "it is the mind which must will the change."[66]

Britain's inability to do just that, to adapt to its new context, was a diagnosis shared by many during the period. For Koestler, the British lion had squandered its wartime victories and, preferring the comforts of self-deception to acknowledging ignoble truths, was back, ostrich-like as ever, to business as usual:

> At times of emergency he rises magnificently to the occasion. In between emergencies he buries his head in the sand with the tranquil conviction that Reality is a nasty word invented by foreigners.[67]

John Holloway, in a series of essays entitled "English Culture and the Feat of Transformation", published in *The Listener* in 1967, agrees. Unlike the nations of mainland Europe, where the experience of occupation had been 'great and transforming', where the old certainties had collapsed and 'reality [had] broken through', wartime in Britain, Holloway argues, had been 'a matter of sticking it out: Dunkirk, raids, rationing, refusing to let events prevent one from holding fast to the old ways.'[68] The war, he argues, had simply vindicated the status quo. A long and unbroken history, uninterrupted by the revolutions, occupations and invasions that had transformed Britain's European counterparts, had produced a traditionalist

[66] Arthur Koestler, "The Lion and the Ostrich," in *Encounter* 21 (July 1963): 5.
[67] Ibid.
[68] John Holloway, "British Culture and the Feat of Transformation-1: The Dickensian Environment," *The Listener*, January 12, 1967, 47.

culture that seemed to be content with quietly revelling in its own quiddity. Britain, according to Koestler, had not become a meritocracy but had remained a 'mediocracy' of bumbling Sunday drivers, putterers and dilletantes, who were inveterately *manqué*, busying themselves with their parochial peccadillos, positively hostile to efficiency, rationalism and expertise and by no means capable of withstanding the 'white heat' of the scientific revolution anticipated in Harold Wilson's era-defining speech in 1963.

In an essay entitled "Get Out and Push!" published in Tom Maschler's polemical state-of-the-nation collection, *Declaration* (1957), film-maker and co-founder of the Free Cinema movement, Lindsay Anderson, describes Britain's post-war, post-imperial spiritual homecoming:

> Let's face it; coming back to Britain is always something of an ordeal. It ought not be, but it is. And you don't have to be a snob to feel it. It isn't just the food, the sauce bottles on the café tables, and the chips with everything… After all, there are things that matter even more than these; and returning from the continent, today in 1957, we feel these strongly too. A certain civilised (as opposed to cultured), quality in everyday life: a certain humour; an atmosphere of tolerance, decency and relaxation. A solidity, even a warmth. We have come home. But the price we pay is high.
>
> For coming back to Britain is also, in many respects, like going back to the nursery. The outside world, the dangerous world, is shut away: its sounds are muffled… Nanny lights the fire, and sits herself down with a nice cup of tea and yesterday's *Daily Express*; but she keeps half an eye on us too.[69]

An addled, conservative elite that was mired in an imperial nostalgia for some prelapsarian past and hubristically convinced of its own continuity was perceived to have instituted what was commonly known at the time as a "cult of amateurism". Sampson, in *Anatomy of Britain*, describes a nation dominated by an overweening,

[69] Lindsay Anderson, "Get out and give it a push!" in *Declaration*, ed. Tom Maschler (London: MacGibbon and Kee, 1957), 153.

out-dated and archaic establishment, which had become 'dangerously out of touch with the public, insensitive to change, and wrapped up in their private rituals'.[70]

> The civil service, the palace, the honours system, have all projected an apparently unchanged and permanent world; while Britain becomes again a competitive trading nation, the weight of tradition and prestige remains in an imperial context. Of all the ideas which the Victorians fostered, surely the most dangerous was permanence – whether of Britain's supremacy, of consols or of the "permanent way". While the sense of the future and the radicalism of the Victorians evaporated, the idea of permanence remained. Railways, family firms, coal mines or regiments all acquired the safe, unchanging character of a country estate.[71]

Despite the paranoia about encroaching totalitarian regimes that was pervasive during the era which W.H. Auden christened the "age of anxiety", for these commentators *what's wrong with Britain* had less to do with a sinister and all-powerful centralised state control, and more to do with concerns about a nation where public pomp and pageantry concealed a hidden seat of power that was diffuse and elusive and perpetuated by bureaucratic conformism. British public life was governed by the 'ubiquitous figure of Muddle' and administered by an unofficial officialdom of mandarins and middle managers – 'thousands of men muttering about their duty "to whom they serve"'.[72] The threat came not from coolly technocratic efficiency, but from the muddled British credo that Sampson describes as an example of the credo, 'it's odd but it works'.[73]

During the period, the public school, with its old school ties and old boys' clubs that initiated successive generations into the ranks of the elect, became the emblematic institutional base of the establishment's insidious and intractable power. In the 1968 film *If…*, named after the Rudyard Kipling poem which celebrates traditional British values, the public school functions as the *mise-en-scène* for a furious indictment of the famous stoicism, stiff upper lip and sense of moral superiority of the British establishment that are, for director, Lindsay Anderson, mere

[70] Anthony Sampson, *Anatomy of Britain* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1962), 638.
[71] Ibid., 621.
[72] Ibid., 615.
[73] Ibid., 623.

cover for rampant chauvinism, snobbery, lassitude and barbarism. In the words of protagonist, Mick Travis, addressed to head Whip, Rowntree:

> The thing I hate about you, Rowntree, is the way you give Coca Cola to your Scum and your best teddy bear to Oxfam and expect us to lick your frigid fingers for the rest of your frigid life.[74]

Based upon Anderson's own experiences of his despised alma mater, Cheltenham College, the film is, in part, an almost proto-Foucauldian study of the ways in which social control is disseminated, replicated and internalised amongst the 'docile bodies' of the school pupils within this citadel of the elect. The headmaster of the school is remote and slippery, eager to pay lip service to the rapid societal changes of the present and espouses open-mindedness, fair punishment, progressivism, claiming to sympathise with the long hairs' 'blameless form of existentialism'.[75] However, underneath his laissez-faire "decency" operates a draconian regime where "college spirit" is instilled via fascistic spectacle, inscrutable rituals and war games. Enforced public conformity is matched by private perversity – the lascivious matron is brought close to orgasm by recorder music, a female teacher wanders the dorms naked whilst fondling the boys' belongings. The college's moral compass is provided by a slavering pederast chaplain and the energies of dissent are put down by ritual humiliation, cold showers, regular beatings, brisk cross-country runs, the mediated violence of the rugby pitch and, perhaps most evocatively, the march of the jack boot. The fervent emotional lives of these teenage boys are furtively channelled into homoerotic longing. Discipline is administered and punishment delivered upon the unquestioningly obedient "Scum" of the lower forms by a band of dandified and sadistic senior "Whips" in the name of a credo of 'self-reliance, service [and] self-sacrifice' best summed up by war hero General Denison's Founder's Day benediction:

> Today it is fashionable to belittle tradition…The old orders that made our nation a living force are for the most part scorned... But what have they got to put in their place? […] Freedom is the heritage of every Englishman… but we

[74] *If…*, DVD, directed by Lindsay Anderson (1968; London: Criterion, 2007).
[75] Ibid.

> won't stay free unless we're ready to fight. And you won't be any good as fighters unless you know something about discipline, the habit of obedience, how to give orders and how to take them. Never mind the sneers of the cynics, let us just be true to honour, duty, national pride. We still need loyalty, we still need tradition, when we look around the world today what do we see? We see bloodshed confusion and decay… England, our England doesn't change so easily… it makes me jolly proud that there is still a tradition here that has not changed and by God it isn't going to change.[76]

Literature: The 'Low Church' of English Culture

In these declinist narratives of the period, literary intellectuals were frequently fingered as the key culprits behind Britain's cultural deficiency. They were perceived to occupy a uniquely privileged position within an anachronistic cultural idiom of 'constitutional conservatism, gentlemanly capitalism, intellectual elitism and a misplaced superior self-understanding'.[77] The literary intelligentsia were seen as a central pillar supporting what Holloway refers to as Britain's nostalgic and regressive 'scumbled national life'.[78] Margaret Drabble, in an article in praise of Angus Wilson's clear-eyed and merciless depiction of the hypocrisies and foibles of the mid-century scene writes: 'The possibility of writing a contemporary novel about a contemporary Britain seemed remote, perhaps not even desirable.' [79]

In an essay in the underground newspaper, *Bananas*, Nairn characterises the English literary intelligentsia as a unique and formidable presence within British culture, whose work was concerned with the creation and propagation of a 'myth-world' of 'moralised romanticism' which would '[bolster] the ailing body' of British society:

> Metaphorically, one might say that there is no very visible High Church of culture in England, with correctly attired Bishops and Priests, and all the

[76] Ibid.
[77] Arthur Aughey, *The Politics of Englishness* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 63.
[78] Holloway, "English Culture," 48.
[79] Margaret Drabble, "Angus Wilson: Cruel-kind Enemy of False Sentiment and Self-Delusion," *New York Times*, January 29, 1995, accessed February 28, 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/books/97/10/19/home/drabble-awilson.html.

> formal rituals. Probably for this reason, there is no very striking anti-Church either, no determined and iconoclastic *avant-garde*. But there *is* a formidable and effective low church of English culture, administered more informally by multitudes of low priests. Their real power is as great as that of any State culture has ever been. Does the culture-landscape look empty here? Search more closely: there are few 'intellectuals', but cassocked huntsmen and fiddling priests are everywhere, zealously shaping a national mentality.[80]

The British elite, argues Koestler, quoting Disraeli, are all literary men through and through:

> Old Struthonians are Amateurs and Gentlemen; they fight valiant rearguard-actions in the merry civil war between Eggheads and Engineers; and they see to it that their sons are educated in the same spirit, by becoming thoroughly immersed in Homer's universe, but not in the universe of Newton. Thus equipped, they may hope for a place in the sun and add their voices to the "plaintive treble of the Treasury Bench".[81]

The tensions between these two competing visions of Britain – on the one hand the 'Egghead' patrician establishment who were held to have assumed guardianship of the "traditional" culture and inculcated their values via a traditionalist education system and, on the other, a burgeoning class of 'Engineers' who comprised a future-facing technocracy with little time or inclination for Shakespeare – were ubiquitous during the period. But as Guy Ortolano points out in his recent book, the "Two cultures controversy" that was to colour so much of the discourse of the intellectual culture of the period was in fact a reiteration of an age-old clash of civilisations, the re-emergence of which was prompted by anxieties about a Britain in terminal decline.[82]

Perhaps the most damning indictment of literary culture came from the Cambridge physicist and novelist, C.P. Snow, whose 1959 Rede Lecture, 'The Two

[80] Tom Nairn, "The English Literary Intelligentsia," in *Bananas*, ed. Emma Tennant (London: Blond and Briggs, 1977), 58-9.
[81] Koestler, "The Lion and the Ostrich," 8.
[82] Guy Ortolano, *The Two Cultures Controversy: Science, Literature and Cultural Politics in Postwar Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

Cultures and the Scientific Revolution', formed the first broadside in the debates. Snow's technocratic critique of literary culture pointedly (and confusingly) conflates the 'literary intelligentsia' and what he calls the 'traditional culture'. He argues that British intellectual life had become dominated by a fundamentally reactionary literary intelligentsia which was mired in intellectual decadence. 'Natural luddites'[83] they had wrinkled their noses in aesthetic revulsion at the industrial age and absconded into navel-gazing obsessions with their 'own unique tragedy'.[84] This culture had been dominated 'for a generation', Snow argues, by a politically-malign literary sensibility, typified by apocalyptic modernists like Yeats, Pound and Wyndham Lewis, which had produced the 'most imbecilic expressions of anti-social feeling'.[85] Against the charge that 'the influence of all they represent [brought] Auschwitz that much closer', Snow finds himself unable to 'defend the indefensible'.[86] Scientific culture, on the other hand, is 'tough and good and determined';[87] 'there is a moral component right in the grain of science itself',[88] Snow argues, and 'the future in its bones'.[89]

His vision of a 'traditional culture' dominated by anti-democratic modernist intelligentsia is, however, somewhat off the mark. Far more prevalent within British intellectual culture was a tradition of dissenting middle class liberal radicalism – a creed not so very far off that of Snow himself – which tended to be nationalistically-inflected with a strongly-held belief in British exceptionalism. This humanist tradition was a 'surrogate religion' which was, Bryan Appleyard argues, 'founded upon a kind of visionary panic at the spectacle of the world being mechanized, centralized, secularized and drained of values.'[90] A British tradition of liberal humanist thought – which attempted to temper an overarching ethical commitment to the human freedom and dignity of an essential and universal Man with a scepticism about mass politics, a theoretical modesty about sweeping abstractions and an individualist faith in the primacy of human relationships – had made frequent recourse to literature and literary history, and specifically to the novel, pressing them into service as communitarian models of dissent. For a lineage of thinkers that culminated in the

[83] C.P. Snow, *The Two Cultures* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 22.
[84] Ibid., 7.
[85] Ibid., 8.
[86] Ibid., 7.
[87] Ibid.
[88] Ibid., 13.
[89] Ibid., 11.
[90] Bryan Appleyard, *The Culture Club: Crisis in the Arts* (London: Faber & Faber, 1984), 21.

twentieth century with the Eliot-Leavis orthodoxy and the English Cultural Studies of Raymond Williams, Richard Hoggart and E.P. Thompson, literature was the central component and privileged object of knowledge of an English tradition of *Kulturkritik*.

Fiction and 'Radical Earnestness'

Come of age in the nineteenth century as the literary expression of the secular, individualist spirit of modern capitalism, the novel had been a vehicle for social mimesis amongst the nascent middle classes, housed in the book, the Gutenberg era's first mass-produced object. In its classic realist mode, novelistic fiction had both reflected and shaped a British creed, one which tempered an overarching ethical commitment to the human freedom and dignity of an essential and universal man with a suspicion of mass politics, a theoretical modesty about sweeping abstractions and an individualist faith in the primacy of human relationships. Its genre-defining characteristic of dissonance held the novel's allegiances to both the fictional and the empirical in a delicate synthesis. Characteristically dialogical and sceptical, literary realism had been a kind of ideal space for the novelistic modelling of liberal humanism's central proposition of man as the supreme author of meaning and action. It was uniquely capable of acknowledging 'the plenitude, diversity and individuality of human beings in society, together with the belief that such characteristics are good as ends in themselves.'[91]

These British intellectuals tended to do their thinking, and their dissenting, both *in* and *through* the novel. 'Time and time again the English intellectual tries to explain his ideas or interpret those of others by resituating them in his literature', writes Fred Inglis.[92] For its ability to apply ideas to experience, fictional narrative became the 'necessarily domestic idiom'[93] of a 'demotic liberalism'[94] predisposed to prefer practice to theory. Fictional narrative was capable of holding in suspension the 'triple tensions' of English thought: 'between dissent and practicality, between individuals and institutions, between experience and hope'.[95] Its world-creating

[91] William J. Harvey, *Character and the Novel* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1965), 24.
[92] Fred Inglis, *Radical Earnestness: English Social Theory, 1889-1980* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1982), 22. .
[93] Ibid., 22.
[94] Ibid., 20.
[95] Ibid., 23.

capacity lent itself to a characteristically Fabian sensibility which held that the 'rational belief in and striving towards a better life and world is only possible if that life and world are not only imaginable but *feasible*.'[96] Fiction was a cornerstone of what Peter Ackroyd has called the 'strange alchemy of humanism, in which aesthetic standards can be transformed into spiritual and social needs'.[97]

Against the familiar cliché that in Britain the public intellectual is a non-native or at the very least extinct, breed, historians like Stefan Collini in a series of books including *Public Moralists* (1991), *English Pasts* (1999) and *Absent Minds* (2006), and Inglis in his *Radical Earnestness* (1982), have sought to map this British tradition of thought, and have identified the ways in which it makes extensive use of literature and literary criticism as its object of study and its parlance. Moreover, they suggest that it is this literary, as opposed to theoretical, cast of mind which might well account for our failure to acknowledge this indigenous tradition of progressive thought, or the persistence with which it is misunderstood as merely the domain of the crude empiricist or sentimental patriot.

What Collini designates as the 'Whig interpretation of English literature' emerged,[98] he argues, concomitantly with the Victorian era's 'moment of Englishness'.[99] At the time, a patriotic mood of national self-confidence that was galvanised by Britain's imperial success enmeshed with a pressing need for national self-definition, an Englishness ripe for export that would both bind the polity and society of a vastly expanded "Britain" and would power (and legitimate) the imperial project together with anxieties about the rapid social transformations effected by industrial capitalism.[100] These historical circumstances provided the impetus, Collini argues, for the production of a national, patriotic consensus that was to be achieved via the invocation of a tradition of English literature as the distinctive embodiment and expression of English national identity.[101] This admixture of nationalism and moralism sought to transform the base metals of the local and the temporary into the precious, the universal and the timeless, via affirmations of the distinct moral properties of English literature. By projecting these values forwards and backwards

[96] Ibid., 22; his italics.
[97] Peter Ackroyd, *Notes for a New Culture* (London: Vision, 1976), 117.
[98] Stefan Collini, *Public Moralists: Political Thought and Intellectual Life in Britain, 1850-1930* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 342.
[99] Ibid., 347.
[100] Ibid.
[101] Ibid.

into a state of pseudo-permanence, nineteenth-century commentators sought to "recover" the nation's timeless and essential soul via its literary history. After the collapse of Victorian consensus and the rise of mass culture, the literary canon became the terrain upon which the conflicts of cultural criticism were played out: 'literary criticism in its broadest sense has been acknowledged as the chief idiom for cultural criticism in mid-twentieth-century Britain'.[102]

This creed had weathered successive crises of identity since its Victorian heyday. Liberalism's cheerful optimism about the inevitability of progress, couched in its belief in a democracy composed of rational individuals and responsible intellectual elites, was to be systematically challenged by the forces of history from the Victorian era onwards. Its discourse of self-reliance, seeded from classical liberalism's faith in free markets and civil liberties, clashed with the reforming spirit of the era, typified in the emergence of the Labour movement and the formation of the Fabian Society. World War I and the Great Depression eventually forced liberals to acknowledge the need for state-level intervention to regulate markets and ameliorate social ills and effected the move towards a Keynesian social democracy. George Dangerfield, in his eponymous 1935 book, famously declared the 'strange death of liberal England'. That said, although in party political terms liberalism was to face a century in the wilderness, a broader liberal humanist sensibility persisted. It confronted the challenge of modernity's mass society and mechanisation with a kind of detached contempt. Accounts of modernism which emphasise the movement's challenge to liberal humanism have tended to obscure the ways in which modernism was itself shaped by and implicated in this tradition of thought. Far more prevalent – if more modest – however, was a form of artistic rebellion seeded in the spiritual crisis amongst genteel Bloomsburyites (Virginia Woolf and E.H. Forster, in particular) who remained broadly committed to the tenets of liberal humanism whilst self-consciously elegising its passing.

From the twenties and thirties onwards, a tradition of thought that had originated as a status-quo-challenging defence of the new social order of modern capitalism had begun to appeal to the novel instead for its abilities to manifest in fiction an 'imagined community' of shared, stable values as a bulwark against a

[102] Stefan Collini, *English Pasts: Essays in History and Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 65.

hostile and atomised present of mass culture, mass media and Americanisation. As Francis Mulhern argues, this tradition of thought

> narrowed, in stages, to the lament for an irrecoverable past, as its actual social bases weakened, its claims mounted towards the absolute… by the middle of the twentieth century it had been reduced to the desperate self-assertion of a specialized minority… as the only sure trustees of an unattainable general spiritual welfare.[103]

In F.R. Leavis, who entered the fray in 1962 with his own Richmond Lecture entitled "Two Cultures? The Significance of C.P. Snow", Snow could scarcely have found a more fitting adversary. Leavis savaged the literary merits of Snow-the-novelist's own realistic fictions then went on to reiterate the project he had pursued for three decades: that of establishing "University English" as the 'humane centre' of the disciplines and, more broadly, as the universal ego of culture. Under Leavis' tutelage, the discipline of University English sought to claim responsibility for a literary culture that was freighted with an extraordinary significance. Its protectorate was to be nothing less than what Leavis called the 'living culture', a communal culture that had been lost to the industrial revolution and of which literature was the highest expression: 'In their keeping… is the language, the changing idiom, upon which fine living depends, and which distinction of spirit is thwarted and incoherent. By "culture" I mean the use of such a language.'[104]

Leavis' metaphysic, which came to shape the pedagogic tradition of English Studies, elevated the "Great Tradition" from a nationalist project to a universalist (and yet nationalistically inflected) one, looking to literary history to supply a communal system of values and beliefs that might could redeem a fallen civilisation. Leavis believed that in the literary canon the last surviving vestiges of this common culture could be found, recovered and preserved by a 'minority culture': 'Upon this minority depends our power of profiting by the finest human experience of the past; they keep alive the subtlest and most perishable parts of the tradition.'[105] Modernism – that is, a particular (i.e. non-Bloomsbury) version of it - was central to Leavis' vision

[103] Francis Mulhern, *Culture/Metaculture* (London: Routledge, 2002), 65-66.
[104] F.R. Leavis, *For Continuity* (Cambridge: Gordon Fraser/Minority Press, 1933), 14-5.
[105] F.R. Leavis, *Mass Civilisation and Minority Culture* (London: Heffer, 1930), 3-5.

of culture. In his championing of T.S. Eliot and then of D.H. Lawrence, he was a key figure in the institutionalisation of modernism in Britain. In what was, for Leavis, as the inheritor of T.S. Eliot's myth of a fallen modernity, an irretrievably postlapsarian and barbaric 'mass civilisation', modernism was pegged as the antidote to what he perceived as the 'quack enlightenment, stock opinion and formulaic gratifications'[106] of the mass media. Modernist poetics, Leavis claimed, had a unique capability of accessing the spiritual essence of civilisation.

Literature, and, indeed – as Alan Sinfield has argued[107] – Leavis would also be central to the 'left-culturalist' project of English Cultural Studies, although the ways in which the pioneers of English Cultural Studies, Williams, Hoggart and Thompson engaged with both of these diverged dramatically. Emerging from the ashes of the British Communist Party after 1956, the Birmingham School sought, on the one hand, to dethrone an Eliot-Leavis critical hegemony and, on the other, and in response to their disillusionment with Communist Marxism, to reinvent what Sinfield calls 'socialism with a British face'.[108] This nativised socialism moved away from the economic base/superstructure paradigm and towards an emphasis on culture. British left-culturalism held that class is fundamentally a cultural, rather than simply economic, construct and sought to emphasis the role of human agency in the creation of human reality. It insists, like E.P. Thompson, that '[t]hese cultural questions are questions about life'.[109]

Although pitching itself resolutely against the Leavisite orthodoxy's elitist vision of a rarefied culture desperately attempting to assert itself against a fallen civilisation, the influence of Leavis, and, indeed, of Matthew Arnold, on the Birmingham School, was explicit and far-ranging. Whilst broadening the scope of their version of culture beyond the realms of the strictly literary, like their predecessors, literature and literary study retained a uniquely privileged place within their political vision. Hoggart (whose preferred title for his most famous work was not *The Uses* but *The* Ab*uses of Literacy* which would have sat quite comfortably with Leavis) shared his progenitor's elegiac vision of an organic community, but situated his own golden age amongst the "authentic" culture of the pre-war working classes

[106] Francis Mulhern, *Culture/Metaculture*, p. 16.
[107] Alan Sinfield, *Literature, Politics and Culture in Postwar Britain* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1989), 241.
[108] Ibid., 235.
[109] E.P. Thompson, "The New Left," *New Reasoner* 9 (Summer 1959), 11.

as opposed to Leavis' more distant – although, in a sense, no more mythical – agrarian ideal. He, like Leavis, remained committed to the superiority of literature as a mode of cultural expression, even whilst attempting to broaden the gamut of what that might constitute, beginning to set out the parameters of a sociology of literature.

For Raymond Williams, the realist novel was a space in which to manifest the ideals of social democracy. In his essay, 'Realism and the Contemporary Novel', Williams, after György Lukács, calls for the reclamation of a 'progressive and revolutionary' realism,[110] against the burgher epic with which the category is more commonly associated. He describes how the separating out of the realist novel into its personal and social functions has reflected a crisis in the relationship between the individual and society. Elaborating upon his 1958 dictum of "culture is ordinary" – and anticipating the constructivist theories of Berger and Luckman which became prominent five years later with the publication of their *The Social Construction of Reality* – Williams argues that if the idea that '[r]eality is continually established by common effort' is now a given, then 'art is one of the highest forms of this process'.[111] The proper function of the novel, he argues, is the attempt to reintegrate the individual and society in communicable form, ascribed to its unique capacity of 'creative discovery'.[112]

Closing Time in the Gardens

Amongst literary intellectuals, however, this faith in literature as, as Williams writes, a 'court of human appeal',[113] had lapsed. In his "Comment" prefacing the December 1947 issue of *Horizon*, editor Cyril Connolly laments a 'Twilight of the Arts' that was indexed to the 'twilight of a civilisation'.[114] His year-end review of an *annus horribilis* declared that, with few exceptions, 'the catalogue of that branch of our literature which can be described as "experimental" is complete.'[115] He sees portents of a 'new Dark Age' lasting 'several hundred years'. In the immediate aftermath of World War

[110] Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1961), 275.
[111] Ibid., 288.
[112] Ibid., 305.
[113] Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society, 1780-1950* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1983), xviii.
[114] Cyril Connolly, "Comment," *Horizon* 16 (December 1947): 299.
[115] Ibid., 299.

II, Connolly describes a culture afflicted by a profound crisis of confidence. The 'leveled, diminished world' World War II had left, as Hugh Kenner describes, was one of 'shared poverty, blunt scissors, blunt minds, numb hopes'.[116]

The effect, argued Connolly, was a literary scene ossified by the 'spiritual problem of the artist in a world without hope'.[117] Three years later, in the final issue of *Horizon*, Connolly famously called 'closing time in the gardens of the West'. From now on, he declared, the 'artist will be judged only by the resonance of his solitude or the quality of his despair.'[118] His complaint is indicative of a mood of profound *kulturpessimismus* that afflicted successive generations of Anglo-American literary commentators during this mid-century period. Accounts of the British post-war period are dominated therefore by twinned narratives of decline, which index a perceived declension in Britain's literary vitality to the contraction of its geopolitical clout. Britain's continuing retreat from imperial power, the threat of Americanisation with the resurgence of mass culture during the fifties, the carving up of "old Europe" as part of the post-war settlement and the new superpowers pact of mutually assured destruction were amongst the factors contributing to a profound crisis of confidence that came to be reflected in a post-war literature characterised as self-consciously unambitious and parochial in outlook.

The literary Left were in a state of collapse. As a twinned aesthetics and ideology of compromise, the fortunes of liberal humanism and the novel were so tightly intertwined they were widely held to be coterminous. Convinced, even complacent, about their creed's continuity and permanence, believing it to be so ingrained in Western civilisation as to be self-evident, British liberal humanists had abided modernity's mass society and mechanisation with a kind of detached contempt. When the incipient threat of totalitarianism and the squalor of the thirties began to press the delicate logic of their creed, such a stance, for some, amounted to so much ineffectual handwringing. For Evelyn Waugh, liberal humanism during this period appeared to have 'two peevish spirits whispering into either ear.'[119] As he writes, in a review of Cyril Connolly's era-defining *Enemies of Promise* (1938):

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[116] Kenner, *Sinking Island*, 241.
[117] Connolly, "Editorial," 299.
[118] Cyril Connolly, "Comment," *Horizon* 20 (December 1949-January 1950): 362.
[119] Evelyn Waugh, "Present Discontents," review of *Enemies of Promise*, by Cyril Connolly, reprinted in *A Little Order*, ed. Donat Gallagher (London: Eyre Methuen, 1977), 126.

> [Connolly] is divided in his mind. On the one hand he sees English life as a secure, hierarchic organization, with, at the top, a glittering world where the artist should by right preen himself. An artist should have ease and appreciation; he should travel and dine well and be continuously in and out of love. On the other hand, he sees English life as rotten and tottering; the physical and moral dangers so imminent and appalling that the artist can only hope for a complete change for his life to be possible; a change which Mr. Connolly inclines to think may be for the worse.[120]

During World War II and its aftermath, however, liberal humanism had found its vanishing point. For a literary intelligentsia reeling from the atrocities perpetrated during war time, the onset of the Cold War, with its incipient threat of totalitarianism from three sides – fascism, communism and McCarthyism – together with fears about the erosion of the middle class literary intelligentsia's traditional milieu and metier by the Welfare State, and the explosion of mass culture were thought to pose a mortal threat to the literary intellectual's material, economic and political conditions and, more fundamentally, to their freedom.

The Anglo-American sense of vindication at victory for moral virtue in what became known as the "Good War" was tempered by the profound and uneasy questions that were raised by the unravelling of its aftermath. As the scope and nature of the atrocities perpetrated by both Axis and Allied forces emerged – the coolly rational modernity of genocide in the concentrations camps; the totality of atomic devastation at Hiroshima and Nagasaki; the extent of collaborationism in Europe and beyond; the indiscriminate brutality inflicted upon prisoner, partisan, resister and civilian alike – Britain and America were confronted with the uncomfortable realisation that the categories of "good" and "evil" were no longer, and had never been, as simple as "us" versus "the Hun". Moreover, the Holocaust had rendered these historic binaries of moral virtue obsolete and had initiated a new moral category that Issac Rosenfeld calls a 'terror beyond evil'.[121] As Rex Warner writes in 1946:

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[120] Ibid.

[121] Isaac Rosenfeld, "Terror Beyond Evil," in *An Age of Enormity: Life and Writing in the Forties and Fifties*, ed. Theodore Solotaroff (New York, NY: World Publishing, 1962), 198.

> There is no longer to be any truck with the dogmatic and generalised belief in a God to whom all human souls are of equal value… no more use for the liberal "scientific" notions that the interests of mankind are inseparable… no longer any talk of gentleness, of international good will and the like… Mere iterations of European ideals of universal love and justice will cut no more ice after this war…[122]

Amongst perplexed and anxious Anglo-American liberals, it became apparent that the events of World War II would not only redraw geopolitical topographies and upset the balance of global hegemony, but would raise more profound and uneasy questions about nationhood and nationalism and, even more fundamentally, would call to account the very notion of being human.

'No poetry after Auschwitz', goes the famous dictum attributed to Theodor Adorno, which in fact, it is important to note, has been paraphrased from a longer and more complex remark made within the concluding passages of his 1949 essay, "Cultural Criticism and Society", in which he actually states that to persist in the cultural production of a culture that produced Auschwitz is to participate by denial in the perpetuation and reification of that barbaric culture.[123] It is perhaps even more pertinent to pose the question of if, as George Steiner puts it, '[the] house of classic humanism, the dream of reason which animated western society, have largely broken down',[124] then what would become of its house organ, the novel?

> Following on the epic and on verse-drama, the novel has been the third principal genre of western literature. It expressed and, in part, shaped the habits of feeling and language of the western *bourgeoisie* from Richardson to Thomas Mann. In it, the dreams and nightmares of the mercantile ethic, of middle-class privacy, and of the monetary-sexual conflicts and delights of industrial society have their monument. With the decline of these ideals and

[122] Rex Warner, *The Cult of Power* (London: John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1946), 19-20.
[123] Theodor Adorno, "Cultural Criticism and Society," in *Prisms*, trans. Samuel Weber and Shierry Weber (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1981), 34.
[124] George Steiner, *Language and Silence: Essays on Language, Literature and the Inhuman* (London: Yale University Press, 1998), ix.

> habits into a phase of crisis and partial rout, the genre is losing much of its vital bearing.[125]

Bradbury argues that the mood during the period was 'one of a broad, cohesive liberalism and anti-totalitarianism', where '[e]xtreme attitudes, whether of the Left or the Right were now in distrust'[126]. That said, however, the liberalism that was the traditional creed of the literary intellectual was now imbued with a fear and self-doubt that was more liable to admit T.S. Eliot's charge, posed earlier in his *The Idea of Christian Society* (1936), that disparaged the essentially negative version of liberty available in liberal societies and suggested that, in setting up freedom as its axiomatic value, liberalism had created an ethical vacuum into which the forces of Fascism had flowed. The British liberal Left admonished itself for its hubris in allowing fascism to slip through and for supporting Soviet Communism after 1956.

Amongst but not limited to an older generation of pre-war intellectual mandarins, traditionalists for whom the Eliot-Leavis orthodoxy still held true, the Welfare State's new commitment to culture with the establishment of the Committee for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts (CEMA) – which in 1945 became the Arts Council, chaired by the architect of welfare capitalism, John Maynard Keynes – was felt to be no less of a threat. This older generation of writers feared that the freedoms and the securities of their traditional *rentier* class milieu were being rapidly eroded. That state intervention in the arts would dismantle the fragile world of patronised dissent, and render the discourse of the middle-class dissident samizdat, replacing it with that which was state-funded and government committee-approved.
Their quasi-mythical idea of culture, passed down direct from Arnold and Southey via Leavis and Eliot, was being usurped by something rather more prosaic; a culture that was administered to the masses "for their own good" – like a daily spoonful of castor oil – alongside their NHS spectacles and break-time milk. Their vision of culture as a sacred and timeless repository of values and beliefs inherited by an organically-elected meritocracy was being replaced by that of a culture that was centrally planned and subsidised by a new class of government bureaucrats. The belief amongst this would-be priesthood, expressed by T.S. Eliot in his *Notes Toward the Definition of Culture* in 1948 that 'culture was the one thing that we

[125] Ibid., 421-2.
[126] Bradbury, *No, Not Bloomsbury*, 198.

cannot deliberately aim at'[127] was being usurped by the endorsement amongst a new clergy of government mandarins of a more consciously worked-out pluralisation of culture.

Amongst the younger generation of left-leaning literary intellectuals, too, the welfare state was not unproblematically embraced. Iris Murdoch, in her 1961 essay, 'Against Dryness', writes that the Welfare State represents the triumph of a "bad" liberalism, one based in a theory of man as a 'brave naked will surrounded by an easily comprehended empirical world'.[128] Commenting upon the politics of welfare capitalism, Murdoch praises the welfare state's socialist accomplishments, but argues that they, in the end, amount to 'a set of thoroughly desirable but limited ends'.[129] Based on a 'debilitated form of Mill's equation: happiness equals freedom equals personality',[130] for Murdoch the Welfare State represents the triumph of "bad" liberalism and has resulted in the 'impoverishment of thinking and language' and the decay of a 'moral and political vocabulary'[131] that was typical of an age in which sincerity had usurped truth.

The quandary of the writer and of the novel after the end of liberal humanism preoccupied many of the self-conscious fictions of the period, but perhaps nowhere are the hypocrisies and handwringing of middle-class literary intellectuals more mercilessly depicted than by the poison of Angus Wilson's pen in his debut novel, *Hemlock and After* (1952) which questions liberalism's adequacy (and integrity) as the moral compass of a "new Britain" and the capacity of the Welfare State to support its cultural life. In it, man of letters, Bernard Sands, finds himself caught between a need for authority and a knee-jerk distaste for power. Having obtained a government grant to set up a writer's centre, Vardon Hall, with the British intellectual's characteristic antipathy to institutional power, he congratulates himself upon his triumph over the 'world of Kafka's "They"'.[132] '[V]ery gratifying to an anarchist humanist', Sands comments, 'to have the State eating out of [my] hand'.[133] But in the novel Sands is systematically challenged by the bureaucratic

[127] T.S. Eliot, *Notes Toward the Definition of Culture* (London: Faber & Faber, 1948), 19.
[128] Iris Murdoch, "Against Dryness," in *The Novel Today: Contemporary Writers on Modern Fiction* ed. Malcolm Bradbury (London: Fontana, 1977), 26.
[129] Ibid., 26.
[130] Ibid.
[131] Ibid.
[132] Angus Wilson, *Hemlock and After* (London: Faber & Faber, 2012), 11.
[133] Ibid., 12.

machinations of government, which, in turn, expose the flaws in his liberal humanist vision.

Writing 'Inside the Whale'

The literary intelligentsia's disillusionment with the collapse of its ideals was matched not only by anxieties about the curtailment of its freedoms, but also by a rather more fundamental crisis of selfhood. This threat, posed from, variously, encroaching totalitarian regimes, mass media, advertising and technology and the state interventions of welfare capitalism, was felt particularly keenly amongst a literary intelligentsia whose thinking about the role of the writer tended to rest upon a characteristically romantic modernist conception of the artist as a unique and privileged seer. As George Orwell, in his classic wartime essay in unlikely praise of Henry Miller, "Inside the Whale", argues:

> What is quite obviously happening, war or no war, is the break-up of *laissez-faire* capitalism and of the liberal-Christian culture… Almost certainly we are moving into an age of totalitarian dictatorships – an age in which freedom of thought will be at first a deadly sin and later on a meaningless abstraction. 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… from now onwards the all-important fact for the creative writer is going to be that this is not a writer's world. That does not mean that he cannot help to bring the new society into being, but he can take no part in the process *as a writer*. For *as a writer* he is a liberal, and what is happening is the destruction of liberalism.[134]

[134] George Orwell, "Inside the Whale," in *Collected Essays* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1961), 157.

The very idea of the privacy and the integrity of a discrete and autonomous self was already under increasing pressure. From the twenties onwards, novels like Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* (1924), H.G. Well's *Men Like Gods* (1923) and *Brave New World* (1932) by Aldous Huxley had given expression to cultural anxieties about technological change, mass production and massification, the new industrial ethos of mechanisation and efficiency and the new scientism and its culture of expertise. World War II and its aftermath had revealed the latent capacity of the self to be amassed into ranks, coerced into the perversions of Fascist and Stalinist thinking and then manipulated into mass genocide on an unthinkable scale. Behaviourism, a branch of experimental psychology that had emerged between the wars, for its attempts to discover and codify techniques for controlling human behaviour, was perceived to have spawned a monster.

In the period following World War II, the writer's fears about the threat to the individual consciousness posed by social engineering, conditioning and miseducation can be seen in mid-century fictions of the dystopic imagination, allegorical novels notably preoccupied by mass psychosis, surveillance, "groupthink" and the covert manipulations of shadowy organisations. Most famously, there was George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) but also Rex Warner's *The Aerodrome: A Love Story* (1941), *Darkness at Noon* (1940) by Arthur Koestler and Nigel Dennis' *Cards of Identity* (1955), a largely forgotten satirical tour de force that explores the crisis of identity amongst confused and directionless post-war subjects and which, with its depiction of the manipulations and machinations of the "Identity Club", a tyrannical elite who rule by the imposition of identities upon their unwitting patients, is a kind of anti-psychiatry novel *avant la letter*.

With the onset of the Cold War, the perceived threats of operant conditioning, manipulation and propaganda were augmented by the new menace that was felt from the secret forms of political coercion that became known as "brain washing" and "mind control". As David Seed chronicles in his study of the paranoid fictions of the era, appalled by reports that American POWs in Korea were being "turned", the United States embarked upon a "battle for the mind", condemning the "mind control" taking place on the other side of the iron curtain whilst themselves embarking upon a massive project of psychological experimentation using behaviouristic techniques and psychotropic drugs which was sponsored and implemented by the CIA and other

state organisations, the most infamous of which was the MK-ULTRA project.[135] By the late fifties, similar strategies of social control and manipulation were strongly suspected to have been extended into civilian everyday life by both corporations and state institutions, which were perceived to be attempting to tame and exploit the chaos of mass society via the application of new sociological and scientific techniques to organise, label and manipulate the masses in a schema of mass psychology.

This issue was addressed in 1960 by a special issue of the *Times Literary Supplement* published under the header "Limits of Control", later collected as *The Writer's Dilemma.* Editor Stephen Spender drew together a coterie of writers including Lawrence Durrell, Alan Sillitoe and Nathalie Sarraute to reflect upon the question: 'what are the limits beyond his own control that threaten the modern writer?'[136] 'We start off in agreement that there is an unprecedented crisis,' he writes in his introduction, '[f]reedom is threatened. Consciousness may be entirely conditioned. Individualism is undermined'.[137] Whilst Spender and his contributors broadly reaffirm their liberal faith in the 'creative genius' of the writer's voice and their Arnoldian faith in writing's social action upon the culture, elsewhere Lessing, in her important essay, 'The Small Personal Voice' (1957), published in *Declaration*, attempts to renegotiate the role of the "committed" writer and of the novel in culture. Confronting head-on the dilemma Gayle Greene sums up as that of 'how to use the novel to say something new when the discourses from which the novelist creates are inscribed within the ideologies she repudiates'[138] – a quandary self-consciously played out again and again in her fictions – Lessing argues for the differently conceived, but nonetheless vital, role of the writerly imagination. The novelist's 'small, personal voice', she argues, must recreate 'warmth and humanity and love of people'[139] in a way that constitutes neither propagandising, or unquestioning political "commitment", but bears the writer's responsibility as an 'instrument of change for

[135] David Seed, "Introduction," *Brainwashing: The Fictions of Mind Control* (London: Kent University Press, 2004), xiii.
[136] Stephen Spender, "Introduction," in *The Writer's Dilemma*, ed. Stephen Spender (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961), viii.
[137] Ibid., ix
[138] Gayle Greene, *Doris Lessing: The Poetics of Change* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2007), 36.
[139] Doris Lessing, "A Small Personal Voice," in *Declaration*, ed. Tom Maschler (London: MacGibbon and Kee, 1957), 27.

good or bad'[140] and as an 'architect of the soul'.[141] Lessing's essay attempts to explore the ways in which novelists might move beyond the impasse presented by realistic writing, that of a mode discredited, whose capacity to accurately and ethically reflect the realities of contemporary life was in doubt, but which was persistently elevated as the literary antidote to the anxieties of the era by an establishment still nostalgic for the now impossible ideals of liberal humanism.

In her 1962 novel, *The Golden Notebook*, Lessing draws together the gamut of dilemmas facing writers during the period. How can novels work to achieve the authentic integration of "the personal" and "the social" insisted upon by Williams without subordinating either and thereby enacting the return to, on the one hand, the introspective preoccupations of modernism or the ideological perils of social(ist) realism? What relevance can art now have when confronted by the inexorable machinations of the culture industry? What mode should one adopt with both the private truths of literary modernism and the political commitment of "critical realism" now perceived as forms of aesthetic collusion with the politics of fascism and Stalinism respectively? Can there now be such a thing as a politically innocent form and given all of this, what can the role of the writer now be? The protagonist of Lessing's novel is Anna Wulf, a chronically blocked writer who is troubled by her own inability to put pen to paper. At her writing desk she is, figuratively, flanked by a Chinese peasant, an Algerian soldier, Castro's guerrilla fighters – those whom Frederic Jameson would call the newly-emergent 'subjects of history' – all of whom ask: "Why aren't you doing something about us, instead of wasting your time scribbling?"[142] During the sixties, writers felt themselves under an untenable pressure to justify their practice. This erstwhile writer feels continually 'as if she had committed a crime'[143]. To call oneself an artist, in these circumstances, is an unforgiveable form of hubris.

Anna's dilemma is at first a formal one. The problem is, as Lessing writes in the opening lines of the novel, that 'as far [Anna] can see, everything's cracking up'.[144] And fiction, according to Lessing, has become an exercise in papering up the cracks. In its social realist mode, the novel is a form of reportage, desperately

[140] Ibid., 16.
[141] Ibid.
[142] Doris Lessing, *The Golden Notebook* (London: HarperCollins, 2012), 485.
[143] Ibid., 82.
[144] Ibid., 25.

grasping at a lost "wholeness" by documenting those sections of society 'not yet admitted to the general literate consciousness'[145]. Its politically-committed social*ist* realist counterpart is no better. Art, according to Lessing, takes to political commitment under duress, as a *quid pro quo* against an all-powerful culture industry. What good is socialist realism anyway, asks Anna, when the "reality" of so-called 'actually existing socialism' consists of 'economics, or machine guns mowing down people who object to the new order'?[146]

These problems of form quickly become problems of language. 'Increasingly', writes Anna, 'words lose their meaning suddenly... the gap between what they are supposed to mean and what in fact they say seems unbridgeable'.[147] In passages that directly allude to Sartre's *Nausea* – right down to the jazz music and the doorknob – Anna's own existential revelation triggers an apprehension of the inadequacy of language. 'A row of asterisks... might be better', she writes, '[o]r a symbol of some kind, a circle, perhaps, or a square. Anything at all, but not words.'[148] It would seem, initially, that in *The Golden Notebook*, Lessing offers us a way out of this aesthetic and political knot. Towards the end of her party days, lapsed card carrying Communist Anna insists that 'humanism stands for the whole person, the whole individual, striving to become as conscious and responsible about everything in the universe'.[149] And it appears, at first, that Lessing is reaffirming this liberal humanist role for fiction. Indeed, Anna's own aim is to write such a novel: her hope is that the golden notebook might be 'powered with an intellectual or moral passion strong enough to create order, to create a new way of looking at life'.[150] Early reviews attempted to reassemble this novel of formal fragmentation and linguistic breakdown, peopled with divided selves, as a more-or-less realistic narrative. But doing so, as Lorna Sage has argued, is a kind of mathematical formal impossibility.[151] In fact, the attempt to recuperate this novel which, like Quin's own later one, *Three*, is so explicitly *about* the impossibility of coherence, linearity and totality, and that formally acts out the disintegration of the realist conventions (of both art *and* life) that had once held true, is a very telling form of critical mimesis. Try as

[145] Ibid., 79.
[146] Ibid., 61.
[147] Ibid., 285.
[148] Ibid., 481.
[149] Ibid., 360.
[150] Ibid., 80.
[151] Lorna Sage, *Women in the House of Fiction: Post-War Women Novelists* (London: Routledge, 1992), 150.

they might, Anna's notebooks will not add up to a single, unified story. But for the ways in which Lessing's novel sustains these dilemmas and, moreover, ingrains them within the epistemological project of fiction-writing itself, what it does do is point towards a new, non-redemptive, but no less vital, *way of telling*.

The dark visions of the forties and early fifties were cautionary tales about totalitarian abuses of power that warned against the dangers of groupthink and the unethical application of scientific rationalism. However, although peopled by characters who are losing their grip on reality, the metaphysical insecurity of these novels has been abstracted and thematised at the level of plot as pathologies of mass psychosis and pandemic insanity. Here, the world-creating capacity of fiction is used to imagine altered but still ordered and substantive story-worlds – the degenerate village and its fascistically ordered counterpart, the Aerodrome, in Warner's novel, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*'s Airstrip One and *Cards of Identity*'s country estate, Hyde Mortimer, for example – that are depicted realistically by the rationalising locus of their third-person narrators. In these fictions, with their pre-occupation with socio-psychotic disorders, there is the sense, as Bradbury writes, that 'modern history was less the crisis of real forces than a mass psychosis'.[152] Irrationality – be it the allure of fascism, the submission to power wielded for its own sake, or the difficulties in sustaining an identity – is depicted as a collective pathology that is socially conditioned but does not disturb the laws of a familiar world capable of being rationally and empirically apprehended. As John MacMurray writes, in the introduction to his 1937 book, *Freedom in the Modern World*, during the period it was felt that it was not the world that had "gone mad", but us:

> When in such a situation as we are in produces problems of a magnitude that is scaring us out of our wits, then there is insanity about. These difficulties have their source in us. There is nowhere else for their source to be. If we confess, as I think we must, that we are living in a world that has gone mad, we have to remember that madness is a malady of the human mind. The world outside us cannot be mad: only the world inside us is capable of sanity and insanity. Plainly, there is something serious the matter with us. We have

[152] Malcolm Bradbury, *No, Not Bloomsbury*, 76

> lost our hold on reality, and the world will continue to reflect the Bedlam inside us until we recover our sanity.[153]

Whilst the dystopian fictions of this earlier period maintained the normative oppositions between reason and unreason, rationality and irrationality, illness and health, sanity and madness, by the late fifties and sixties, the very efficacy of these distinctions was being called into question. Fear about the social implications of the "medicalisation of the mind" meshed with the radical scepticism of the intellectual climate of the period, first intuited within fictional writing, and then conceptualised within literary criticism, sociology, philosophy and cultural theory. It was now felt that it was not *us* who had gone mad but the *world*.

During the period, humanist recoil at the atrocities of World War II, together with the unimaginable discoveries of science that seemed to challenge the rational basis of scientific thought and the existence of an "ultimate reality", engendered a profound sense of "reality crisis" amongst intellectuals. Two leading philosophers of science were during the sixties to have remarkable impacts upon the ways in which we conceive of scientific knowledge. Thomas Kuhn's hugely influential 1962 book, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, challenged the prevailing positivist view of scientific progress and assumptions about the perfectibility of the scientific method, arguing that change is unsteady and uneven, characterised by alternating "normal" and "revolutionary" phases. Karl Popper's falsification principle shook the epistemic status of the discipline, reorienting the aims of science away from Truth and towards increasing verisimilitude. Elsewhere, theoretical physicist, Werner Heisenberg had formulated his uncertainty principle in the late twenties, but by the sixties it had superseded the classical intuitions of physics with the description of a probable and random universe and toppled the certainty that there is any reality independent of the act of observation. During the early sixties, American mathematician Edward Lorenz pioneered chaos theory, which describes the ways in which small events can cause large-scale and unexpected consequences. In the middle part of the decade, the theory of plate tectonics overthrew earth science's principles about the composition of the earth's interior, which had been accepted since the "golden age" of nineteenth century geology. Scientific progress itself looked to be the Enlightenment project's

[153] John Macmurray, *Freedom in the Modern World* (London: Faber, 1968), 23.

undoing. The sixties also signalled a waning of the Enlightenment's "myth of progress" and a new apprehension of its consequences, especially in the environmental sphere. Rachel Carson's landmark book, *Silent Spring* (1962), which explored the impact of pesticides, is often credited with beginning the contemporary environmentalist movement and marked the beginning of the end of an unproblematic belief in the human capacity to harness and control nature without repercussions.

The calling into question of the foundationalist approaches of the past to human knowledge, the laying bare of myths of truth and the embrace of the idea that existence could be understood in terms of a number of provisional and contingent narratives during the mid-century gave rise to a fictionalist moment that is evident, for example, in the philosophies of existentialism, the later "fictional turn" amongst French theorists such as Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida and Julia Kristeva amongst others, and the theories of social constructivism that emerged within the discipline of sociology.[154] Victor Sage in 1973 notes the 'fashionable extension' of the term "fiction" to denote the ways in which we make sense of the 'formless flux' of the world via the imaginative creation of mental activity.[155] This new, radically sceptical mood was to animate postmodernist claims that "all truths are fictions". And, if truths were now fictions, if fictionality was now to be understood not as pertaining to the products of our imagination but as a vast umbrella under which our new way of experiencing the world could shelter, then what, exactly, was fiction? And what would be its function? This extended quote from Sukenick's "Death of the Novel" captures the mood of perplexed ennui amongst writers during the period:

> The contemporary writer – the writer who is acutely in touch with the life of which he is part – is forced to start from scratch: Reality doesn't exist, time doesn't exist, personality doesn't exist. God was the omniscient author, but he died; now no one knows the plot, and since our reality lacks the sanction of a creator, there's no guarantee as to the authenticity of the received version. Time is reduced to presence, the content of a series of discontinuous moments. Time is no longer purposive, and so there is no destiny, only

[154] For extended discussion of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century origins of the fictionalism of the sixties, see Michael Saler's *As If: Modern Enchantment and the Literary Prehistory of Virtual Reality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).
[155] Victor Sage, "Fiction," in *The Routledge Dictionary of Literary Terms* (London: Routledge, 2006), 88.

> chance. Reality is, simply, our experience, and objectivity is, of course, an illusion. Personality, after passing through a phase of awkward self-consciousness, has become, quite minimally, a mere locus for our experience. In view of these annihilations, it should be no surprise that literature, also, does not exist – how could it? There is only reading and writing, which are things we do, like eating and making love, to pass the time, ways of maintaining a considered boredom in the face of the abyss.[156]

Literary theorists, most notably Frank Kermode in *The Sense of an Ending*, his landmark study of the relationship between the traditions of eschatological thought and novelistic plot-making, which appeared in 1968, made recourse to a lineage of fictionalist thought, including Kant and Nietzsche, together with Hans Vaihinger (whose own *The Philosophy of As If* [1911] is an important precedent for the literary fictionalism of the sixties) and the American poet Wallace Stevens (whose conceptualisation of the 'supreme fiction' is another) to renegotiate the role of the novel and to distinguish it as one fiction amongst many. Now, when the human experience of and confidence in a commonplace reality or, more properly, *realities*, has been forcefully queried and fiction and experience are conceived of as related rather than opposed casts of mind, Kermode's account insists upon literary fiction's privileged status amongst different orders of fictionality. Navigating the Sartrean impasse of fictionality that motivates his novel *Nausea*, summed up by Frank Lentricchia as one in which 'no sooner is [the] neoidealist, fictive act of consciousness privileged as an act of freedom from the determining forces of reality, than it is quickly deprivileged by an existentialist investment which sees fictive arrangements of being as impoverished in the face of being itself',[157] Kermode argues that the novel is capable of reconciling the self-contradictory paradox of fictionality through fictional self-consciousness and is thereby a unique and powerful tool of human sense-making. Novelistic irony's characteristic double consciousness, Kermode argues, presents us with those necessary fictions that we know to be false but that we momentarily accept. And in this way, novels have the ability to

[156] Ronald Sukenick, "The Death of the Novel," in *The Death of the Novel and Other Stories* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2003), 41.
[157] Frank Lentricchia, *After the New Criticism* (London: Methuen, 1983), 35.

simultaneously offer and ethically deny the consolations of form, of concordance, of beginnings, middles and endings.

The writers of the period, however, were less concerned with realising Kermode's ethical vision of fiction as heuristic device, than with militating against the order of fiction to find ways to more authentically reflect the chaos, disorder and discordance of reality. Despite – or, perhaps, as Byatt argues, because of – our 'more cautious and empirical climate'[158] British novelists had long been engaged in exploring fictionality. Alongside writers like Spark, Lessing, Murdoch, Fowles and Golding, British experimental novelists were equally preoccupied with interrogating fictional narrative, from B.S. Johnson's ultraist attempts to dispute the fictionality of fiction to Brigid Brophy's baroque novels of Austenian designedness. Christine Brooke-Rose's rangy and brilliant study of this tendency, *A Rhetoric of the Unreal* (1968), whose significance as an account of the development of post-war fiction has yet to be fully acknowledged, conceptualises this new, self-metaphorising role of the novel as a modern re-emergence of forms of the fantastic:

> [T]he sense that empirical reality is not as secure as it used to be is now pervasive at all levels of society. Certainly what used to be called empirical reality, or the world, seems to have become more and more unreal, and what has long been regarded as unreal is more and more turned to or studied as the only "true" or "another and equally valid" reality… This apparent and for the moment still partial (and perhaps transient) inversion of the real/unreal is perfectly logical: if the 'real' has come to seem unreal, it is natural to turn to the 'unreal' as real.[159]

And in this way, the writers of the time employ the unique self-metaphorising capabilities of the novel to explore the *metaphoric*, rather than the *mimetic* potentials of the form. Their works do not test hypotheses – a criticism frequently levelled at the *nouveau romancier* attempt to produce fictions to meet and match its manifestos – but use travestying strategies to test the limits of literary fiction. By deconstructing fictional convention, these writers of the sixties sought at once reveal the life-

[158] Bernard Bergonzi, *The Situation of the Novel* (London: Macmillan Press, 1970), 49.
[159] Christine Brooke-Rose, *A Rhetoric of the Unreal: Studies in Narrative and Structure, Especially of the Fantastic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 4.

strategies we employ to order and to categorise the flux of experience and to more authentically capture the presence of that experience.

Their strategies were wildly divergent. In this study, I will focus specifically upon the ways in which Quin and others drew sustenance from the debates and controversies surrounding the "science of the soul" that provided the theoretical underpinning of the counterculture, and which coalesced under the banners of anti-psychiatry, Freudo-Marxism and others. This tendency within intellectual thought itself arose from the same sense of radical scepticism that motivated Kermode's apologia for fiction. I will examine the ways in which within the writing of the period, an abiding novelistic preoccupation with phenomenological exploration enmeshed with the period's claims about the relativism of all truths and, moreover, with the valorisation of alternative modes of experience. I will also explore the ways in which by allying themselves with these theories, the writers of the period sought to renegotiate the novel's traditional role as a communal model of dissent.

The Sleep of Unreason

Disillusioned with Marxism after Stalin, Prague and Budapest, and in response to the spread of totalitarianism in Europe, in the sixties the New Left sought a new mode of thinking that emphasised the *human* aspect of capitalist alienation, returning to the individual and their freedoms in reaction against the political and social abstractions of traditional Marxism which were now indelibly associated with Stalinist genocide, Soviet bureaucracy and party corruption. During the period, the ethical return to the individual meshed with the reassessment of the long-held values and assumptions of the Enlightenment tradition undertaken in response to the atrocities of World War II and disenchantment with Communism as the 'God that failed'. Left-wing intellectuals sought to uncover the structures of unreason that lay behind both the unthinkable events of recent history and the apparently rational façade of technocratic capitalism.

One line of socially conservative thought during the sixties sought to reaffirm existing assumptions about the – in Goya's words – monsters brought forth in the sleep of reason, pleading for moral responsibility and arguing that permissive attitudes towards what Pamela Hansford Johnson calls 'moral corruption' –

particularly within literature – had birthed an 'affectless and affluent… Ugly Society'[160] in which murderousness and brutality were rife. The emergence of anti-permissive attitudes is seen especially in the reaction to the Moors murders of the mid-sixties, which were perceived as a terrible testament to the 'swelling violence in the air',[161] by figures like C.P. Snow, whose novel *The Sleep of Reason* (1968) reflects upon the perils of the instincts left unfettered by reason and the social chaos he was convinced would ensue and Hansford Johnson, whose 1967 book, *On Iniquity*, is a meditation upon the trials of Brady and Hindley. The 'increasingly permissive society', Hansford Johnson suggests, is like a 'compost-heap of rottenness out of which such ugly weeds could flourish and grow lush'.[162]

However, amongst a generation of thinkers, including Freudo-Marxists like Herbert Marcuse, Norman O. Brown and Erich Fromm, R.D. Laing and David Cooper of the anti-psychiatry movement and cultural theorists like Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze and Feliz Guattari, Adorno and Horkheimer's Frankfurt School critical theory and Guy Debord's Situationism, it was felt, on the contrary, that it was the unnatural repression of the instincts that had produced the violence, sadism and genocide of totalitarianism and that the failure of rationalism was the product of the capitalist distortion and transfiguration of the drives into a destructive force.

Within the intellectual climate of the sixties, unreason, irrationality and "madness" emerged as the significant and pressing cultural questions of the era. Accounts like Foucault's *Madness and Civilisation* (1960) and Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947) theorised madness as the latent other of civilisation's reason, and held the repression of irrationality to account for those events that had so confounded left-wing thought. Marcuse's *Eros and Civilisation* (1955) and Brown's *Life Against Death* (1959) develop a psychoanalytic interpretation of history which draws upon an identification between history of civilisation and the return of the repressed, from which antinomian and Dionysian anarchy and its rejection of the claims upon the individual made by society and the state offers the only escape. The Scottish figurehead of the anti-psychiatry movement, R.D. Laing's famous dictum declares that insanity is the only sane response to an insane world: 'In the context of our present pervasive madness that

[160] Ibid., 136.
[161] Pamela Hansford Johnson, *On Iniquity: Some Personal Reflections Arising Out of the Moors Murder Trial* (London: Scribners, 1967), 59.
[162] Ibid., 11.

we call normality, sanity, freedom, all our frames of reference are ambiguous and equivocal', he argues in his Preface to *The Divided Self*.[163] Published in 1960, this landmark book had sought to revolutionise the way we perceive mental illness by making madness comprehensible. By the mid-sixties, Laing's indictment of mainstream psychiatry had been extended to society at large. Amongst the intellectuals of the counterculture, sanity was felt to entail merely the presentation of a false self that had been "adjusted" – by psychiatry, by the family and by political institutions – to an alienated social reality. Psychopathology was increasingly perceived as a cultural symptom, an expression of the effects of the psychosis of contemporary society upon individual subjectivity.

Going Quietly Mad

In the sixties, fiction became a sympathetic medium for lines of enquiry which sought to dispute and to overturn normative distinctions between reason and madness, rationality and irrationality, and sickness and health, not merely for its declared interest in human experience, but also for its phenomenological capacity to render subjective experience meaningful and to embody it within imaginary worlds. There had long been a perceived kinship between madness and creativity. As Corrine Saunders and Jane Macnaughton write in the introduction to their study on madness and creativity in literature and culture: 'Madness is one of the great topoi of literature from the classical period onwards.'[164] Throughout history, both popular and intellectual culture alike have found the symbolic annihilation of the artist irresistible. However, this affinity, and the authorial construct of the "mad writer" with their special, sacrificial knowledge, flourished during the sixties amongst literary intellectuals seeking an antidote to the instrumental reason, conformity and social control that were perceived as the toxic dividends of the Enlightenment's fall. Edmund Wilson's seminal study of artistic creation, 'Philocetes: The Wound and the Bow', which appeared in 1941, turns to the Philocetes myth to posit a link between psychic trauma (the wound) and the healing power of insight (the bow). Drawing

[163] R.D. Laing, *The Divided Self* (London: Penguin, 2010), i.
[164] Corrine Saunders and Jane McNaughton, "Introduction," *Madness and Creativity in Literature and Culture* (London: Palgave Macmillan, 2004), 1.

sustenance from the period's return to Freud, during the sixties, Wilson's contention that trauma, abuse, deficit, misfortune and conflict can provide the impetus and the motivation for creative achievement enmeshed with what Al Alvarez calls the period's 'myth of the artist', which he defines as the 'general belief – by the public as well as the artists themselves – that the work and the life are not only inextricable but also virtually indistinguishable'.[165] The notion that, through the flight of the consciousness into sensual or mystical states of "madness", one could escape the narrow parameters of Western rationalistic thought and, thus liberated from false attitudes and values, encounter one's "real" or "authentic" inner self was revived by the figurehead of the anti-psychiatry movement, R.D. Laing, in the early sixties. The influence of Laingian thought upon imaginative literature during the period is seen in the ritualization of the process of writing as a liberatory response to the constraints of *being normal*, variously for example, in the writing of Doris Lessing, in the feminist and proto-feminist novels of Margaret Atwood, Marge Piercy, and Margaret Drabble, (rather differently) in Norman Mailer, in the work of Ken Kesey, of course, in Penelope Mortimer's eighth novel, *The Pumpkin Eater* (1962), Paul Ableman's *I Hear Voices* (1958), in the American confessional poets and (perhaps unexpectedly) in Evelyn Waugh's *The Ordeal of Gilbert Pinfold* (1957). It resonated not only within literary fiction, but also in the popular fiction of the time. The period's appetite for what Plath in her diaries calls 'mental hospital stuff'[166] is seen perhaps most notably in Joanne Greenberg's bestselling novel *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden* (1964), which chronicles a teenage girl's experience of institutionalisation, but also in Jennifer Dawson's autobiographical novel, *The Ha-Ha* (1961) and Irvin Yalom and Ginny Golderg's *Every Day Gets A Little Closer* (1974), a trans-personal narrative duet of patient and therapist, amongst others.

The classic plotline of the mental breakdown novel of the mid-century tells the story of an affluent, university-educated female protagonist attempting to reconcile the contradictory aspirations and obligations of her position. Her ambitions are, at once, unfulfilled within the home and ever-thwarted within the hostile workplace. Thoroughly primed for a life of achievement, and yet repeatedly shunted into the domestic sidings by pressures to conform to the period's persistent gender norms,

[165] Al Alvarez, "The Myth of the Artist," in *Madness and Creativity in Literature and Culture*, eds. Corrine Saunders and Jane McNaughton (London: Palgave Macmillan, 2004), 196.
[166] Sylvia Plath, *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath, 1950-1962*, ed. Karen V. Kukil (New York, NY: Anchor Books, 2000), 495.

she attempts to navigate that characteristic feminine predicament of the period (and, of course, beyond): the struggle to reconcile her obligations to hearth and home with the desire for professional fulfilment when either choice, under the circumstances, looks equally unappealing.

In Sylvia Plath's *roman à clef*, *The Bell Jar* (1963), the landmark exemplar of the genre, we meet Esther Greenwood, a 'wicked' – in the sense of wickedly ambitious – college student. The novel chronicles her attempts to navigate womanhood and sex and her struggle to come of age in spite of the formidable impediments that are visited upon her as a woman in the 1950s. The rite of passage between adolescence and adulthood is tempestuous, Esther is, at once, thoroughly – biblically – repulsed by, and giddily attracted to, her life's potentials. Her parable of the fig tree – with its biblical echoes of the tree of life or of knowledge – represents the contradictory pulls upon the woman writer, with its image of a life's possibility divided and branching off into mutually exclusive options:

> I saw my life branching out before me like the green fig tree in the story. From the tip of every branch, like a fat purple fig, a wonderful future beckoned and winked. One fig was a husband and a happy home and children, and another fig was a famous poet… I saw myself sitting in the crotch of this fig tree, starving to death, just because I couldn't make up my mind which of the figs I would choose. I wanted each and every one of them.[167]

As Marilyn Yalom points out, there is a tragic irony in Plath's vision of Esther gazing up at this life-giving tree, lodged in its fecund 'crotch' and yet 'starving to death', paralysed by its plethora of Either/Or options, wanting, desperately, Both/And.[168] Esther, Plath writes, wants 'to shoot off in all directions' rather than play the role allotted to her, as the passive, stable centre, the 'place the arrows shoot from'.[169] Thus confronted with an impossible predicament, these protagonists, to paraphrase

[167] Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar* (London: Faber & Faber, 2005), 73.
[168] Marilyn Yalom, "Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar*, and Related Poems," in *Coming to Light: American Women Poets in the Twentieth Century*, eds. Diane Wood Middlebrook and Marilyn Yalom (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1985), 495.
[169] Plath, *The Bell Jar*, 79.

Doris Lessing in *The Golden Notebook*, another classic of genre, 'go quietly mad'.[170]

Quin's predicament, however, was rather more perilous. As a working-class, non-university educated woman of the sixties, neither the winking fig of affluent suburban housewifedom, nor that of bluestocking spinsterhood, beckoned. For women like Quin, there would be no such dilemma. For what did beckon was rather less enticing: a working-class existence of frustrated aspirations and claustrophobic inertia which did not so much branch out as trammel one into the kind of life where both to marry and bear children were givens and to take on unfulfilling work was a financial necessity. This is the prospect that provides the basis for the gothic horrors of Quin's debut novel, *Berg*, with its vision of a desperately wan and diminished world: a couple coddled together in bedsitting rooms poignantly jauntified by the placing of a single pink in a vase on a plastic table cloth. Writing across gender – a significant feature of Quin's oeuvre – *Berg*'s male protagonist repeatedly attempts to abscond but is haplessly drawn back within a domestic milieu that on the one hand, with its cosy promise of easy affection, tempts and, on the other, threatens to slowly, heterostatically annihilate him. He envisions a life panned out before him in which he would

> potter about between the velvet-covered couch, and the table with its knick knacks, his best pin-striped suit hung beside the wardrobe, his cracked leather boots beside her blue fluffy mule, and watch her wash his shirts and iron them…Stranded here, morning, afternoons of making tea, playing rummy, attempting to meet the moral obligations Judith presumably expected.[171]

A similar world is glimpsed in Quin's unpublished poem, 'There's a Party', which depicts a 'corrupting domestic bliss' menaced by a basement-dwelling and an overbearing landlord. The poem's persona, like Hermes, has '[w]ings on [her] feet', but unlike the god of transitions and of boundaries, hers are clipped. 'Jiving in the dark, sweat and smoke' she becomes conscious of a 'dull ache spreading'. She wants to be 'save[d]… from this', to '[e]lope' to some Hellenic, Durrellian idyll with 'mysterious Justines' and 'Arab horses stamping by a lake'.[172] She would get there

[170] Doris Lessing, *The Golden Notebook* (London: HarperCollins, 2012), 160.
[171] Ann Quin, *Berg* (London: Paladin, 1989), 87.
[172] Unpublished manuscript, Ann Quin, "There's a Party," private collection.

later, spending the summer of 1964 island-hopping in Greece, but what she found, as she depicts later in *Passages*, was not quite so idyllic.

Equally, although Quin's oeuvre similarly militates against normalcy at all costs, it would be inaccurate to conceive of her novels as the products of some Norman-Mailer-style Laingian creative frenzy, the source of her inspiration as spontaneous revelation, or her writing practice as the unmediated discharge of the fruits of some supranatural vision. Within Quin's novels madness is never romantically valorised, or courted as some exotic muse. While she frequently peoples them with Laingian fellow travellers, as in *Passages*, she does so in order to indict their vain and hubristic attempts to summon the Dionysus within. Their ecstatic release never arrives. To be insane is always to suffer; toying dilettantishly with these dark and formidable forces can be deadly and by "going over the edge" her characters sacrifice themselves to more authentic truths that are at length revealed to be trivial and insubstantial myths.

'When I Was Crazy That Was All I Was'

Foucault, in the conclusion to his *Madness and Civilisation*, writes that 'madness is contemporary with the work of art' but, paradoxically, that '*where there is a work of art, there is no madness'*.[173] Drawing upon the work of Freud, he argues that art is twin-born with madness, that both are imbricated within that dark centre of primal oneness that is without reason. Prior to his work in the 1920s, in which he admits that it confounded even his "universal science" of psychoanalysis, creativity was the test case with which Freud sought to prove his theories about the universality of human consciousness. In essays such as 'Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming' (1907), Freud argues that the creative impulse is the quintessential subliminal activity, which, like neurosis, redirects repressed desires into the realm of the aesthetic. Elaborating this thesis, Foucault argues that in order to emerge into the rational world, the *madness that is art* must undergo a process of translation. And, therefore, creativity might well be forged, as Arthur Koestler argued during the period in his *The Act of*

[173] Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilisation: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* (London: Vintage, 2001), 275, italics his.

Creation (1964), in the suspension of rational thought,[174] but to become art, it cannot remain there. The artist must draw upon the symbols, images and rhythms of the familiar world which are, at once, capable of rationally communicating and yet crucially also preserving the irrationality of the self. Whereupon creativity latently transmits the self's primal energies, resonating, in turn, with the irrationality that lurks within us all. This secret call-and-response of self with self, I argue in Chapter Three of this study, is dramatised in Quin's novel *Three*.

Whilst art, thus transformed, journeys out into the world, madness remains trapped within the solipsistic bounds of the self. And therefore, Foucault argues, the subject-position of madness is not to be understood as one of radical empowerment, of a differently calibrated but nonetheless equally sovereign mode of experience. The mad person valorised by Laing as the master of an alternative fiction which is as relativistically valid as any other is, for Foucault, powerless, unproductive, caught up in their own illusion and therefore unable to speak or think or live:

> The difference is clear when confronted by the shrewd deceiver, the meditating mind behaves, not like a madman panic-stricken in the face of universal error, but like an equally shrewd adversary always on the alert, constantly reasonable, and never ceasing to be the master of his fiction.[175]

'When you are insane, you are busy being insane – all the time', writes Plath.[176] In her seminal survey of the field, *Writing and Madness*, Shoshana Felman writes that the 'madman… is engulfed by his own fiction', that madness can be distinguished as 'the non-mastery of its own fiction':

> As opposed to the subject of logos, the subject of pathos is a subject whose position with respect to fiction (even when he is the author) is not one of mastery, or control, of sovereign affirmation of meaning, but of *vestige*, of *loss of meaning*.[177]

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[174] Arthur Koestler, *The Act of Creation* (London: Arkana, 1964), 178.
[175] Michel Foucault, *History of Madness*, quoted in Shoshana Felman, *Writing and Madness: Literature/PhilosophyPsychoanalysis* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 49.
[176] Sylvia Plath, quoted in Jeffrey A. Kottler, *Divine Madness: Ten Stories of Creative Struggle* (New York, NY: John Wiley & Sons, 2005), 275.
[177] Felman, *Writing and Madness*, 49.

This loss of control, of mastery and of dominion is characteristic of another strain of the "mad" novels of the long sixties. Lessing's *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* (1971) and Ableman's *I Hear Voices* (1958) depict the Homeric voyage of the mind embarked upon by men who are plunged into madness. In both novels, madness is a contrivance for the fabulation of delusory story-worlds which co-exist alongside and are impinged upon by the real world of the hospital ward in which they are confined. In *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* professor of classics Charles Watkins has been admitted to hospital in a state of shock; the novel chronicles his journeys of the mind across a hallucinatory seascape from his bed. Similarly, *I Hear Voices* tells the story of Arthur, confined to his asylum ward from whence he travels through an imaginary city of the psyche.

But crucially, in Quin, madness "proper" is always madness *remembered*. The writing of her peculiar poetic fictions is for her, as poetry was famously for Wordsworth and Coleridge, the 'spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings recollected in tranquility'. Her novels reflect the complex negotiations between two antithetical modes of experience, the rational and irrational, or, that which de Beauvoir designates as reason and the instincts, and Nietzsche, as the Apollonian and Dionysian impulses. Quin's fictions reflect the struggles of a divided self to preserve the "presence" of a radically different mode of experience within the parameters of a communal language that militates against the sustaining of difference. As Felman comments: 'To speak about madness is to speak about the difference between languages: to import into one language the strangeness of another; to unsettle the decisions language has prescribed to us so that, somewhere between languages, will emerge the freedom to speak.'[178] Her novels attempt to discover and to test the efficacy of that space between languages as a space of freedom and of expression. Frequently, especially within the middle period novels, *Three* and *Passages*, Quin makes use of multiperspectival dialogism to thematise this work of sense-making at the limits of experience. And for her nuanced sensitivity to the complexities of the "literature of madness" and, moreover, to the "madness of literature", and its implications for the expression not only of "peak experience" but also, more broadly, the ways in which we all attempt to make sense of our lives, Quin's oeuvre differs from so much of the writing of and from madness of the sixties.

[178] Ibid., 19.

It harks back to, and elaborates upon, a lineage of female writers who endowed their work with the same burden: Mary Butts, Jean Rhys, Anna Kavan, Janet Frame, Christa Wolf, Elizabeth Smart, Katherine Mansfield and others. Like these writers, Quin's project is to make the inner life connect with physical manifestation, to enact in fiction the attempt to draw reason and unreason together in order to capture, preserve and communicate the contents of experience.

Patricia Waugh's recent work has argued that, for its ability to render the expressive distortion of reality and the filtering of the external world through subjectivity as an imaginary and yet still somehow substantive universe, fiction and phenomenology had a long-standing affiliation.[179] For the conventional relationship between the world and the book had never been as simple as all that. Despite time-worn claims that it was only with postmodernism that fiction finally admitted that the story-world and the social world were not magically yoked together and that it was only through postmodern "experiment" that the novel rescinded its privileged claim on the real, since the nineteenth century novels have, in fact, sought to demonstrate the construction and reconstruction of the real via narrative focalisation through the subject. The novel has always been a sceptical mode, its narrators always, in a sense, unreliable. The world-creating capacity of fiction had intuited and then explored this sense of ontological insecurity – alongside Kant, Nietzsche and Vaihinger – long before it had been conceptualised anew during the "reality crisis" of the mid-century period.

Because of its ability to convey prereflective and preobjective mental states and set them forth within substantive worlds, Brooke-Rose argues in her *A Rhetoric of the Unreal* that fiction is characteristically imbued with the epistemic function of the fantastic. Fantastic, that is, in the Todorovian sense: fictional narrative always demands not only a suspension of disbelief but also of belief. Since *The Turn of the Screw* appeared in 1898 (and even before) fiction has posed and even pressed but refused to satisfactorily answer the question: Is it the world that is mad or am I? Fiction is able to suspend indefinitely that Cartesian coup of reason that established the sovereignty of a thinking subject in a knowable world who *could not be mad*. If modernism took flight from a hostile world into abstraction and introspection, it surely

[179] Patricia Waugh, "The Naturalistic Turn, the Syndrome, and the Rise of the Neo-Phenomenological Novel," in *Diseases and Disorders in Contemporary Fiction: The Syndrome Syndrome* (London: Routledge, 2013), 17-35.

also, most explicitly in the late modernism of Henry Green, Elizabeth Bowen, Elizabeth Taylor and Ivy Compton Burnett but also in their predecessors like Woolf, Proust and even Joyce, sought to (as Woolf herself put it in her 1919 essay "Modern Fiction") 'catch the innumerable atoms… as they fall',[180] interrogating, reconstituting and imaginatively transforming the unspeakable elements of human experience through phenomenologies of perception that effaced the frontier between inner and outer and the visible and the invisible. And, once our shared assumptions about *what the real might consititute* had been categorically called into question by both the events of history and the bodies of thought that were attempting to conceptualise them, the 'restoration of words to things' would by no means be as easy as all that.

I'm Not Alright, Jack: A "return to realism"?

Look closely at many of these novels of the so-called return to realism, and it is not difficult to detect a profound metaphysical insecurity beneath their rather more apparent social concerns. Often despite their author's protestations to the contrary, many of these novels contain tacit and tentatively self-conscious admissions of the inadequacy of conventional realism. Even those who in their critical writings are most stoically wed to the old liberal metaphysics – to the notion that fiction could and, moreover, *should* provide a paradigm for a knowable and ordered world – tended to betray themselves in their novels. Theirs is a kind of concrete existentialism, one that tended to figure empirically its metaphysical preoccupations. These novels reflect on the existential choice between the bondage of the working class life and the paucity of the promise of the strictly-bounded possibilities of middle class life. The British novelists of this so-called "return to realism" were in fact equally preoccupied by existential concerns, although their fictions added realist flesh of plot, character and setting to the bones of the abstracted, parabolic or quasi-allegorical existentialist fictions of Sartre and Camus that had emerged in France during the earlier mid-century period. In their British counterparts, metaphysical preoccupations tend to be metaphorised in plot. Altered states of being-in-the-world and the disintegration of selfhood, for example, are signalled by apocalyptic drunkenness. Post-pub punch-

[180] Virginia Woolf, "Modern Fiction," in *The Common Reader* (London: Hogarth Press, 1933), 190.

ups represent the conflict between dominant institutional power and the existential hero. A Camusian lucidity is sought and found in illicit sex.

We see (significantly predominantly male) protagonists in the process of making and unmaking the life strategies with which they confront a reality that has become an unknown quantity. For the roving consciousness of *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*'s Arthur Seaton, for example, 'only a calendar gave any real indication of passing time'. 'Once a rebel always a rebel',[181] Arthur grasps the freedom of the condemned man with his 'broad-fisted exuberant cunning' which amounts to 'fourteen quid a week to squander as best he could at the weekend' as he '[serves] a life's penance at the lathe'.[182] Or take Jim Dixon, the fortuitous hero of Kingsley Amis' *Lucky Jim*, a grammar school boy having trouble committing to his role as a young lecturer in the rarefied world of academe, characterised with relish by Amis' poisoned pen. The strain of Jim's imposture, his duplicity and doublespeak, is beginning to show, his private rebellions against the cant and pretention of his new milieu escalate as the repressed violence of his inner life erupts into public display: grotesque mimicry, Tourettish outbursts and dumb-struck bouts of aphasia. It is not until the end of the novel, having arbitrarily and despite his very best attempts at self-sabotage played the system and won – the £500-a-year job in London, the girl, the humiliating defeat of his rival, Bertrand – that thought and action are finally reconciled and he is able to openly articulate his resistance:

> The bloody old towser-faced boot-faced totem-pole on a crap reservation, Dixon thought. "You bloody old towser-faced boot-faced totem-pole on a crap reservation," he said.[183]

Even a novel as smugly committed – in the political sense too – to the quotidian as William Cooper's *Scenes from Provincial Life* is fraught with anxiety about its own inability to reconcile reality with its fictional model. Written in 1950, but set in '39, and with the threat of totalitarianism hanging heavily over its protagonists, the novel endorses a kind of unreconstructed, reflex liberalism which for Cooper under the circumstances amounts to a kind of radicalism: '[we] could be called

[181] Alan Sillitoe, *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (London: Paladin, 1979), 202.
[182] Ibid., 203.
[183] Kingsley Amis, *Lucky Jim*, (London: Penguin, 1975), 209.

radicals… we were made for a period thirty years earlier when we could happily have voted liberal…the essence was that we thought that life for us would be unsupportable in a totalitarian state… we had in common a strong element of the rootless and unconforming.' [184] Elsewhere, however, the narrator remarks that under the circumstances, such a stance amounts to a 'slackness in Weltanschauung':[185]

> Sometimes I tried to link the disintegration of our private lives with the disintegration of affairs in the world. I saw us all being carried along into some nameless chaos. Yet it rang false. In spite of what the headlines told me every morning, in spite of what I reasoned must happen in the world, I was really preoccupied most deeply with what was going on between me and Myrtle and between Tom and Steve. People can concentrate on their private lives, I thought, in the middle of anything. [186]

The narrator's own frequent interjections give the lie to the notion that narrative can still support this worldview. *Scenes from Provincial Life* reflects self-consciously upon the problems with realistic writing: on the impossibility of recreating the vast social scope of nineteenth-century realism after community as an integral and knowable entity has collapsed, on the difficulties of writing a political novel and of translating the banalities of human experience into the significant events of plot.

Take, for example, John Braine's *Room at the Top,* which records the social ascent of Joe Lampton, a recently-demobbed RAF pilot and former POW orphaned by World War II, turned lower-middle-class boy done good, who leaves behind his hometown, 'Deadly Dufton', and his working class roots to take up a job at the Municipal Treasury in the town of Warley. Narrated by a decade-older Joe, Braine's novel is a meditation upon the self-deceptions of this newly-minted company man. As if seeking empirical confirmation of his new, middle-class milieu, Joe junior exhibits an almost Balzacian fetish for home furnishings, exhaustively cataloguing parquet floors, Windsor chairs, art prints, divans and book cases. If, in Sartre's *Nausea*, Roquentin's apprehension of the shocking materiality of a door knob is the beginning of a series of revelatory confrontations with objects which expose human

[184] William Cooper, *Scenes from Provincial Life* (New York, NY: Dutton, 1982), 9.
[185] Ibid., 124.
[186] Ibid.

existence in all its contingency, then Joe's own encounter with the accoutrements of middle-class life has quite the opposite effect. For Joe on the up-and-up the world feels meaningful for the very first time. Whilst 'deadly Dufton' and its 'zombie' inhabitants are described with an almost Mortmere-ish horror, Warley's is a different kind of unreality. There everything is suddenly *just so*:

> It was as if some barrier had been removed: everything seemed intensely real, as if I were watching myself taking part in a documentary film… everything was immensely significant, yet neither more nor less than itself… I felt that I were using my senses for the first time.[187]

The narrative is fraught with a profound sense of dislocation. Joe has 'come a long way since 1941,' he remarks, '[t]oo far perhaps'.[188] He assures his lover, Alice, that the traumas of the death of his parents and of his time in the RAF have been 'forgotten':

> 'Sometimes something happens to bring them out. They poke out their heads and growl and then you shove them back in the cage. Why are you asking? Afraid I'm neurotic?[189]

His self-presence, however, has been sacrificed in the process. Joe's interiority and exteriority fail to match up; he inhabits the "Joe Lampton" persona of a silver-tongued rogue, his inner life separated into 'watertight compartments'. Alice is his 'guarantee of reality':

> [A]s long as Alice was there I wouldn't die, it was like having my father and mother alive again, it was the end of being afraid and alone.[190]

Following her death by suicide, in which he is arguably complicit, Joe, now referring to himself in the third person, embarks upon a dissociative fugue across the new suburban estates of Dufton:

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[187] John Braine, *Room at the Top* (London: Penguin, 2002), 26.
[188] Ibid., 94.
[189] Ibid., 102.
[190] Ibid., 180.

> I tried to make my mind as blank as possible… But Alice had been killed, and what I saw was the components of a huge machine that now only functioned out of bravado: it had been designed and manufactured for one purpose, to kill Alice. That purpose was accomplished; it should have been allowed to run down and then stop, the driver asleep at the wheel, the passengers sitting docilely with their mouths wide open, waiting for the bus to fly away.[191]

Alice, too, is afflicted by a similar metaphysical instability:

> 'Oh God, everything's going so fast. There's no way to stop the merrygoround. You never feel safe. When I was young I used to feel safe. Even if Father and Mother quarrelled they were kind to me. The house was solid too. That bloody concrete barracks I live in now – it's so clean and streamlined that I wouldn't be at all surprised if it took flight.'[192]

But, financially and socially dependent upon a loveless marriage, and keenly feeling her increasing age, Alice, unlike Joe, has no claim upon any notion of a kind of existential freedom. Hypocritically reprimanded by Joe for her infidelity and for posing nude and summarily cast off in favour of Susan, the younger and more beautiful daughter of a local business magnate, and as such a 'Grade One' prospect more appropriate for Joe's social ambitions, Alice commits suicide. In *Lucky Jim* the protagonist rejoices in his lucky escape from the 'neurotic' lecturer Margaret, to whom, due to 'pity and sentimentality', he was unwillingly attached after her own unsuccessful suicide attempt. Margaret is not even permitted the authenticity of existential angst. Towards the end of the novel, her would-be suitors, Jim and Catchpole, confer and conclude that her overdose was merely a hysterical performance for attention's sake. Margaret's problem, Jim reflects, is her 'bad luck… probably derived… from the anterior bad luck of being sexually unattractive'[193].

Significantly, then, in each of these novels our anti-hero has, by the end, to a greater or lesser extent been reconciled with his diminished world. Joe Lampton's is

[191] Ibid., 220.
[192] Ibid., 103.
[193] Kingsley Amis, *Lucky Jim*, (London: Penguin, 1975), 242.

a pained and knowing acceptance of his own bad faith complicity, Arthur Seaton's a defiant acceptance of freedom-in-bondage, grimly resigned to 'fighting every day until [he] die[s]', whilst Jim Dixon makes a lucky escape from the upper-middle-class intelligentsia to another, more "authentic" social mobility endorsed by Amis. It is, in the end, the female supporting characters who are martyred by social and moral dislocation. For the male protagonists' lovers and mistresses, "liberation" leads merely to the re-imposition of repressive and restrictive structures. See, for example, Arthur's lover, Brenda's backstreet abortion in a zinc bath. Or, alternatively, these women figure merely as the fetish-objects of social mobility, at once the cipheric spoils of the protagonist's Faustian bargains and ancillaries of the system, entrapping, domesticating and taming these men. Joe and his childhood friend Charles in *Room at the Top*, for example, conclude that 'the more money a man [has] the better looking [is] his wife', and create a grading scheme, the 'Lampton-Lufford Report on Love', which correlates women's attractiveness with the incomes of their husbands.

The characters that people these mid-century novels of the so-called return to realism, then, are by no means merely the upwardly-mobile avatars of the age of affluence, I'm-all-right-Jacks, victors eagerly claiming the spoils of the post-war settlement inhabiting story-worlds that amount to stable, if hard-won, fictional paradigms of certainty and structure – despite their author's protestations to the contrary. And even when their story-worlds finally click into place, the women for whom the new world will still not come into focus attest to the ways in which realistic writing could no longer meet and match its object.

Critical accounts both of and from the period have tended to suffer from a fundamental insensitivity to the articulation in fictional form of the cultural transformations of the period. Heads turned by the new stories and new voices that were the fruits of social change, critics tend to mistake "honesty" for realism, and realism for the artless disgorging of experience onto paper. Attuned only to the manifest, these accounts have tended to directly map the social world onto the novel form, neglecting what Alan Swingewood calls the 'concrete and complex mediations between the novel, its form, its creators and society'.[194] But this was by no means merely a "New Wave" on the level of content. Both in contemporary accounts, and

[194] Alan Swingewood, *The Novel and Revolution* (London: Macmillan, 1975), 30.

subsequent critical surveys, too little attention has been focused upon the ways in which the profound transformations of the period were absorbed into the fabric of the narrative discourse itself. The positivist assumptions of accounts of the period have been borne out in unlikely places. Subsequent critical surveys have tended to accept their predecessors' accounts of the fifties novel at face value – as the homogenous, unproblematically-realised fictional project of the worst of Kingsley Amis's diatribes in the *Spectator* – by an academy all too eager to dispossess a literary history which it has persistently underestimated. The realist-experimentalist dichotomy that has dominated literary-historical accounts of this mid-century period has tended to mask the continuity of shared preoccupations and modes of expression amongst the writers of the fifties and sixties. As I move, in the next chapters of this thesis, to more closely examine Quin's oeuvre, I will examine the ways in which these more nuanced but no less significant characteristics of fifties writing are developed by Quin and others in the following decade.

If You Don't Mind We'll Leave My Mother Out of All of This: Liberating Oedipus in *Berg*

Ann Quin's 1964 debut novel, *Berg*, is the story of dissolute hair restorer salesman and self-confessed mummy's boy, Alistair Berg, aka Greb, who, as the opening legend states, 'came to a seaside town intending to kill his father'.[1] He has installed himself as a lodger in a tawdry guesthouse in an out-of-season resort where, like Hamlet, he lays in wait, plotting and scheming his parricidal revenge, separated by a flimsy partition wall from his intended murderee, his absentee father, Nathy, a has-been (perhaps never-was) music hall performer and old soak touring his vaudevillian ventriloquist act around seaside towns and his father's young, glamorous mistress, Judith Goldstein, who are lodging in the room next door. Berg is Nietzschean man, his will-to-power aspires to assert his mastery over heredity and determinism. By killing his father, he seeks to destroy the given order of things and recreate the world in his own image:

> Of course it's ridiculous to think the whole thing is simply a vehicle for revenge, or even resentment – hardly can it be called personal, not now, indeed I have never felt so objective. If inherent in the age, well and good, though historically speaking the idea perhaps is a little decadent. (39)

His quest is existential. He yearns to 'defy fate' and the 'tragic sense of destiny that is inherent in every man' (27). To become 'responsible for every action' (27), to '[d]efeat the desire and act' (40), to 'dispose of the mind' and 'bring reality into something vital, felt, seen, even smelt' (23). Berg's aim is to gather up the 'tangle of broken wires' of life and create an order: 'sort out, graft together, encircle the mind, the body, thus bound, motionless become, and in becoming: know' (131).

But, like the Prince of Denmark, Berg cannot complete his act of vengeance. The novel follows his ham-fisted attempts to ingratiate himself into this ersatz burlesque of a family romance: unwittingly becoming his father's drinking buddy confidante, finding his own bewildered attempts to seduce Judith outclassed by her

[1] Ann Quin, *Berg* (London: Paladin, 1989), hereafter to be cited within the text.

own barefaced vamping. Following a drunken fracas at a fireworks party at Nathy and Judith's, Berg is convinced that he has strangled his father and has rolled up the "corpse" in a rug: 'At last I can rest in peace amen. Accomplished.' (75) But, from there, and with a terrifying inevitability, Berg finds himself embroiled in a dizzying succession of Oedipal variations, each one darker and more farcical than the last.

Liberating Oedipus?

In Oedipus the sixties found a figure for the times. The tragic son of Thebes was to become poster boy of the tumultuous upsurge of creativity and rebellion that swept across Europe and America during the period. He appears as a metaphor for the sixties' inter-generational battle time and time again in the philosophy, literature, theatre, film and even music of the period. Writers, artist, filmmakers and musicians turned to this tragedy of knowledge, vision and blindness, drawing out the resonances of its themes of fate, free will and state control, employing it to not only elucidate but to lend a psycho-historical sense of mythic weight and historical inevitability to the period's denigrations of authority of the "Name of the Father". Peter Brooke revived Seneca's *Oedipus* in an adaptation by Ted Hughes at the Old Vic in 1968 – Steven Berkoff found this nine-hour production, with its six-foot gold phallus and jazz band rendering of "Yes, We Have No Bananas" 'too eclectic for words'.[2] Stravinsky's 1927 opera, *Oedipus Rex*, with a libretto by Jean Cocteau, was revived in 1960 at Sadler's Wells by Colin Graham. Film adaptations appeared, first *Oedipus Rex* from the Italian director, Pier Paulo Pasolini in 1967, and then Phillip Saville's *Oedipus the King* in 1968.

The Oedipus story of self-deception and self-detection was recovered and reinvented to describe the limits upon the individual that are imposed by social reality and internalised, etched upon the self by ideology. It was employed to describe the ways in which the anarchic productivity of unconscious desire is sublimated and regulated. For the way in which Oedipus' desire to know the truth at all costs is put down by the introjection of culture; the myth reflected the limits imposed upon human knowledge. His tragic plight was perceived to express the impediments to the sixties'

[2] Steven Berkoff, *Free Association: An Autobiography* (London: Faber & Faber, 1996), 110.

much-vaunted “cultural revolution” as the inheritance of authoritarian structures reinforced by societal taboos.

The ancient myth of Oedipus, who unwittingly murders his father and marries his mother, had been revived by Freud at the turn of the century in his *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1899) as the “Oedipus complex”, to describe the universal phylogenetic phenomenon of guilty infantile desires and familial rivalry. For its designation of the exemplary trauma *par excellence* of psychosexual development, and its account of the ways in which repression is installed as the means by which we manage prohibited desires via the internalisation of paternal authority as the superego, the Oedipus complex became the theoretic cornerstone of psychoanalysis, establishing subjectivity as the site of perpetual conflict between desire and the law. Freud’s Oedipus complex has been revised, problematized and later disputed by successive generations of psychoanalytic thinkers since the thirties.

Carl Jung developed Freud’s own tentative conceptualisation of the Electra complex to provide a feminine archetypical counterpart for Freud’s account of the male psychosexual developmental drama. Object-relations theorists such as D.W. Winnicott, Otto Rank and Melanie Klein reject the priority of the Paternal and reorient their theories of mind towards the mother-child relationship, prepending the onset of Oedipus with their hypothesisations of the pre-Oedipal. Prior to a *volte face* in his thinking about the Oedipal complex in the late sixties, during the fifties Jacques Lacan sought to rehabilitate Freud’s theory via the structural anthropology of Claude Levi-Strauss and the structural linguistics of Saussure. Lacan elaborates Freud’s own speculations about the linguistic structuration of the unconscious, arguing famously that the ‘textual unconscious’ is structured like a language.[3] He states the centrality of the Oedipus complex as the means by which, at once, the child’s subjectivity emerges and they come into language by mapping the Oedipal structure onto the process of language acquisition. Concerned not with the development of the individual subject, but with placing the subject in the social field and thereby de-emphasising the bourgeois nuclear family structuration of Freud’s family romance, Lacan assigns socio-cultural roles to the players within the Oedipal drama. According to the triadic structure of the Lacanian registers of subjectivity, the Oedipus complex represents the triangular schema through which the father, familial

[3] Jacques Lacan, “The Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious or Reason Since Freud,” in *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. A. Sheridan (New York, NY: Norton, 1977), 146-78.

envoy of the wider "symbolic" order of the social world, intervenes in the dyadic symbiosis of mutual desire between mother and child located in the "imaginary", a condition of free-flowing identifications where the boundaries between the two, as subject and object, are blurred. The resolution of the Oedipus complex instigates the subject's troubled entrance into the symbolic order and the imposition of language, difference, reason and the law. The condition of the subject's emergence is one of loss and lack, of disunity and disharmony, in which the subject mourns the lost object of mother-child identification, displacing their incestuous fantasies onto other "partial objects". It signals the beginning of the subject's fruitless, desirous pursuit of this originary meaning along the chain of signifiers. Thus,' Jane Silverman Van Buren notes, 'cultural man is sentenced to an endless metonymic search for satisfaction that will always be incomplete.'[4]

In the sixties, the blighted figure of Oedipus, felt to have been wrongfully imprisoned in language by the law for his symbolic crime, had become something of a *cause célèbre*. Oedipus was to be saved, recovered from psychoanalysis – whose bedrock, the process by which the individual is rightly and properly socialised, bore his name – and liberated by Eros. The Oedipus complex was increasingly thought not, as Freud had claimed, to be a phylogenetic product of the unconscious, but the symptom of an authoritarian social order's colonisation of the mind: the tyranny within which the individual is forcibly adjusted to a "sick society" which was propagated by the institution of the family, and given sanction by psychoanalysis. Following Lacan, young Marxists "returned to Freud", radicalising his insights into the unconscious to pursue desire into more subversive directions. Both Marcuse and Brown advocated 'polymorphous perversity', the liberation of desire which was subject to the 'repressive desublimation' of scientific rationality. Highlighting the existential aloneness of Oedipus' plight, that which Brown christened the "Oedipal project" came to denote man's doomed existential quest to become, in Spinoza's terms, *causa sui* ("one's own cause"); a drive to emancipation, a project of *becoming god*, but finally a fantasy of self-authorship which results, tragically, in the reaffirmation of ambivalence and dependence.[5] Equally, the expressed aim of Gilles Deleuze and Feliz Guattari's notoriously iconoclastic, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and*

[4] Jane Silverman Van Buren, *The Modernist Madonna: Semiotics of the Maternal Metaphor* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1989), 13.
[5] Norman O. Brown, *Life Against Death: The Psychoanalytic Meaning of History* (New York, NY: Viking Books, 1959), 118ff.

Schizophrenia, which appeared in the post-1968 aftermath of *événements* in France was to 'shake off the Oedipal yoke' and 'deoedipalize the unconscious'. Oedipalization was the process produced by capitalism, propagated by the family as capitalism's delegated agent and consolidated by psychiatry, by which the subject learns to desire its own repression wherein revolutionary desire is distorted and reimagined as tabooed incest and then repressed.

Oedipus appeared also in less immediately recognisable form as the mythic underpinning of so much of the art of the period. See, for example, Norman Bates' grotesque mother-love in Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960), Benjamin Braddock's designs upon Mrs Robinson in *The Graduate* (1967), based upon Charles Webb's 1963 novel, Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* or Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* (1962). More relevant here, though, is the way in which the Oedipus story reappears in radically distorted forms in the anti-detective novels of the period emerging from Europe and America, like Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966), Alain Robbe Grillet's *The Erasers* (1953) and Michel Butor's *Passing Time* (1957). Oedipus was, in a sense, the very first detective; both the Oedipus myth and classical detective fiction take as their logic the revelation of mysteries and the reestablishment of the order of things, their subject matter the exposure of lies and the tearing off of masks. Both forms are teleologically-organised paradigmatic examples of the "causal plot" (as Aristotle argues of the Oedipus myth in his *Poetics* and Todorov of detective fiction in his *The Typology of Detective Fiction*). They share assumptions about the nature of reality and of fiction. And, in this sense, the Oedipus story is paradigmatic of all narratives.

Roland Barthes, in *The Pleasure of the Text*, asks: 'Doesn't every narrative lead back to Oedipus? Isn't storytelling always a way of searching for one's origin, speaking one's conflicts with the Law, entering into the dialectic of tenderness and hatred?'[6] For him, every narrative is the 'staging of the (absent, hidden, hypostatized) father' constructed in text to satisfy in fiction the desire that we cannot in life: the desire 'to know, to learn the origin and end'.[7] Barthes suggests that narrative's Oedipal drive represents the triumph of civilisation over the primal instincts, and results in the subject's search in narrative for fictional metaphorisations of the origin and end which have been forever debarred by the incest taboo. 'If there

[6] Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 1975), 47.
[7] Ibid.

is no longer any father, why tell stories?' Barthes ponders.[8] However, refracted through the radical scepticism of the age, by the mid-century the Oedipal ur-narrative of causality and order was drawn upon to reflect the epistemological doubt, indeterminacy, relativity and the acknowledgement of the limits of reason, that characterised the era. The anti-detective novel now sought to employ these structures as a framework through which to examine the process of knowledge itself. As Deborah A. Moddelmog comments, in the detective novels of Pynchon and Robbe Grillet, the mystery that is length revealed by the unfurling of the fiction is a 'metaphysical quagmire' that forecloses the very possibility of meaning.[9]

Quin's Ill-made Men

Alastair Berg is the first in the cast of oedipal anti-heroes that populate Quinworld. Throughout her oeuvre, Quin turns to the Oedipus story as a mythic master code with which to articulate the human existential plight and her profound ontological distrust of the normative. Berg, together with Leonard of *Three* and the unnamed male protagonists of *Passages* and *Tripticks*, are all similarly ill-made men lurching haplessly towards a kind of (re-)birth. All are wearied and diminished subjects, troubled by a weakened sense of what Sartre calls *ipseity* – a sense of selfhood, that is, of fundamental self-givenness, that the world exists for me and is my world and that I exist for myself.[10] And in search of this sense of identity they, like Oedipus, attempt to exercise their conscious will by imposing upon a bewildering and radically contingent world the ordering, sense-making capacities of the mind. To solve the riddle of the world, they seek to translate the power of the mind into social power, to conquer, that is, the Cartesian division between thought and action. But, ironically, their efforts to reveal the mystery of the world always remove them from their own discovery and confront them with different, and far more troubling, truths. Forced to use the tool of language, which points beyond itself but forever entangles us within this world, deforming everything to which we apply it, these Oedipal protagonists'

[8] Ibid.
[9] Deborah A. Moddelmog, *Readers and Mythic Signs: The Oedipus Myth in Twentieth-Century Fiction* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1993), 78.
[10] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* (New York, NY: Philosophical Library, 1956), 103.

attempts to reconstruct and reformulate experience ceaselessly come up against the impasse of Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, which describes the ways in which observation distorts reality. They are repeatedly forced to recognise the ways in which comprehension itself is always vulnerable to the world and therefore the falsity of the idea of the autonomous, self-actualising mind. And in response they become tyrants of subjectivity, ensconced in a hermeneutic frenzy of interpretation, rumination and self-questioning. They are, to a man, as Quin herself so memorably puts it, 'anal-retentive researchers'[11] (often, as in *Three* and *Passages*, they are professionally engaged in the life of the mind as translators and writers). Or, as Louis Sass defines this sense of distorted and disordered self-consciousness, they are afflicted by 'hyperreflexivity'.[12] Their attempt to draw closer to the world paradoxically results in being driven further and further away and drawn deeper and more irrecoverably within their own interiority. There they remain, trapped between thought and action, between, that is, an interior vision which can never be actualised and is, in any case, not their own, and an external world that is indeterminate, unpindownable and ever elusive and impossible to comprehend.

'A man called Berg who changed his name to Greb came to the seaside intending to kill his father'. The memorable epigraph that begins the novel is unequivocal about Berg's parricidal intent. But his *mens rea* is never matched by an *actus reus*. Recounted in synopsis, Quin's novel becomes the very blackest, black as noir, of bedroom farces. A slapstick, sexual tragicomedy in which the hapless Berg, a would-be Oedipus, succeeds only in murdering a succession of symbolic surrogates of the father and mostly cannot even manage that. In fact the death toll by the end of the novel amounts to the slaughter of Judith's feline familiar, her cat, Seby, and his father's beloved budgie who dies of natural causes. Berg's quarry, the "corpse" of his father by which his progress is constantly hamstrung, is, at length, revealed to be his father's much simonised ventriloquist's dummy. His attempts to return to his mother, Edith, victorious with his father's "body" in tow are continually thwarted by Judith. He is repeatedly folded back into the stultifying absurdity of domestic life from which he longs to establish distance but whose safety, 'the

[11] Unpublished manuscript, Ann Quin, "The Unmapped Country," (c. 1973), box 52, folder 2-5, Calder & Boyars mss., Lilly Library, Indiana University.
[12] Louis Sass, "Self-disturbance in Schizophrenia: Hyperreflexivity and diminished self-affection," in *The Self in Neuroscience and Psychiatry*, eds. Tilo Kircher and Anthony S. David (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 242-271.

comfort of her arms at night…know[ledge] [that] at last he belonged to one person' (125), he finds insidiously seductive. Job not done and still casting around for a resolution to his Oedipal plight, Berg visits the coroner and identifies a drowned destitute, one of the tramps that form, as Giles Gordon has commented,[13] the Greek chorus of this novel so heavily soaked in myth, as his father. Berg attempts to usurp the-Name-of-the-Father by *literally* killing his own father, but only succeeds in "killing" his father's proxies which, in the end, seals his own fate. The novel's myriad Oedipal variations persist well beyond the close of the novel. It closes in classic chiller style with the reappearance of Nathan, subtly changed but with his resurrected taxidermied budgie, strangely familiar, who installs himself in the room next door.

Alienation-on-Sea

In an out-of-season seaside resort – a resolutely non-place which with its Oriental folly and pier we might infer to be Brighton, if that were not to miss the point entirely – Berg could scarcely have chosen a better setting for a parricide, that most fundamental of transgressions. Lodged where the land meets the sea, the seaside is a quintessentially liminal space, a place, as Rob Shields describes in his study of Brighton in *Places on the Margin*, of "in between-ness", of 'discontinuity in the social fabric, in social space, and in history'.[14] Stallybrass and White in their *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* define the British Isles' coastal periphery as the final resting place of the carnival, describing how, marginalised by the forces of modernity, it ran towards the sea.[15] The British seaside was the place for the legitimated transgressions of carnival, where the usual rules and codes of behaviour are temporarily suspended, even inverted. A place where the Regency pleasure-seeker, the Victorian bather and the thirties charabanc daytripper alike could enjoy the frisson of sanctioned and regulated liminality set in the safely mediated sublime of cliff, sea and vast horizon.

By the sixties, however, into a "frontstage" - in sociologist Erving Goffman's terms – of performed rituals of transgression and staged pleasures, a "backstage" of

[13] Giles Gordon, introduction to *Berg* (Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 2001), viii.
[14] Rob Shields, *Places on the Margin: Alternative Geographies of Modernity* (London: Routledge, 1992), 83.
[15] Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986), 180.

aimlessless, small-time gangsterism, brute power and exploitation had begun to extrude. As Britons that could abandon the pleasures of the seaside for the wine and sunshine of the continent, following the advent of cheap tourist flights in 1952, they left behind a sense of anomie, decrepitude, seediness and stagnation. Even as in a post-war, post-Suez Britain struggling to reconcile itself with its loss of prestige, the seaside was hymned for its traditionally English brand of good, off-colour fun and became enshrined in the nostalgic myths of a collective childhood spent digging up sandworms in a kiss me quick hat as, with so much else, the veil had been lifted, innocence lost, and the seaside carnival began to seem less like temporary and socially productive liberation from the boundaries – both spatial and social – of respectable urban society – and more like the intimation of a seedy underbelly of ambivalent and irrational forces laying latent but at the very heart of everyday life. It is no accident that both Roquentin and Meursault found themselves on beaches, that their 'nausea' should manifest where, as T.S. Eliot wrote of Margate Sands in *The Wasteland*, 'I can connect / Nothing with nothing'[16]. Or that the English occultist and mystic Aleister Crowley, dubbed "The Wickedest Man in the World", should live out his final years cooking up heroin in Room 13 of a guesthouse in Bohemia, Hastings.[17]

During the late fifties and sixties a succession of writers – as well as musicians, most notably The Beatles – sought to recover music hall, vaudeville and other traditional forms of a more "authentic" and indigenous popular culture in response to anxieties about national identity (and especially the perceived threat of Americanisation) which enmeshed with a renewed sense of working class consciousness. Colin MacInnes, in his 1961 essay, 'Young England Half English' claims that 'until some forty years ago, the English song about English life resounded boisterously in the music halls. Since then, new American musical idioms… have swamped our own ditties'.[18] Richard Hoggart might have accused George Orwell of viewing the English working classes 'through the cosy fug of an Edwardian music hall',[19] but he too was liable to romanticise the beanfeast, the charabanc trip and even the mid-week fish and chip supper as 'free acts' of what he calls 'cheerful

[16] T.S. Eliot, *The Wasteland: A Facsimile and Transcript of the Original Drafts*, ed. Valerie Eliot (London: Faber & Faber, 1971), 301-2

[17] Aleister Crowley's final years allegedly inspired Anthony Powell's Dr. Trelawny in his *The Kindly Ones* (1962), the sixth instalment of his *A Dance to the Music of Time*.

[18] Colin MacInnes, *Young England Half English* (New York, NY: Random House, 1961), 14.

[19] Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), 15.

existentialism'.[20] His auto-ethnographic memoir, *The Uses of Literacy*, elegises an English working class which sought and found its meaning in 'that little bit extra': the 'sprawling, highly ornamental, rococo extravagance' of popular culture.[21] The playwright, John Osborne, articulated a similar declinist thesis in his 1957 play, *The Entertainer*, which is set during the Suez crisis. In the play, which mingles vaudeville set piece *mises en scène* with domestic life, Britain is metaphorised as a tatty, decaying music hall, presided over by failed comic turned dissolute philanderer, Archie Rice. 'The music hall is dying and with it, a significant part of England', writes Osborne in his introduction, '[s]ome of the heart of England has gone; something that once belonged to everyone, for this was truly a folk art.'[22] Welfare capitalism might have meant that '[n]obody wants, and nobody goes without, all are provided for', but what was left, as Jean comments, was the meagre paucity of an existence where you 'go on and on till they carry you out in a box'.[23]

However, Quin clearly had no truck with the period's rose-tinted, nostalgic attempts to ennoble and memorialise the gilt edges of a kinder and gentler age. *Berg* resonates powerfully with a tendency in drama that became known, after Martin Esslin's coinage, as the Theatre of the Absurd,[24] typified in the works of playwrights like Joe Orton, Harold Pinter, Samuel Beckett and Eugene Ionesco. This movement in theatre sought to appropriate and re-contextualise the motifs of traditional popular culture for far more ambivalent ends. The novel's commingling of farce and menace is certainly Ortonesque, its bedraggled milieu and down-at-heel rooming house setting could be straight out of Pinter plays such as *The Room* (1957) and *The Birthday Party* (1957). The new anachronisms of popular culture that emerge in the works of these writers are shop-soiled, time-worn and pitiful, and used to define the estranged and alienated conditions of human existence. These playwrights were influenced by the existentialism of Camus and his assessment, set out in his essay "The Myth of Sisyphus" (1942), of the human situation as "absurd", afflicted by a sense of alienation and anomie at the purposelessness of existence in a universe without meaning or value.[25] For those affiliated with the Theatre of the Absurd, the theatrical forms of music hall, pantomime, vaudeville, variety, the revue and the light

[20] Ibid., 105.
[21] Ibid., 119.
[22] John Osborne, introduction to *Three Plays* (New York, NY: Criterion Books, 1958), 102.
[23] Ibid., 134.
[24] Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd* (New York, NY: Knopf, 2009).
[25] Albert Camus, "The Myth of Sisyphus," in *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays* (London: Penguin, 2013).

opera (which were themselves derived from older popular forms like the *commedia dell' arte*, and they, in turn, seeded from primitive forms like mummery) were employed to convey the artificiality and estrangement of the conditions of modern life. The unity and integrity of the well-rounded character was replaced by debilitated and depthless stock types, for example. Dialogue becomes a relentless call-and-response of inconsequential clichés, innuendos and non sequiturs.

The forces of carnival that had, as Bahktin so influentially argues in *Rabelais and His World*, signalled the productive, even radical possibilities of the albeit temporary transgression from reason – or at least the socially useful delusion of it – were now being deployed to depict the irrationality at the very heart of human existence: the reductive nature of human experience and the displacement of the subject. The Age of Reason had now lapsed and had brought about nothing but its opposite; Adorno and Horkheimer, Juergen Habermas and Max Weber had all recognised the rotten heart of Enlightenment modernity. Scientific rationality had participated in genocide, the enslavement of human by technology and large-scale environmental destruction. The comedy of farce had become the tragedy of the absurd.

Voiceless Bodies and Bodiless Voices

Berg's ventriloquial plot might well allude to the curious case of Archie Andrews, a ventriloquist's dummy that disappeared from a London train bound for Leeds in October 1951. At the time one of the most prominent stars of British radio, millions followed the Archie Andrews "kidnap" scandal in the press. After an anonymous tip-off, Archie was found three days later by his vent, Peter Brough, trussed up in a suitcase in the left luggage office at King's Cross, a similar scene to that in which Berg repeatedly attempts to dispose of his father's "corpse" in the novel. 'Paternity is often an issue' in ventriloquism, writes Steven Connor in *Dumbstruck*, his cultural history of the art of 'seeming to speak where one is not':

> [O]ften the ventriloquist attempts to supply the place of the figure's real father, who is said to be elsewhere. The ventriloquist fathers himself, in a not-quite-bloodless vocal birth, in which the child never in fact leaves the

> ventriloquist's body (indeed, the ventriloquist is partly inside the body of its figure).[26]

In the figure of the ventriloquist and his dummy, Quin (not quite) embodies the Oedipal process. By killing the dummy, the hapless Berg seeks to corporealise the bodiless voice of the parental ghost, to actualise Lacan's Paternal metaphor, through which the subject is doomed to pursue endless substitutions for the originary loss, and then extinguish it. But the Oedipal psychodrama, of course, only ever has one ending: 'It is Death', as Kristeva writes in her reading of Samuel Beckett's "First Love", 'it always was':[27]

> It is the meaning of the narrative of the son… As long as a son pursues meaning in a story or through narratives… he narrates in the name of death.

In his later reflections upon culture, especially his *Totem and Taboo* (1913), Freud sought to extend his account of Oedipus as a psychic phenomenon to explain the origins of social life. The psychic process by which the subject is enculturated, Freud argues, is the schematic inheritance of the parricidal origins of civilisation. He theorises that the Oedipus complex has empirical origins, seeking to establish the oedipal story of prohibition and punishment as prehistoric fact which, as Zizek put it, 'really had to happen'.[28] Our internal, eternal conflict between desire and the law, Freud speculates, is the memory-trace of a primordial scene in which the primal father is murdered by his sons and then reincarnated as a totem animal by whose ritual sacrifice the sons attempt to appease the absent father, who in death has become even more powerful than in life:

> As far as the father that Oedipus knew is concerned, he only becomes the father, as Freud's myth indicates, once he is dead. It is thus here, as I've said a hundred times, that one finds the paternal function.[29]

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[26] Steven Connor, *Dumbstruck: A Cultural History of Ventriloquism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 408.
[27] Julia Kristeva, "The Father, Love and Banishment," in *Desire in Language*, trans. L.S. Roudiez (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 150-1.
[28] Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (London: Verso, 2000), 315.
[29] Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*: *Book VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis 1959-1960*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Dennis Porter (New York, NY: Norton, 1992), 309.

The ritual murder of the dummy, the totemistic father-surrogate, then, results not in Berg's emancipation but his enslavement in the machinations of oedipal process and the inevitable succession to his place within the paternal lineage. The oedipal narrative has a terrifying inevitability; we find Berg, after Nathy's "death", installed in his father's chair in their seaside bedsit, firmly ensconced within the 'annihilation of domesticity' (147):

> Yes, let's have a proper meal, with a proper woman sitting opposite, with a proper plastic table cloth, a proper pink, with proper yellow cups and saucers, and a proper clock ticking over with the proper time. (161)

In her essay, Kristeva sketches a grisly tableau of Beckett's mourning sons, all waiting for Godot, the figure of the father with his deathly power. In Beckett, of course, he never arrives, but in *Berg* he does. In yet another shift of the Oedipal structure the father re-emerges as an ominous figure behind the partition that shakes like an 'animal thumping its tail' (168).

Intending to kill the father's bodiless voice, then, *Berg*'s protagonist succeeds only in birthing his own voiceless body: the dummy, his silent, speechless familiar. Developing a technique she later employed in her short story, 'Motherlogue',[30] a one-sided dialogue between the narrator and her mother in which the narrator's responses seem to have been redacted, Berg is almost mute, talked *at*, never verbalised. Even here, voicing his one line, Berg stumbles, there is a slip of the tongue ("never" instead of "ever") and, in any case, Judith infers what she would rather hear: 'Of course I knew where was something between us right from the start, that wicked look you used to give me on the stairs' (89).

Berg's story is told in that characteristically Quinian mode wherein the verb "to be", conferring the impression that a story is, at least, *taking place* and is happening within some substantive universe, is consistently elided. A kind of fictional E-Prime, where thought and action are (almost) always hypothetical, depicted in a slippery *as if* register, which describes without ever conferring existence. Memory and perception and inner and outer voices are enmeshed and occur along the same

[30] Ann Quin, "Motherlogue," in *Transatlantic Review* 32 (1969), 101-105.

irreal plane where the lines of sight are off. There is a sense, in *Berg*, of a past and present that lay cheek-by-jowl, of a memory world and a perceptual world that show forth almost simultaneously and are connected metonymically. Within this logic of sensation, time becomes a merely flimsy accretion that is easily scraped away. The phenomena of the present appear distant and etiolated, but segue sometimes imperceptibly into the memory-tone of a vital and highly-charged world. Narrative voice slips from a claustrophobically internalised third-person to address the second-person of this divided self and constitutes a memory-world that is fragmentary and yet abundant, cornucopic, sublime, even in its sensorial intensity:

> Remember the swings, the shoots, and roundabout horses; dizzy and dazzled, sticky fingers on a stray cat, a dead thrush, a rabbit stunned; cornflowers sprayed against stained glass; poppies in cornfields, the first, second, or was it the third kiss given, not on the lips, in the hay; rats scuttling, and the kisses later chalk-marked on park benches: I've got the most. Days of sun and smells of home-made cakes, toffee, fallen apples… Hills meeting sky, and those who charmed paths with snails, or put catherine wheels in hedges; rockets misfired from other planets; the whole galaxy: a giant's chair, oneself a splinter in the leg. (8)

The phenomenological world that young Berg draws around himself is a 'freedom that found its own reality' (153). It is a kind of narcissistic sanctuary that offers protection from the vertiginous apprehension of a 'world that no longer revolves around you.' There 'channels of light… flickered on the boy who was left the other side of the hedge' (11). A 'sticky, sickly child' with '[r]ound scarred knees' – 'just a common cissy' (100) – is afforded the possibilities of transcendence:

> But once on your own when you lorded it with beast and flower, striding the hills, welcomed by a natural order, a slow sensuality that circled the sun, rose the wind through the grass forests, then nothing mattered, because everything comprehended your significance. (11)

Berg's perceptual world, however, is etiolated and antinomian, peopled with marginal characters and marginal lives lived in cramped and mildewed rooms on the déclassé

fringes of society. Of dusty chintz and velveteen, bare bulbs swinging, phlegmy coughs in the night, cat hair, moth balls, artificial fruit, milk-skin and tide-marked cuffs, the 'familiar furniture and objects scattered about the room, yet no longer belonging' (112). See the description of Berg's room with its

> rumpled bed, the chest of drawers, that refused to close; the half open wardrobe doors, the chipped enamel pot with its faded blue flowers; the wall paper making everything else collide; this morning's dirty dishes, half a brown loaf – a monk's cowl – perched on the pale yellow plastic table cloth; pin-striped trousers over the rose-chintz chair; pants, string vests; the case full of bottles, wigs, pamplets: BUY BERG'S BEST HAIR TONIC DEFEAT DELILAH'S DAMAGE: IN TWO MONTHS YOU WILL BE A NEW MAN. (3)

People are self-fashioning grotesques, mere personae busied with role-playing paltry renditions of character; 'cosy mice in their cages of respectability' (81). This world is revealed from the point of view of the peeping tom, the voyeur; human perspective is found kneeling at keyholes, or with an ear pressed against the partition which serves as the screen against which he projects his pseudo-incestuous fantasies. This sense of estrangement between Berg and the outer world is made flesh, portrayed as a cartoon appendage that protrudes from the self, an antenna that gropes towards the outer world. With echoes of Stephen's umbilical cord in *Ulysses*, in *Berg* perceiving happens through a 'microscopic eye' which looks upon the world through a gap in the curtain 'as if from a umbilical cord' (5), his gaze is returned 'as through a telescope' (6). Music is heard as if strung like a thread of 'hard-polished beads' (7), Berg 'pull[s] his eye through a keyhole' (7). Conversation is a relentless call-and-response of inconsequential clichés, innuendos and non-sequiturs: "Good morning, nice day. Good afternoon, cold today." (2).

Berg is a 'Pirandello hero', a character very much in search of an author, as frigid and solitary as the iceberg his name implies and engaged in an elaborate Jungian masquerade. As an enervated and acne-ridden youth with shoes that pinched, who was 'terrified of so much sophistication, everyone that much more adult, more knowledgeable in the rules of the social game' (44), Berg 'learned how to make contact by spraying a fashionable, acceptable brand of sanctity onto others' (45), fashioning a persona with which to reconcile himself with the outside world.

Arranging his face into appropriate shapes in the mirror, donning a limp bow tie, he is 'trying hard not to expose the internal rustle, or lay bare the final draft', to 'abide by the rules and regulations of [his] chosen part' (6).

Memory sequences apparently disclose a plethora of psychoanalytic etiologies to account for Berg's damaged subject. Can one pin down his distress via a Freudo-Lacanian interpretation of a malfunctioning Oedipal complex, for example? He is a 'monumental bird weighed down by elemental forces' (27): the "good mother" turned bad, too intimate, too devoted, queasily over-familiar, the absentee dad, bringer of reason gone AWOL, the Name-of-the-Father never imposed, never introjected leaving the young Berg left with vast reservoirs of untranslated infant omnipotence, 'longing to be castrated' (4) to be divested of his primary narcissism. Or, is this an instance of Jungian enantiodromia, an unsuccessful process of individuation and the return of a repressed individuality from beneath an empty persona? There are obscure intimations of sexual abuse at the hands of drunk Uncle Billy, a 'faint recollection of a grizzled face peering over' (4)and of the 'dormitory pleasures' inflicted upon Berg as a 'pretty boy at the age of nine' (10), of Berg's aberrant sexual development, of his attempted suicide at ten, of sexual deviance and guilt. He is a would-be pick-up artist, cruising the dancehalls of this seaside town for a 'piece of fluff' (4) and yet he is repulsed by the ignominy of sex, impotent and yet a shamefaced onanist:

> Like playing with a doll, rising out of the bath, a pink jujube, a lighthouse, outside the rocks rose in body, later forming into maggots that invaded the long nights, crawled out of seal walls, and tumbled between the creased in the sheets. (4)

Equally, Quin appears to endorse the theory of the schizophrenogenic mother that rose to prominence in psychoanalysis between the fifties and seventies under the aegis of Melanie Klein. Berg's mother, Edith, is depicted as a boundaryless despot, 'devoted unconditionally to her only son' (3), the 'good' mother turned bad; too intimate, too devoted, queasily over-familiar.

Contrary to the cultural return to the mother that was being enacted elsewhere during the period – the reclamation and recuperation, that is, of the feminine as a position of empowered marginality – in *Berg* the traditional associations of the

feminine (with irrationality, madness, excess and the grotesque) are reaffirmed. In *Berg* the feminine is always deeply ambivalent. Judith is overripe and superabundant, smelling of 'wet fur and confectionery' (70) her flesh 'blotched and mottled' (123), her smile 'a crack in icing sugar' (92) the mascara 'congealed blood under her eyes' (93). She leers at him lasciviously, snarls, bites and licks him. She seems to extrude pneumatically. Her sexuality is portrayed as seductive and menacing. She is a siren, a venus flytrap, a vampire, who seduces with her 'round soft belly, the quick relief of her opening thighs, the smell between, like hyacinths' but once captured will '[e]at you whole, drain everything out of you within a week'. (125) She is invariably found set into highly-charged scenes that embody these claggy and sweetish associations and that seem to pulse and vibrate with a kind of atavistic sexual menace. She is a 'secret hot-house pleasure' (69) amongst monstrous dancing pot plants whose sticky, grasping tendrils threaten to overwhelm Berg (in an echo of Nathalie Sarraute's botanic metaphorisations, tropisms). Or they seem to become doused in a Sartean slime, the spilled hair tonic 'that spread its mucus-like way right round them, between them, over them.' (85)

For Betty Friedan, in her *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), women are the passive victims of the 'comfortable concentration camp' of middle-class domesticity. 'Dehumanized' and 'adjusted' as housewives, they, like the victims of the holocaust, walk to a 'slow death of mind and spirit'.[31] In *Berg*, however, as in the novels of Amis, Cooper, Wain, et al., women are portrayed as the willing ancillaries of the system, the foot soldiers that entrap and ensnare their male charges in clotted and cloying worlds of domestic annihilation. In naming Judith Goldstein, Quin draws similarly upon a problematic identification between women and the figure of the Jewish concentration camp victim – one which she would return to in her novel *Passages* – but in *Berg*, women are consenting conspirators with the mystique. As role-players *par excellence*, women are the agents of a metaphysical absurdity. They are Hemingwayian "bitch goddesses" who feign an 'air of complete innocence' that conceals their 'anarchy of destruction' (88). Judith clings 'like a snail to its shell' (94) to her social mask. The 'curlers, the daily, nightly rituals' (92) conceal an authentic self that is 'a centre of real hardness' (90):

[31] Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York, NY: Norton, 1963), 306-7.

> Isn't she the very prototype of the woman one dreams of being caught up by, at rest in her omnipotent, knowing her to be ruthless, but never accepting the fact, half the fascination in wondering how far she will go – the wiles, the lies, all vanity accepted but never quite confronted. The so-called mystery of the woman, so involved in the many-sided portraits of herself, eternally eluding one's grasp, knowing she would lose all if she ever showed her real identity, her real worth. (145)

Berg, like Daniel Paul Schreber before him, fancies himself in drag. Making up as a women, a masque worn on top of a mask, he ponders the thrilling sexual possibilities: 'if only the navy were in… the adventures he could have had in such a disguise' (117). Berg's, however, is no feminisation phantasy of benignly embodied subjectivity, of *jouissance*; his transvestitism is in no way, as Louis Sass has interpreted of Schreber's own, an 'antidote to the intellect' or a 'palliative for the self-torturing mind'[32]. It is portrayed, on the contrary, as thoroughly Freudian, a vengeful longing for the father who, in a comic set piece unwittingly mistakes Berg for Judith: 'Lead him on, lead him right there, produce it in his face, in his ear, in his eye, let him have it so he'll remember it to the day he dies. (119).

In the end, the sea is Berg's only respite. Failing to fulfil his doomed fantasy of self-authorship Berg abandons his attempts to climb out of his inner cosmology and submits to the void, attempting to whittle down reality into its elemental constituent parts. It is only adrift, floating between life and death that Berg, like fellow shipwreck, Pincher Martin, can finally play Prometheus, reaching a zero condition of homeostasis described as

> a moment caught between two moods, that space within, separated from life, as well as death, when the sun is faced without blinking, when eternity lies here inside; no division whatsoever, simply a series of circular motivations? (23)

Adrift in a watery purgatory between life and death Berg feels himself 'falling in endless space' (151). Where 'all suddenly would be soundless' and time is reduced

[32] Louis Sass, *The Paradoxes of Delusion: Wittgenstein, Schreber and the Schizophrenic Mind* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994), 126.

to the ‘moment fixed between one wave and the next’, one can enjoy the ‘glorious sensation of weightless, moon-controlled’, can ‘forget, be forgotten’ and ‘becom[e] part of the sky’ (153). One cannot, however, suspend this zero condition infinitely. Berg is in the balance, suspended precariously between opposing forces that, on the one hand, draw him under the waves towards engulfment and submission and, on the other, call him to return to shore. The sea’s watery purgatory is merely a palliative. This, after all, is a mere fantasy of human limits, hanging precariously between the impossible transgression of those limits – engulfment, drowning – and return. Like Prometheus, Berg is left in the impossible quandary of the self-divided man who knows too much.

It is the tramp, not Berg, who is blinded, like Prospero, the ‘pearls that were his eyes’ plucked out by gulls, not punctured with a pin. Berg is, in the end, only figuratively pricked by the pin that seals his fate and signals the further interminable, inexorable rotation of the Oedipal triangle. The pin, that is, which clasps Judith’s butterfly brooch, on which his eyes alight in the coda of the novel, remembering, perhaps, the ‘rusty pin’ on Edith’s ‘saved-up birthday brooch’ that ‘always caught something in your throat’ (7) and which stands for the inescapable tawdriness and disappointment of the world in which Berg is finally and irrecoverably trapped.

Invisible Injuries and the Algebras of Liberation: **Three,** *the Nouveau Roman and British Late Modernism*

In Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook* (1962), the number of liberation is four: four notebooks, four gates and four directions. Frederick R. Karl has commented that in the figure of four, Lessing finds a form that blocks all other exits except to utopia.[1] For Quin, however, in literature – as in life – it is always three. The figure of the triangle occurs time and time again in Quin's fictions: in *Berg*'s endlessly reiterated Oedipal variations, for example, in the trinity of a woman, her lover and her missing brother in *Passages*' re-inscription of the Antigone myth and in *Tripticks'* protagonist's trio of 'X-wives', his affair with his mother-in-law and his not-so-cosy threesome with his second and third spouses. Within her own romantic relationships, Quin pursued sexual and social threesomes with varying degrees of success. Indeed, *Three* is dedicated to 'Bob and Bobbie': the American poet Robert Creeley and his wife, Bobbie, with whom Quin lodged in Placitas, New Mexico during her D.H. Lawrence Fellowship in 1964. In a profile of her in the *Arts Guardian* prior to the publication of her final novel, *Tripticks,* in 1972, Quin's love life is reported with no little titillation: 'Miss Quin had a relationship which involved going to bed with a boyfriend and a girlfriend at the same time', the interviewer breathlessly reports.[2] For the journalist perhaps this unorthodox lifestyle was just another notch on the bedpost of the "sexual revolution". Conservative commentators like C.P. Snow, Pamela Hansford Johnson and later Margaret Thatcher perceived the new sexual permissiveness as signalling moral collapse, the mindlessly and irresponsibly hedonistic pursuit of instant gratification. But for Quin, "free love" is the privileged and paradigmatic instance of the communing of self with self, and therefore always practiced in pursuit of knowledge, the exploration of human connectedness and the attempt to forge new paths for the circulation of desire.

Her second novel, *Three*, published in 1966, two years after her debut, is, as its title implies, a study in fiction of life *a ménage a trois*. *Three*'s titular trio are Ruth and Leonard, an unhappily married, middle-aged couple; she a housewife, he a

[1] Frederick R. Karl, "Doris Lessing in the Sixties: The New Anatomy of Melancholy," *Contemporary Literature* 13 (Winter 1972): 16.
[2] John Hall, "The Mighty Quin," *Arts Guardian*, April 29, 1972, 9.

translator, the absent third is S., their young female lodger, who has – it *seems* – taken her own life by drowning. All three are both narrators and readers; their story is told and, simultaneously, read via a salad of multi-perspectival accounts and fragmentary documents, nested narratives set cheek-by-jowl, voice unattributed and frequently remaining undifferentiated within the body of text. The frame narrative, passages of brittle, enervated third-person free direct speech which depict Ruth and Leonard's narrative present, are inlaid with sections from Leonard's diary, whose telegraphed sentences and coded X's the couple refer to in failed attempts to fix the events of the previous summer: 'Yes I'm sure yes but when was that? Check your diary.'[3] Leavened into this are fragments of S.'s own diary and transcriptions of her audio journal, expressionist renditions that blur perception and memory, which Ruth and Leonard each consult semi-clandestinely and with no little lurid fascination. There are the cine films that the couple provide a commentary upon, and the secret reel that Leonard watches alone. Transcriptions of Leonard's taped audio diary, which is listened to by Ruth, and Ruth's diary, read by Leonard, appear towards the end of the novel and finally offer tantalising glimpses into the couple's inner lives. *Three*'s multi-perspectival witnessing structure and the self-reflexive thematisation of writing and of reading foregrounds hermeneutic issues surrounding articulation, interpretation and their availability, their limits and, at last, their indeterminacy. We "read" the protagonists "reading" one another and by placing these accounts side-by-side, the novel at once tentatively, glimpsingly, and always only partially, reveals both the "truth" of the characters' existence and the measures the protagonists take to keep that "truth" at bay. Moreover, the metarepresentative aspect of *Three*, its depiction of the ways in which Ruth and Leonard attempt to read and to represent one another's mind, reflects more broadly upon *what fiction is*.

In the novel, Quin dramatises what the French *nouveau romancier*, Nathalie Sarraute – that other chronicler *par excellence* of human intersubjective relationships – called, adopting the expression from Katherine Mansfield, a fellow writer singularly attuned to their complex and ambivalent mechanics, 'the terrible desire to establish contact'.[4] Quin, like Sarraute, employs a bifocular, anti-behaviourist mode that turns surface realism against itself, endowing every gesture, every word and every thing

[3] Ann Quin, *Three* (Champaign, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 2003), 2, hereafter to be cited within the text.
[4] Nathalie Sarraute, "From Dostoievski to Kafka," *Tropisms and The Age of Suspicion*, trans. Maria Jolas (London: John Calder, 1963), 76.

with the secret chaos of what lies beneath. But, unlike Sarraute, Quin also speculates in fiction upon the possibilities, by replacing human coupling with "tripling", for more "authentic" relations between self and other and a much-yearned-for rapprochement between the interior life and the external world. That is, the potential for a form of human connectedness which Hélène Cixous, a writer and theorist who shares Quin's preoccupation with finding alternative ways for humans to relate to one another, defines as one in which the self 'would not use the word love to cover up its opposite'.[5] But, as the novel chronicles, the possibility of attaining that state of mutual recognition is dependent upon the other and demands a leap into the other's abyss without any guarantee of reciprocation. These are the stakes of *Three*: the risk that the pursuit of connectedness may well lead to its opposite.

Three's Company

For Quin, as for existential phenomenologists like R.D. Laing, human life is forged in the correlative existence of living beings and others who comprise their surrounding world. Quin recognises the inherently dialogic nature of the self and of culture, the way in which our reality is continually established intersubjectively, via the inter- and intra-psychic relationships between two experiencing subjects. People, Quin writes in *Three*, like the creatures upon Noah's Ark, arrive '[t]wo by two' (56) and the quotidian is sustained by the action and reaction of their equal and opposite forces. But, like Cixous, Quin also recognises these couplings as the social analogue of what she, after Derrida, defines as 'logocentrism',[6] that the pairing of man and woman recapitulates the ways in which binaristic structures of thought are reproduced endlessly as the units of culture: self/other, inner/outer, male/female, mother/father, child/adult, pleasure/pain, good/evil, love/hate. And for Quin, as for Cixous (and, of course, for Derrida), this oppositional system is governed by a mechanics of presence and absence that requires a passive partner in each coupling, a part that "woman" as irretrievably "other" – at once necessary to the system but forever excluded from it – is inevitably called upon to play. For Quin, the discordant third is

[5] Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clement, *The Newly Born Woman*, trans. Betsy Wing (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 78.
[6] Ibid., 63-4.

the disruptive element that breaks the bonds of these oppositional couplings that form the base molecules of reality.

Quin's rule of thirds speculates in fiction upon a route out of the master-slave dialectic in which human relations, in a time and a culture when authentic connectedness is no longer possible, are condemned to be a tragic 'struggle to the death' of lordship and bondage. One where, as conceptualised by Hegel in his *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807), the desire for recognition tragically precludes the very possibility of forging a connection with others. Human relationships for Quin are pursued for their potential of satisfying the self's craving for recognition by others. The sharing of a cigarette is singularly – transcendentally – freighted for '[t]he contact it promises' (110). This promise is one of the happy and harmonious co-presence of subjectivities and the consensual sharing of meaning, and is therefore the means by which the subject might gain access to a world beyond the imprisonment of the self, by which it might recover a sense of certainty about the world's existence beyond the interminably frustrating limits of one's own subjectivity, and, in this way, finally escape solipsism and conclusively establish a stable sense of being-in-the-world.

But in *Three* such a craving is always futile and always endlessly frustrated, for the quest for identity necessarily entails its dissolution. Human relations are a constant subterranean battle of provocation and humiliation, as lashed-together consciousnesses antagonise one another in their struggle to differentiate themselves and jostle for dominance. The relationship between self and other is depicted as the way in which humans, unwittingly or otherwise, collude with one another to create the toxic, chimerical worlds they inhabit. Apparently innocent exchanges are a mere veneer for acts of cruelty and brutality. Human relations (fail to) contain their potential for psychic violence. In *Three*, the power embedded within the other's perception of the self is a deeply ambivalent one. Laing, in *The Divided Self*, describes the being of schizophrenia as a condition of profound ontological insecurity, which is characterised by the subject's apprehension of immanent threat – that of 'engulfment', 'implosion' and 'petrification' – to the continuity, autonomy and integrity of the unified and discrete self.[7] And in *Three*, as in Sarraute's novels, we

[7] R.D. Laing, *The Divided Self* (London: Penguin, 2010), 43.

gain an experiential sense of the lived world that results when everyday life is pervaded by these anxieties.

The real's stable – or rather, for Quin, frustratingly heterostatic – dualism is depicted in *Three* as a mere performance of 'defiant, unapproachable unity' (57) that always bears the anxious trace of the interloping third that threatens to imbalance the real's delicate and hard-won equilibrium: 'Everybody [is] immediately concerned in being, doing what is expected of them. As if [they were] given the choice of two packs of cards to set the pace, but were misled by an invisible third.' (57) Reality is a performance, or a game, its players merely the embodied envoys of their' "true" and "authentic" selves. The 'invisible third' by splitting desire two ways, thereby breaking the frame of dualism's pageant of brittle, insubstantial unity, or by throwing the game, for Quin presents the possibility not just of accessing a truly embodied subjectivity, but of transgressing those bodily limits. In her radically non-Oedipal fictions, the third is made to stand for the apex in continuing triangular human relations where transgressive desires remain unforeclosed.

The third, according to the geometries of Freudian psychoanalytic theory, is generally associated with the Name-of-the-Father, the bringer of authority, of reason and of language. It is the paternal intervention that forecloses the free flow of communicative intercourse between mother and child. It is, for Lacan and for Zizek, for example, the 'big Other', the authoritarian superego of the symbolic economy that imperils the freedom of the subject. For Quin, however, the third is the mistress of the Real, lascivious and capricious, her expansive and free-flowing desiring appetites never fully sated. It is she who overturns the subject-object relations with which we mediate our relationship with the world, a spanner in the works of a desire assumed to be unilateral and unidirectional.

But, as René Girard warns, the love triangle is by no means a stable and unproblematic framework for the circulation of desire. His hugely influential *Desire, Deceit and the Novel* (1966) transformed literature's formal algebra, replacing the coefficient two with three. Later, in *The Scapegoat* (1989), Girard elaborates his mimetic theory of desire, explaining that we yearn for the desired object only because some third-party mediator has desired it before us. This rivalry, Girard

writes, is the 'source of all disorder… the true secret of conflict and violence'.[8] To keep the peace, he argues, this murderous rage must be channelled onto a scapegoat, an innocent victim whose death brings about temporary calm but whose persecution and murder ultimately gives the lie to the illusion of human order. In Quin's novels, desire's apogee is always in danger of becoming its scapegoat. The third of *Three*, S., is the bringer of a heady and intoxicating chaos who must, necessarily, be "sacrificed", for the restoration of an order which can now only ever be illusory.

Unlike her contemporaries, in particular Lessing, B.S. Johnson and Alan Burns, Quin claimed not to be "political", that class 'never bothered [her]', that she was 'sick to death' of it being the primary focus of the social realist novel of the fifties. She felt it had 'been overdone'.[9] But her books, with their sensitivity to what the psychologist and social theorist Erich Fromm, in his 1941 book *Escape from Freedom*, designates as the pathologisation of the normative,[10] and their attunement to what V.S. Pritchett, writing of Henry Green's *Doting* called the 'injury done to certain English minds by the main, conventional emphases of English life'[11] are, without doubt, implicitly political. In what follows, I will explore the ways in which Quin's *Three* seeks to discover and to capture what lies below what was for her the flimsy veneer of civilisation – to think the unthinkable and to say the unsayable – by self-consciously enacting, testing the limits of and speculating upon what lies beyond the metarepresentational function of fiction. More broadly, I want to continue the task of re-stitching and re-situating Quin's work back into its contexts within the writing and thought of the period, by exploring the novel's resonances with a deep and abiding mistrust of the quotidian that is evident in a lineage of Anglo-French late-modern, after-modern, not-quite-post-modern writers, such as Elizabeth Bowen, Henry Green, William Sansom, Nathalie Sarraute, Alain Robbe-Grillet and others.

[8] René Girard, *The Scapegoat*, trans. Yvonne Freddero (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1989), 65.
[9] Ann Quin, quoted in Nell Dunn, ed., *Talking to Women* (London: Harper Collins, 1965), 133.
[10] Erich Fromm, *Escape from Freedom* (New York, NY: Rinehart & Co., 1941).
[11] V.S. Pritchett, "Green on Doting," *New Yorker*, May 17, 1952, 137.

We meet Ruth and Leonard in the aftermath of S.'s disappearance, each of them taking great pains to establish for themselves and for each other their lack of culpability. Their disquiet is euphemised into stock obituary phrases: 'No one can be blamed Ruth we must understand that least of all ourselves… We're not to blame remember that no one is responsible for another's action – any tea left by the way?' (1-2). The novel chronicles their quest, upon discovering S.'s diary, to expose the mystery of her death by reconstructing the summer prior to her drowning: 'Let's face it neither of us understood her there was a need in her for security yet at the same time she rebelled background convent family everything contributed…' (117)

Both Ruth and Leonard have assumed the well-worn roles of domestic life: she peevish and nit-picking, addled with phobias and neurotic ailments – migraines, hay fever – and popping pills against her jangled nerves, emotionally hyperborean, except with the coddled cat; he a long-suffering nail-baiter, sexually frustrated but afflicted by erectile dysfunction and sedating himself with television, his emotional life channelled into amateur botany, his intellectual life into books. The neurotic, highly-charged prose of the main narrative told in the third person permits Ruth and Leonard no interiority – indeed, they joke hubristically about their lack of 'hidden depths' – but it jangles with the paratactic force of an invisible injury it cannot contain which fractures the surface realism of their comfortable, familiar, middle-class milieu, summed up by S. as '[d]ays of headaches, library, dinner and lunch engagements' (65).

S. is *Three*'s MacGuffin. The narrative reveals that this couple of would-be gumshoe detectives, whatever they tell themselves and one another, are in pursuit not of the truth of S.'s death – there is, after all, a suicide note and the verdict of a police investigation – but of their own ambivalent erotic fascination with what she represents: the mythic third, the apex of triangular relations, the eternal interloper who embodies the possibilities of an alternative mode of existence outside of the constraints of the nuclear family unit, her suicide a wish-fulfilment fantasy of engulfment and self-annihilation. 'What did she want of us, need from him, myself? We shall probably never know' (125), Ruth asks, lacking the self-knowledge to invert the terms of her question in order to pose the one that is equally begged by the text. And for S. too a 'simple recognition is all that's needed' (139). Pursued by her own

demons she longs to 'become something in their lives, anything' (60). She is a honey trap, a hand grenade thrown into Ruth and Leonard's gated world who is '[p]ursued by the compulsion to jeopardise such a bourgeois stronghold' (61):

> To see their cotton wool faces, zipper mouths expand, shrivel, contract. To throw their salt-cellar out of the window, drill through their soundproofed walls. (63)

She initiates an ontological game of risk, urging Ruth and Leonard further and further towards the edge of the abyss:

> A recognisable nausea provokes the desire to become something in their lives, anything. Everything. But whose move is the next? (60)

Games, as Freud knew, are never innocuous, are always the acting out in miniature, and within the safe confines of the bounded act, with its binding rules and low stakes, of the rituals that regulate our social existence. But in Quin's games the stakes of play are considerably higher. The trio of Ruth, Leonard and S. mediate the strung-out boredom of domesticity with dangerous games at the edge of oblivion that toy with brutal and violent forces:

> Shall we play pontoon? Chinese Rummy? Consequences? Where are the masks? Let's pretend we're the only inhabitants left after an atomic war. Or prisoners all in one cell. (105)

In what is perhaps a rather unexpected literary echo, just as in Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* a stranger, Mr Yates, masterminds a parlour production of *Lover's Vows* which pollutes the bounded unity of the house with moral anarchism, so too in *Three* S. devises a masked mime play which destabilises an already fragile social order. For Quin, like Austen, "theatricals" represent a license for social boundary-breaking. Masques invite her characters to cast off their masks; they constitute a *mise-en-abyme* of the performativity of social order which enables the release of the transgressive energies that lay beneath the thin veneer of civil society.

Significantly, the stage for this trio's masked plays is provided by the misappropriated empty swimming pool of Ruth and Leonard's holiday home, a motif familiar from the work of J.G. Ballard, a ruin of the future in the arrived in the present much employed by him for its metaphoric evocation of bourgeois malaise. And, equally significantly, the swimming pool is surrounded by '[r]ow upon row' of mock-Grecian statues which '[s]alute the house' (25), forming a makeshift legion that defends the citadel of Ruth and Leonard's 'bourgeois stronghold'. 'An attempt', writes Quin, 'to add / amend / defend.' (25) It is from here that the ghosts of the outside finally emerge. During one mime play, whitewashed figures concealed amongst the clusters of statues "come to life" and incite a riot, vandalising the gardens, assaulting the players and throwing the social order of the house into disarray: 'They looked like clowns giving vent to years of repressed feelings, as they punched, and kicked L' (137).

For Leonard, the possibility of transgression is intoxicating, whilst for Ruth it is vertiginous and devastating; S. is an interloper who threatens the very foundations of her closely-guarded world. Against which Ruth takes great pains to fix the veneer of the quotidian – diaries kept, engagements attended, routine duly and properly completed – but it all remains distressingly frail and insubstantial. Her sanctuary of bourgeois normativity is besieged by menaces, both real and imaginary: from the prying eyes of their curtain-twitching neighbours, the 'bloody trespassers' who 'trample on everything' (43), the 'vulgar crowd from the holiday camp' who 'muck about in the river' (9):

> Such peasants here too… like beasts and how they stare too Leon have you noticed when we drive past that woman and her awful kids honestly given half the chance I think they'd quite happily see us dead? They're all right if you talk to them. But what on earth can one say they wouldn't understand just go on staring and once we're through the gateway I can hear them laugh. (9)

For Leonard, however, the ghosts of the outside fascinate. He courts the horrors of contingency from the safe distance of newspaper headlines, eagerly devouring reports of a man's suicide (1), news of a distant volcano eruption (48), a domestic murder-suicide (78), a body found on a remote mountain top (131).

At every turn, then, the brittle tranquillity of the domestic life they have fashioned, and the traditional bourgeois humanist ethics for which is it a self-consciously constructed synecdoche, is troubled by threats from without. 'At least', Ruth assures herself in her diary, 'everything around us has substance and gives security. A home we have built up together.' (124) But whilst Ruth's night terrors are centred upon the bourgeois bogeymen that threaten to invade from the outside, the real threat, Quin reveals, lies much closer to home.

The Terribly Normal Fiction of the Mid-century

As they do in *Passages,* in *Three,* the primal forces of recent history cast a long and menacing shadow. In her diary, without comment, S. records the newspaper court transcriptions of a Nazi war crimes trial. For the camp adjutant in the dock, genocide 'was not [his] concern' (60). As in Quin's later novel, there are intimations about Leonard's own involvement in the atrocities of recent history. Like the male protagonist of *Passages*, Leonard has a secret, shady past. He too, it seems, was a Communist defector, at sixteen a 'little soldier playing with real lives to create a bigger and better world where all things and everyone would be equal.' (120) He conspired, it is implied, like the camp adjutant, with violence and torture which, in denial or perhaps repression, says he '[n]ever witnessed' (123).

Quin's *Three* was published only three years after Hannah Arendt's authoritative report on the trial of Adolf Eichmann, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, and her ontological distrust of what the pre-eminent political thinker called the 'terribly and terrifyingly normal'[12] very much resonates with what Arendt famously conceptualised as the 'banality of evil'. Arendt conceives of evil after the collapse of traditional humanist ethics as no longer denoting deviance from societal norms, but people's tendency to collude loyally and unquestioningly with the fictions of power to implement, accommodate and fulfil the laws based on those norms. Leonard himself, coming rather late to self-awareness in his own audio diary, describes how the 'illusion was shattered' and begins to apprehend how his youthful idealism had led to his complicity in atrocity: 'the pattern is set' and '[s]oon one believes that is oneself';

[12] Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York, NY: Viking Press, 1965), 276.

when the 'image topples… no one notices… and one goes on automatically complying being doing. For that is the easiest way.' (122) By allusively situating her domestic psychodramas against this submerged, half-glimpsed context, Quin forges an implicit link between the wartime atrocities implemented by those "just following orders" and observed by those who by obeying the letter of the law relinquish their own responsibility and the insidious violence of domestic life. Perpetrated by a cast of emotionally repressed, blindly obedient and insubstantial characters, cruelty and inhuman brutality has become the law of "normal" and "respectable" society. Beneath that ever-thinner veneer of respectability, there lurks a cesspool of malign and primeval forces that threatens to erupt at the very heart of the home, like the blood clot on her upper lip that Ruth attempts to cover with powder and lipstick (100).

There is, in each of us, as Elizabeth Bowen has Portia, the protagonist of *The Death of the Heart* (1938), remark, in perhaps the most oft-quoted passage of her fiction, 'battened down inside of himself, a sort of lunatic giant – impossible socially, but full-scale – and it's the knocking and batterings we sometimes hear in each other that keeps our intercourse from utter banality.'[13] Quin's *Three* is singularly attuned to those distant, primeval rumblings that emanate involuntarily from some elusive and enigmatic primordial realm within the infinite mystery of the self, and the ways in which they impact upon our lives. So too is the fiction of the mid-century from both sides of the Channel – in Britain that of Ivy Compton Burnett, Henry Green, Iris Murdoch, Muriel Spark, William Sansom, Rayner Heppenstall and Bowen herself, and in France the *nouveaux romans* of Nathalie Sarraute, Alain Robbe Grillet and Marguerite Duras, amongst others.

If modernism's subject was the inner life, it was undoubtedly also, and in equal measure by this late period, about the struggle to reconcile the inner life with what lay outside. 'Turning', as Lorna Sage comments astutely of Henry Green, the 'deadly conventionality' of life 'into a kind of brilliant metafiction'[14], in these Anglo-French novels of the mid-century, modernism's styles of estrangement descend from the aesthetic world of abstraction and are brought to bear on the real – but not, however, as we know it – lending a chilly and etiolated voice to the unspeakable experiences of the traumatised twentieth-century subject.

[13] Elizabeth Bowen, *The Death of the Heart* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987), 310.
[14] Lorna Sage, *Good as her Word*: *Selected Journalism* (London: Fourth Estate, 2003), 126.

They are singularly centreless novels, Cartesian parodies – as is often commented of Beckett – set in claustrophobically over-familiar and therefore uncannily false vraisemblables, which are peopled by characters who are scarcely people at all; indefinable, bloodless beings that in 1985 Christopher Lasch would categorise as 'minimal selves'.[15] With their acute, often obsessional or voyeuristic, perspectives upon human behaviour, and their construction of minimal selves that are elusive and mysterious and controlled by appetites that lie beyond the verbal consciousness, both undoubtedly evince the influence of the Behaviourist paradigm of psychology during the period. But crucially these novelists are preoccupied by observable behaviour and the surface of the real only for their capacity to reveal the unobservable, internal events of the mind. A literary parallel for the cognitive revolution of the fifties, they seek to open up the "black box" of the mind, and to find ways in fiction to hypothesise about the unconscious domain that lies beyond the reach of the linguistic and its effects upon the ways in which humans create meaning out of their encounters with the world. These novelists are no longer convinced about the unity and integrity of the self, or about the capacity of psychology to provide an account of its depths. Sarraute defines the era as the 'age of suspicion'[16] in which the character in fiction has become a vehicle for a disingenuous form of "realism" that is more concerned with paraphernalia than penetration and which has come to occupy a position of mutual distrust between author and reader. The exploration of interiority undertaken in modernist novels, like those of Proust, Woolf and Joyce, argues Sarraute, sought to shine a light upon the 'dark places of psychology' but found not Proust's 'ultimate deep' but merely 'a superficial network of conventional opinions taken over just as they were from the group to which he belonged'.[17] Disembodiment is the condition of universal psychological truth within these fictions, and by positing a model of the mind in which consciousness is dispersed amongst the trappings of modernity, these novelists sought to discover new kinds of objective correlative with which to metaphorise its mechanisms and dynamics.

[15] Christopher Lasch's conception of the 'minimal of narcissistic self' designates an emergent category of selfhood wherein self-interest has become a life-strategy with which humans negotiate the world after the lapse of assumptions about the security and stability of an ordered world. In Christopher Lasch, *The Minimal Self: Psychic Survival in Troubled Times* (New York, NY: Norton, 1985).
[16] Nathalie Sarraute, "The Age of Suspicion," in *Tropisms and The Age of Suspicion*, trans. Maria Jolas (London: John Calder, 1963), 123.
[17] Nathalie Sarraute, "From Dostoievski to Kafka," in *Tropisms and The Age of Suspicion*, trans. Maria Jolas, (London: John Calder, 1963), 60.

For if modernism could be said, as D.H. Lawrence commented, to have taken flight from the 'slowly revolving madness of civilisation', it was also fascinated by modernity's accoutrements: the cars, telephones, typewriters, household furniture and landscaped gardens that were no doubt the subject of Lawrence's ire. Between the 'high' modernist period, and this later iteration, however, there is a significant difference in the way in which "things" function. Mrs Ramsay's stockings in *To The Lighthouse* (1927), for example, are not Josephine's roses in 'Look At All Those Roses' (1941). Maud Ellmann, in her brilliant study of Bowen's work, makes this crucial distinction between Woolf's world of objects and Bowen's:

> In Woolf, consciousness exists in opposition to the object; in Bowen, consciousness escapes into the object, leaving human beings as vacant as the landscapes that threaten to devour them.[18]

Between Woolf and Bowen characters' relationships with the perceptual world have changed. Object relations have shifted; the boundary between the ego and the external realm has been effaced. We are now, as Ellmann comments, in Merleau-Ponty's inside-out world, which 'reciprocates the gaze of the spectator'.[19] The inanimate world is animated by the self's psychic distress which is projected upon neurotic objects that constitute metonymically-charged objective correlatives of the psyche. In this way, the vociferous clamour of our primitive instincts is registered upon the very paraphernalia with which characters mark the distance between their civilised selves and their atavistic impulses: the places they live, the things that surround them.

The knockings and batterings of that lunatic giant are heard across the fiction of the mid-century. In the novels of the period, we encounter elusive and undefined husks of subjects who appeal to the spoils of bourgeois materialism to mediate and insulate their monstrous depths, projecting upon objects the invisible injuries of their damaged psyches, which, thus endowed with an atavistic charge, implicate them. In Murdoch's *The Black Prince* (1973) rooms have a 'sinister tedium' and '[breathe] the

[18] Maud Ellman, *Elizabeth Bowen: The Shadow Across the Page* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003), 7.
[19] Ibid., 6.

flat horror of genuine mortality'.[20] In Green's *Nothing* (1950), they '[stand] prepared' and emit an 'untenanted attention'.[21] In *Caught* (1943) consciousness spills out of the mind and colours the scene like a theatrical gel and houses shriek with supressed violence.[22] In Spark, characters are mere hollowed-out grotesques – 'gargoyles' as Caroline Rose describes Mrs Hogg in *The Comforters* (1957) – who, having fulfilled their functions, recede back into the wallpaper of Sparkworld.[23] Typewriters (*The Comforters*) and telephones (*Memento Mori* [1959]) are the repositories for uncanny anxieties. Though, of course, in Spark's 'sacramental view'[24] it is not the unconscious that is the absence that looms, but the divine fiction to which the earthly but insubstantial world of human fiction is always subordinate. Giving voice to the desperate, blackened truth hidden within the smooth, monied ease of the propertied petty aristocracy, the stiflingly claustrophobic domestic milieu of Ivy Compton Burnett's novels provides the arena for ritualised violence of Greek tragedy proportions in which murder, incest and blackmail pass without comment whilst poor table manners are subject to harsh rebukes. Compton Burnett's novels, writes Storm Jameson, with their repetitive 'acting-out of the powerful impulses that run counter to an accepted social morality… [offer] ritual purgation in a modern idiom'.[25]

The cross-channel alliance I am attempting to forge might seem like a rather unlikely one. The approach of Bowen, Green and Murdoch et al, is explicitly phenomenological; their novels seek to reveal the presence of things as the objects of consciousness in all their phenomenality. The project of the *nouveau roman* – a 'case apart in the house of fiction',[26] as Ann Jefferson puts it – is surely quite the opposite. Reacting against nineteenth-century realistic writing for its elevation and aestheticisation of bourgeois materialism, critics tend to associate the "anti-novels" of Robbe Grillet and Sarraute with the – either radical and heroic or needlessly antagonistic and aesthetically bankrupt – attempt to slough off fiction's

[20] Iris Murdoch, *The Black Prince* (London: Vintage, 2003), 38-9.
[21] Henry Green, "Nothing," in *Nothing, Doting, Blindness* (London: Penguin, 1993), 61.
[22] Henry Green *Caught* (New York, NY: Random House, 2013).
[23] Muriel Spark, "The Comforters," in *Muriel Spark: Omnibus 1* (London: Constable, 1993), 234.
[24] Muriel Spark, "The Religion of an Agnostic: A Sacramental View of the World in the Writings of Marcel Proust," *Church of England Newspaper*, November 27, 1951, 1.
[25] Storm Jameson, review of *The Last and the First*, by Ivy Compton Burnett, *Spectator* 288 (March 19, 1971), 19.
[26] Ann Jefferson, *The Nouveau Roman and the Poetics of Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 315.

phenomenological bases and "return" to the noumenal. That is, the thing-in-itself, the world independent of what is perceived by these writers as the tyranny of human perspective, which attempts, at every turn, to enlist the world of objects into complicity with its own false consciousness.

Robbe Grillet's theory of fiction, developed in his collection of essays, *Towards a New Novel* (1965), seeks 'a path for the future novel'. In his eponymous 1956 essay he advocates a flat, precise, descriptive mode of fictional writing, shorn of figurative language and human-imposed significance:

> [T]he first impact of objects and gestures should be that of their *presence*, and that this presence should then continue to dominate, taking precedence over any explanatory theory which would attempt to imprison them in some system of reference…[27]

Sarraute too is committed to a mode of writing that seeks to resist the human colonisation of the external world:

> To achieve this [the writer] works unceasingly to rid what he sees of the matrix of preconceived ideas and ready-made images that encase it, as also of all the surface reality that anyone can easily see and which, for want of anything better, everyone uses; and occasionally he succeeds in attaining to something that is thus far unknown, which it seems to him he is the first to have seen.[28]

These theories were validated by Roland Barthes' hugely influential reading of Robbe Grillet's novels in his essay "Objective Literature", which positions the writer as the founding father of the *école du regard*.[29] In Robbe Grillet's work, Barthes found a fictional exemplar of his 'writing degree zero'. This interpretation has tended to constitute the critical context against which the work of the *nouveau romanciers* is read. Celia Britton comments that 'particularly in the academic context in which the

[27] Alain Robbe-Grillet, "Towards a New Novel," in *Snapshots and Towards a New Novel*, trans. Barbara Wright (London: Calder and Boyars, 1965), 54.
[28] Nathalie Sarraute, "What Birds See," in *Tropisms and The Age of Suspicion*, trans. Maria Jolas (London: John Calder, 1963), 128.
[29] Roland Barthes, "Objective Literature," in *Critical Essays*, trans. Richard Howard (Everton: Northwestern University Press, 1972), 13-24.

Nouveau Roman is most usually read' the *nouveaux romanciers*' theories are used 'as a kind of key with which to "explain" their fiction'.[30]

The critical debates surrounding the *nouveau roman* are dominated by the issues surrounding this, the phenomenological (or otherwise) quality of their work: questions of whether, for example, Robbe Grillet is as Barthes argues the founder of an 'objective school of literature', or as Bruce Morrissette's dissenting realistic reading, has it, in fact an extreme subjectivist and his works ones of psychological realism,[31] or, in fact, as Stephen Heath suggests, a "bad" phenomenologist, whose fiction is classically materialist in its failure to recognise the intentionality of consciousness.[32] Certainly, within their own critical writings, the *nouveaux romanciers* espouse a kind of theoretically problematic phenomenological anti-phenomenology. Their call for a return to pre-reflective states of perception has an affinity with Husserl's conceptualisation of the phenomenological reduction and with the broader phenomenological project of bracketing the "natural attitude" in order to focus upon the ways in which we bestow meaning upon things. And yet their vision of a world beyond the percepts populated by non-meaningful objects and, moreover, the paradoxical insistence that, via this process of reduction, such a world might nevertheless reveal itself to those very percepts, appeals to its opposite.

When Robbe Grillet assures us, *ad nauseam*, that his descriptions are 'without meaning' or that they 'lead only to nothing' then 'we may assume the contrary', argues Christine Brooke Rose in *A Rhetoric of the Unreal*.[33] '[P]rotesting much could mean the opposite', she tartly observes.[34] Although their theoretical writings speculate upon an authentically contingent reality and signal towards the possibility of, via a non-signifying fictional language, "discovering" this register of human experience in fiction, the *nouveaux romanciers* do not – and, in any case cannot – reach a 'degree zero of writing'. Instead, these novels do something far more ambiguous and, arguably, more significant. Maintaining a modernist faith in the representational quality of words, their fictional language is one of signifying non-signification, where the opacity of language mimics the solidity of objects but crucially, in this very neutrality, always posits the *possibility* of meaning. See for

[30] Celia Britton, *The Nouveau Roman: Fiction, Theory and Politics* (London: St. Martin's Press, 1992), 1.
[31] Bruce Morrissette, *Novel and Film: Essays in Two Genres* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 14.
[32] Stephen Heath, *The Nouveau Roman: A Study in the Practice of Writing* (London: Elek, 1972), 68.
[33] Brooke-Rose, *Rhetoric of the Unreal*, 291.
[34] Ibid.

example, in the early novels of Robbe Grillet, and their insistently recurring motifs: doors, windows and walls. All apparently blameless objects, all described in the neutral terms of their smooth, clean lines and abstract geometrical forms and yet all, nonetheless, so freighted, so interminably allusive of boundaries (and their transgression), of looking (and being blind), or internment (and freedom). Even upon bracketing their human significance – if such a thing were possible – and returning them to a neutral existence as objects in space, they are still so meaningful, indicative, as they are, of the ways in which humans use geometry and form to order, organise and therefore master the space that surrounds them. And in this way these novels at once depict the merciless disinterest of objects and our indefatigable desire to *make them meaningful*.

Robbe-Grillet's third novel, *Jealousy* (1957), transforms the domestic sphere into a crime scene, as the unnamed narrator appeals to its constituent objects to confirm his suspicions of an affair between his wife, referred to only as 'A…', and family friend, Franck. They will not, of course. Like a memory game they are obsessively revisited; their surfaces, their proximity, their arrangement, forensically examined and re-examined as the narrator seeks to quell his ontological unease about things *not being as they seem*:

> On the ring finger gleams a thin ribbon of gold that barely rises above the flesh. Around the hand radiate the creases, looser and looser as they move out from the center, but also wider and wider, finally becoming a uniform white surface on which Franck's brown, muscular hand wearing a large flat ring of the same type comes to rest.[35]

Things remain (for both the narrator and the reader) maddeningly ambiguous, adulterous even, accumulating to form a perceptual screen against which one can project any number of possible meanings. In this way, the "solid" elements of our world, those that we claim and own and endow synecdochically with the meaning of our lives just as easily betray us.

Similarly, Sarraute's oeuvre chronicles the rarified world of the Parisian *haute bourgeoisie*, who desperately accumulate the Balzacian trappings of their social

[35] Alain Robbe-Grillet, *Jealousy*, trans. Richard Howard (London: John Calder, 1959), 76.

milieu in the attempt to shore themselves up against what lies beneath, a realm she designates as "tropisms". Borrowing the term from plant biology, where it describes the phenomenon whereby plants move or grow in response to environmental stimulus, tropisms are made to constitute the instinctual inner drama of human intersubjective relations, that 'terrible desire to establish contact'. Circumventing the impasse of attempting to depict in language that register of experience that necessarily lies beyond language, she employs tropisms metaphorically to posit an instinctual realm on the very threshold of consciousness, an 'ultimate deep' – pre-rational, pre-linguistic and beyond the remit of psychology, that is the secret source of human existence. This realm is metaphorised by Sarraute as a seething, pulsing mass which collects at the very lowest strata of being; tentacular, molluscan, positively oozing, it seeps out as 'mysterious effluvia' in her novel, *Portrait of a Man Unknown* (1958),[36] 'like a live animal curled up on itself' in *Between Life and Death* (1968)[37] and as 'noxious swarmings' in *The Golden Fruits* (1963).[38] To defend themselves, Sarraute's characters build domestic fortresses of Chesterfield sofas, silver-plate cocktail shakers, Italian leather shoes, coveting and maniacally amassing the fetish-objects of bourgeois life – 'things made of tortoise shell… frames of lapis lazuli… that honey-coloured cigarette holder'[39] – in hope that the paraphernalia of existence, in its abundance and its visceral pleasure, might fend off the subterranean world within:

> Between them and a formless, strange, threatening universe, the world of things has interposed itself like a screen to protect them.[40]

Objects of Desire

The world of objects has a similar function in *Three*. At home, Ruth and Leonard 'move around each other' (5), the minutiae of their every action – their every jitter and tic and twitch – is nervily over-narrated. Like stage directions for the

[36] Nathalie Sarraute, *Portrait of a Man Unknown*, trans. Maria Jolas (London: John Calder, 1958), 63.
[37] Nathalie Sarraute, *Between Life and Death*, trans. Maria Jolas (London: Calder and Boyars Ltd, 1970), 72.
[38] Nathalie Sarraute, *The Golden Fruits*, trans. Maria Jolas (London: John Calder, 1965), 39.
[39] Sarraute, *Portrait*, 151.
[40] Ibid., 150.

performance of banal and useless tasks, the descriptions of the way they move read like the notation of some obscure ritual. Just as, in *Berg* domestic settings are merely '[a] background composed of things for reassurance, knick-knacks to fill in the odd gaps between petty rows and worked up passion' (60), in *Three* objects seem to mediate and contain Ruth and Leonard's distress. So intensely phenomenologically charged are objects, the dioramas of domestic life are made to pulse and crackle with neurotic energy. Ruth is forever restlessly arranging and rearranging the props of their domestic scene: fiddling, adjusting, straightening, opening and closing:

> She slid her feet out of her mules, brought them up, under a cushion… Cleaned her spectacles, breathed on slowly, held to the light. Reached for a cigarette, the pistol lighter, the metal shiny part she stroked, put down. She jumped up and opened the door. Switched on all the lights in every ground floor room. Opened all the doors, moved from room to room. Switched off all the lights, left the doors open, and crouched in front of the television. The cat curled at her feet she caressed him with her toes. (11)

'At least', Ruth writes in her diary, 'everything here around us has substance give security. A home we have built together.' (124) Sartre, too, recognises the comfort of things. Humans forge intricate and intimate relationships with objects 'to delay the collapse of the human world of measures, of quantities, of bearings', he writes, in denial of the irrefutable ontology that

> Existence if not necessity. To exist is simply *to be there*; what exists appears, lets itself be *encountered*, but you can never *deduce* it.[41]

But seemingly unable to contain the psychic pressure exerted upon them, these objects frequently incriminate Leonard: the snail squashed underfoot, the kicked cat, the wet patch on the sheet in the morning, the jelly spilled on the carpet: 'Get a cloth darling – ohhhhhh what a mess.' (49) And animistically endowed with vibrancy and movement, the objects sometimes appear to reciprocate.

[41] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea* (London: Penguin, 1986), 188.

As Waugh writes of Muriel Spark, the world of these mid-century fictions 'takes on the strange and disturbing sense of what psychiatrists sometimes refer to as the *Stimmung* – the feeling or mood or eeriness experienced by the psychotic and, in particular, schizophrenic sufferers.'[42] But crucially, these spooky irruptions are not assimilable as the mere delusions of a single, damaged focalising consciousness. If these are mere hallucinations, then they are collective ones that extend to the reader too. These are visions which, when called upon to verify, the author consistently absents themselves. Endowed with such an intensity of feeling, these objects seem to take on an atavistic life of their own, which begs the question: do such depictions reflect a kind of materio-mysticism or are they merely solipsistic fantasy? Quin's *Three*, like other Anglo-French fictions of the period, defers its answer, instead calling into question the perceptual relationship the self and the world. The 'perceptual instability' of these fictions, as Jacqueline Rose writes of Bowen, shakes 'our confidence that there is a world which, simply by looking at it, is there to be seen.'[43] As Iris Murdoch, in an interview in 1978, comments in response to being reminded of the title of 'the Mrs Radcliffe *de nos jours*', which was bestowed upon her by the critic A.L. Rowse on account of her 'Gothic fantasies and unreal horrors':

> I don't know what these "unreal horrors" are that he's speaking of. It is ordinary life that I'm talking about which after all is full of horrors.[44]

The secret monstrosity that lies within us also makes itself known in the way that fictional characters talk. Perhaps most notably in the conversation novels of Green and Compton Burnett – which are composed almost entirely of direct discourse, supplemented with the thinnest of stage direction – conversation is the earthly agent of internal disorder. For all its 'commonplace appearance', Sarraute writes, conversation is the 'daily, insidious and very effective weapon responsible for countless minor crimes'.[45] It is always silently appended, she explains, by a

[42] Patricia Waugh, "Muriel Spark and the Metaphysics of Modernity," in *Muriel Spark: Twenty-First-Century Perspectives*, ed. David Herman (London: John Hopkins University Press, 2010), 66.
[43] Jacqueline Rose, *On Not Being Able to Sleep: Psychoanalysis and the Modern World* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2003), 92.
[44] Iris Murdoch quoted in Gillian Dooley ed., *From a Tiny Corner in the House of Fiction: Conversations with Iris Murdoch* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2003), 86.
[45] Henry Green quoted in in V.S. Pritchett, "Green on Doting," *New Yorker*, May 17, 1952, 137.

communicative register that she designates as “sub-conversation”. Dialogue, Sarraute argues, is merely the outward extrusion of the inner life that she conceives as taking place on the frontiers of consciousness. In her terms, conversation, in the realm of external reality, sets off a tropistic reaction at the level of sub-conversation, which, in turn, is projected externally as dialogue.

For the characters within these novels, conversation is, as Green puts it, ‘beautifully inadequate to their condition’.[46] But although it cannot convey it, conversation can, nonetheless, *communicate* the vast, latent reservoir of the unsaid that accompanies every speech act. Parapractic and ever prone to slippage, dialogue reflects the constant negotiations of the private, fragmented self with the other. With its preverbal impulses and unspoken sentiments, conversation always conveys more or less than what is said; the intersubjective encounter becomes the scene of countless mutual (mis)recognitions. Ruth and Leonard’s everyday conversations are a doublespeak of the stock phrases and clichés of a claustrophobic kind of middle-class domesticity: pet names and flummery, barely concealed resentment, passive aggression and barbed comments about one another’s drinking:

> Aren’t you going out then? What’s the point? I thought you wanted to. Like a drink now? That’s the third you’ve poured out Leon. All right Sherlock envious have one do you good relax for Godsake and sit down. I drank too much last night still quite headachey think I’ll take one of my pills. Drink might do it love you haven’t a migraine one have you? A little nothing to worry about. Where are your pills Ruth you know you should take them as soon as… Upstairs be a pet and get them will you? (3)

Undifferentiated and scarcely punctuated, speech is without rhythm or emphasis and riddled with mid-sentence anacolutha that blur one voice with another. Quin’s unpunctuated sentences are certainly not Joyce’s. They connote not the breathless, word-tripping discharge of vibrancy and human vitality of Molly Bloom, but the mere monotone accretion of banality upon banality. Ruth and Leonard’s conversations are shammed intersubjectivity, the exchange of a phony communality,

[46] Ibid.

all too frequently misheard, misinterpreted, misarticulated and misremembered: 'I never said that – never. Sorry thought you had.' (3) Hardly speech acts at all, their attempt to mime human connection merely connotes its opposite. As in Sarraute's novels, in *Three* it is the very cliché formulae that Ruth and Leonard appeal to with which to mime human connection that, in fact, reveals their unutterable solitude, their solipsistic plight.

'Some Life if You Can't Even Read Them'

Tellingly, in *Three*, people only say what they mean when they are alone. Together, engaged in the embodied, dialogic exchange of meaning, they are always the unreliable narrators of their own lives, whilst in the disembodied voices that emanate from their journals and audio diaries we glimpse the truth. 'You look for one thing… and you frequently find another'[47] advises Muriel Spark in *Memento Mori*. And nowhere is this truer than in the illicit reading of diaries, especially in fiction. Other people's diaries are where we, and the characters in novels, look to catch clandestine and revelatory glimpses of others' private selves. These are selves that are mediated, to be sure, ones textually constructed, rendered with varying degrees of fictionality, literariness, reflexivity and self-censorship and perhaps, even, written in the tacit acknowledgement of a potential audience. But still we assume that the textual self constructed within this "private" writing is more unified and more authentic than the "real" one that we enact for others, our public face. This is not so in the case of S.'s diary, which provides 'not a word not a clue' (116). As Ruth says, in what might be read as an arch dig at the often baffled critical reception of Quinian irrealis: 'There's a life here all right. Some life if you can't even read them Leon. I prefer to listen. Still it's difficult to follow the way she says things…' (51).

S.'s diary, then, apparently reveals nothing disturbing but somehow disturbs everything. It depicts the events of the previous summer in that characteristically Quinian undecidable and equivocal mode of expressionist rendition that blurs memory, perception and fantasy, focalised through divided selves that posit and then swiftly erase their shifting imagos of the world. S.'s narrative consistently defers the

[47] Muriel Spark, *Memento Mori* (New York, NY: The Modern Library, 1966), 206.

private revelations of introspection. In the final passages, toying elusively with the idea of suicide, she decides that 'to write it down would almost be like performing the action itself', that it is 'better to let it nurture.' (139) S. suffers that characteristically Quinian belatedness: 'All seems now a dream, attempts at piecing together, and other dreams only are remembered.' (139) She realises her quest for recognition has an '[a]lmost accidental' genesis: 'An unconscious action at the time. Only afterwards the predetermined appreciated.' (139) S.'s diaries offer not a secret aperture upon an authentic self, but draw us within only in order to look outwards through her focalising consciousness upon the external world. In *Three*, as in the rest of her novels, S. narrates from the bifurcated perspective of a Laingian divided self that is trapped in the intercessory space between thought and action, the mind disengaged, ruminating voyeuristically upon a scene from which it is far removed, an onlooker upon a surrogate embodied self which it deploys into the world. S., like Berg, is an inveterate schemer. She 'hang[s] over many desultory designs, toy[s] with subterfuges.' (56) As in this earlier novel, in *Three* a disembodied "true" self lies in wait, '[m]antis-like', planning '[m]anipulations they must never be aware of'. This self is a would-be tyrant, a hyperconscious megalomaniac with fantasies of omnipotence which is metaphorised as a 'figure monstrous in shape chiselled from soft substances' from which thoughts are 'chipped out' and are realised metaphorically as 'titbits' thrown benevolently to her hungry quarry. 'My certainty', she decides, 'shall be their confusion.' (53)

This "true" self is, in turn, under siege from the manipulations of the external world from which it seeks to preserve its integrity:

> Attempts at censoring any desire to think what should be felt. This is the most difficult. So conditioned are the reflexes they become part of the mausoleum… (56)

Into the life-world S. deploys a false, embodied self that is detached and felt as merely one object amongst others, 'almost a shadow' (62), in fact. She is an onlooker upon herself, she 'hear[s] [her]self talk, laugh' (57). Looking in the mirror she is 'startled by [her] own reflection a carved face in the middle of a stone wall' (60). S.'s disembodied self lacks all sense of a presence in the world, she is a voyeur upon a scene that lacks all sense of solidity and substantiality. And outside, the

social milieu of the 'bourgeois stronghold' depicted within S.'s diaries is peopled with mummies, '[s]hadow players' on 'revolving stages' (56), 'new dolls' (57) and marionettes that '[d]angle from waxed strings' (19). Here the players rehearse 'repertoires never exhausted' (57), '[hoping] for the others to take their cue' (57), in a desperate masque of the normalcy that scarcely disguises the perilous void of reality beneath. Social transactions are military manoeuvres, each party busily working at their 'areas of chosen colour' from the 'bases they had secured' (56) upon the battlefield of social life.

During a heat wave, S. perceives people suddenly roused from this state of somnambulant dissociation. Their 'faces seem more expansive… aware of their bodies, their surroundings, in a heightened way.' But this state of receptivity and openness 'hardly lasted, and soon everyone started to grumble.' (141) At the beach, she finds an appropriate metaphor for her two-level topography of the real. She paddles in cold breakwaters, watching children build and re-build sandcastles which, like the characters' fabrications of reality, are repeatedly engulfed and felled by the 'dark eddies' of the tide. Fed by sewage pipes, the sea creates 'mucous masses' which suspends alluvial rubbish. It seems to '[shift] as though by some underground motivation' (55). 'No sooner,' she writes, 'had one construction fallen, or been pushed over, than another one was quickly put together' (55). She dares Leonard to take off his shoes and join her; Ruth has retreated to the cliffs. He, it seems, has shared her metaphorical vision. He 'shudders', equivocates, 'locked in some quiet confusion of his own' (55) and returns to shore. For in Quin's writing, objective correlatives have not only *symbolic* power. 'Emotions' also have the capacity to 'outweigh surrounding matter' (56). They are externalisations of the psyche given form, substantiated, and thus endowed with an animistic power and, once shared, they threaten to usurp the frail quotidian.

S.'s gaze is as keen as an anthropologist's, then, but one keenly attuned to and privileged with the ability to decode the secret significance of every gesture, every movement, every facial expression:

> A time ago I was more vulnerable to my own reactions, responses, taking into account only what others might say, voice inflections, gestures dismissed. But after a series of mime lessons, with masks, I realised how much can be interpreted by mere movement. How easy it is to camouflage with a flux of

innuendos. The habitual nervousness of animals, but never so predictable. (62)

She notes the way they 'pamper' their cigars, fiddle with lighters, stroke the stems of their liquor glasses (57). These actions are fleeting betrayals of their true selves which intimate a more solid, and more menacing, realm below the surface of the real's wearied performance. At length, her privileged perspective reveals the truth of the bourgeois illusion: the abscesses, the plastic surgery, the fertility treatment that are its scaffolding, making explicit what remains hinted at, half-glimpsed, in the main narrative.

Quin's Phenomenology of Desire

For Quin, like Merleau-Ponty, sex is the paradigmatic encounter of human intersubjective relations and state of human corporeality, rather than, as it is for psychoanalysis, a hidden substructure of human life. In the 'linking of body to body', Merleau-Ponty writes in his study of sexuality, 'desire comprehends blindly'[48]. 'Blindly', that is, in the Hegelian sense of a comprehension that operates prior to the order of understanding, where the contents of experience are subsumed by cognition. Sexual perception is an 'erotic comprehension'[49] that offers access to the presence and fullness of embodied experience in the awareness of ourselves as, at once, autonomous and dependent subjects.

Merleau-Ponty's conceptualisation of the universality of bodily experience and libidinised perception has, unsurprisingly, been subject to feminist critique by thinkers like Judith Butler ("Sexual Ideology and Phenomenological Description: A Feminist Critique of Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology of Perception") Luce Irigaray ("The Invisible of the Flesh") and Linda Martin Alcoff ("Merleau-Ponty and Feminist Theory on Experience"), amongst others. Whilst Merleau-Ponty purports to offer 'a view of sexuality freed from naturalistic ideology', writes Butler, in fact his thinking 'contains tacit normative assumptions about the heterosexual character of

[48] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge, 1961), 157.
[49] Ibid.

sexuality'.[50] For all his notion of libidinal perception apparently seeks to emphasise ontological ambiguity, openness and reversibility, she argues, it is modelled upon a gender-coded master-slave dialectic and, in fact, reiterates the unethical and unproductive dichotomies of sexual binaries. In this way, Butler argues, Merleau-Ponty's existential phenomenology 'manages to reify cultural relations between the sexes… by calling them "essential" or "metaphysical".'[51] These relations, as Simone de Beauvoir explains in *The Second Sex*, are by no means innate or organic but are socially conditioned. She dismisses the assumption that frigidity is an exemplary act of female passivity and therefore associated with some essentially female state of objecthood. It is, instead, for de Beauvoir, a meaningful gesture reflective of 'the complexity of the feminine situation',[52] a symbolic act of active female resistance to male domination and cultural oppression and therefore indicative of unjust power relations. Similarly, male domination by no means follows from some metaphysical "maleness", but issues from the man's freedom to 'assume [awareness of his body] easily and with pride in its desires.'[53]

Whilst conceptually invested in the liberatory possibilities of a Merleau-Pontian ideal of libidinal perception, Quin's exploration of sex and states of embodiment in *Three* shares Butler and Irigaray et al.'s scepticism about its hidden assumptions and seeks to imagine alternative possibilities. In Quin's novels, marriage is merely the formalisation, with dresses and rings, of these cultural relations between the sexes, the lashing together of master and slave in wedlock to forever play out their power struggle. And accordingly for Quin, within the sanctioned, normative sex of marriage, there can be no access to the embodied subjectivity of erotic comprehension. Within marriage, sex is, at best, the reluctantly embarked upon and mutually dissatisfying discharge of marital obligations, a skirmish in the marital power play conducted via the gendered codes of male domineering concupiscence and female resistant frigidity that only serves to underline the couple's estrangement. 'You always have to get sexy in the bath Leon… You must admit it's hardly the time or the place' (44), Ruth complains. At worst, sex is sexualised violence, in which the man overcomes his female spouse's

[50] Judith Butler, "Sexual Ideology and Phenomenological Description: A Feminist Critique of Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*," in *The Thinking Muse: Feminism and Modern French Philosophy* (Bloomington, IN: University of Indiana Press, 1989), 86.
[51] Ibid.
[52] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. and ed. H.M. Parshley (London: Virago, 1989), 372.
[53] Ibid., 307.

resistance through force: 'Going to fuck you fuck you fuck you until… She screamed out as he went deeper in.' (128).

Although the text pulses with a chaos of erotic energies, sexual desire in *Three* is always misdirected, unreciprocated, frustrated or, if realised at all, then discharged destructively. Sex in *Three* is frequently depicted as the mere desperate attempt to stage connection by compulsively re-enacting this paradigmatic encounter of intersubjective human relations. In one extraordinary sex scene, told in parallel alternating paragraphs – a device Quin frequently uses in *Three* to foreground the psychic distance between Ruth and Leonard – the couple separately embark upon a kind of erotic intercourse with objects.

Ruth dresses and undresses, festoons herself with jewellery, flings herself into a mountain of clothes:

> Her tongue slithered over lower lip, drew it in. She licked the beads, replaced them on the extended nipples, her head thrown back, knees parted, pressed into the carpet, feet together. (12-13)

Here Quin literalises the libidinal metaphor. Caressed, poked, fondled, rubbed, stroked: for Ruth objects are always fetish-objects, the neurotic repositories of a paraphiliac desire endowed with an erotic significance. Ernest Dichter, the father of motivation research, describes our 'every-increasing intimacy with objects':

> The objects which surround us to not simply have utilitarian aspects; rather they serve as a kind of mirror which reflects our own image. Objects which surround us permit us to discover more and more about ourselves.[54]

This, argues Jean Baudrillard in his *The System of Objects*, constitutes the 'new humanism of consumption':

> The thesis is simple: (1) the consumer society (objects, products, advertising) offers the individual the possibility, for the first time in history, of total liberation and self-realization; (2) transcending consumption pure and simple in the

[54] Ernest Dichter, *The Strategy of Desire* (New Brunswick: Transaction Books, 2004), 91.

> direction of the individual and collective self-expression, the system of consumption constitutes a true language, a new culture.[55]

In Ruth's narcissistic desire for the spoils of bourgeois materialism, Quin depicts Marcuse's 'repressive desublimation' of libidinal desires captured, misdirected and channelled onto the accoutrements of consumer capitalism. This desire is policed and regulated, and serves only to affirm the status quo.

Leonard, meanwhile, has a thing for orchids. He turns the pages of his horticultural catalogues as furtively as if it had been *Playboy*. He retreats to his greenhouse, hot, damp, dark and heady where the plants 'sucked and dripped around and above' (12). A 'bee orchid leaned over… touched his mouth' (11), he 'ran a finger along stems, pink against pink laid there' (12), '[t]ips of red and purple dipped, shrivelled in the darkness' (12), 'he parted leaves. Thrust through' (12), 'tongues striped, tilted towards him' (12) he 'pressed the earth in, smoothed over' (12). Leonard 'murmured with pleasure, sometimes sighed… His fingers trembled. His body sloped. Face flushed in the one stream of light.' (12)

The disordered subject of William Sansom's earlier mid-century novel, *The Body* (1949), is also an amateur botanist, who, like Leonard, putters about in his suburban garden harbouring barely-concealed megalomaniacal fantasies and paranoid delusions. In Quin's novel and in Sansom's botanical themes bring together the period's ambivalence about scientific rationality and the vexed figure of the scientist with a Freudian protoplasmic vision of existence which draws upon Sarraute's vegetal metaphors for the dark side of consciousness and Sartre's inquiry into the significative basis of the slimy in the final chapter of his *Being and Nothingness* (1943). Sarraute and Sartre, Jennifer Willging neatly has it, are 'partners in slime'.[56] Both argue that an authentic human intersubjectivity – one that is never simply benignly communicative, but always fraught and perilous – is forged in this primordial region, only to be forced apart by the entry into the linguistic. Sartre shares what he acutely identifies as Sarraute's 'protoplasmic vision of our inner universe', filled with 'running discharges, slobbering, mucous, hesitant, amoeba-like

[55] Jean Baudrillard, *The System of Objects* (London: Verso, 2005), 201.
[56] Jennifer Willging, "Partners in Slime: The Liquid and the Viscous in Sarraute and Sartre," *Romantic Review* 92 (2004): 277-96.

movement' in his introduction to her novel, *Portrait of a Man Unknown*.[57] For Sartre, our horror of slime relates to its psychic significance. He argues that 'the slimy' represents the 'revenge of the in-itself': the simultaneous promise of transcendence and the threat of stagnation which thereby reveals the impossibility of transcending oneself.

Like Leonard, Henry Bishop, the narrator of Sansom's novel, is a keen amateur naturalist, seeking respite in the garden away from the house with its 'ivy, strangling everything'.[58] Nostalgic for the 'great age of scientific belief', there he discovers 'a certain solidity, a certainty, a diligent sense of inquiry that I find missing in my life nowadays'.[59] In both *Three* and *The Body*, there is something terrible about horticulture: it is portrayed as a scientifically mediated erotic obsession, a desire for the unknowable that is sublimated into sadism. This attempt to "play god", to impose reason and order upon the dark side of consciousness, can be seen in the following passage, which depicts Henry executing a fly:

> [C]arefully prod, no tickle – tickle the long dead leg on the leaf… down by the ivy I was secure, nothing to disturb the secret moment…That squat syringe filled with brown glutinous killer armed me powerfully; still – it was forbidden, naughty to play with flies, embarrassing an adult to be uncovered at such play. Close there to the leaves, with the world contracted and all small things made huge as in the first world of private garden games, I could see the gothic melancholy of last year's cobwebs hung with mortar dust on the dark wall underneath the ivy. A fearful place – but the dragon slept unmoved in such forest quiet, in the faint luminous mixture of shade and reflected sunlight. Then huge, bullying, god-like, I drew back the piston of the syringe.[60]

Whilst conventional desire, for Quin, is always frustrated, or manipulated, or discharged onto objects or mediated with terrible consequences, illicit, adulterous sex, by liberating desire from the perpetual frustrations of lordship and bondage, offers access to a truly, albeit fleetingly, embodied subjectivity. "Free love" practiced

[57] Jean-Paul Sartre, "Preface," in Nathalie Sarraute, *Portrait of a Man Unknown*, trans. Maria Jolas, (London: John Calder, 1958), xii.
[58] William Sansom, *The Body* (London: Sphere Books, 1968), 9.
[59] Ibid.
[60] Ibid., 5.

outside the dualistic strictures of marriage and conducted according to the transgressive logic of three offers access to a mode of existence where the private consciousness and the physical body can be finally re-conjoined. In *Three*, perhaps more so than in any of her other novels, there occur erotic moments of a kind of (textual) bliss in which it seems her characters finally lose themselves, that they cast off the fixity of identity and liberate themselves from their minds and their bodies to achieve such a state of ambiguity and indeterminacy. At times, heady deluges of text, suffused with affective rhythms and erotic *jouissance*, create sense of unity and of sublime submission coupled with the affirmation – with echoes of Molly Bloom's final words – of a fluid and equivocal sense of identity and of the facticity of existence:

> Hurt me hurt
> me hurt me
> there
> here
> anywhere. This way. If you like. Talk to me talk.
> Talk
> to
> me
> Was it like this with
> Never before. Not like this. No one has touched me ever
> never never
> like this. Before. Like waves. The coming
> slowly. Dual roles
> realised. Yes yes
> yes
> Be a boy. If you like. Anything. Be
> Just be. (114)

It cannot be sustained, however. Even having attained a state of delicious post-coital indeterminacy, in which S. and her lover are 'invisible', no longer self-divided, at last '[c]ontained in [their] bodies… that had crossed borders never realised' S. realises that 'soon it would evaporate' and become 'something that

would be impossible to recall' (142). And '[a]ttempting to hold onto the smell of each other… the sense of touch, fantasies re-explored' the couple fuck in the frenzied attempt to avert inter- and intra-subjective dislocation, in the attempt to sustain the moment, in the hope that 'this could last like this' (142):

> Have you tried it with three? Have you? Be three now. And incest? Whip me with your hair. Let me come between your breasts. In your mouth. Ear. (142)

But they do so no longer in pursuit of the *jouissance* of the limitless and ecstatic flow between two blissfully embodied subjects, but by engaging in edgy and transgressive sexual acts seek to reconfirm the existence of the body by literally forcing it into feeling through the giving and receiving of bodily pain and degradation in order to reunite their pathologically Cartesian selves by force and thereby prove their existence. Sex is like this for Quin: the transitory pleasure which is the object of a perpetual want and which we attempt to recover through pain. In this way "free love", the transgressive and clandestine desire of illicit sex, amounts to much to same thing as its legitimate counterpart. Sex, then, for Quin, although the life-strategy her characters most often make recourse to in the attempt to re-conjoin mind and body, and then, via the joining of self-body with self-body, to reconcile the self and the external world, serves to underline their distance, and their solipsistic alienation from one another and the world.

And in *Three*, as in *Passages*, these fleeting moments of full and vital embodiment are starkly juxtaposed against resonant images of bodies that have been desiccated and torn asunder. S., for example, encounters a 'party of cripples' on the beach: '[a] few men without arms were in the water' (143). The female protagonist of *Passages* swim with and is groped by a war veteran with '[b]roken black teeth, one side of his face scarred, one eye hung down, met his cheek covered with black hairs' and his 'arms cut off at the elbows' (20), his 'patterned stumps' which fondle her like 'two animals' (21). In the placing of these bodies side-by-side, Quin implies the dreadful irony in the analogy between those, on the one hand, that are bodily "incomplete" and yet nonetheless fully embodied (in the Merleau-Pontian sense), vital, unified and desirous and, on the other, the "complete" body that has been psychically amputated, rent apart from the mind.

So, as one review of the novel asked: what became of S.?[61] The text, certainly, remains undecidable. By enacting what Bernard Duyfhuizen has called the 'drama of intertextuality'[62] as a detective investigation, *Three* evokes the witnessing structure where meaning is forged communally in the fictionalised gathering together of the threads of disparate accounts. But here there are no such congruencies. As the novel ends, S. is preparing to drown herself in a mountain lake:

> The boat is ready, as planned. And all that's necessary now is a note. I know nothing will change. (143)

S. seems stoically resigned to an inexorable fate. She accepts that, according to the symbolic logic of her quandary, like all good literary madwomen, having failed in her quest to reveal the truth of the illusion and her desire perpetually frustrated she must, necessarily, sacrifice herself by surrendering to the dark and primitive forces that lay beneath the quotidian. Forces that are here, as they are so often and so significantly in Quin, symbolised by bodies of water, with their mythic ambivalence, their simultaneous threat of engulfment and promise of dissolution. But ambiguity persists, has even been accounted for by S. in the planning of her death: 'How easy for a body to drift out, caught up in a current, and never be discovered, or for anyone to ever be certain.' (139) Although heavily foreshadowed and alluded to, her intention is never fully articulated. Closure proper within a first-person narrative of suicide is, of course, impossible; notwithstanding posthumous narration, such an ending must necessarily occur outside of text. But still, uncanny echoes seem to contradict the projected conclusion of *Three*, seeming to imply a murder, and to implicate Leonard as her murderer. He watches apparently incognito as she meets and talks to the band of men who had assaulted him in their garden. Perhaps, then, he suspected her of subterfuge? Certainly in the closing passages of the novel he pauses – perhaps significantly? – over a newspaper report of the murder of an unidentified woman at the Sugarloaf mountain, near to where S. had planned to

[61] Daniel Stern, "What Became of S?" in *New York Times Book Review*, October 9, 1966, 66.
[62] Bernard Duyfhuizen, *Narratives of Transmission* (London: Associated University Presses, 1992), p. 123.

commit suicide (131). And Ruth in her diary confesses her own murderous designs upon S. recalling:

> The time when we were on the bed together, her white neck, hadn't my fingers felt a strange tingling sensation, as though they were someone else's hands, a murderer's hands grafted? (125)

On the other, more implicit, scandal of the novel – that of whether Ruth's suspicions of Leonard's adultery with S. were justified – the novel also remains inconclusive. Ruth's diary records: 'there is nothing definite to go on. No substantial evidence as it were.' (124) S.'s own is filled with erotically charged depictions of snatched trysts with an anonymous lover under waterfalls, in caves after dark, in hotel rooms, in 'places that replace the boundaries of bed, floor, walls', but Leonard is never named. Significantly, S.'s description of erotic bliss, which first appears in her journal, and is echoed soon after, almost word-for-word, in Leonard's audio diary, provides the only moment of textual congruence in the novel, the only point at which the accounts intersect and therefore the only answer to the mystery posed by the text, seeming to confirm Ruth (and our) suspicions that the final third apex of their triangular relationship was conjoined. In sex, then, they finally attain a kind of fleeting certainty, an experience authentically shared and communally forged.

But it remains unclear whether these encounters belong to the realm of reality, of fantasy, or of dreams. Within the diary's heady and disorientating textual flux, what is representation and what is metarepresentation is impossible to distinguish. The boundary where the mind ends and the world begins has been effaced. The objects of the world and the objects of the mind all "appear" along the same indefinable perceptual plane, all rendered in the same irregular condensed conjugations that frequently lack the verb "to be" that describe without bestowing existence upon. They are told in the present tense, but it's unclear whether S. is constructing an onanistic fantasy, reconstructing a dream or reliving a memory. And, moreover, even when memory-states are explicitly that, recalled in repose past experiences seem more like dreams. The quicksilver of experience, its presence, once consigned to memory, is forgotten. Recall constitutes the simultaneous comprehension and disintegration of experience: 'Leaving gaps / as sleep. In an

afternoon.' (111) Fragmentary, irrecoverable with '[p]arts lost like stolen flowers dropped on the way back.' (111)

By the end of the novel, the false selves that Ruth and Leonard have crafted with which to confront a publicly verifiable reality do finally and irrevocably crumble. The statuettes that appear as a motif throughout the book for the couple's petrified selves are found by Ruth having been trodden into tiny pieces: 'she tried placing them together, but found some could not be joined for some were missing' (82). However, Quin in no sense romantically valorises S.'s "great refusal", her pursuit and final destructive embrace of the void. Pressing the logic of the phenomenological bases of the theories of social constructedness that pervaded the thought of the period, Quin depicts the profound solitude of a life conducted in that private world of the percepts that S. calls, in an allusion to the Platonic allegory, a '[c]ave of our own making' (61). *Three*, with its open form, its dissonance, contradictions and incomprehensibility, is a meditation upon the tragedy of human solipsism. The sifted fragments of the narrative reveal three protagonists that co-exist in private worlds. Its dialogic threesome dramatises the plight of human intersubjective relations, where the inner life and the outer world can never be reconciled. Humans are insulated, opaque beings, irretrievably destined to be strangers not only to one another but also to themselves.

If life inside the *Lebenswelt* is lonely and fraught with unutterable menaces, then life outside it is lonelier still. For Quin, transgression is never simply a benign liberation of happy and harmonious consciousnesses. *Three*, like her later novel *Passages*, by no means unproblematically endorses the 'polymorphous' sexuality it depicts. Both novels examine the destructive, self-shattering implications of the countercultural theories of sexual liberation that permeated the thought of the time. Quin is by no means convinced about the possibilities of liberating desire. She is, in a sense, a classical Freudian; her protagonists' inner lives are well beyond reclamation, their disordered desires the product not of scientific rationality but immanent in the structure of the subject itself. The pursuit of the myriad erotic possibilities of transcending the self are in Quin shown to be mere onanistic phantasy.

On the one hand, *Three* depicts the struggle of the self to articulate – and, even prior to this, to apprehend in the moment – those forms of experience that, by definition, cannot be brought to speech. And on the other it depicts, on the part of the

other, the failure of textual understanding and impossibility of interpretation. In the ways in which it, both internally and externally, promises but does not deliver the unveiling of a secret, *Three* is an allegory of interpretation or, more properly, of unreadability. In this way, the novel is what J. Hillis Miller calls an 'uncanny text',[63] one which metafictionally enacts the all-too-human search for an "ideal reader" and a fictional analogue for Quin's own predicament as an "experimental" writer, which reflects her authorly anxieties (and ambivalence) about *being understood*.

[63] J. Hillis Miller, *Fiction and Repetition: Seven English Novels* (Boston, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), 69.

The Map and the Territory of Liberation in Passages

As it had been for successive generations of refuseniks before them, in the sixties, the process of "finding oneself" was not just an *inner* quest, but one embarked upon outwardly too. If, as R.D. Laing proposes in his *The Politics of Experience* (1967), reality and fantasy, perception and imagination, experience and memory, were simply 'different 'modalities of experience, none more "inner" or "outer" than any other',[1], then the metaphysical search would also be a geographical one. Those who could not wait for utopia to manifest followed predecessors like Byron, Gauguin, Lawrence, Miller and Burroughs and countless others in seeking their promised land someplace else. By inducing disorientation and alienation through exiling oneself from home, one could catalyse the psychic epiphanies of self-transformation, or else, discover a world whose lineaments made a more hospitable setting for a different way of life. Accordingly, by the mid-seventies, hippie enclaves had sprung up on the by now inchoately post-colonial peripheries of empire and the geographical fringes of the West: in North Africa, especially Morocco, for example, in India, Thailand and, closer to home, in Greece and along the west coast of the United States.

Like Lawrence Durrell, Quin sought the spiritual antipodes – both psychic and physical – of Britain, and eked out a hand-to-mouth living from her Calder & Boyars advances, Arts Council grants and the occasional book prize and fellowship to fund extended sorties to Ireland, Greece, the U.S., the Bahamas and Mexico. The region she sought, she admitted, would not be found on the map. In art, as in life, Quin's bearings were set for the region she calls, in an allusion to George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*, the 'unmapped country', a phrase which became the title of her final novel, which remained unpublished at the time of her death. Quin's 1967 book, *Passages*, is set in one such place. It is a picaresque in which two questing lovers maraud across a terra incognita of both map and mind. She, like Antigone, is looking for her brother who has gone missing from a detention camp and is presumed dead. He, meanwhile, is in search of himself. A self-fashioning existential hero, his quest is Sisyphean. He has 'an argument to follow through', one 'he must endur[e]… without any hope for an answer'.[2] Their quests are linked. Both are seeking to climb out of the quotidian: she to defy the limits imposed by home and state, he the frontiers

[1] Laing, *Politics of Experience*, 18.
[2] Ann Quin, *Passages* (Champaign: Dalkey Archive Press, 2003), 28, hereafter to be cited within the text.

imposed by the bounded self. In both mood and form *Passages* bears resemblance to the existential Bonnie and Clyde narratives of Jean-Luc Godard's cinematic period: *The Little Soldier* (1960, released 1963), *Breathless* (1960) and *Pierrot le Fou* (1965). The novel chronicles its unnamed protagonists' parallel quests.

Her search is continually thwarted by the machinations of a truly Kafkaesque bureaucracy. Although the couple's bearings are set for transcendence, as in Godard's films, the political present lurks around every corner:

> They spoke at times in a dialect we didn't understand. We were misinterpreted. Information given in exchange for money, clothes, cigarettes, drink. We were misinformed… She knew it was impossible. She remained. (7-8)

He, equally, is 'completely lost in this country – this climate' (31). The novel follows his sexual adventures and misadventures as he frequents the bacchic rituals and sadomasochistic orgies of a bohemian underworld in the attempt to invoke Dionysus, to induce a 'madness he almost wants' (62):

> Women in backless dresses, they paid little attention to the men, talked amongst themselves. Shrieked with laughter. The men smoked, talked of the navy, army, wars and cars… Each room had the latest fashionable paintings, illuminated from lights under. From balcony city lights fingered the sky. (23)

Writers and thinkers have frequently drawn upon the links between the terrain of the consciousness and that of cartography to figure psychic, social and cultural transgression in geographical terms. Lacking a language with which to describe what might lie beyond the limits of the human – that which, necessarily, lies beyond language – writers imaginatively invent spatial metaphorisations of other realms and regions – be they worldly or otherworldly – to stand for the distant objects of our metaphysical drives, the aterritorial freedoms of romantic exile. Metaphors of self-exile – or, more appropriately, self-banishment – of nomadism and of deterritorialization have been deployed by writers and thinkers throughout history, but perhaps most notably within the Romantic and the Gothic traditions, during the

Modernist period and later by the many legatees of oeuvre of Gilles Deleuze, for their earthly echo of the transcendental.

In the writing of the long sixties, the quest for liberation, as it had been for their modernist predecessors, was frequently imagined as a "savage pilgrimage". Taking what is perhaps the ur-text of this tendency, Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, as their map, in many sixties novels the quest for liberation is frequently imagined as a Dionysian odyssey of travel, drugs and erotic deviance. In novels like Lawrence Durrell's *The Alexandria Quartet* (1960) and John Fowles' *The Magus* (1966), for example, for the ways in which they proffer but then rescind their elusive promise of a Lawrentian encounter with some lost, primitive unity that might redeem the fragmentary and destabilised subject of modernity, these Orients function as the paradigmatic loci of the existential encounter. Like Camus' Algiers, with its 'paralysing' abundance and the 'violent throbbing of the two o'clock sun' which afford a sense of being-in-the-world apparently without consolation,[3] these are places whose attendant myths of authenticity are revealed to be, in fact, just one of the many fictional constructs with which we mediate our relationship with the world. Crucially, and unlike their forebears, these characters are not on the run *from* Western rationality, but *towards* it. They "return" to Durrell's Alexandria and Fowles' Phraxos to implore the cradles of civilisation to yield some authentic truth that has been lost to modernity. But in both cases, in the end, their protagonists, like Quin's in *Passages*, are forced to accept the phenomenal and political limitations of the self and to acknowledge the delusory nature of their freedoms.

Passages' geographical setting is an island archipelago and mainland coast that is arid and sand-blown and beaten by a constant midday sun. Naming it is, of course, beside the point: the 'city… might be any city' (12), the 'illusion… is the most real thing here' (43). For the protagonists of *Passages*, as for their 'fellow bankrupts' in the novels of Durrell and Fowles, place is inscrutable, pregnant with an indecipherable significance, but in the end functions only as that upon which they project myths of brutal vitality and orgiastic sensuality that are discovered, in the end, to be mere moral sun-blindness. With its poverty, its amputee peasants, its war-torn landscapes, bullet hole pockmarks, detention camps, prisoner beatings and authoritarian state control, *Passages*' setting might be Greece under the military

[3] Albert Camus, "Summer in Algiers," in *The Myth of Sisyphus* trans. Justin O'Brian (London: Penguin, 2000), 127.

junta of 1967-1974. Quin explores, but – ever morally ambiguous – stops short of explicitly indicting the decadence, the unforgiveable hubris of these neo-colonials.

In this chapter, I will explore the ways in which in *Passages* Quin interrogates the ambivalence of the liberation project. Here, where Dionysian spectacle and authoritarian tyranny co-exist cheek-by-jowl, there seems to be little distinction between the sadomasochistic orgies and the bacchic rituals enacted by the travellers and the political torture and rape inflicted upon the region's native inhabitants. They shrink in horror from beggars, 'who could not be ignored, though their faces were part of the wall they leaned against' (15-6), but not from the whip. He considers employing the services of a child prostitute. Quin demonstrates that limitless freedoms and unbounded tyranny amount to much the same thing. The quest to 'transcend the limits of the possible' always involves the exploitation of suffering – both their own and others'. And, crucially, whilst men are able to enjoy the bacchanal's temporary respite from reason, women have no such luxury. This chapter will examine how *Passages,* in its figure of the Janus-faced picaro, examines the gendered paradigms of liberation and thereby problematizes the political and personal efficacy of the liberation project. For the protagonists, the surrender of reason is a dangerous experience of self-dispossession. As Quin's protagonists edge the abyss, courting, *willing* the divine madness that promises an ecstatic ascent from quotidian life, there is no sense of the limitless possibilities, the anarchic productivity, the *jouissance*, that characterises the post-structuralist vision of liberation. The protagonists' metaphysical quest is shown, on the one hand, to be just as hubristic and as futile as its opposite and, on the other, to be self-distressing and perilous.

Folie à Deux

The novel is narrated from the two enmeshed perspectives of two lovers which, at length, begin to merge. Hers, on the one hand, describes the submission of an unbounded self to its disordered and disorderly yearnings. His, on the other, is a hypertrophied, introspective and acutely self-reflexive awareness. The woman's narrative continually oscillates between first- and third-person, devolving subjecthood to objecthood, perceiver to the perceived. Hers is a radically embodied

consciousness for whom the boundary between self and other, inner and outer, are blurred. A self that both orders and is ordered by the external world, that dissolves outwards to commune with the objects of its desires: '[s]hapes suiting [her] fancy' (5) and shapes that 'shaped her moods' (19). Her account is a series of discontinuous and fragmentary vignettes, enfluxed by jump cuts which Quin, like Godard, uses to forge metonymic links between discrete events; to suspend a moment, or a thought, infinitely or to depict, almost simultaneously, the occurrence of an event and its opposite placing both under erasure, or to give intransitive verbs an object. She enjambs, for example, the lines of a murmuration of birds with the lines on a face (16), the spaces between objects and the spaces between bodies (18). An ambiguous longing becomes, after the caesura, a longing for rain (6). She 'stepped out of / Into the swimmingpool' (17).

Within the woman's experiential story-world, objects lack solidity and consistency; events a sense of *having actually occurred.* Her self-abnegating voice depicts impossible vignettes of passivised experience. Just as in *Berg* the process of perception is materialised; in *Passages* the woman apprehends the world literally as if through glass. Phenomena are experienced at such distance they are not merely externalised – perceived voyeuristically as being enacted upon some real-world surrogate – but appear to occur only as the phantasms of the imagination. In the opening passages of the novel, for example, she seemingly observes someone who might perhaps be herself having sex in an adjacent room:

> I listened to sounds, waited for those that never came. I didn't look up. Their bodies rotated, she above. Legs, arms moved with the music over him… Movement so near… I couldn't see, but saw what next would happen… Laughter. Afterwards recognized as my own… In the next room I pictured her smile, larger than it seemed a face could hold. (5)

His narrative, in contrast, explores an introspective self that has turned in upon itself and lost all contact with the outside world. He is a 'voyeur in all senses': '[h]ow many hours I waste lying in bed thinking about getting up. I see myself get up, go out, move, drink, eat, go up, go down' (108). His narrative maps the inner cosmology of a hyperreflexive subject turned epistemological bricoleur who continually attempts to abstract, order and to rationalise the experiential and the sensorial. His diaries

reshape experience into lists and marginalia, retell it as aphorisms, dialogues and fictionalised vignettes which appeal to a salad of explicatory systems: narratological, mythical, mystical, archetypal, geometrical, psychoanalytic and psychological.

The man's account chronicles his attempt to climb out of his hyperreflexive cosmology, a madness that is 'not swift enough' (39). He seeks an 'unambiguous truth' (29): the ability 'to determine the truth of things, to share an experience' (29), to 'play it cool' (33), to 'forget everything' (30). A modest form of knowledge, of *knowing*, in fact, that would usurp his 'morbid habit of self-examination' (32): 'Just to be in some hotel, part of the room, chairs, table. A little music perhaps.' (28) A return to the body, to become 'some drifting thing that at least had found somewhere for inhabiting'. (94) He strives for what Camus, in his later essay, "The Myth of Sisyphus" (1942), calls 'lucidity in the face of experience',[4] the cognitive self-restraint that defies the tragic human impulse of ordering experience and meaning-making – the 'desire for unity, this longing to solve, this need for clarity and cohesion' – and instead accepts the absurdity of man's relationship with the world.

At length, the couple's experiential worlds begin to merge, they become 'mediums inhabiting each others' imagination' (39) and they embark upon an intersubjective power struggle, a 'master/slave situation', he writes, in which ']r]oles [are] reversed from day to day' (90). In this war of nerves, what is at stake is the possibility of transcendence: '[t]he need to find some unambiguous truth' (29). They challenge one another not to accept the phenomenal limits of the self. Defeat is 'submission to the image', the images that in *Passages* are all there is. In *Matter and Memory*, Henri Bergson formulates his theory of 'pure perception'. Mediating between the traditionally opposed doctrines of realism and idealism, the first of which holds that matter exists independently of its representation and the second, that matter's existence is equivalent to the representation that one can have of it, in *Matter and Memory*, Bergson invents a third position. Embracing both doctrines, Bergson appropriates the concept of the 'image' from philosophical theories of representation to solve the problem of dualism:

> Matter, in our view, is an aggregate of "images". And by "image" we mean a certain existence which is more than that which the idealist calls a

[4] Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays* (London: Penguin, 2013), 12.

> *representation*, but less than what which the realist calls a *thing* – an existence placed half-way between the "thing" and the "representation".[5]

He argues that both the material and mental worlds are made up of an 'aggregate of images' and are thereby not antithetical, but capable of approximating one another. But in "solving" the problem of dualism, Bergson's conceptualisation of the image throws up yet more. By affirming both sides of the subject-object split, Bergson at once denies the existence of the absolute and the possibility of knowing what lies outside of ourselves. This philosophical quandary provides the troubled terrain of *Passages*: somewhere indefinable between the internal and external worlds. The couple dare one another to acknowledge that one's percepts are not representative of a "real world" beyond the internality of the self but that equally, although reality may only be apparent, those percepts are percepts of *something*, that contrary to philosophical idealism, perception is attached to a real that can only be accessed through images. Having abandoned the real, the couple exist in a kind of purgatorial virtuality from which they seek to metaphysically ascend.

The Sexual Politics of Madness

Madness has traditionally been associatively gendered. Altogether more curiously and sympathetically received in antiquity for its wisdom and prophetic knowledge, with modernity it became a cultural repository for everything that Enlightenment rationality was not, a counterforce that posed a dangerous threat to the age of reason and was therefore marginalised by allying it with womanhood. As Showalter argues in her eponymous book, madness has traditionally been positioned as 'the feminine malady'.[6] Women, on the one hand, are situated on the 'side of irrationality, silence, nature and the body, while men are situated on the side of reason, discourse, culture, and mind… Thus madness, even when experienced by men, is metaphorically and symbolically represented as feminine'.[7] The Feminist protest against the pathologisation of the feminine that emerged in the early seventies with

[5] Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory* (New York, NY: Dover Publications, 2004), vii-viii.
[6] Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture, 1830-1980* (London: Penguin, 1987).
[7] Ibid., 4.

books like Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* (1969) (she was later to chronicle her own experiences of being incarcerated in psychiatric facilities in *The Loony-Bin Trip* [1990]), Phyllis Chesler's *Women in Madness* (1972) and Sheila Rowbotham's *Woman's Consciousness, Man's World* (1973) drew upon the antipsychiatry that predated it – and with which by conservative commentators it was often lumped.

Feminism and antipsychiatry similarly condemned the abuses of psychiatry and psychiatric institutions' attempts to police diversity and disavowal, both identified "mental illness" as a socio-political construct and the two movements held shared beliefs about the oppressive nature of domesticity and an antipathy towards the nuclear family. However, although Thomas Szasz, in *The Manufacture of Madness* (1970), touches upon the social control of women, drawing parallels between psychiatry and witch-hunting,[8] and R.D. Laing disputes the psychiatric construction of the 'schizophrenogenic mother' – mothers 'are always the first to get the blame for everything', he comments[9] – antipsychiatry was a male-dominated movement which had largely neglected (and, moreover, as has been argued in the case of Mary Barnes amongst others, exploited) the sexual politics of madness. Amongst the legacies of the antipsychiatry movement is the initiation of a shift in the gendering of madness from female to male, as Angela Woods notes.[10] One that is formalised, as Woods suggests, in the work of Louis Sass, who in his *Madness and Modernism* insists that, contrary to prevailing thought, schizophrenia is 'an alienation not from reason but from the emotions, instincts and the body'.[11] Within Sass' conceptualisation of madness, the '"feminine" experience of embodied subjectivity' represents an attempt to establish distance from the 'hyperreflexivity of schizophrenia' which is, for Sass, a fundamentally masculine experience of atrophied instrumental reason.[12]

But if Oedipus was to be liberated, then what would become of the madwoman in the attic, or the nineteenth-century "hysteric"? Simone de Beauvoir notes that what she perceives as Freud's cobbled-together account of female

[8] Thomas Szasz, *The Manufacture of Madness: A Comparative Study of the Inquisition and the Mental Health Movement* (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1970).
[9] Laing, *Politics of Experience*, 93.
[10] Angela Woods, *The Sublime Object of Psychiatry: Schizophrenia in Clinical and Cultural Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 173.
[11] Louis Sass, *Madness and Modernism: Insanity in the Light of Modern Art, Literature, and Thought* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1992), 4.
[12] Ibid., 11.

subjectivity was just a diminished mirror image of that of her male counterpart, wherein feminine desire figures merely as the desire to be the object of masculine desire. Oedipus' female counterpart, Electra, de Beauvoir argues, had been furnished with neither a satisfactory schema for her desire, nor a robust model for the subjugation of those desires – never mind the emancipation of them.[13] And if, for Freudo-Marxist thinkers, escape for the constraints of scientific rationality and instrumental reason was to be found in the ecstatic embrace of anti-rationality, unreason and embodiment, then what recourse had women who had, historically, been shunted into such a position and there found not liberation but a fraught and perilous experience of profound suffering, disempowerment and self-dispossession? Although the feminist movement was to draw deeply upon the theories and formulations of anti-psychiatry it also, undoubtedly, grew out of a profound scepticism about its implicitly gendered paradigms of revolution. Sexual liberation, as Kate Millett warns in "Sexual Politics: A Manifesto for Revolution", a 1968 speech at Columbia University, could easily lead to 'exploitative license for patriarchal and reactionary ends.'[14] For a group of thinkers affiliated with what become known (problematically) as "French feminism", including Hélène Cixous, Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray, amongst others, the attempt to destroy the oedipal motifs of culture and the self via what was often perceived as the strategic embrace of feminine values of difference and non-identity simply reaffirmed Oedipus as a model for universal identity. Whither, then, a model of female liberation?

French feminism sought to circumvent Oedipus by proposing an alternative model of female subjectivity that drew upon de Beauvoir's critique of the Oedipus complex and reinvented Lacan's ideas about the acquisition of language. The Freudo-Lacanian woman, assigned the inferior position of the not-I, the eternal Other, belongs, to borrow the heavily punning title of Irigary's 1977 work, to the 'sex which is not one'. She is not subject but object, and her existence is defined as a function of male self-representation.[15] And if the male subject is tasked with the oedipal work of civilisation-building – the language, culture, reason and law of the Symbolic – whilst women are allied with the body, emotions, silence and

[13] De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 77.
[14] Kate Millet, "Sexual Politics: A Manifesto for Revolution," in *Radical Feminism*, ed. Anne Koedt et al. (New York, NY: Quadrangle Books, 1973), 366.
[15] Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), 23.

"nothingness" of the Imaginary, then, French feminism queried, how can a woman *speak*?

For Irigaray, the feminine is not simply the inverse of the masculine; it is not to be defined by the position of subjugation which is imposed upon it by binaristic thinking of masculine reason.[16] It is instead, to be understood in its multiplicity, its lack of a single, unified (and therefore masculine) sense of selfhood, and therefore it demands an entirely new way of thinking, the invention of a resolutely non-phallogentic system which is not governed by what de Beauvoir memorably calls the 'primacy of the penis' and in which desire is no longer defined by its presence or absence. Drawing upon de Beauvoir's critique of the Oedipus complex, together with Deleuze and Guattari's designation of the 'nomadic' and 'deterritorialized' circulation of desire, French feminism sought to reorient Freud's distinction between pre-Oedipal and Oedipal drives and Lacan's concepts of the 'imaginary' and the 'symbolic', refocusing attention upon the pre-Oedipal or pre-symbolic, which Kristeva in her *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1974) calls 'the semiotic'. This realm precedes meaning and signification, it is archaic and instinctual, it marks the return of the speaking subject to a pre-linguistic phrase. Its source is what Kristeva following Plato's *Timaeus*, calls the *chora*: 'an ancient, mobile, unstable receptacle, prior to the One, to the father, and even to the syllable, metaphorically suggesting something nourishing and maternal'.[17] The semiotic surfaces in poetic language as a feminine aesthetic of digressive writing that is more in tune with the intangible rhythms of the human body and its unconscious desires that are held in check by masculine civilisation. It disrupts symbolic structures, functioning within signifying practice as the transmittal of pulsations and vibrations, a 'dissonance within the thetic, paternal function of language'.[18]

Cixous understands *écriture féminine* as a kind of writing that eschews the need for closure and the restrictions of linearity: 'The quest for origins, illustrated by Oedipus, doesn't haunt a feminine unconscious. Rather it's the beginning, or beginning… not promptly with the phallus in order to close with the phallus, but

[16] Ibid., 26.
[17] Julia Kristeva, *In the Beginning Was Love: Psychoanalysis and Faith* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1987), 5.
[18] Julia Kristeva, 'Desire in Language," *The Portable Kristeva*, ed. Kelly Oliver, (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2001), 104.

starting on all sides at once'.[19] And as such, it is politically productive; by disrupting the order and the law of language through which the world is defined and structured, *écriture féminine* has the potential to not only linguistically but also socially disrupt those definitions and structures. In this way, by embracing the feminine's inferior status as a space of anarchic and subversive potential that precedes the imposition of the symbolic order, French feminism sought to valorise the marginal position as one of empowerment.

In the figure of the Janus-faced picaro, in *Passages* Quin draws together these two gendered accounts of liberation and finds that both are wanting. The man envies the woman her lightness, her polyvalent signifiers, her embodied self, her harmonious consciousness and its radical receptivity to the external world. The way in which she 'cannot live without sensations', that 'like a sorceress', she 'shape[s] them out of the air itself it seems' (105):

> You will dance and look back at me, not count the scribbling foolishness that put wings on your heels, behind your ears. (87)

The protagonists' attempts to loosen the bonds of reason amount to dangerous and hubristic psychic tourism. His mime of madness in the attempt to escape the quandary of hyperreflexivity is merely the mastery and negation of being-in-itself, and fundamentally fails to efface the division between subject and object. And for the woman, madness is anything but liberating. It is a self-dissolution and self-dispossession that surrenders coherent selfhood as well as human agency and political purchase. If the challenge for men during the period was to "go mad" and thereby to self-deconstruct the bourgeois liberal construction of selfhood, then the challenge for women was to *go sane*. Without a stable, self-consistent sense of self to rebel against, Quin seems to ask, how can women afford to heed the era's injuction to "lose themselves". And, in this sense, doesn't the male drive towards self-destruction and negation constitute merely yet another – and more insidious – manoeuvre within the Cartesian tradition of subjecthood? In *Passages*, the madwoman still cannot speak.

[19] Hélène Cixous, "Castration or Decapitation?" trans. Annette Kuhn, *Signs* 7, no. 1 (1981): 53

In the novel, Quin seeks to test the Marcusean logic that the revolutionary critique of society depends upon a sex revolutionary critique of culture. For Quin's protagonists' disordered desires are already well beyond reclamation and, as elsewhere in her work, their desublimation is just another form of determinism. In the novel, polymorphous sexuality simply serves to re-impose the power structures that it would seek to explode. In another of Quin's extraordinary sex scenes, the man initiates a sex game in which the woman is kidnapped, tortured and raped:

> She felt them in the small room he brought her to. Kept her there until there was no sense of day, of night. A blinding flashlight on her face. No sense of who touched her, who she was stripped by, who woke her as soon as she tried to sleep. (71)

Her account blurs the description of real (but ritual) and imagined (but actual) violence. She is beaten, bitten, whipped; a police informer (her brother?) is thrown from a building, a cigarette stubbed out on his chest, his clothes searched (74). Sex is imaginatively transformed into a bloody shooting (79). The other side of freedom is tyranny. Erotic deviance is merely a grotesque parody of authoritarian brutality. *Passages* explores the ambivalent implications of the masculine 'de-Oedipalized" consciousness as a kind of megalomania of experiential mastery – 'I only want to dominate', (48) the man admits – in which the woman inevitably figures as the slave who is instinctually schooled to yearn for an intoxicating and yet perilous surrender.

The man's metaphysical quest to invoke Dionysus is, as he admits, a journey without a destination, it is a 'distance… that never reaches its limits.' (111) There are, he concludes, 'so many routes' but 'all lead me finally to the edge of where I am at the moment: in a room I know only too well, a woman I love, but hardly know, and a city where every street declares its defeat.' (111) That said, for the man, divine madness sustains on the one hand the ever-present possibility of transcendence – the 'sea that soon perhaps we will cross' (112) – and, on the other, a home to which he can return. For the woman, however, both exits are blocked. She is bounded, on the one hand, by the mirror and, on the other, by the cliff, the two images which in the novel frequently appear overlaid atop one another in the manner of a double-exposed photograph, as twinned metaphorisations of the limits of the real, both equally impossible to cross.

For the woman, the world is apprehended as if a 'Pan-like figure held the side of a concave mirror' (16). The mirror is the reflective boundary which simultaneously marks the edges of the phenomenal world and signals the impossibility of transgressing that world. It is the reflective lens which purports to offer a spectacular vision of what lies beyond and yet forever turns perception back on itself, dividing the self, offering the reflected image of a false self – 'some other person, some other life' (72) – that is disembodied, ephemeral, without identity. That false self with which the self confronts the outside world, but with whom the self can never be reconciled. Quin places the mirrors face to face, creating a vertiginously self-referential abyss which entraps the woman in a world in which the ever-diminishing image of the real, replicated endlessly, is all that can exist:

> The first mirror reflected in the second. The second in the first. Images within images. Smaller than the last, one inside the other. (25)

The cliff, on the other hand, represents a perceptual precipice that promises not the transcending, but the terminus of all experience in the actual self-annihilation of death. The man's quest might remain unfulfilled, transcendence might never be reached, but he, at least, retains the liberty of committing free acts in pursuit of it. His quest will continue. 'He would catch the train to another place. Some other life.' (82) The women's account ends at the cliff's edge as she gazes at her own reflection in the window of a halted train superimposed upon the vista of the sea below (83). Within her involuted experiential world, such possibilities are continually foreclosed.

Just as the Oedipal architecture of Quin's first novel, *Berg*, renders as self-fulfilling prophesy the doomed masculine attempt to redefine one's existence within the *a priori* terms of the family romance, *Passages* takes for its mythic underpinning the story of Antigone, daughter of Oedipus, who defies the law of home and polis, as well as the station of womanhood, in order to bury her dead brother, Polynices. Rebels both, Oedipus and Antigone are, as Silke-Maria Weineck argues, partners in perversion.[20] However whilst Oedipus' act of rebellion, in its reaffirmation of naturalised desire and the patriarchal logic of prohibition and displacement, is enacted purely in the terms of this world, Antigone's sights are set on the next. For

[20] Silke-Maria Weineck, *The Abyss Above: Philosophy and Poetic Madness in Plato, Holderlin and Nietzsche* (New York, NY: SUNY Press, 2002), 14.

her embodiment of difference, and her realisation of the productive potentials of the womanly threat to public order, within feminist thought, most notably in the work of de Beauvoir, Irigaray and Showalter, the figure of Antigone has been elevated as a specifically feminine paradigm of subjectivity and, crucially, one not merely, as Freud had it, a derivation or a reversal of the Oedipal model. She has been mobilised as a metaphor for the ethical life, a desire that will not compromise, for feminist revolt against the authority of the superego.

In *Passages*, as elsewhere in her writing, however, Quin insists on asking: but at what cost? Liberation is a perilous project, and particularly for women. Oedipus, blinded by insight, might be condemned to live out his days within the high walls of the polis, but for his daughter, reimagined within Quin's novels, life in the metaphysical desert that lies outside might be still worse. In *Passages*, limitless freedoms and unbounded tyranny are shown to amount to much the same thing. In her death by suicide Antigone is vindicated; as the last of the line she has, at last, repealed the Theban curse. But although Quin's fictions are suffused by the undeniable seductions of Thanatos, in the end Quin insists that death, even on one's own account, is still mere annihilation.

Living in the Present: *Tripticks* and the "Texty Texts" of the British Experimental Novel

Quin's fourth and final published novel, *Tripticks*, is a raucous and Rabelaisian excursion across the spectacular Amerikan dreamscape. A jitteringly paranoid exploration, on the one hand, of consumer culture's debauch and, on the other, of the moral nihilism and political vacuity of the counterculture, *Tripticks* is peopled by the skewed archetypes of the mediascape's spiritual malaise. Here, catatonic tycoons anaesthetise their disenchantment by watching infomercials, bored housewives channel their discontent into Black Mass orgies, executives frantically attempt to preserve their youth by strapping themselves into futuristic fitness machines in roof terrace gyms and families sun themselves beside heated outdoor swimming pools garlanded with plastic ivy.

Tripticks, is Quin's first – as Christine Brooke Rose would put it – 'texty text'. At the close of the sixties, she abandons the montaging of inner speech that had characterised the intimate mode of her earlier novels and turns instead to new techniques of vocal collage, exchanging the private language of the perceptual imagination for a cut/up glossolia of the extra-literary discourses of the mass media. The novel's primary texts are drawn from the readymade fabric of the modern mediascape – True Crime potboilers, psychometric testing, spaghetti westerns, Freudian psychoanalysis, hard-boiled detective fiction, advertising puffery, daytime soap operas, infomercials, televangelism, tabloid newspapers and horoscopes – that have colonised and live within the memories, dreams and desires of the protagonist's focalising consciousness. In the novel, Quin discursively constructs a self and a story-world that is as dizzyingly plurivocal as a cracked jukebox.

Quin was not alone in her new interest in textual experimentation; other British writers had also begun speaking in tongues. In what follows, this chapter will explore Quin's burgeoning interest in what one reviewer derided as 'Ambit-dextrous punpricks, Joycean parody and sub-Burrovian cut-uppery'[1] and its relation to the "language games" embarked upon in the novels of Christine Brooke Rose, Brigid Brophy and others. Once again picking up the story of British *Kulturkritik*, which provides, as I have sought to demonstrate, a hugely significant parallel narrative to

[1] Raymond Durgnat, review of *Tripticks* by Ann Quin, *Books and Bookmen,* November 1973, 66.

that of British experimental writing, in this chapter I will examine the different ways in which the British writers of the period sought to re-negotiate and re-envision a dissenting role for the novel in Britain after its traditional role as a 'court of human appeal' was perceived to have lapsed. A role which would allow the novel to, as the title of one of Quin's texty short stories has it, 'live in the present' and not persist as its own fiction of the "as if", endlessly harking back to an imagined past in order to fictionally project an impossible future.

Quin's new interest in textual experimentation was first signalled three years earlier in short stories published in Dr Martin Bax and J.G. Ballard's *Ambit*, the literary magazine that was to become the spiritual home of this new, cut/up, visual-textual mode of writing. 'Living In the Present' (1968) co-authored with Robert Sward, is, like J.G. Ballard's *The Atrocity Exhibition*, which was published the following year, a composition of headlined micro-narratives told in a Ballardian dead pan that borrows and burlesques the stylistic tics of newspaper report pseudo-naturalism. However, theirs is an altogether looser and more freewheeling text than Ballard's. The juxtapositions produced by *The Atrocity Exhibition*'s generative grammar of significations create allegorical meanings which for all their promiscuity are nonetheless carefully controlled by Ballard's finely-wrought surreal logic. In 'Living In The Present', on the other hand, syntax and signification are condensed almost beyond all recognition to produce a mosaic of bizarre vignettes within which juxtapositions of meaning are left orphaned and dangling, to create a text that is more zeugmatic than surreal:

> Crisp sales in recent weeks have shown a marked increase and the third part of the stars; so as the third part of them was darkened. Salt 'n' Vinegar flavour crisps. And the day shown an unkind critic. The name of the star is called Wormwood.[2]

The second story, 'Tripticks',[3] is an early draft of what would become the first chapter of Quin's novel of the same name, and won her the £40 first prize in *Ambit* magazine's Drugs and the Creative Writer competition, awarded to the best poem or short story by an author under the influence of drugs, one of a number of provocative

[2] Robert Sward and Ann Quin, "Living In The Present," *Ambit* 34 (1968), 20.
[3] Ann Quin, "Tripticks," *Ambit* 35 (1968), 9-16.

wheezes hatched by editor J.G. Ballard, which raised the ire of Prime Minster Harold Wilson's legal counsel Lord Goodman who, as Ballard recounts in his autobiography, *Miracles of Life*, 'denounced *Ambit* for committing a public mischief (a criminal offence) and in effect threatened us with prosecution.'[4] The incident gained minor notoriety, a side note in accounts of the many skirmishes between the art world and the establishment around issues of censorship and "public decency" during the period – debates that Ballard, an inveterate *provocateur* all too keen to prick the pieties of public moralism, was eager to inflame.

In a 1972 interview, she recounts the beneficial effects that her experiments with LSD and peyote during her time in New Mexico had on the development of her writing practice:

> Taking peyote was particularly beautiful taken in such a beautiful landscape, with all that vast space. Perhaps if I'd stayed in England and not taken drugs, it would have taken me ten to 15 years to reach that particular stage that I reached then. Peyote verified and made concrete things I'd thought about, and made fantasies more real. It made an outer reality seem equivalent to an inner landscape. It seemed to make all things possible. I just found that when I did write, it all seemed to tie up, and I don't think it would have been the same if I hadn't had this experience of drugs.[5]

'Tripticks', however, had been written under the influence of nothing more innocuous than Orthonovin 2, or the contraceptive pill. *Tripticks* proper, named punningly for both the tripartite work of art and the American travel guides, was to be Quin's Amerikan epic. '[T]here is a sense,' Bernard Bergonzi reluctantly admits, 'in which the very air of America seems more highly charged, more oxygenated, than the atmosphere in England'.[6] He cannot resist adding: 'It is not, perhaps, wise for Americans to be so hooked on excitement since their society as a whole could use some English tranquillity.'[7] Quin, like so many other writers and artists during this period, found America's ambience intoxicating. During the early sixties, she had worked as a secretary to the Head of Painting, Carel Wright, at the Royal College of

[4] J.G. Ballard, *Miracles of Life* (London: HarperCollins, 2008), 18.
[5] Hall, "The Mighty Quin," 8-9.
[6] Bergonzi, *The Situation of the* Novel, 62.
[7] Ibid.

Art,[8] where she had come into contact with an art scene incubated at the RCA during the period that was similarly attuned to and energised by the icon of modernity that loomed so large in the mid-century cultural imagination: those associated with the nascent Pop art movement like David Hockney, Peter Blake, Pauline Boty, Patrick Caulfield and others. Amongst the earliest writings in her corpus are texts ghost-written on behalf of her lover, the New Zealand pop artist, Billy Apple, who was a student at the RCA at that time. *Popcorn* is an imagined dialogue between Vincent Van Gogh and the American painter Larry Rivers set at The Five Spot Jazz Club in New York,[9] and *B.B.'s Second Manifesto* is a self-conscious parody of blasting and bombardiering proclamations issued by the high modernist avant-garde which begins, appositely lackadaisically with: 'Yeah maybe I ought to get organised, trouble is I don't know what I really want to do.'[10] In them Quin, like Nabokov before her, luxuriates in the vulgarisms of her borrowed idiom, inventing, as Nabokov does in his *Lolita* (1955), a not-quite-authentic macaronic second language of jive talk and hipster slang alongside Britishism non-sequiturs. In Quin's Amerikan lingo, although lovers "make it", "fag" always means cigarette. See, for example, this passage from an unpublished text from the period, with its self-conscious nod to Henry Miller:

> Neh man it's like this I'm though with image, it's the word now, reality that's what I want. Take this guy with six others leaving the Bronx, cops were waiting for them, so he shot one down, just that, man it's real, none of this stuff slobs care about. Look at that cat in his crappy outback outfit, what a slob. What do you think they're thinking? Whether or not he'll make it with her, and she's wishing she could make it with the guy two yards away. Made it with a gorgeous nymphomaniac negress, man she was wild, crazy, in full view of the whole of New York, with the light on, man across the way cleaning his teeth, having an orgasm. O.K. Henry Miller.[11]

The novel, which appeared in 1972, was rather more ambitious. It is, in her own words: 'Part love story part lecture in existential psychoanalysis and part rumination on the frayed boot-straps of mankind.' (*T*, 163) Following *Passages*' more

[8] Alice Butler, "Quin's Night-time Ink: A Postscript," (Master's thesis, Royal College of Art, 2012), 4.
[9] Unpublished manuscript, Ann Quin and Billy Apple, *Popcorn*, private collection.
[10] Unpublished manuscript, Ann Quin and Billy Apple, *B.B.'s Second Manifesto*, private collection.
[11] Unpublished manuscript, Ann Quin, *Untitled*, private collection.

abstract reverie upon the dark drive towards distintegration within European expatriate bohemia, *Tripticks* is Quin's most explicit thematic engagement with the sixties counterculture. Indeed, it draws upon – often in order to self-consciously burlesque – the countercultural aesthetic associated with that movement, including the picaresque-psychedelic hippy narratives of Ken Kesey's Merry Pranksters and Tom Wolfe, the Menippean satires of Kurt Vonnegut, and the cabbalistic paranoia of Thomas Pynchon and William Gaddis. Resituating the rootless, vagabond narrator familiar from her earlier novels *on the road*, it resonates too with the American road movie that came of age in the sixties. The filmic celebration of Romantic flight, visionary rebellion, motorised mobility and machinic desire had been seeded in the Beat movement, and particularly in Jack Kerouac's pronouncements about the transcendental promise of the "holy road". It emerged in films like *The Wild One* (1963), and in *Rebel Without A Cause* (1955), both ciphers for the era's anxieties about "youthquake" which embodied the freedoms and intoxicating possibilities of the period. By the high sixties, however, wide-eyed optimism began to be replaced by the sense that there was, after all, nowhere to run and the limitless potential of "just going" irrevocably lapsed. The existential angst and mindless violence of films like *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) with its spectacularly bloody ending, *Five Easy Pieces* (1970), the nightmare odyssey of Spielberg's first film, *Duel* (1970) and *Badlands* (1973) came to epitomise an age of political unrest, countercultural disenchantment and continuing civil rights struggles.

The 'Word Virus' in British Fiction

"Textualism" and linguistic experimentation, which were to become synonymous with the most notoriously, "unreadably" self-indulgent – or most significant and radically innovative – excesses of what would become known as postmodernism, are perhaps more familiar from the literary high postmodernism of American authors like John Barth, Donald Barthelme, Ronald Sukenick and later Kathy Acker (the "avant-pop" writer who is often name-checked as Quin's more-or-less sole legatee) and David Foster Wallace, amongst others, or the theoretical avant-garde of French post-structuralist critical theory. But within the British experimental writing of the sixties, by the dog days of that decade, one can detect a common interest within the work of

Quin, alongside that of Christine Brooke Rose, Brigid Brophy, Alan Burns, J.G. Ballard and others, in linguistic experimentation and adventures into textuality, polyphony and eclecticism. Never, it must be said, easily (or willingly) corralled, one can nevertheless trace a shared trajectory in their writing practice: a new recognition of the materiality of language, the apprehension that the self is discursively constructed by the linguistic universe that one inhabits – or, rather, that inhabits one – and that, as Saussure discovered, meaning is only ever one element amongst many others. By critics seeking to emphasise British postmodernism's own keen embrace and assimilation of the radical new theoretical agenda from continental Europe, the "linguistic turn" within British experimental writing of the sixties is often assumed to evince the increasing influence of French structuralist and post-structuralist theories of language, the novels the product of the cross-pollination of literary discourses, a kind of anomalous Anglo-French literary hybrid.

Seeded in the political ferment of mid-sixties France, the theories that coalesced variously under the umbrella of post-structuralism sought to make structuralism's latent political content explicit via a methodology of the epistemological critique of not just socially produced structures, but of the very act of structure-building. Turning to fictional narrative, theorists such as Roland Barthes, Julia Kristeva and the Tel Quel movement in France attempted to model an ideal, revolutionary form of literary practice. For them, the realist text is perceived as an agent of ideology, and literature's resistance to domination is in the attack through 'textual production', the 'critique, subversion and transformation of language and literary conventions'.[12] Kristeva saw the potentialities of poetic language in the displacement of the thetic safeguard between signifier and signified, freeing *le sémiotique*, the subterranean meaning of the signifer which does not signify, but reveals the patriarchal ideology inherent in realist representation. Barthes' *S/Z* creates a typology of 'readerly' and 'writerly' texts: the first representational, with an ideological value that is 'committed to the closure system of the West, produced according to the goals of this system, devoted to the law of the Signified'[13] and the second a 'galaxy of signifiers, not a structure of signifieds'[14] which is plural, indeterminable, reversible.

[12] Britton, *The Nouveau Roman*, 89-90.
[13] Roland Barthes, *S/Z* (London: Blackwell, 2002), 7-8.
[14] Ibid., 5.

What scant critical attention the British experimental novel of the sixties has received, as I have argued, has tended to be focused upon this later period of more explicitly linguistic experimentation. The "texty texts" of Quin, Burns, and Brophy have languished within a critical gap, perceived as naïve Burroughsian copyists and overshadowed by their American counterparts. But Quin, in an interview prior to the publication of *Tripticks* in 1972, claims not to be influenced by Burroughs at all, but by 'Dostoevsky, Beckett, Virginia Woolf, Camus, Gide, Antonioni, Fellini and… [the Robbe Grillet scripted, Alain Renais-directed film] "Last Year at Marienbad"'.[15] If accounted for at all, within these critical surveys, this tendency has mostly been grafted on to later developments in postmodern aesthetics as exemplary of a premature and provisional "proto-postmodernist" style. But such a reading is generally deployed to support a time-worn thesis in which the advent of postmodernism represents a radical break with a "straw man" version of modernism perceived as intellectually mandarin, ideologically monolithic and psychically monadic, and a new, radically sceptical attitude towards novelistic truth. But in fact, the "linguistic turn" in British experimental fiction by no means signals the thoroughgoing displacement of modernist attitudes towards novelistic truth, but the continuation of them. Modernism, write Bradbury and MacFarlane in their critical survey of the movement, 'is the art consequent on the dis-establishing of communal reality and conventional notions of causality, on the destruction of traditional notions of individual character, on the linguistic chaos that ensues when public notions of language have been discredited and when all realities have become subjective fictions.'[16] Reality, of course, had long since receded and the foundations of language's claims to truth had been shaken. Pound, Joyce, Woolf, James, Proust, Eliot and Beckett were already what Richard Rorty would call 'textualists',[17] all recognised, and exploited artistically, the notion that modernity had loosened language from its referents and therefore that language is a way of organising and conceptualising human experience that is not necessarily connected to a pre-existing reality. Disabused of Nietzsche's 'metaphysical consolations', through aesthetic self-consciousness, ambiguity, uncertainty, juxtaposition and montage, they sought to explore the experience of being-in-the-world where human truths have been

[15] Hall, "The Mighty Quin," 10.
[16] Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane, *Modernism, 1890-1930* (London: Penguin, 1981), 27.
[17] Richard Rorty, "Nineteenth-Century Idealism and Twentieth-Century Textualism," in *Consequences of Pragmatism: Essays 1972-1980* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 139-159.

irrevocably denuded and revealed to be fictions and therefore, as Hayden White explains, the written text constitutes a 'paradigm of culture'.[18]

What was new, however – and what this mid-period shift in British experimental style represents – was, as Patricia Waugh argues, the recognition of the '*comprehensive* nature of postmodern intertextuality' and with it the apprehension of the inescapable reciprocity of textuality, the idea that one is not just 'radically *situated* in a linguistic culture, but that one is entirely *constructed* through it'.[19] As just one text amongst many, fiction had lost what Jameson calls the written text's 'privileged and exemplary status' and with it, its claims upon aesthetic autonomy.[20] Modernist assumptions about the status of the individual and their relationship with the world and a commitment to the aesthetic as an oppositional space in which literary innovation might renovate and replenish a fallen communal language would have to be reassessed and renegotiated. Crucially, however, they were not discarded altogether. Works like Christine Brooke-Rose's *Out* (1964), *Such* (1966), *Between* (1968) and *Thru* (1975), Brigid Brophy's *In Transit* (1969), Alan Burns' *Babel* (1969) and *Dreamerika!* (1971) and J.G. Ballard's *The Atrocity Exhibition* (1970), together with Quin's *Tripticks*, explore the potentials for fiction as an intertextual but nonetheless oppositional space. If the novel, as a 'linguistic artefact' caught within Jameson's prison-house of language could not escape institutionalisation, then it could, at least, seek to disrupt the agent of its institutionalisation – language – from within.

Accordingly, these novelists sought to turn the materiality of language against itself, mobilising the Bakhtinian function of the novel as the ideal form for the literary embodiment of heteroglossia, his hugely influential designation of the myriad discursive strata of language and their dialogic interaction. Writers like Brooke-Rose, Brophy, Burns, Ballard and Quin began to explore the productive potentials of a polyvocal mode of linguistic experimentation capable of seeking out and then deconstructing the internal contradictions within the structures of institutionally-produced meaning encoded within language itself. This way of writing sought to

[18] Hayden White, "Postmodernism and Textual Anxieties," in *The Postmodern Challenge: Perspectives East and West*, eds. Bo Strath and Nina Witoszek (Amsterdam, Rodopi, 1999), 36.
[19] Patricia Waugh, *Practising Postmodernism, Reading Modernism* (London: Arnold, 1997), 50-51, italics hers.
[20] Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), 68.

exploit languages' escape from referentiality and use fiction's characteristic plurivocality to demonstrate Saussure's ideas about the multiplicity of meaning.

Christine Brooke-Rose was first, abandoning her brittle and deeply self-conscious Sparkishly satirical novels of the fifties to produce a quadriptych of explosively experimental mononymical works, including the magisterial and notoriously "unreadable" apex of the cycle, *Thru*. The author herself was keen to excise the novels she deemed mere juvenilia from the Brooke-Rose canon: '[A]ll those novels were satires – but it struck me as much too easy… I was somehow taken seriously. I hadn't read Bakhtin yet.'[21] *Out* is a witty subversion of Robbe-Grillean neo-phenomenology, the novel rewrites his *Jealousy* in order to reveal the aesthetic and political fallacy of his project to rid language of its human meanings and describe the world *as is*, demonstrating, in no uncertain terms, Barthes' truism that 'language is never innocent'. In Brooke Rose's hands, the *enfant terrible* of French letters becomes quite the literary conservative. She flags up his ontological blindspot – the fundamental realism that underlies Robbe Grillet's epistemological tricksterism. Wheeling out an array of fantastic scientific instruments she points out the perceptual limits of Robbe-Grillet's so-called "objective literature": A 'psychoscope' penetrates Mrs Mgulu's smile to reveal narcissism or is it perhaps magnanimity in a set-piece reproduction of Robbe-Grillet's surveillance of 'A…' at her dressing table in *Jealousy*[22]. An 'oscillograph' charts the pitch of hammering, an 'electroencelograph' separates the elements of conversation into 'silence, reality and unreality'.[23]

Having cleared the decks, then, and armed with Bahktin's concept of heteroglossia, the blending of world views through language that creates a complex unity from a hybrid of utterances, together with Jakobson's structural linguistics and Saussurian semiotics, the novels that follow exploit the concept of textuality to produce *romans à clef* of discourse in which subjecthood is effaced and character reduced to the transcription of a plurivocal narrative voice that interweaves extra-literary discourses including biochemistry and astrophysics (*Out* and *Such*), foreign languages (*Between*) and finally the metalanguage of linguistics itself (*Thru*).

[21] Tom Boncza-Tomaszewski, '"Christine Brooke-Rose: The Texterminator," *Independent on Sunday*, March 27, 2005, accessed January 12, 2009, http://www.carcanet.co.uk/cgi-bin/scribe?showdoc=7;doctype=interview.
[22] Alain Robbe-Grillet, *Jealousy*, trans. Richard Howard (London: John Calder, 1959), 80 – 81.
[23] Christine Brooke-Rose, "Out," in *The Christine Brooke-Rose Omnibus* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2006), 100.

Och, the anarchic heroine of Brophy's 1969 novel, *In Transit*, declares: 'To be absolutely frank, what I should most like to resemble is a small but powerful and concentrated bomb. My ambition is to explode and shatter the rules.' Accordingly, the novel is a comic, textually labyrinthine feminist fantasy about the performativity of language. 'A cross,' comments Karen Lawrence , 'between Norman O. Brown and Luce Irigaray'[24] and an airport novel in the literal sense, it chronicles the increasingly unlikely escapades of Evelyn Hillary O'Rooley, a protagonist of uncertain gender, who decides to defer his/her flight in favour of remaining within the departure lounge's state of intransience. Euphoric at first, s/he revels in this new non-static, non-defined state of becoming:

> I was in a capsule enclaved not only in the sequence of time but in political geography. I was inhabiting an embodiment come true of such splendid notion al diplomatic entities as free ports and extraterritorial territory.[25]

However, suddenly afflicted by 'linguistic leprosy', s/he quickly discovers that extraterritoriality does not only entail the throwing off of the arbitrary limits of human self-definition, but also involves the loss of the language by which they are performatively inscribed which, thereby, results in the loss too of gender distinctions. In short, the narrator can no longer recall whether he or she is male or female, and embarks upon a quest to find out via a series of fictionalised syllogisms in which she tries on and tests parodic discourses of masculinity and femininity.

For Roland Barthes, the 'writerly' text was a text of bliss [*jouissance*], a 'happy Babel'[26] whose plurivocality no longer represents the 'confounded speech' meted out by a jealous and wrathful God. '[T]he confusion of tongues', he writes, 'is no longer a punishment; the subject gains access to bliss by the cohabitation of languages *working side by side*.'[27] And both Brooke-Rose and Brophy embrace the new paradigm of self-as-text for its playfulness, its comedy, its self-subversive qualities, for the infinite capacities of the self-as-experimental-narrative. These are, as Judy Little comments of Brooke-Rose's novels, 'voices [that] are… prepared to face an

[24] Karen Lawrence, *Penelope Voyages: Women and Travel in the British Literary Tradition* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994), 232.
[25] Brophy, *In Transit*, 26.
[26] Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 4.
[27] Ibid., italics his.

experimental future, even one where the grand narratives of "difference", origin, and (textual) authority are themselves hypothetical and simulatable.'[28]

Theirs, then, is an art of humanist affirmation, one that seeks to carve out the productive potentials of the discursively constructed self. But Quin, Ballard and Burns are rather less optimistic. Whilst Brooke Rose and Brophy sought to explore the condition of a language that is already fictional – the, as the neo-phenomenologist Shaun Gallagher writes, 'essential hermeneutical dimension of language' which is 'the one that operates "behind our backs"[29] – this trio of writers turned to the mythic speech of mass culture, replacing the affirmative ethos of Brooke Rose and Brophy's "textual production" with altogether more ambivalent strategies of *détournement,* to explore the subliminal qualities of a language that would by no means so willingly give up its ideological charge. Theirs is a Beckettian anguished acceptance, rather than ecstatic embrace, of the self as text. If Quin's first three novels chronicle their protagonists' terrible apprehension of the void, and their desperate search for oppositional spaces – the unconscious in *Berg*, for example, or the Mediterranean alternative living scene in *Passages*, even *Thre*e*'s* suicide (for the will *not to live* surely bears the trace of the transcendental ego) – then in *Tripticks* there are, no longer any hiding places.

Quin, alongside Ballard and Burns, then, sought not to create a new language, but to remake it from remnants of the old. As Quin's narrator declares in *Tripticks*: 'I had a new surge for a tired old idiom the seedbed for a psychic revolution'.[30] They choose to engage with mass culture – with lurid fascination and revulsion – over the revolutions promised by the free-floating signifier. Theirs is a more pessimistic take on textuality: morally ambiguous, ethically ambivalent and fundamentally non-utopian. In this study, I want to explore an alternative context for this "negative" tendency within the "linguistic turn", an indigenous structure of feeling that resonates more powerfully and – bearing in mind the literary-historical disjunction between these novels of the late sixties and early seventies and the theories that emerged (and then only within the academy) during the mid-to-late seventies – in a less anachronistic fashion and is signalled in Quin's own juvenilia:

[28] Judy Little, "S(t)imulating Origins: Self-subversion in the Early Brooke Rose Texts," in *Utterly Other Discourse: The Texts of Christine Brooke-Rose*, eds. Ellen G. Friedman and Richard Miller (Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 1995), 65.
[29] Shaun Gallagher, *Hermeneutics and Education* (New York, NY: SUNY Press, 1992), 328-9.
[30] Ann Quin, *Tripticks* (Champaign, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 2002), 43, hereafter to be cited within the text.

that of the "proto"-Pop attitudes that emerged in the art of fifties and early sixties in Britain. This sensibility can be seen, for example, in the work of the multidisciplinary art collective that coalesced around the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London, the self-styled "fathers of Pop", the Independent Group, and in the image-text collage that was curated within publications like *Ambit* magazine.

'Brideshead and the Tower Blocks': "Soft" Modernism at Mid-century

This radical new idiom within the visual arts in Britain had been seeded, as Isabelle Moffat notes,[31] in the civic jamboree of post-war optimism that surrounded the Festival of Britain of 1951. Bryan Appleyard, in his *The Pleasures of Peace*, argues that it was only then, with the national exhibition that sought to galvanise post-war recovery and morale, and to position Britain as a future-facing nation at the forefront of developments in science, technology, industrial design, architecture and the arts, that the 'significance of the modern was established' in Britain.[32] In America, during the post-war years at the beginnings of the Cold War, perplexed and anxious liberal commentators mobilised a reinvented version of modernism as what Alfred Kazin called 'our only real tradition'[33] to assuage America's crisis of identity and to manifest through culture a vision of renewal, rebellion and reinvigoration. Similarly, on the other side of the Atlantic, the organisers of the Festival of Britain sought to propagate a softened, and more humane version of modernism, one that was egalitarian and yet elegant, demotic and yet refined, one heavily inflected by the social thought of the period and that – like the original – had a complicated relationship to tradition. This belated embrace of "the modern" was emphatically future-oriented and technologically engaged, seeking to bridge 'the two cultures' it placed its faith in the potentials of scientific discovery to deliver its utopian dreams by transforming everyday life: in mass production to deliver plenty for the many, in the high-rise tower blocks which were later to become such a troubled and heavily-freighted symbol of the failure of this project and a monument to the wreckage of 1945, to deliver decent

[31] Isabelle Moffat, "'A horror of abstract thought': Postwar Britain and Hamilton's 1951 Growth and Form Exhibition," *October* 94 (Autumn 2000): 91

[32] Bryan Appleyard, *The Pleasures of Peace: Art and Imagination in Post-war Britain* (London: Faber & Faber, 1989), 31.

[33] Alfred Kazin, "On Modernism," *The New Republic*, January 17, 1976, 29.

and habitable housing for all. But it was also tasked with the work of nation-building, of manifesting a new, technologically-inflected incarnation of the old English metaphysic of virtue, character and heritage:

> New people thinking new thoughts could do things better than in the past. What was being celebrated at the Festival was not Imperial pomp but British ingenuity and humanity, the wonders of science and the sheer lightness of the world to come. It was an attempt to will into existence a prevailing myth, humanist and reasonable, which would sweep away the darknesses of the past and replace them with towns as picturesque as the countryside.[34]

F.R. Leavis and Franco Marinetti certainly made uneasy bedfellows. Modernism's American apologists had sought – and struggled – to reconcile their nostalgic investment in modernism's progressivism and dynamism as the fulfilment of the Enlightenment project and an ethical repugnance towards the reactionary politics of some of its principal protagonists. Such a manoeuvre, argues Peter Brooker, demanded 'extraordinary contrivance'.[35] And so too did the post-war reinvention of modernism in Britain. It was obliged to negotiate the 'ubiquitous antinomies' of this vision of the nation as both 'pragmatic *and* visionary; urban *and* rural; international *and* national, and most importantly – refined *and* popular.'[36] Whether it succeeded is another matter. The tensions within the polarity of culture that the Festival attempted to bring to a productive détente, which Patrick Wright brilliantly sums up as 'the void… between the polarized clichés of Brideshead and the tower blocks',[37] were to continue to dominate the political climate in Britain for the remainder of the twentieth century and beyond.

The Independent Group and their affiliated cadre of the fifties retained the Festival's preoccupation with the intersections between the arts, technology and mass culture, its futurity, its new understanding of contemporary life and of transformations within the discursive environment, its cultural materialist attention to the ordinary, and its quest to find an appropriate cultural and artistic idiom with which

[34] Appleyard, *Pleasures of Peace*, 31.
[35] Peter Brooker, ed., *Modernism/Postmodernism* (New York, NY: Longman, 1992), 9.
[36] Barry Curtis, "One Continuous Interwoven Story," *Block* 11 (1985-86): 51.
[37] Patrick Wright, *A Journey Through Ruins: The Last Days of London* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 132.

to reflect it. But they turned away from Brideshead, the 'great tradition' and the venerable "truths" of Britishness, and towards America to attempt to develop new representational practices that could articulate, and both celebrate and critique, the realities of life within a British consumer culture that was increasingly influenced by American values and attitudes.

'Over Here': Americanisation in Fifties Britain

In the aftermath of World War II, Britain had been irrevocably transformed from an obstinately parochial nation, clinging to the remnants of Empire, into a battered ex-world power, grievously dependent upon the Marshall Plan for economic relief, but with a new, tentatively cosmopolitan, outlook. But whilst Britain struggled to reconcile itself with its new, more modest status on the world stage, the end of rationing in 1954 heralded a consumer boom; as the lead article in a 1959 edition of *Queen* magazine devoted to the "boom... boom... boom" of the mid-fifties asked, 'when did you last hear the word austerity?'[38] Full employment and rising wages brought about a "social revolution" in which the fruits of affluence were not only confined to the upper echelons of the middle classes, 'even working class families... found themselves in Priestley's "new England" with wirelesses, television sets, cinema visits and free-flowing gas and electricity'[39]. As Harry Hopkins writes:

> From hula hoops to Zen Buddhism, from do-it-yourself to laundrettes or the latest sociological catch-phrase or typographical trick, from Rock n' Roll to Action Painting, barbecued chickens rotating on their spits in the shop windows to parking meters, clearways, bowling alleys, glass-skyscrapers, flying saucers, pay-roll raids, armoured trucks and beatniks, American habits and vogues now crossed the Atlantic with a speed and certainty that suggested Britain was just one more offshore island.[40]

[38] Jocelyn Stevens, "When Did You Last Hear the Word Austerity?" *Queen*, September 15, 1959.
[39] Dominic Sandbrook, *Never Had It So Good: A History of Britain from Suez to The Beatles* (London: Abacus, 2005), 108.
[40] Hopkins, *The New Look*, 454.

The upswing of the British economy in the affluent fifties meant booming consumer demand was met by the fruits of market revival in the United States, and the indefatigable rise of mass culture in Britain was fuelled by American cultural imports: the jukeboxes, rock and roll and paperback novels that Hoggart declaims in his virulently anti-Americanisation auto-ethnographic memoir, *The Uses of Literacy*, as 'sex in shiny packets'.[41]

These aftershocks felt in the wake of World War II only deepened pre-existing anxieties about a weakened indigenous culture that was seen in the climate of cultural protectionism that had coalesced around the 'Anglocentric turn' of the thirties and 1940s. Whilst Britain, in geopolitical terms, was felt to be in the doldrums, arriviste America was enjoying an irresistible rise. Writing of the so-called cultural consensus of the post-war era, Dick Hebdige, explores Britain's cultural antagonism towards America, identifying a set of 'ideologically charged connotational codes'[42] which were shared and understood amongst a vast number of the great and the good of the British cultural establishment:

> Groups and individuals as apparently unrelated as the British Modern Design establishment, BBC staff members, *Picture Post* and music paper journalists, critical sociologists, 'independent' cultural critics like [George] Orwell and [Richard] Hoggart, a Frankfurt-trained Marxist like [Herbert] Marcuse, even an obsessive isolationist like Evelyn Waugh, all had access to these codes.[43]

For a British school of *Kulturkritik* that remained dominated by the Culture and Society tradition of thought, the "contamination" of British culture with American values posed a grievous threat to the attempt to mobilise a narrowly construed conceptualisation of (high) 'culture' against an increasingly and inexorably barbaric 'society'. As Duncan Webster astutely identifies: 'America-as-threat goes back to the mid-nineteenth century and the reason that Americanisation is "absorbed" into the Culture and Society tradition [of British *Kulturkritik*] is because that is where the term came from'.[44]

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[41] Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy,* 247
[42] Dick Hebdige, *Hiding in the Light: On Images and Things* (London: Routledge, 1988), 71.
[43] Ibid.
[44] Duncan Webster, *Looka Yonder! The Imaginary America of Popular Culture* (London: Routledge, 1988), 183.

The perceived threat of Americanisation prompted a new investigation of human experience and culture as "lived" from the Left. Distinguished from the metaphysical inheritance model of the Eliot-Leavis orthodoxy, the nascent field of English Cultural Studies had its precedents in the "ordinary concerns" of social documentary fiction (such as the thirties novels of George Orwell and the "proletarian authors" that emerged via John Lehmann's *Penguin New Writing* series in the forties) and the Mass Observation movement of the thirties. But despite its proto-de Certeauan regard for the symbolic value of everyday life, its critique of elitist conceptualisations of culture and insistence upon broader definitions and a more expansive field of enquiry, this impulse amongst British intellectuals remained caught within the historical undertow of the sovereign tradition of British thought. The 'predominant tendency' in the work of Williams, Hoggart, Thompson et al, Francis Mulhern argues, 'has been to negate the specific social values of Kulturkritik while retaining their deep form, which it therefore repeats as the pattern of its own strategic imagination'.[45] Accordingly, their attempts to take stock of cultural change remain fraught with anti-American feeling; these more inclusive, more egalitarian theories of a 'common culture' still balk at their own fevered visions of a low-rent, chromium-plated, apple pie future.

Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy* (1957) registers this perceived threat in no uncertain terms, examining the folk devil 'juke-box boys' with their 'American slouch' listening to the nickelodeon in 'harshly lighted milk bars', playing records that 'almost all are American', who 'stare, as desperately as Humphrey Bogart, across tubular chairs.'[46] They are, Hoggart writes, 'living to a large extent in a myth world compounded of a few simple elements which they take to be those of American life': the 'modernistic knick-knacks… [and] glaring showiness' that, for him, amount to an 'aesthetic breakdown' which departs from 'a balanced and civilised [tradition]'.[47]

E.P. Thompson's *The Making of The English Working Class* (1963) sought to present the forgotten "biography" of the first working class political movement in the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century:

[45] Mulhern, *Culture/Metaculture*, xviii.
[46] Hoggart, *Uses of Literacy*, 247-8.
[47] Ibid.

> I am seeking to rescue the poor stockinger, the Luddite cropper, the "obsolete" hand-loom weaver, and even the deluded follower of Joanna Southcott, from the enormous condescension of posterity.[48]

Thompson sought to formulate class as a dynamic 'historical phenomenon',[49] not a static concept but a structure of human relationships. Since the English working classes have never made a bid for dominance, Thompson is forced to 'make visible' a tradition of dissent from a rebellious popular cultural tradition – from Jacobian agitation, the syndicalised workers groups of the Industrial Revolution, plebian Radicalism, the rioting Luddites and the "heroic" articulation of class consciousness at the end of the Napoleonic Wars. For him, popular culture is the manifestation of class consciousness. It is transmitted not from above via an élite, or a literary intelligentsia, but, as he argues in his later work, *Customs and Culture* (1991), via the 'slowly differentiating ambiance of custom'.[50] Just as Hoggart mourns the passing of an authentic popular culture eroded by the mass culture of the post-war era, Thompson's reading of its tradition of dissent is an attempt to galvanise its vital, rebellious spirit and present a historicised opposition to this new cultural hegemony.

Raymond Williams' materialist approach to mass culture is more permissive. His thesis, developed in a triad of books – *Culture and Society* (1958), *The Long Revolution* (1961) and *Marxism and Literature* (1977) – argues for a sense of continuity in culture. As defined in *The Long Revolution*, this is the attempt to track the 'meanings and values which are lived in works and relationships' through the process of historical development.[51] He seeks to undermine the 'bad fiction of our second-rate social analysts', whose 'ritual indignation and despair at the cultural condition of "the masses" replicates the structures of domination they are attempting to analyse. Williams emphasises the social forces embedded in the concept:

> The version of the ordinary people as masses is not only the conscious creation of the élites (who work very hard at it, by the way). It is also a

[48] E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Penguin, 1980), 12.
[49] Ibid., 9.
[50] E.P. Thompson, *Customs and Culture* (London: Merlin Press, 1991), 8.
[51] Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965), 319.

> conclusion from actual experience within the forms of a society which requires the existence of masses.[52]

As such, he removes the distinction between popular "folk" culture and the mass culture of the contemporary scene, tracing the changing manifestations of a tradition of popular culture from the "rough music" of the seventeenth century to the mass-produced entertainments of the mid-twentieth century as a product of social change rather than an index of cultural decline. He refutes the passivity and manipulation implicit in an ahistorical concept of mass culture. Under capitalism the cultural system may be in the hands of cowboy speculators but – as he reminds us – it is we who bankroll it.[53] He insists that mass culture must be understood in these terms, legitimised as a cultural manifestation of social change with human dimensions, rather than condemned as the ahistorical imposition of capitalism's "invisible hands". Culture, for Williams, is a 'whole way of life'. As he writes in his 1958 essay, "Culture is Ordinary", maintaining the distinction between high and low constitutes an 'extraordinary decision to call certain things culture and then separate them, as with a park wall, from ordinary people and ordinary work'.[54]

But as Hoggart's nightmare vision of jukebox Britain indicates, what tends to be at issue in these accounts is not simply the perceived threat of an American cultural imperialism but more a moral panic about the willingness with which the rebellious youth of the new mass working-class teenage market eschewed the 'peculiar gripping wholeness' of a working class life bounded by hearth and lathe in favour of the 'shiny barbarism' of a appropriated and re-inscribed American mythology. And here lie the 'deep forms' of which Mulhern writes. What the debates about mass culture and Americanisation that emanated from the Birmingham School with one hand give – their insistence upon an understanding of mass culture as a series of complex interrelations which comprise of 'whole way of life', lending credence and legitimacy to the new mass culture – they, with the other, take away. By tacitly relying upon the quasi-mythical programme of betterment-by-Bildung, Hoggart, Williams et al. fail to theoretically interrogate the ways in which that culture is disseminated, effectively re-imposing the old hierarchies and value judgements.

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[52] Ibid., 379.
[53] Ibid., 366-7.
[54] Raymond Williams, "Culture is Ordinary," in *The Raymond Williams Reader*, ed. John Higgins (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 12.

In fact, an imagined community of wholeness and harmony – national culture, heritage and authentic "Englishness" – was being imperilled by far more diffuse forces. America had a lot to answer for. But its elevation as an icon of modernity indicates not so much the confidence and vitality of American culture, but the perhaps terminal decline of Britain's own. As Dominic Sandbrook points out in his history of the period, *Never Had It So Good*, critics were 'really arguing about the changing values of the affluent society rather than about Americans and American products themselves'.[55] The old shibboleth of Americanisation was made to stand for a vast repertoire of the era's most pressing concerns, including massification, generational conflict, technological advance and social mobility. A moral panic about what Christopher Brooker in his *The Neophiliacs* describes as a 'new, more fluid, and dare one say it, more neurotic social structure in which no-one any longer knew with quite such certainty who or where they stood all the familiar landmarks were being eroded, nothing any longer seemed to be quite so real'.[56] George Steiner mourns the distintegration of the 'hierarchised, definitional value-gradients' upon which 'civilisation itself' was based.[57] Perhaps, commentators seemed to be suggesting at the time, the Leavis-Eliot orthodoxy, with their fears of the collapse of the citadels of "good culture" against which they had asserted a moral aesthetic, had been right after all.

For its compelling sense of novelty and its egalitarian vitality, this 'new classless Americanized world of Wimpy bars, coffee-bars, television, mini-motors, pre-packaged food, ice-skating, Marks and Spencers, Vespas and airport lounges' described by Anthony Sampson in his 1962 *Anatomy of Britain* was embraced by many.[58] What Hoggart derided as a 'candy floss world' represented for downtrodden Britons a thrilling alternative to fossilised and yet still pervasive establishmentarian attitudes, cultural conservatism and the stiff upper lip. As Alan Sinfield writes, 'if "Americanization" was indeed cultural imperialism, it was also… a mode of resistance.'[59] By the youth of the fifties, 'a fantasy image of US cultural power' was

[55] Dominic Sandbrook, *Never Had It So Good: A History of Britain from Suez to The Beatles* (London: Abacus, 2005), 136.
[56] Christopher Booker, *The Neophiliacs: The Revolution in English Life in the Fifties and Sixties* (London: Pimlico, 1992), 289-9.
[57] George Steiner, cited in David Ellwood, *The Shock of America: Europe and the Challenge of the Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 431.
[58] Sampson, *Anatomy of Britain*,199.
[59] Sinfield, *Postwar Britain*, 156.

deployed 'against a home situation that offered them little'.[60] And it was beginning to be theorised similarly by the cultural commentators of the period. Even whilst the culture wars continued to rage, there began to emerge what Susan Sontag, in her seminal 1965 essay of the same name, called 'the new sensibility'; an approach to culture that was devoutly pluralistic and anti-elitist, one that has 'broken… with the Matthew Arnold notion of culture, finding it historically and humanly obsolescent' and no longer 'demand[s] that pleasure in art necessarily be associated with edification', that can experience a Rauschenberg painting, a song by the Supremes, the 'brio and elegance of Budd Boetticher's *The Rise and Fall of Legs Diamond*' and the 'singing style of Dionne Warwick' equally and 'without condescension' as alike in richness and in value.[61] The 'new sensibility' began to discard the hitherto unchallenged Greenbergian view of "kitsch" and to engage affirmatively with mass culture, attempting to do away with the old distinctions between "high" and "low, "popular" and "mass", along with the intellectual's traditional antipathy towards technology, whilst navigating the legacies of modernism. America, or rather, Amerika provided writers and artists with the material – often quite literally – with which to do so. Within the cultural landscape of the fifties and sixties in Britain, these 'hysterical constructions of America as "enemy", Dick Hebdige argues, represented 'a repressed, potentially fertile realm invoked against the grain' where between "official" and "unofficial" taste formations' transgressive and potentially oppositional meanings could be articulated in a 'productive clash of opposing forces'.[62] The writers affiliated with the Independent Group like Hebdige and Lawrence Alloway credit the IG with effecting a paradigmatic shift in notions of cultural hierarchy. In a 1958 essay Alloway coined the important term the 'long front of culture' to describe a continuum between high and mass art wherein 'unique oil paintings' sit comfortably beside 'mass-distributed magazines' and 'highly personal poems' alongside 'group-aimed magazines'.[63]

Reactivating a radical (and largely continental) artistic heritage that included Surrealism's signature juxtapositions, its use of *objets trouvés* and its investigations into the unconscious, Dadaism's elevation of the aleatory and anti-art rejection of

[60] Ibid.
[61] Susan Sontag, "One Culture and the New Sensibility," in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (London: Penguin, 2013), 299.
[62] Hebdige, *Hiding in the Light*, 128.
[63] Lawrence Alloway, "The Long Front of Culture," *Cambridge Opinion* 17 (1959): 11

traditional notions of aesthetic value, Cubism's interest in collage forms and multi-perspectivity and Futurism's preoccupation with the machine aesthetic, speed and technological revolution, and enmeshing it with the Freudo-Marxist thought of the period, they sought to develop a new, demotic artistic vernacular that would constitute – as the Independent Group entitled their inaugural exhibition at the ICA in 1953 – a 'parallel of life and art', a new form of artistic attention that was capable at once of *articulating* the new ways of contemporary life and of *penetrating* its "forest of signs" to expose mass culture's hidden interior logics. This alternative paradigm of dissident thinking came in reaction against the traditions of thought that still continued, in modified forms, to dominate the intellectual climate of the post-war so-called consensus: the perceived impoverishment of the ideals of the Culture and Society tradition, with its "moral aesthetic", its ethos of "commitment", its overtly egalitarian attitudes and yet persistently-held demarcations between high and low culture, welfare culture's paternalistically well-intended but complacently mandarin values, hands tied by its betrothal to both the state and the Oxbridge axis, and its attempts to dole out the castor oil of "good culture".

In what follows, by exploring Quin's *Tripticks*, and its resonances within the literature and art of the period, I want to examine the ways in which the writers and artists of this tendency turned to an Amerikan dreamscape in order to speculate upon a new role for art in a mass media age. One that did not so much represent a radical break from earlier forms of representation as a transformation of them. And, in doing so, I want to argue that these British experimental writers of the sixties were not so much legatees of thinkers like the Tel Quel group, Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida and Julia Kristeva, but co-explorers in parallel – although, significantly through fiction rather than theory – of shared but differently concieved literary-philosophical preoccupations with language that also animated Situationism's critique of the mass media "spectacle" of advanced capitalism, for example, and *Tel Quel*'s epistemological interrogation of the sign system.

By comparison to the critiques of mass culture that were emerging from Frankfurt, Berkeley and Paris during the period, British intellectual culture's own attempts at resistance seem rather parochial. Freudo-Marxism, the attempt to synthesise a reinterpretation of Freudian psychoanalytic theory with the political philosophy of Marx, was begun by Frankfurt School thinkers like Adorno, Marcuse and Habermas and dispersed mostly to the United States following the rise of Nazism in Europe. Following a bizarre but highly influential detour via Wilhelm Reich's cloud-busting orgasmatrons in the thirties and forties, in the fifties, it become popularised in the U.S. with books like Herbert Marcuse's *Eros and Civilisation* (1955), Norman O. Brown's *Life Against Death* (1959) and Michel Foucault's *Madness and Civilisation* (1964). This group of critical theorists sought to supplement the socio-economic analysis of historical development with Freud's conceptualisation of the dynamic unconscious, and by drawing together the theory and methodology of Marxism with a psychoanalytic account of the self and of human motivation, to attempt to explain the appeal of political and capitalist authoritarianism. And, elaborating upon Adorno and Horkeimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947), whose hermetic logic of co-optation, commodification and absorption had led to stalemate, these thinkers sought to plot routes of resistance by exploring the interaction between the individual and society: the ways in which capitalism imposes its norms upon its subjects and how these norms are introjected by the intra-psychic mechanism described by Freud's schema.

Herbert Marcuse, like Adorno and Horkheimer, identifies the inherent contradictions within this stage of capitalism and his *One-Dimensional Man* (1964) attempts to uncover its potentials, as well as the system's efforts to close these loopholes:

> The technological processes of mechanization and standardization might release individual energy into a yet uncharted realm of freedom beyond necessity... the individual would be free to exert autonomy over a life that would be his own. If the productive apparatus could be organized and directed toward the satisfaction of vital needs, its control might well be

centralized; such control would not prevent individual autonomy, but render it possible.[64]

Since, Marcuse argues, the logical end-point of 'technological rationality'[65] would be its own destruction, the established order must perpetuate the system via the 'manipulation of needs by vested interests'.[66] Theodor Roszak calls this the 'technocracy', defining it as the 'social form in which an industrial society reaches the peak of its organizational integration'.[67] The aim of the technocracy is 'human organization that matches the precision of our mechanistic organization', a process of 'social engineering' that ensures its perpetuation and the elimination of opposition to the system. Order is imposed from above, via a 'regime of experts'[68] who 'assume authoritarian influence over even the most seemingly personal aspects of life: sexual behaviour, child-rearing, and mental health'. [69]

Behaviourism, a branch of experimental psychology that had emerged between the wars, for its attempts to discover and codify techniques for controlling human behaviour, was perceived to have spawned a monster. This was the applied social science of what became known pejoratively as the "technocracy" and the beginnings of the "quanitifed self" where, in an age of Dr. Spock, Alfred Kinsey and Anna Freud's ego psychology, state and corporate institutions employed social scientists – psychiatrists, anthropologists and sociologists – to investigate, and to monetise, the libidinally-directed motivations of the individual self and sought to expand these models of human desire into a schema of mass psychology. Amongst commentators, the fate of the individual was felt to be that of a maze-bound rat, covertly and insidiously coerced and manipulated by secret armies of malign execs, shadowy bureaucrats and sinister lab-coated experts. The cognitive revolution rapidly augmented behaviourist techniques with computational models of the mind. Psychometric testing, the quantification of human behaviour, was designed to adapt the population to the demands of the new corporate life.

64 Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man* (London: Routledge, 1991), 2.
65 Ibid.
66 Ibid., 3.
67 Ibid., 5.
68 Theodore Roszak, *The Making of a Counter Culture: Reflections on the Technocratic Society & Its Youthful Opposition* (London: Faber, 1973), 9.
69 Ibid., 7.

The archetypal figure of the era was that which William H. Whyte christened the "organization man", in his eponymous book which appeared in 1956 and which was just one of a raft of industrial sociology bestsellers that took as their subject matter the newly-ubiquitous 'man in the gray flannel suit'. Whyte argues convincingly that throughout the western world, but especially in America, new models of bureaucratic collectivism have quietly displaced the myths of rugged individualism that had characterised capitalism's earlier phase. A new secular faith in a "social ethic", which located meaning in what Whyte calls "belongingness", pursues, via the application of scientific rationality, its belief in the capacity of "organization" to deploy the techniques of science in order to eliminate conflict in human relationships and to create harmony and equilibrium in the relationship between the individual and society.[70] Suburbia, the large corporation, the Myers-Briggs Type indicator, the new class of middle management were all the stuff of the "organization life". Avatars of the period can be found, for example, in B.S. Johnson's penultimate novel, *Christie Malry's Own Double Entry* (1973), or in John Berger's *Corker's Freedom* (1964). Johnson's novel is a black farce of technocratic ennui, which chronicles a young accounts clerk's petty grievances and frustrations and his attempts to claim a kind of existential recompense for the personal injustices enacted upon him by using the organisation systems of the technocracy against itself. He operates a system of moral double entry book-keeping, keeping a balance sheet of wrongs and rights and claiming his debts via bigger and bigger terrorist atrocities. The novel ends, after Malry contracts cancer and dies, with the words "Account Closed". *Corker's Freedom*, a diminished mirror image of Joyce's *Ulysses*, is set over the course of a day and describes the attempts by its protagonist, the septuagenarian proprietor of a down-at-heel Croydon employment agency, William Corker, to seize his freedom and escape the banality of his white-collar life.

During the era, the behaviourist's attempts to make materialist interventions in the mind were extended by new methods of "motivation research" which sought to probe the consumer unconscious: their fantasies and their desires. This new phase in consumer capitalism came first to the affluent America of the post-war era. Despite Americans' increasing disposable incomes due to the post-war market revival, market researchers were stumped by the inability of market forces to fully

[70] William H. Whyte, *The Organization Man* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), 29.

exploit consumer wants. Marketing underwent a "revolution", shifting its focus from satisfying consumer needs to mobilising their libidinal desires. Surveys of the time began to debunk the old assumption of the traditional 'nose-counting'[71] school of marketing: that the consumer knows what they want, that they can be trusted to tell you the truth about those wants and that the consumer will behave rationally, that they make economic decision based upon "perfect knowledge".[72] The new figure of the consumer in the fifties was capricious, emotional, unreasonable and irrationally-motivated. In response, marketeers employed new methods of 'motivation research', using 'depth research' to attempt to probe the unconscious. As the founder of the Institute for Motivation Research, Ernest Dichter explains, in his *The Strategy of Desire* (1960):

> Whatever your attitude toward modern psychology or psychoanalysis, it has been proved beyond any doubt that many of our daily decisions are governed by motivations over which we have no control and of which we are quite often unaware.[73]

These new findings were employed by the advertising industry to direct and to influence consumer motivation by encouraging the desublimation of libidinal desires into economic wants. Edward Bernays, an Austrian émigré and Freud's nephew, had combined his uncle's psychoanalysis, together with the theories of crowd psychology developed by psychologists such as Gustave Le Bon and Wilfred Trotter, to found the public relations industry, opening his consultancy in New York in 1919. Bernays argues that the 'conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organized habits and opinions of the masses is an important element in democratic society',[74] and not only in the commercial sphere, but also in that of politics and social life. The chaos of mass society, where the very scale of human experience was undergoing seismic shifts, he argued, could and should be tamed through the application of new scientific techniques to categorise and organise the masses and the use of new technological media of communication to direct human motivation.

[71] Vance Packard, *The Hidden Persuaders* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981), 17.
[72] Ibid., 18-19.
[73] Ibid., 12.
[74] Edward Bernays, *Propaganda* (New York, NY: Horace Liveright, 1928), 9.

Bernays famously called this the 'engineering of consent'. Implicit here is, on the one hand, the distrust of the "irrational" subject and the "herd instinct" of mass society and, on the other, a belief in capitalism's inherent benevolence. Both Bernays and Dichter characterise the hegemony of the dominant order as a fundamentally benign, paternal elite who are motivated by 'socially constructive goals and values' with the aim of a 'smooth-running society'.[75] Social engineering, they argue, is the 'very essence of the democratic process, the freedom to persuade and suggest'.[76] Although Bernays admits his methods are open to misuse, for him the onus is on a supervisory elite to master the 'operational know-how of consent engineering, and to out-manoeuvre his opponents in the public interest'.[77] The unimpeachable cultural value of "expertise" has replaced that of "ethics". Under paternal supervision, he argues, the masses could enjoy the spoils of consumer capitalism, unfettered by their own ignorance and irrationality.

Another key avatar of the period was Herbert Marcuse's "one-dimensional man" whose individual capacity for critical thought and dissent has withered away. Marcuse describes how in advanced industrial societies, individuals are integrated into existing systems of production and consumption via mass media, advertising and industrial management, which work to erode the ego and to impose upon man a reality principle of false consciousness. Synthesising Marx and Freud to examine the pathologising effects of consumer capitalism upon what he called the 'neurotic personality of our time', in *Eros and Civilisation* (1955), and later in *One Dimensional Man*, Marcuse explains how technological reality works to impose a Reality Principle of false consciousness, then disarms the instinctual revolt via 'controlled desublimation'[78] of instinctual drives: the 'scientific management of libido'.[79] Distinguished from sublimation, which is the transformation of libido into socially productive forces, for Marcuse the desublimation effected by consumer culture is repressive. It reconfigures the subject as consumer and redirects their libido from the tabooed object of desire onto a phantom object, the commodity, that bears the trace of that taboo. Marcuse argues that this process erodes the Ego. The technocracy produces a new form of "introjection", not in the Freudian sense of the Ego's

[75] Edward Bernays, "The Engineering of Consent," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 250 (March 1947), 114.
[76] Ibid.
[77] Ibid., 113.
[78] Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man* (London: Routledge, 1991), 77.
[79] Ibid.

continual adjustment via the Reality Principle, but as a mimetic process that constitutes the 'immediate identification of the individual with *his* society, and, through with, with the society as a whole'.[80]

A Parallel of Life and Art

It was to this new, subliminal quality of culture that the art of the fifties and sixties in Britain turned. The Independent Group were a loose agglomeration of artists, architects, designers, critics and theorists working in and around the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London during the fifties. As an art practice, what Anne Massey calls their 'expendable aesthetic' was wildly diverse, both within the group and within the artists' own oeuvres. When Eduardo Paolozzi began exhibiting his scrapbooked mass media collages, he was perhaps best known for his sculptures in bronze which are extraterrestrial relics that combine biomorphic and mechanical forms. Nigel Henderson produced social documentary photography after Brassai, depicting the decay of post-war Britain alongside new advertising hoardings and shopfronts, as well as artificially-distressed photomontage in which petrified images of the body sit alongside microscopic photographs and advertisements. Richard Hamilton, though better known for his collage works – especially "Just what is it that makes today's homes so different, so appealing" - produced the early series "Trainsition" which married the painterly impulse of Abstract Expressionism and the dynamism of Futurism to create paintings that explore mechanisation. The early Constructivist collages of John McHale are specifically designed for mass production, a maquette of neutral forms designed for self-assembly. Later he produced collaged books, headlines and news and advertising photographs cut into bound strips to be read in any order, then collage paintings of the 'media-fed man',[81] primitivist figures composed of mass media, microscopic and architectural imagery. Architects Alison and Peter Smithson were the founders of the Brutalist style of architecture that challenged the prevalent "soft Modernism" of the fifties. They conjoin architectural draughtsmanship and collage to create blueprints for the city of

[80] Ibid.
[81] Robert Freeman, "The Human Image," in *The Independent Group: Post-war Britain and the Aesthetics of Plenty*, ed. David Robbins (Institute of Contemporary Arts: London, 1990), 87.

the future, a sociologically-engaged urbanism that sought to explore the impact of mass media on the cityscape. In their (unsuccessful) proposal for the Golden Lane housing complex in London, the figures of Joe DiMaggio and Marilyn Monroe are embedded in rapidograph plan.

Perhaps most exemplary of their new strategies of representation is Paolozzi's *Bunk* (1972) series, comprised of scrapbooked pages of images he had collected during the forties and fifties. In the series, images of consumer durables – tinned food, wireless sets, kitchen appliances, motorbikes, cars – are collaged cheek-by-jowl with those of starlets, beauty queens, models and bodybuilders. In the most famous, "I Was a Rich Man's Plaything" - credited with the first appearance of the word "pop" - the cover of pulp magazine *Intimate Confessions*, with its stylised portrait of a vamp in lingerie and salacious cover headlines ("I Confess", "If this be Sin") is decoupaged with a cartoon pop gun, an illustration of cherry pie and a torn section from an orange juice advertisement which reads "Real Gold". This sits alongside a jingoistic postcard ("Keep 'Em Flying") of a bomber aircraft and a section of a Coca Cola advertisement.

These artists, then, sought to disembowel mass culture's iconography to reveal the hidden ideologies at work behind mythic structures. Arising from the same moment, in *Mythologies* (1957), Barthes attempted to develop a structural analysis of the communications patterns of the mass media. Modern myth, he argues, is a second order semiological system imposed on the sign. It converts the sign into an 'empty, parasitical form'[82] that liquidates the plurality of *meaning* in favour of *concept* to be appropriated, 'confused, made of yielding, shapeless associations'.[83] Myth 'transforms history into nature',[84] and with this creates a world of essences where meaning is immanent. By scrambling the mass media's coded messages of sex, consumerism, violence and power, *Bunk* debunks their "naturalness", drawing attention to the means of their construction, to the latent machinations of the culture industry by which cars are indelibly associated with virility, lipsticks with sex, their, as Hebdige writes, 'loaded arbitrariness'.[85] They expose what Julian Myers calls the 'distorted logic of fetishism'[86] that is operant upon mass culture's visual imagination.

[82] Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (London: Vintage, 2000), 117.
[83] Ibid., 119.
[84] Ibid., 129.
[85] Hebdige, *Hiding in the Light*, 126.
[86] Julian Myers, "The Future as Fetish," *October* 94 (Autumn 2000): 67.

And by detourning the cultural industry's mythology with the logic of fetish, this 'popular art remade according to private fantasy'[87] reveals the scaffolding of desublimation.

On the one hand, the Independent Group's subversion of the messages of mass culture sought to reveal the ways in which the culture industry had moved to reinvent the commodity value of objects, endowing them with the mythic capabilities of fulfilling even our most private desires. Marx had argued that the alienation of the worker from the product of his labour had produced the commodity fetish, whereby objects are desired for the exchange value over and above their use value: 'a definite social relation between men… assumes the fantastic form of a relation between things.' But as thinkers like Marcuse and Adorno argue, by this later period, the social processes (what Adorno calls the object's 'social rating') by which we assign value to things had now inhered within the object as its quasi-essential properties. Julian Myers argues that the IG's work is a kind of 'politicized fetishism'[88] that affirmatively engages with mass culture to produce a 'capitalist surrealism'[89] that 'rewrote postwar capitalist technoculture as a bizarre, dysfunctional circus, martial seriousness as pornographic compulsion'.[90] As the IG's Richard Hamilton writes in 1962, 'sex is everywhere, symbolized in the glamour of mass-produced luxury – the interplay of fleshy plastic and smooth, fleshier metal'.[91] And, on the other, they sought to examine the processes of aesthetic production in mass culture, the ways in which value is similarly assigned to the work of art, despite it being traditionally held to be metaphysically removed from the machinations of the culture industry by its privileged status. By reversing the process which Walter Benjamin describes in his "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", whereby an 'aura' inheres as a ritual value within unique works of art that is absent in their mere reproduction, the Independent Group sought to question the role of art in an age where, as John Berger argues, in an oft-quoted passage of his landmark *Ways of Seeing*: '[f]or the first time ever, images of art have become ephemeral, ubiquitous, insubstantial, available, valueless, free'.[92] For if – as Adorno argues – the significance of the work of art is defined as its exchange-value and therefore it is 'valuable only to the extent

[87] Ibid., 68.
[88] Ibid., 88.
[89] Ibid.
[90] Ibid.
[91] Richard Hamilton, *Collected Words* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1982), 32.
[92] John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin, 2002), 89.

that it can be exchanged',[93] then what is it that distinguishes that which is art from that which is not?

In 1967, prose editor J.G. Ballard recruited Paolozzi to join *Ambit*, a quarterly "little magazine" with the same set of preoccupations – modernism, mass culture and technology – as the Independent Group. Under the editorship of paediatrician Dr. Martin Bax, *Ambit* sought to erase the boundaries and hierarchies between image and text, publishing word art and visual fiction alongside short stories, poems, criticism, graphic design, illustration and photomontage. For Paolozzi, the magazine was the ideal medium to explore this matrix of interests. Marshall McLuhan agreed, noting the upsurge in magazines like *Time* and *Newsweek* and the format's mimicry of television's 'mosaic format' in his *Understanding Media* (1964). With the advent of TV, the old, linear pictoral world has been replaced by mosaic imagery, a 'trend towards the iconic image'[94] which replaces the consumer image of a product with 'compressed images that include producer and consumer, seller and society in a single image'.[95] Television's new mosaic image, according to McLuhan, has its precedent in the symbolist techniques of modernism – those of Mallarmé, Eliot, Pound and Joyce. The mosaic is a constellation of synecdochic images, where signification is achieved through juxtaposition. The mesh of fragments must be welded together by the viewer to complete the image. In relying on surrogates, the mosaic image of the magazine, or of television, is a 'cool medium' that 'invites maximal participation in the social process'.[96] Yet again, mass culture has a subliminal, coercive quality, as McLuhan writes:

> By requiring us to constantly fill in the spaces of the mosaic mesh, the iconoscope is tattooing its message directly on our skins.[97]

Ambit co-opted the medium, producing its own mosaic images to subvert the linearity and consequentiality of print media towards the discontinuity of the electronic universe in order to probe the ways in which media "massages" consciousness.

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[93] Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 158.
[94] Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994), 227.
[95] Ibid.
[96] Ibid.
[97] Marshall McLuhan, quoted in "The Playboy Interview: Marshall McLuhan," *Playboy*, March 1969, 37.

'Noses Pressed Against the Glass'

The preoccupation with Americana in the art of the fifties and sixties was criticised at the time for its lurid fascination with American culture, which was perceived by some critics as a thoroughly uncritical (in fact, anti-critical) and un-dialectical infatuation that amounted in a disingenuous collusion with the very worst of the culture industry. What later became known as "Pop" was simply, John Adkins Richardson writes, a 'revelation of the obvious', with tiredly satiric designs upon the straw man of American culture. In subsequent critical surveys of the period, Pop has been credited and denigrated in turn for opening up the floodgates of postmodernism. Now, when postmodernism's discourse of aesthetic inclusiveness is increasingly thought to militate against the singularity and difference of cultural forms that it purports to permit and, worse, there is the suspicion that its ability to recuperate all-comers masks its absconding from the political sphere and its ideological collusion with the status quo, Pop's camp refusal to differentiate looks like hubris. Its most abiding legacy seems to be the commercially ubiquitous Pop aesthetic and the priceless and endlessly reproduced Andy Warhol screen prints, and the ethics of this movement's attempts to co-opt the co-opted co-option seem more difficult to locate than ever.

Within the culture industry's complex and insidious economies of desire, this tendency within the art of the fifties and sixties played the markets. These artists sought to draw out the latent erotic qualities of mass culture by détourning the visual grammars of advertising and the mass media to reveal the hidden economies of desire that lay behind the billboards. But also, and in equal measure, by – quite literally – reframing the detritus of mass culture within a new, fine art context, they sought to dismantle the 'vertical fallacy'[98] of cultural hierarchy. And beyond the debates about their collusion (or otherwise) with mass culture, this essential ambivalence sought to circumnavigate the fundamental Adornian impasse within Western thought that failed to match its ideals with praxis. The old hopes, for example, of transcendence in art which were only ever open to a self-perpetuating dynastical elite. The "disinterested pleasure" of Kantian aesthetic judgement would wash its hands of the new mass art, failing, on the one hand, to acknowledge its

[98] John McHale, "The Future of Art and Mass Culture," *Leonardo* 12, no. 1 (Winter 1979): 60.

aesthetic value and generative possibilities, and, on the other, to interrogate its significance. As Alison and Peter Smithson write:

> Today we are being edged out of our traditional role by the new phenomenon of the popular arts – advertising… We must somehow get the measure of this intervention if we are to match its powerful and exciting impulses with our own.[99]

Marcuse argues that 'the progress of technological rationality is liquidating the oppositional and transcendent elements in the "higher culture"',[100] and not by the shifting of cultural values – as the apologists for mass culture celebrate – but via mechanical reproduction and dissemination, 'through their wholesale incorporation into the established order, through their production and display on a massive scale'.[101] The totality of the culture industry subsumes all, in a 'stereotyped appropriation of everything'.[102] Mass culture is, for Adorno, the ultimate stylist. It strives for a 'prearranged harmony'[103] where 'the formula replaces the work'[104] to create a caricature of style. This is style as imposition, with its regularity and predictability it is an expression of social power. When the culture industry works to effect an immediate identification of the individual with society, as manifested in the romance between consumer and product, purity of style becomes a form of domination:

> From every sound film and every broadcast program the social effect can be inferred which is exclusive to none but shared by all alike. The culture industry as a whole has molded men as a type unfailingly produced in every product.[105]

[99] Alison and Peter Smithson, "But Today We Collect Ads," *Ark*, November 1956, reprinted in Stephen Madoff, ed. *Pop Art: A Critical History* (London: University of California Press, 2002), 3.
[100] Herbert Marcuse, *One Dimensional Society* (London: Routledge, 1991), 56.
[101] Ibid., 57.
[102] Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 127.
[103] Ibid., 126.
[104] Ibid.
[105] Ibid., 127.

Maverick deviations are regarded as 'calculated mutations' which 'confirm the validity of the system'.[106] In this sense, the 'parallel of life and art' constitutes the potential for resistance. As the machinations of the culture industry work to liquidate the high culture's ideals, their avant-garde position is valorised. Their affirmative engagement with mass culture co-opts, détournes, and – in William Burrough's terms – "sprays back" its non-Aristotelian logic. Though they remain politically ambiguous, in refuting the totalising impulses of mass culture, of nineteenth-century bourgeois art, and of a modernist legacy haunted by nostalgia for totality, they mark out a separate space within which art – and literature – might operate.

'Adventure Lies Ahead': British experimental writing and 'naïve mimesis'

> But it is quite beyond doubt that the development of writing will not be indefinitely bound by the claims to power of academic and commercial activity; rather, quantity is approaching the moment of a qualitative leap when writing, advancing ever more deeply into the graphic regions of its new eccentric figurativeness will take sudden possession of adequate factual content. In this picture writing, poets, who will now as in earlier times be first and foremost experts in writing, will be able to participate only by mastering the fields in which (quite unobtrusively) it is being constructed: the statistical and technical diagram.[107]

Walter Benjamin speculates on the future of the book in the age of mass media, when print is 'subjected to the brutal heteronomies of economic chaos',[108] torn from its 'refuge in the book' to be 'dragged out on the street in advertisements'.[109] He foresees a 'qualitative leap' when the old disputes between high and low culture will be laid aside, and poetry will begin to co-opt and master the new techniques of advertising to assert its primacy in the construction of 'picture writing'.[110] He was not alone in recognising the potentials of technological mass media for literature. George

[106] Ibid.
[107] Walter Benjamin, "Attested Auditor of Books," in *One Way Street* (London: Verso, 1997), 78.
[108] Ibid., 76.
[109] Ibid., 77.
[110] Ibid.

Steiner speculates that 'the "textual" character of our writing' and the 'private library may soon be archaic and increasingly "luxurious" modes' and '[p]rivacies of perception… may be lost' but in equal measure remains tentatively optimistic about 'the excitement, the sense of discovery, being registered by those who can make sentences dance and change on the screen'.[111] Amongst literary intellectuals of the sixties, visions of technological apocalypse were tempered by the recognition of its generative possibilities. Technology presented the opportunity to step out of a literary history that was a process of hierarchical displacement organised around experimentation and cliché and to widen the remit of art. As William Burroughs writes in "The Future of the Novel":

> If writers are to travel in space time and explore areas opened up by the space age, i [*sic*] think they must develope [*sic*] techniques quite as new and definite as the techniques of physical space travel.[112]

By no means convinced that "another world is possible", that the new, textual world might, whilst demolishing our long-held notions about truth, meaning and identity, also furnish us with radical new life-strategies with which to navigate these new ways of living, writers like Quin, Ballard and Burns choose to accept their status as the hyper-mediated denizens of Guy Debord's 'society of the spectacle'. Their work occupies, as Roger Luckhurst has written, that uneasy 'knife edge of complicity and critique'.[113] As a kind of neo-avant-garde writing with a sophisticated awareness of the problems of co-optation, commodification and absorption, this mode of writing is altogether less assured about the radical potential and political efficacy of the project of interrogating language's foundational structures. The attempt to sublate life and art here has a more modest remit. These writers chose to engage with mass culture not to plot paths of resistance but, on the one hand, to develop new, neo-realist strategies of representation. For if the hyper-mediated experience of contemporary life is already *beyond belief*, if the truth is already stranger than fiction, then the fiction could at least evolve better and more perceptive ways in which to

[111] George Steiner, introduction to *Language and Silence: Essays on Language, Literature and the Inhuman* (London: Faber & Faber, 2010), xviii.
[112] William Burroughs, "The Future of the Novel," *The Transatlantic Review* 11 (Winter 1962): 35.
[113] Roger Luckhurst, *The Angle Between Two Walls: The Fiction of J.G. Ballard* (London: St. Martin's Press, 1997), 57.

capture that experience. And, on the other hand, by doing violence to an already degraded language and by disembowelling mass culture's iconography, these novels problematize the hierarchical positioning of art and mass culture. For Quin, Ballard, Burns and others, mass culture is a rich and legitimate source of generative material. Finding a literary idiom that demonstrates an awareness of the materiality of language, of the visual, rather than textual, imagination of the mediatised subject and of the book as a physical object, in works such as Quin's *Tripticks*, as well as, for example, Burns' *Dreamerika!* and Ballard's *The Atrocity Exhibition*, these writers speculate upon what the new, non-redemptive role of art might be.

Amongst their effects, British literary cut/up employed the disruption of syntax via the welding of embedded narratives; the use of ideogrammatic devices that make page layout representational (such as listing, subtitles, the epistolary format) and the incorporation of facsimile found graphic-typographic elements within the page (such as newspaper headlines, illustrations or photographs). The first does not disrupt the weave of the text, in fact it employs the conventional linearity of narrative to catalyse its strange juxtapositions. The latter two, however, are examples of what Glyn White calls 'graphic devices'.[114] In the introduction to his study of their effects, *Reading the Graphic Surface*, White argues that the use of such devices is not merely an instance of Shklovskian defamiliarisation, used – as Brian McHale's *Postmodernist Fiction* argues – to foreground the presence of the book as object. Instead, he argues that 'such disruptions *may* be the result of efforts to make the text function in a *more* mimetic manner'.[115] All three maintain the status of the book, not attempting to climb out of its consecutive, bound pages, but, like *Ambit* magazine, putting the medium to work. White, borrowing Christine Brooke-Rose's term, calls this overturning of literary convention 'naïve mimesis'.[116] As Brooke-Rose explains elsewhere:

[114] Glyn White, *Reading the Graphic Surface: The Presence of the Book in Prose Fiction* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), 21.
[115] Ibid, italics his.
[116] White includes Brooke-Rose's use of concrete poetics within this bracket of "naïve realism", referring to her "miming" of physical forms. I would adjust the use of the term to denote specifically the ideogrammatic mimetic techniques of the signifier - and distinguish concrete poetics' exploration of materiality, a form of "mimesis" that is, at the very least, contestable.

> All right, people will say, "How do you expect your reader to follow this?" But I'm surprised that readers find this difficult. They all live like this.[117]

These techniques signalled a new recognition of the materiality of language, of the book as an object, of text as construction and of narrative as arrangement. This tendency of British cut/up – in Dadaist style – consistently defers political commitment, remaining deeply ambiguous. It chooses engagement - and fascination with – mass culture over the revolutions promised by the free-floating signifier. As paratactic works they speculate on linguistic and typographical innovation, not through the theorising of a potential literature, but via the development of the novel form. This is a surrealism for the Jet Age: politically ambiguous, pornographic, militant whilst systematically refusing the moral gratifications of satire. This mode openly acknowledges its modernist inheritance, although whilst modernism's effects were employed to materialise the experience of modernity as trauma, by the fifties, for the writers and artists of this coterie, there was no longer any need to *simulate* insanity: psychopathology was already manifest at the level of everyday life. As J.G. Ballard cautionary oeuvre attests:

> We must bear in mind, however sadly, that psychopathology is no longer the exclusive preserve of the degenerate and perverse. The Congo, Vietnam, Biafra – these are games anyone can play.[118]

Tripticks is Quin's first visual-textual work. Vast tracts of ventriloquised, stream-of-consciousness narrative are interspersed with comic strip-style doodles by the artist, Carol Annand which depict stills from the inner fantasia, including Dali-esque scenes of melting wedding parties, crude cartoons of fragmented female bodies, portraits reproduced as shooting range targets, painstaking pen-and-ink renderings of advertising hoardings and iconic Hollywood images: Shirley Temple illustrated in type and a doodle of Marlene Dietrich. It chronicles the journey of its unnamed narrator in pursuit of his 'No. 1 X-wife and her schoolboy gigolo' (7) and, in turn, pursued – literally rather than figuratively – by his own demons across a phantasmic

[117] Christine Brooke-Rose quoted in David Hayman, Keith Cohen and Christine Brooke-Rose, "An Interview with Christine Brooke-Rose," *Contemporary Literature* 17, no. 1 (Winter 1976): 15-16.
[118] Ballard, *Atrocity Exhibition*, 119-120.

Amerikan landscape that is an oneiric projection of his own fractured and colonised inner space. As she does in her earlier fictions, here once again, Quin deploys narrative's Oedipal rationale to dramatise in fiction the all-too-human search for a fiction of origin that might solve the riddle of identity. A quest that in *Tripticks* Quin, anticipating Fredric Jameson's definition of identity as 'the effect of a certain temporal unification of past and future with one's present',[119] defines as:

> An attempt explicit, ardent, heroic perhaps, though at best only half successful – to perform the most necessary task: to connect the past with the future. (176)

Here, however, who is pursed and who the pursuer is no longer clear: '[w]ho was chasing who I had forgotten' (136). Jittery and trigger-happy, the protagonist's paranoid imagination weaves the dizzingly inchoate fragments of his world into an elaborate conspiracy whose threat has become internalised. Its origins remain unclear. Is it the shadowy Nightripper, a.k.a. the 'Mystic Murderer' (59), a drug pusher and a Black Mass leader straight from the pages of *Black Mask* magazine, with 'war-painted face' and 'silvered toenails' who whilst hallucinating a 'Bosch vision of hell' the protagonist become convinced is his 'motherfucking father'? Is it his mother in law's women's liberation group WITCH (Women's International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell)? Or is it the Man from U.N.C.L.E. (22)?

Our anti-hero is a man without qualities, a mere 'particularity of flesh attired in a grey suit and a button-down Brooks Brothers shirt' (7). In Quin's hands the self-made man of Amerikan myth becomes a mediated and mediatised self-fashioning hero. This protean self has 'many names' and [m]any faces' (7), inventing and reinventing himself as an ever-proliferating series of fantasy personae through recourse to desultory fragments of pre-existing representational codes. He 'trie[s] on his faces in the rear-view mirror' (163): an angelheaded hipster-prophet spooked by his own interior visions (9), a corrupt drunkard politician (9), a serial rapist (9), the 'surly, inarticulate "man like I mean"' (15), a 'long-haired stranger from across the border' (24), Superman (50), a would-be Thoreau in search of his Walden (83), an 'infamous gunslinger' (122), a 'sensitive intellectual' (122), and a 'crime fighter' (136).

[119] Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 26-7.

As the novel progresses, his fantasy avatars become ever more elaborate; composed of unlikely minutiae that parody the metrics and archetypes of personality testing: an 'health faddist and sometime plumbing engineer and now an itinerant diemaker on his way out', for example, (163), an 'artful managerial mechanism, oiled with serenity, unanimity and self-confidence' (163),and a 'big bear of a man' with the 'hard blue eyes of a riverboat gambler' who is a 'budding billionaire' with a 'strong fondness for the trappings of success' but who is 'never given credit for exceptional performances or generous impulses' (172), but also the 'little man beset by terrors and nightmares' (174).

'Now I could try to ease my way out of this by saying I didn't ask questions, just stated my personality' (16), the unnamed protagonist reasons. But in *Tripticks* personhood is externally and discursively constructed and always demands complicity with a world that depersonalises. Here the authenticity, mystery and the privacy of human character have been scientifically winnowed by a culture industry and psychological establishment in cahoots to create quantified selves that reduce human identity to the atomised assemblage of meaningless signifiers. 'The E-meter', one scrap of pseudo-puffery announces, 'can not only detect unhealthy habit patterns during the oedipal period, but can also pick up subtle emanations from a tomato.' (21) Here, then, the claims of identity can only be a tick-box litany of parodic Myers-Briggs-style metrics:

> I am sophisticated
> considered attractive
> interested in marriage
> liberal regarding sex
> more of a dove than a hawk
> my date should be psychologically weaker
> I am optimistic
> Pot and pop-pills are morally right
> I drink regularly (21)

Like *Hangover Square*'s George Harvey Bone, the protagonist of *Tripticks* suffers what Patrick Hamilton calls 'dead moods', which Quin depicts via the literal

contrivance of “waking” and “dreaming”: ‘I woke up in a cold sweat. What was real, what wasn’t?’ (138). He surfaces, momentarily, to address the reader:

> The time has come to call a halt to this Theatre of the Absurd, to examine the motivation of the authors of the absurdity and challenge their star players. Let me now, as they say in court, connect up with the current scene. (156)

‘Was I brainwashed?’ he asks himself. The narrative oscillates between the narrator’s struggle to make sense of the patterning of his life and his surrender to a spectacular flux of images and representations which can never be authenticated. Suspecting that that catch-22 whereby the very means by which he might verify his reality have themselves been manipulated, he ponders: ‘Would I think I was brainwashed if I had been brainwashed?’ Is he involved in ‘little more than an engagement in a shaggy-dog story?’ However he is all too soon re-engulfed: ‘Go back to sleep. Go on with the game. The chase. The kill. Get the gun loaded.’ (138) He slides into depersonalised third-person narration (“Oh God, he cried, I wish I could be in my own pad like in Malibu...” [157]) and then back into fantasy, (“O-oh here comes that Emotional charge in me again.” [158]).

Quin develops her own topographical metaphors for the protagonist’s psyche. It is a cave-like crevice in which

> [t]houghts now encounter shelves of projecting ideals from these enormous arcs of nostalgia thrown high in the air rising 20 feet and spanning 50 feet in the arc. A large depression whose floor is scarred by numerous ideals. (42)

Here memory is no more constitutive of stable identity than the protagonist’s borrowed idioms; it is similarly depersonalised “other” speech. Describing self-reflection, and, by extension, the process of narrating the chaos of the inner life, Quin employs the metaphor of dredging also used previously by B.S. Johnson in his novel, *Trawl*, which chronicles a period of self-imposed exile upon a deep sea fishing vessel and an anguished stock take of the archive of experience:

> [T]he content of dreams [was] so dense that the only life within them consisted of small briny shrimp and the pupae of the ephyda fly. I began to organise a free-form dimensional equipment in the shape of a bucket. Digging below the surface the continuous bucket line operated 24 hours a day, except on July 4th and December 25th, and I viewed the dredge from foreign lands. (42)

It is this psychic sub-strata that provides *Tripticks*' setting. Upon the "desert of the real" the narrator projects a map of his crisis of consciousness. This is an 'immense interior region' of profound ontological instability, an 'endless desert' in which '[d]ays were nights' and '[d]reams were reality' with '[n]o sense of time', through which characters who are merely 'chartered shadows' chase their own tails.

Tripticks' is not a world to be inhabited, then, but a world that inhabits. The narrator internalises and then re-externalises as oneiric projection a mesh of fragmentary scraps of discourse. In this passage from the opening pages of the novel, for example, we meet our protagonist on an armed stake-out outside the home of his first ex-wife and her lover:

> Reproductions
> a gristmill
> wine press
> and the reservoir with its undershot waterwheel, a restored chapel and adjoining wing of seven rooms she has taken over with the fourth husband of my No. 2 wife. Under the rough-hewn redwood timbers they were lashed together with rawhide. Open during daylight hours an unusual arrangement of garden pools. Hours subject to change in summer. No dog, with the exception of seeing-eye dogs, are allowed. Cats are permitted to stay overnight provided they are on a leash. A naturalist is on duty. As members of the 89-person party died, those remaining resorted to cannibalism. Only 47 were rescued. Picnicking. Campsites near the original area. Where I waited. (9)

Here, Quin welds a complex chain of associations, code-switching between the, by turn, illusory, hyperbolic and pornotropic discursive styles of tourist advertising

('Open during daylight hours...'), newspaper reporting ('As members of the 89-person party died...') and sadomasochism ('…lashed together with rawhide'). Narrative proceeds via a diabolical metaphoric logic, where meaning drifts between the description of his former spouse's home, which is, in itself, with its reproduction mill and wine press, an "authentic replica" of a charming rural chateau which triggers a voyeuristic sexual fantasy which, in turn sets in motion the vision of their home as a tourist attraction ("Hours subject to change in summer..."). The next link springs from the double meaning of "naturalist" – referring to a natural historian and to a naturalist philosopher, whose moral assumptions involve a disregard for metaphysics and the positing of truth in nature which couples obscurely with cannibalism, which, in turn, is made analogous to picnicking.

In *Tripticks*, as in *Berg*, Quin makes recourse to the generic conventions and moral codes of Noir to articulate this inchoate and contingent world in which the existential dilemma is a hollow one. Where "authenticity" and "freedom" are unreachable ideals and the rebellious potential of meaningful action has been replaced by acts of arbitrary self-assertion against a world which withholds human agency. Here, however, unlike in *Berg*, the noir universe is *all there is*, it is the stable referent, the reality whose anxieties and dread it once articulated has been all but displaced. Here the Camusian "man of action" is reimagined as – in fact, discursively fashions himself into – a post-existentialist hard-boiled hero. Over a thoroughly Baudrillardian desert of the real, with its ghost towns, health resorts, leisure parks and seedy motels, the protagonist hounds his quarry, with the intention of committing a lover's lane *crime passionnelle:*

> I decided it would be a stunning scientific and intellectual accomplishment for a creature, who, in the space of a few million years – the bat of an eyelash in evolutionary accounting – emerged from the desert to hurl himself at two bodies. Its effects on human civilisation would be a matter of conjecture. But it would in any event be a shining reaffirmation of the optimistic premise that whatever man imagines he can bring to pass. (73)

But the forward thrust of the protagonist's narrative desire is continually frustrated. Its linear progression is simultaneously driven backwards analeptically into the past that is anterior to the narrative present and fissured outwards

metaleptically onto the paratextual semiotic structures that constitute its textuality by the irruption of fragments of memory, discourse and visual images that are 'a kind of emotional fishhook, snagged in the mind. Not wholly explicable, but impossible to dislodge' (146). The horizontal and vertical axes that situate the agents, events and actions over time and space with reference to the broader social order have collapsed. Present experience is displaced; '[m]ixing / Memory and desire' – as Eliot describes in the opening lines of his *The Waste Land* – Quin's narrative describes a diachronic flux of experience that is overwritten by the phantasmic projections of desublimated desire. Here 'memories [are] handled like auto-erotic symbols' (72). The ontological distinctions between memory, perception and fantasy have been sublated. The perceptual present merges and unmerges with memory, collapsing orders of time, and memory, in turn, merges with fantasy which is, in any case, no less "real" than perceptions and memories that are themselves in fact doubly "unreal", the unreliable percepts or memory traces of a reality that is merely simulacrum.

Is, then, the protagonist "mad"? And if he is, is Quin positing the cause as the Oedipalisation by the enculturation of the socio-symbolic order, the ontological uncertainty that results when the reality that encroaches is already an "authentic copy"? As she does throughout her oeuvre, in *Tripticks,* Quin provides a traditionally Freudo-Lacanian aetiology for her protagonist's psychic distress, implicating a failure of the Paternal function in his psychosis. Fantasising about 'a case of [sexual] initiation involving mother and son' he reflects, '[h]ow often I had wished mine had' (72). He identifies the origins of his own ontological unravelling in the belated breaking of the mother-child dyad during adolescence. Recalling the first closing in of his inner space, he recounts the synaesthetic transformation of his mother's body onto the geological formations with which he externalises his crisis of consciousness:

> This was particularly so when I was sixteen and she stopped tucking me up in bed, that was when the moraines where enormous. The descent on my own into sleep became extremely diverse, with sheer drops of 2,000 and 3,000 feet into rock bound gorges, carpeted with hairy patches and wildflowers sprouted from overhanging breasts. (72)

After the appearance of his step-father on the scene, an 'ex-surf, ex-track, ex-movie star' degenerate gold digger, 'who somehow thought mother was well off and out to explore the outer reaches of eros' (73), he recalls, ' I doubt if I ever forgave mother for marrying again' (73):

> As soon as he turned up the scene of our family life from then on turned from a semicircular urn of intimacy, a kind of womb with seats where mother and I had nuzzled together so comfortably, into battle scenes played in a refrigerator.' (79)

An unwelcome interloper within the family romance, the step-father here represents the Paternal function of sexual rivalry but not of authority, he is a 'born-false Messiah' (77). Here lie the beginnings of the narrator's textual and psychosexual perversity: 'And that was that. I went about learning how to become a fearless self-defence fighter overpowering any bully twice my size.' (79) In his account of the Oedipal origins of narrative, Barthes poses the question: 'If there is no longer any father, why tell stories?' Quin's post-patriarchal narrative perhaps proposes an answer. Her fatherless protagonist – desire debarred but authority not imposed – does so in order to endlessly re-enact that primal scene via the originary phantasms of patricide, castration and seduction: 'I knew I could no longer impose a preferred solution,' the narrator reasons, 'but I must seek to evoke it.' (78)

Evoke it he does, via a cast of characters that people his past, psychically extrude into memory and are realised as a bizarre retinue of phantasms: pep pill-popping, freaked-out ex-wives, an amorous mother-in-law and her over-coddled poodle and a depressed tycoon father-in-law. His first wife is the heiress to the fortune of a ballpoint pen tycoon with whom he eloped and later found himself ensconced within her billionaire father's compound which 'seemed like an immense swimming pool making me feel like an extra in a home movie' (151). In this heartland of Amerikan domestic psychosis, with its '[i]ncreasing hysterical rituals of confession and conformity' violence is always 'just a dare away' (34). The second, whom he met at a 'pretzelrama' happening which featured an '8 foot mound of every kind of bread' is a karate expert, a hippy activist and a 'militant hedonist in constant search of the best that can be eaten, drunk, and fucked or otherwise savoured', with a side-line in Black Mass orgies. Which is where he meets the woman who was to become

his third wife, a junky with a 'great desire to expose the pretention of pretending not to be pretentious and therefore destroy pretention by a general condition of total candour in the mutual acknowledgement of all pretention' (156).

Refusing the "Great Refusal"

By the mid-seventies, the critique of the counterculture that had been mounted by American Liberals like Lionel Trilling, Daniel Bell and Irving Kristol during the sixties – a moral panic on behalf of the Arnoldian project – warned against a culture infected by modernism. This notion of an 'adversary culture' that had become mainstream and was hell-bent on steering culture away from civilisation, gained credence amongst many commentators disillusioned by its legacies. A funny thing happened on the way to utopia. The sixties' status-quo-challenging spirit of rebelliousness had ushered in not *another world*, but an era that Tom Wolfe in the mid-seventies christened the "Me Decade".[120] The counterculture's interest in esoterica, the 'eclectic taste for mystic, occult, and magical phenomena [that] has been a marked characteristic of our postwar youth since the days of the beatniks',[121] which characterised what Theodor Roszak identitied as a new "Age of Aquarius" evolved into what would become known as the New Age: a loosely confederated alliance of quasi-psychotherapeutic practices and esoteric philosophies which coalesced under the umbrella term of the Human Potential Movement. Summed up by Alvin Toffler as the 'odds and ends of Eastern religion, sexual experimentation, game playing and old-time revivalism',[122] the movement comprised, variously, the field of humanistic and transpersonal psychologies and Fritz Perls' Gestalt therapy, the Mecca of which was his Esalen Institute in Big Sur, alongside pantheistic spiritual practices including neo-Paganism, the Goddess movement and from Eastern mysticism, like Taoism, Tarot, Zen meditation and Chinese medicine. As the "Age of Aquarius" became the "New Age", the commitment to the capacity of the liberated self as a new alternative to political reform had evolved into a belief in the potential of the self as the internal wellspring of meaning-making, of "life-direction" and of value which simply needed to

[120] Tom Wolfe, "The 'Me' Decade and the Third Great Awakening," *New York Magazine*, August 23, 1976, accessed October 10, 2013, http://nymag.com/news/features/45938/.
[121] Roszak, *Counterculture*, 125.
[122] Alvin Toffler, *Futureshock: The Third Wave* (New York, Bantam Books, 1981), 366.

be unlocked. Its object was no longer revolution, but personal fulfilment. The transitive function of anti-psychiatry – its socially applied aspect, that hypothesis that a revolution of the self could and would naturally produce a revolution of the world which had never been satisfactorily elucidated – was all but abandoned in favour of a Rousseauian quest to "expand human awareness" and "develop human potential" via the happiness, creativity and fulfilment of the "fully actualised" self.

The founder of the Human Potential Movement, Abraham Maslow, in his famous Hierarchy of Needs, proposed a theory of motivation which held that human happiness was achieved via the satisfaction of a pyramidal system of needs, the peak of which was self-actualisation, the fulfilment of one's full personal potential: 'to become more and more what one is, to become everything that one is capable of becoming', the 'full realization' of one's 'true self'. And the royal road to self-actualisation was not, as it had been for antipsychiatry, the articulation of a crisis of selfhood and, thereby, the critique of the forces that had produced it, but the enactment of that crisis via free expression, by *doing your own thing*, an ethos which was formalised in anarchic therapeutic practices which co-mingled elements of Freudian theory and behaviour-modification techniques together with Eastern spirituality like primal therapy, encounter groups and re-birthing which sought to remove those obstacles that might impinge the scaling of the pyramid by revisiting and thereby resolving repressed trauma or "Pain".

What was at stake was no longer revolution – indeed, for Trilling, Bell and Kristol and others, it never had been – but the radically individualist simonising of the self that had become euphemised as "personal growth". The acolytes of the Human Potential Movement were to become self-fashioning "gods of their own universes", moulding themselves into "better" selves. As Wolfe memorably comments, the 'new alchemical dream is: changing one's personality – remaking, remodelling, elevating, and polishing one's very *self*… and observing, studying, and doting on it. (Me!)….'. By the seventies, then, the counterculture had begun to look very much like its other. Christopher Lasch's epoch-anointing *The Culture of Narcissism* (1979), together with his earlier work, *Haven in a Heartless World* (1977) virulently condemns the mindless hedonism and moral vacuity of the 'so-called counterculture' which was merely a 'mirror image of consumer capitalism':

> Cultural radicalism has become so fashionable and so pernicious in the support it unwittingly provides for the status quo, that any criticism of contemporary society that hopes to get beneath the surface has to criticize, at the same time, much of what currently goes under the name of radicalism.[123]

Quin turns to America to explore not only the spiritual destitution of the affluent society but also, and in equal measure, the bankruptcy of its discontents. At length, the protagonist is led by the couple to the Centre for Studies of the Body and Soul, or, as he puts it, 'Groupe Grope and the Feely Show' (164), a thinly veiled satire of the Esalen Institute and its ilk, peopled with 'raging sado-masochists', 'fire-breathing spinsters' and 'silicon freaks' (174). Quin makes great play with the counterculture at its most vacuously outré:

> 'And in here is a lecturer talking about "Erotica, Ennui and Where Do We Go From Here". We entered and would you believe that he didn't tell us? […] 'And in here we have instant analysis and querulous criticism.' As soon as I entered someone shouted at me 'You have an anarchical mentality totally rejecting civilized standards of behaviour.' (168)

Finding himself enlisted into encounter therapy with his second ex-wife, presided over by two therapists whom he suspects are collecting information on behalf of 'the Army, the Justice Department and the F.B.I.' (178), he flees. The Centre's frenzied gropings towards "cosmic consciousness" have failed to assuage his existential angst. It is all merely an 'ego-trip of Shakespearian proportions' whose 'verbal glory' masks 'desperate competitiveness'. He seeks a more authentic spiritual discovery than 'some squalid freakout' or 'monstrous Dionysian revel' where 'a mob of crazies gather to drop acid and groove to hours of amplified cacophony' (185):

> I could understand if I were made to feel it, the terrible figure of Kali, I could understand a kind of Lawrencian [sic] blood sacrifice, I could understand if I were made to feel it, the marvellous serenity of Krishna love. I needed to feel

[123] Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York, NY: Norton, 1991), 8.

> the premises inundated with the Terrible Mother and the serene compassionate Krishna I needed to be shaken by terror and love. (185)

And accordingly the denouement of the novel is an almost parodic set-piece in grand countercultural style in which the protagonist (with shades of Jim Morrison) picks up a mysterious and prophetic hitchhiker – who might be a Native American shaman or just '[s]ome hippy having me on' (183) – who directs him to an adobe village in the mesa where he partakes in a mystical drumming ritual. There he catches a glimpse of cosmic unity:

> So there I was, suddenly it seemed without a past or a future on a flat sandy floor, 7,500 feet above sea level, encircled by steep mountain walls, not unlike one of the great dry seas of the moon. And as I walked it seemed I had no sense of gravity. My pulse, I noticed, kept up the same rhythm as the drums.' (185)

He suspects the Native Americans intend to slaughter him as a ritual sacrifice but, he reasons, 'what better way to croak. Ritualistic, part of an inheritance, I would perhaps go down in history after all.' (185) At last he might have evaded the "depth manipulators" and the world of spiralling representations they have spun and managed to access a savage, primal authenticity. But released from the captivity of the image he soon experiences semiotic Stockholm Syndrome. Bereft of his map of words and images he cannot navigate the territory. To the eyes of these 'Fellini figures' (185) he is 'an intruder, an invader, a Real Estate speculator' (187). These are 'ancient witches', where, he implores, 'were the young ones to shout Hey there he is in a super, supple antiqued leather jacket' (187)? Suddenly divested of the fabric of ready-mades which connects him to the empire of signs, the protagonist becomes a hollowed-out husk of a subject in a reality that seems further away than ever:

> Here on an Indian Reservation, I felt more of an outsider. […] The buildings, part of the earth, made from earth, threw me into narrow spaces. Swept along by dust rain and wind. And longing for the comfort of four walls. (189)

'If you can't believe it's happening, pretend it's a movie'[124] Andy Warhol advises and, heeding this, the protagonist appeals for the cinematic apparatus that might frame and spectacularise this 'strange environment' and render it semiotically comprehensible: 'Where for Christsake the movie cameras, and Bob Hope dressed as an Indian would surely appear in the midst of the dancers.'(188) But his phantoms reappear in new disguises: his first wife, a strange figure who may or may not be the Nightripper, together with a cadre of members from WITCH who form an inquisition that chases him across the adobe rooftops until he arrives at the edge. He considers a suicide, encoding it as a 'revolutionary jump' as '[h]istory caught with a stoop-action [*sic*] camera' (191). But in a rare moment of lucidity, the protagonist begins to consider the possibility that the inquisition was merely a delusional projection, and that his fate is not patterned by the obscure machinations of some external conspiracy but that he is subject to processes beyond his control that originate within:

> Perhaps I had been mistaken, they had not disguised themselves themselves at all, but had split, left me to find my own death. By chance. By an absurd piece of my own fantasy. (191)

Eschewing a death that is no longer heroic, he hides in a church where he attempts to verify his reality by appealing to a kind of empirico-phenomenology:

> There must be a detailed patient exploration of evidence in support of an original philosophical vision. Or on a humbler level simply testing out propositions with data. Dissolving false and ideological constructs about the world and letting reality emerge as it really is. (191)

But it cannot. Quin's first three novels are all characterised, variously, by their protagonists' speechlessness. By the inner voice emanating from some subterranean strata between thought and action that cannot extrude into utterance, that remains suspended there. It is Hamlet-speech, a muteness that nonetheless speaks of that terrible struggle to reconcile the inner design with external chaos.

[124] Andy Warhol, *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol: From A to B and Back Again* (London: Picador), 176.

Berg's titular anti-hero ruminates, plots and schemes but speaks only once to utter what might be a parapractic tic, or perhaps just a typographical error. *Three*'s banal babble masks a vast, dank reservoir of the unsaid, only finally revealed via S's disembodied speech which emanates from audio tapes long after its subject has sought to obliterate her own subjecthood. *Passages*, meanwhile, reveals the fallacy of its protagonists' vain attempts to remove themselves from symbolic rationality and return to the non-linguistic *jouissance* of the embodied self in the name of liberation, whilst all the while their most basic freedoms are continually and brutally foreclosed by shady totalitarian agents on the very account of that speechlessness: 'They spoke at times in a dialect we didn't understand. We were misinterpreted… We were misinformed.' (7). These are selves that are stranded tragically in that liminal space – a psychic limbo – in which via the processes of projection and introjection the fusion of the inner and outer can only be achieved at the grave expense of a loss of Ego boundaries with destructive and self-shattering effects. For Quin the cost is always a terrible one. There is no sense of the "ecstatic surrender" of the self here which was so valorised by countercultural thinkers as the royal road to accessing a more authentic and more vital mode of existence. In *Passages*, whose protagonists all too willingly seek out and *drink the kool aid*, the performative self-annihilation that was the counterculture's favourite party trick is depicted as merely an ethically corrupt burlesque of more real and more dangerous forms of psychic disturbance.

In *Tripticks*, at last, Quin finally furnishes her narrative with a speaking subject. But the voice is not his own. Sandra, the protagonist of Quin's final, unpublished novel, *The Unmapped Country*, opines her own speechlessness, the loss of her 'subterranean language with the underground forces':[125]

> If speech at all then it was the spaces between words, and the echoes the words left, or what might be really meant under the surface. She knew, had known. No longer knew.[126]

Electro-shock therapy, Quin writes, has 'shape[d] [Sandra] into a walky talky doll with all the correct responses.'[127] And the protagonist of *Tripticks*, like Sandra and like

[125] Unpublished manuscript, Ann Quin, "The Unmapped Country," box 52, folder 2-5, Calder & Boyars mss., Lilly Library, Indiana University.
[126] Ibid.

Berg, also has become a voiceless body – or, indeed, a ventriloquist's dummy – through whom others speak. In the closing passages of the novel, the protagonist readies himself to deliver a violent benediction from the church pulpit: 'The scream inside me was working itself loose... a desperate need to break out into a stream of verbal images. The pulpit could become an extension of my voice, my skin, my dreams.' (191) However, when he 'open[s] [his] mouth' there are 'no words':

> Only the words of others I saw, like ads, text, psalms, from those who attempted to persuade me into their systems. A power I did not want to possess. The inquisition. (191)

Quin was fond of claiming that she was telepathic. Her fellow experimental writer, Alan Burns, recalls a group reading at the ICA given by Quin, B.S. Johnson, himself and others. Quin, he recounts, was 'doing her Quin thing' which, he explains, involved sitting on the stage staring at the audience in complete silence: 'she wouldn't say a goddamn word':

> She either implied or she actually stated that we sort of "think-communicate". That we can communicate more in silence than with someone actually putting the words across.[128]

Convinced that this was some kind of avant-garde jape, B.S. Johnson was furious, Burns recalls. Both Sontag, in her "The Aesthetics of Silence" (1967), and Ihab Hassan, in his *The Literature of Silence: Henry Miller and Samuel Beckett* (1969), have reflected upon the refusal to speak within the art of the sixties, finding – contrary to Steiner, for whom the 'retreat from the word' constitutes a form of absconding from political life[129] – in the evasion, renunciation and non-communication of speechlessness a valid and productive artistic gesture that seeks to question the validity of all utterances. But despite her turn at the reading, the novels attest that the same cannot be said of Quin. In the 'subterranean language' of the early novels – found, as Sandra explains, in the 'space between words' that, like

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[127] Ibid.
[128] Alan Burns, quoted in Coe, *Like a Fiery Elephant*, 405.
[129] Steiner, *Language and Silence*, 30.

Felman's 'freedom to speak', lies 'somewhere between languages' – there is a certain power. But in silence there is none at all or, worse, there is the disempowerment of having others speak on one's behalf. Quin, like Woolf before her, is committed to a vision of subjectivity that is distressed and dispersed but nonetheless maintains a commitment to the power of language to shape a world and power of consciousness to shape a self. Language is the vehicle which enables the continuing circulation of those contradictory desires, deferring a Faustian choice between the coherent and unified selfhood that is, for Quin, a kind of death-in-life, and engulfment.

Postscript: 'Such a Thing as Avant-garde in Literature Has Ceased to Exist'

> The English as a nation have always been kind to eccentrics.
> — Ernest Barker, *The Character of England*

Back in the present, the novel, once again, is caught in a tug of love. Forty-odd years after the original "situation of the novel" debates of the sixties and seventies, when literary intellectuals speculated upon the role of the novel after the unprecedented social and cultural transformations following World War II, the forms and functions of fiction are being deliberated anew, in response to the pressing ethical and political dilemmas of Anglo-American liberals (multiculturalism, globalisation, global economic recession, anxieties about human flourishing), the sense of crisis in the arts effected by swingeing public sector cuts, the new post-Browne Report paradigm of higher education and the perceived mortal threat to the book posed by the indefatigable rise of digital technologies. We demand that the novel tradition anthropologise our twenty-first century disaffection. We want this form, long privileged (or perhaps charged) with making sense of our lives and our selves, to readily provide the consolations of fiction against the existential angst of our age. Now, perhaps more than ever, we seek the easy, familiar pleasures of the text.

But equally, in this new digital age of global neo-corporatism, the novel is being forced to justify its continued existence as never before. Previous reports of its death at the hands of radio, then cinema, then television all proved, in the end, to be greatly exaggerated. But with the seemingly indefatigable rise of digital cultures, the very medium of the novel – the dog-eared, spine-cracked paperback – finally appears to be on its way out. It was not supposed to be this way. The breathless technological utopianism of the nineties prophesised the reinvention of what was perceived, even then, as an ailing literary anachronism. Early adapters, like the American writer Robert Coover, in his influential 1992 essay, "The End of Books", predicted that with the coming of the digital age the novel would die but be gloriously reborn as hypertext fiction: ludic, labyrinthine, radically non-linear narratives in the spirit of

Jorge Luis Borges.[1] In the end, however, the novel's digital future proved to be rather more prosaic. In August 2012, the UK's biggest bookseller, Amazon, announced that sales of e-books now outweigh those of paperbacks and hardbacks combined.[2] '[E]very generation rewrites the book's epitaph; all that changes is the whodunit', assures a recent article in the *New York Times*, noting 'how rarely one technology supersedes another'.[3]

In the case of digital media, commerce gave chase. The longer-term problems of our increasingly commercial book culture – which is subject to the bottom line of multinational publishing conglomerates, the almighty clout of chain bookshops and the vagaries of literary prize culture – begin to look like small fry in comparison to what is now darkly referred to as 'the Amazon problem'. Our open-source lives on the "cloud" pose a mortal threat not only to the physical book but also, with the near-impossibility of enforcing digital rights, to the livelihoods of those who write and publish them. Brophy's campaign for the Public Lending Right and her Writer's Action Group which, during the sixties, lobbied to secure a living wage for writers or, as she puts it in her inimitable style, 'justice in the shape of dinner of practitioners',[4] certainly provides food for thought in an age when writers' meagre livelihoods look more precarious than ever. The crisis in the publishing industry is oft remarked upon. Grub Street is said to be rationalising and prioritising as never before in response to untenable financial pressures. In these circumstances, the American novelist Jonathan Franzen who is rapidly becoming the Anglo-American literary establishment's foremost provocateur, has argued controversially that to be a literary innovator is an unforgivable (and commercially unviable) form of artistic irresponsibility. Only the most marketable, the surest bet, can ensure the form's survival:

> Fiction is the most fundamental human art form. Fiction is storytelling and our reality arguably consists of the stories we tell about ourselves. Fiction is also

[1] Robert Coover, "The End of Books," *New York Times*, September 27, 1992, accessed August 5, 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/books/98/09/27/specials/coover-end.html.
[2] Shiv Malik, "Kindle ebook sales have overtaken Amazon print sales, say book seller," *Guardian*, August 6, 2012, accessed August 8, 2012, http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2012/aug/06/amazon-kindle-ebook-sales-overtake-print.
[3] Leah Price, "Dead Again," *New York Times*, August 10, 2012, accessed August 12, 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/12/books/review/the-death-of-the-book-through-the-ages.html.
[4] Brigid Brophy, *Prancing Novelist: A Defence of Fiction in the Form of a Critical Biography in Praise of Ronald Fairbank* (London: Macmillan, 1973), xiii.

> conservative and conventional, because the structure of its market is relatively democratic (novelists make a living one book at a time, bringing pleasure to large audiences), and because a novel asks for ten or twenty hours of solitary attentiveness from each member of its audience. … To wrest the novel away from its original owner, the bourgeois reader, required strenuous effort from theoreticians. And once literature and its criticism become co-dependent the fallacies set in.[5]

This sense of crisis surrounding the novel was, even in the sixties, nothing new. The 'special fate of the novel', the most eminent theorist of the novel's eschatological anxieties, Kermode, argues, 'is always to be dying'.[6] Indeed, in Britain, beating our chests about the lassitude of novel writing appears to be a critical tradition in its own right, stretching back as far as Samuel Johnson, who famously commented with devastating inaccuracy of the novel in its infancy: 'Nothing odd will do long. *Tristram Shandy* did not last'.[7]

The difference now is one of expectation. Gone are our Arnoldian assumptions about the novel's role in culture, the powerful and pervasive aesthetic creed of Eliot and Leavis which dominated the field of literary criticism in Britain throughout the twentieth century finally seems to have lapsed. Our preoccupations with fiction's ability to deliver a coherent whole, or to forge an aesthetic community, have been replaced by rather more fundamental doubts about the very possibility of representation in an era when the social sphere has already been so thoroughly commodified and aestheticised. We now inhabit the order of simulacra, Baudrillard proposes, and here there is no real to imitate. The redemptive capacity of literature, that traditional bond between the world and the book that assumes, Leo Bersani writes, 'the world of art has the authority to master the raw material of experience in a manner than uniquely gives value to, perhaps even redeems, that material'[8] – a relationship that had been problematised but not severed by fictional self-consciousness – is now rather more narrowly conceived. What we now hope for from

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[5] Jonathan Franzen, "Mr Difficult: William Gaddis and the Problem of Hard-to-Read Books," *New Yorker*, September 30, 2002, accessed July 3, 2011, http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2002/09/30/020930fa_fact_franzen.

[6] Frank Kermode, "Life and Death of the Novel," *New York Review of Books*, October 28, 1965, accessed July 3, 2011, http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/1965/oct/28/life-and-death-of-the-novel/.

[7] James Boswell, *The Life of Samuel Johnson* 2 (London: Henry Baldwin, 1791), 27, Google Books edition.

[8] Leo Bersani, *The Culture of Redemption* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1990), 1.

our fictions, Dominic Head argues, is an 'alternative imaginative space' with a 'social function' that is always provisional and that forcefully disputes its own demise by 'recognising the existence and potential of that autonomy'.[9] Cautiously, he adds that the 'extent of the dissidence, or reinvention such a space makes possible should not be overstated'.[10]

Why, then, do British novelists seem so reluctant to grasp the nettle of this autonomy? Despite the successive incursions of threads, pockets and outcroppings of the "experimental" and the realities of a rich and more variegated literary history than "official" accounts almost always record, and to which this study has sought to attest, the mainstream picture of the British novel is still dominated by the notion of a time-worn "English style". Colm Tóibín recently characterised the 'quintessential English novel of our age' as 'well made, low on ambition and filled with restraint, taking its bearings from a world that Philip Larkin made in his own image.'[11] Zadie Smith, in her timely and influential essay, "Two Paths for the Novel" (2008), speculates upon the future of fiction in English, by way of reviews of *Netherland* by the latter-day realist, Joseph O'Neill, and *Remainder* by great white hope for British avant-garde writing, Tom McCarthy. She finds O'Neill's is the road most travelled. His 'breed of lyrical Realism' has 'had the freedom of the highway for some time now, with most other exits blocked'.[12] Although Smith specifies the Anglophone novel, her view seems more narrowly applicable to fiction in Britain. Disrobed – some would say rudely – of its metaphysics, realist fiction has abandoned its claim to reunite the individual and the world. The realist contract has had to be rewritten, its terms now rather more modestly conceived. Realistic writing, as Smith argues, has itself become self-conscious about its own lack of authenticity: 'it foregrounds its narrative nostalgia, asking us to note it, and look kindly upon it'.[13]

British literary critics, meanwhile, have tended to remain reverential about the innate value of the (capital letter, definite article) Novel, but wholly unconvinced about (and in some cases, positively hostile to) the broader imaginative possibilities of fictional narrative. The fields of narrative and narrativity are now, of course, no

[9] Head, *State of the Novel*, 8-9.
[10] Ibid., 8.
[11] Colm Tóibin, "Going Beyond the Limits," *New York Review of Books*, May 10, 2012, accessed June 25, 2012, http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2012/may/10/julian-barnes-going-beyond-limits.
[12] Zadie Smith, "Two Paths for the Novel," *New York Review of Books*, November 20, 2008, accessed July 3, 2011, http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2008/nov/20/two-paths-for-the-novel/.
[13] Ibid.

longer the specialist domain of literature, but are terms that are employed throughout human discourse as a way of conceptualising cognition. The idea of the narrative self, which proposes that narrative meaning-making is innate to the human condition, is central to the account of selfhood, identity and consciousness developed by philosophers such as Daniel Dennett, in works such as the book *Consciousness Explained* (1991) and the essay "The Self as a Center of Narrative Gravity" (1992), Alasdair MacIntyre, most notably in his watershed book *After Virtue* (1981) and Paul Riceour, throughout his oeuvre following his seminal three-volume study on the mimetic function of narrative, *Time and Narrative* (1983-5). This 'narrative paradigm' describes the ways in which humans synthesise reality by making narratives out of the disconnected events of our lives, creating a meaningful and unified pattern out of the chaos of experience. 'We are all virtuoso novelists', as Dennett, puts it; we 'try to make all our material cohere into a single good story … that story is our autobiography' and the 'chief fictional character … of that autobiography is one's self'.[14]

That we understand ourselves through stories is now a given. The narrative paradigm's thesis about human "self-telling" is now ubiquitous amongst fields as diverse as psychology, sociology, philosophy, advertising and even medicine and finance. As David Herman, Manfred Jahn and Marie-Laure Ryan, in their Introduction to the recent *Routledge Encyclopaedia of Narrative Theory*, comment: '[t]he past several decades have seen an explosion of interest in narrative'[15]. Narrative theory has begun cropping up in unexpected places: in accounts of the global economic recession, for example, Roland Barthes' proairetic code of narrative expectation is invoked to account for the climate of unchecked speculative investment that produced the financial crisis and (relatedly) in response to the renewed scrutiny of the trustworthiness and perceived integrity of commercial practices, "brand storytelling" has become a key concern within the marketing and public relations industries. But are novels to be understood merely as the literary incarnation of the narrative paradigm? The versions of narrativity that have emerged in the fields of marketing, psychology, sociology and medicine, for example, tend to privilege one half of the essential binominal impulse of narrative, what the Russian formalists

[14] Dan Dennett, "Why Everyone is a Novelist," *Times Literary Supplement* 4459 (September 16-22, 1988): 1088.
[15] David Herman, Manfred Jahn and Marie-Laure Ryan, *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory* (London: Routledge, 2007), 1.

called the *fabula* (or story), focusing solely upon narrative as a series of events in time and neglecting narrative's crucial other component: the *sujet* (or plot). That is, the way that these events are manifested into discourse, *the way that the story is told*. And, notwithstanding the implications for the art of the novel of its underestimation of the complexities of narrative, is such a narrowly-conceived paradigm really an appropriate or effective way of conceptualising the breadth and the diversity human experience?

The fictionalists of the sixties, I have argued, in response to the extension of the domain of fiction, insisted upon literary fiction's special status amongst the orders of fictionality. These days, it seems literary critics are no longer prepared to make such high claims for fiction, but neither are they certain what the alternative might be. Perhaps in response to a perceived lapse in the novel's special claim to knowledge, they have sought to safeguard the distinctiveness of literary narrative by attempting to define the "novelness" of novels. Liam McIlvanney and Ray Ryan's recent study, *The Good of the Novel* (2011), for instance, seeks to emphasise that which is 'distinctive and ingenious to the novel form':

> One can say, for one thing, that the truth of novels cannot be rendered in any other form; it cannot be abstracted or codified, turned into thesis or proposition. Novelistic truth is not data, not reportage, not documentary, not philosophical tenet, not political slogan. Novelistic truth is dramatic, which means above all it has to do with character. … In exploring character, the novel's key strength is the disclosure of human interiority. To the question, what does the novel do?, we might most pertinently answer: the novel does character, and the novel does interiority.[16]

Claiming that the academy has 'retreat[ed] into theoretical obscurantism'[17] – that old British bugbear – their collection seeks to refocus attention back on the novel itself, attesting its unique truth by lifting the taboo on evaluation. However, the emphasis of the title seems to have shifted from 'What good can the novel do?' to a kind of backhanded compliment: 'How good is the novel at doing what it does?' And *what it does* seems rather limited: 'the novel does character, and 'the novel does interiority'.

[16] Liam McIlvanney and Ray Ryan, eds. *The Good of the Novel* (London: Faber & Faber, 2011), xii.
[17] Ibid., vii.

No mention here of the complex mediatory relationship between the novel and society, of the novel's capacity not only to 'disclose' but also to expand the remit of human experience, or of the ways in which fiction offers temporary access to other ways of perceiving. Or of the novel as thought experiment, as a viable form of knowledge all of its own – let alone a ticket to peak experience at the limits of language.

Is this the best that we can hope for from our fictions? Is the novel now, as Smith ponders, 'simply the bedtime story that comforts us most'? And if that is the case, should we, as Franzen insists, simply submit to its "guilty pleasures":

> Think of the novel as a lover: Let's stay home tonight and have a great time. Just because you're touched where you want to be touched, it doesn't mean you're cheap; before a book can change you, you have to love it.[18]

In this study, by reassessing the work of the British experimental novelist, Ann Quin, I have sought to develop an alternative account of the distinctiveness of literary narrative that rests not upon notions about the consolatory capacity of our "necessary fictions", or of craft and technique, or of the metaphysical power of a 'great tradition', but upon the ways in which the novel shapes and is shaped by the experiential nuances of imagination, perception, memory, dreams and fantasy, which, in turn, themselves shape and are shaped by a culture, a feeling, a place and a moment. I suggest that the timely reappraisal of the writing of Quin and her colleagues might go some way to establishing the sense of 'historical continuity' lacking within existing accounts of the British contemporary novel. And I have attempted to trace the legacies of British experimentalism beyond the modernist watershed, after which it is generally assumed to have collapsed, through to a British 'postmodern realism'. Relatedly, this study has attempted to confront and begin to explore the important questions begged by the troubled literary-historical fate of the British experimental fiction: those to do with the ways we nurture innovative twenty-first century in Britain and the ways in which we practise literary criticism. As British twentieth-century literary history is recast, and the "firm" assumptions of postmodern knowledge are discarded, it remains to be seen what form such an inheritance of

[18] Franzen, "Mr Difficult."

innovation might take: whether a rear-guard avant-garde will emerge to satisfy what appears to be a burgeoning appetite for innovation, or else remain a reward for the faithful, quarrying reader.

Appendix I: An Ann Quin Bibliography

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