The Modern Novel
A Short Introduction

Jesse Matz

Blackwell
Publishing

CHAPTER 6

Questioning the Modern: Mid-Century Revisions

If the politics and satires of the 1930s were not enough to discredit modern experimentation, the events of World War II were. The first world war had done much to make "civilization" seem like a lie. Nevertheless, faith in culture persisted enough to make writers believe that art could yet make up for losses. No such belief could really survive World War II, for its unimaginable atrocities could only make art seem like feeble recompense. Or, worse, itself a dangerous lie: "idealism" of a sinister kind had often justified the war's barbarism; was aesthetic idealism complicit? The most famous statement to this effect is Theodor Adorno's claim that "to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric."[1] To those who agreed, it seemed necessary at least to limit fiction's aspirations – to cease to hope that its aesthetic forms could make any real difference, and even to distrust them for their association with power and purity.

Some people therefore think that World War II put an end to the modern novel. Did it not prove, once and for all, that its experiments were trivial, and that fiction could not abandon its responsibilities to social life, seen plainly, with fully clear critical judgment? Did it not prove that the relative detachment of the modern novel – its movement "inward" – entailed a dangerous retreat from reality? Did it not discredit the belief that fiction could make a new form for any function, since the horrors of the war were well beyond the limits of representation? Did it not prove that fiction should not cultivate chaos, or pretend to order?

These were the questions the war raised, and they did indeed pose a nearly insuperable challenge to fiction's modern impulse. Even if

they did not put the modern novel completely in doubt, they mark a good place for us to pause to question it. Clearly, the modern novel had not yet developed the resources necessary to make it a fully satisfying response to modernity. What was missing? What was lacking in the modern novel, at the end of its first major stage of development, and how could it change to become more satisfying to the writers and readers of the future?

The modern writers often wanted immediacy – to make fiction fully able to "show" us things rather than just to tell us about them. They wanted perfect mimesis. In Joyce, Woolf, and others there is a powerful striving toward greater intensity, and no small amount of hope that modern fiction could break through the barrier that language tends naturally to place between readers and reality. Modern fiction depended in large measure on the faith that it might, in Joseph Conrad's words, "make you *see*." But could it? Could it ever get past the "mediation" of language, and deliver reality immediately to the reader? More and more it seemed that it could not, that the hope of perfect mimesis was a naive one, that even if modern fiction could present things with greater intensity, it could not every really be fully immediate. More and more, the prevailing attitude was that which Conrad's narrator Marlow in *Heart of Darkness* expresses when his storytelling seems to fail. Conrad, remember, had expressed the wish to "make you *see*," but here Marlow asks:

> Do you see the story? Do you see anything? It seems to me I am trying to tell you a dream – making a vain attempt, because no relation of a dream can convey the dream sensation . . . No, it is impossible; it is impossible to convey the life-sensation of any given epoch of one's existence – that which makes its truth, its meaning – its subtle and penetrating essence. It is impossible. We live, as we dream – alone.

Conrad, like many modern novelists, hoped that fiction could be immediate, and bind people together in "solidarity." But here Marlow expresses what they tended to realize: that fiction could not be immediate, and that hope for human togetherness on the basis of it was vain.

This does not mean, though, that modern fiction would have to give up on immediacy – that to prove itself valid, it would have to surrender this ideal. What it means is that, going forward, modern fiction

would have to combine its better mimesis with better attention to the "problematics of language," the ways that language stands in the way of immediacy. Just as modern fiction had already begun to "question reality," it would have to question language itself. The modern novel had already shown reality to be a far more complex, problematic thing than it had seemed to be in the writing of the past; now, to become the modern novel of the future, it would have to wrestle with the ways that language, too, was a problem and not just a solution.

The modern writers tried for a full range of perspectives. As we have seen, they attempted to widen out fiction's constituencies and points of view, to take in the perceptions of people the novel had not tended to include. But just how inclusive had the novel in fact become? Was the range of perspectives really wide enough? Were the treatments of other classes, other races, and other cultures really authentic? Some people thought not: they looked at the modern novel's treatment of other classes, other races, and other cultures and saw not perspective but *primitivism*. What they saw, that is, was not the authentic lives and minds of unfamiliar people, but exotics – people presented in their strangeness rather than their normality. In *Going Primitive*, Marianna Torgovnick describes this tendency to exoticize, the way modern artists often use "others" deceptively: "[These 'others'] exist for us in a cherished series of dichotomies: by turns gentle, in tune with nature, paradisal, ideal – or violent, in need of control; what we should emulate or, alternately, what we should fear; noble savages or cannibals."[2] When, for example, Joyce ends *Ulysses* in the consciousness of Molly Bloom, are we finally getting insight into the female mind, or are we getting a "natural" fantasy? When Faulkner puts a black woman into *The Sound and the Fury*, is she real, or is she a "noble" caricature? And why are there no poor people at all in the novels of Virginia Woolf, with the exception of some mysterious ideal entities that haunt the edges of reality? Questions like these made some people think that "perspective" could go a lot further.

Even worse, the modern novel seemed to threaten fiction's powers of social engagement. Modern writers had tried to delve more deeply into consciousness, to go subjective, to depict a world in flux. To some critics, they had too excessively detached the novel from the real world; they had retreated into utter interiority, dissolving social lives into the fragments and ambiguities of consciousness. Did this not have to mean that the novel would become less able to reflect social reality?

And did this not mean that the novel would stop serving a key social purpose? Georg Lukács, a Marxist philosopher and critic, thought so: in his writing against Modernism, he argued that its movement into consciousness was a retreat from responsibility, and a real danger to public culture. Lukács saw a "negation of history" in modern writing. Writers like Joyce, he thought, presented people as too "strictly confined within the limits of [their] own experience," and too lost in a "static" reality; missing was any sense of humanity's "concrete potentiality" – the way it realizes itself through engagement with objective reality. The "surrender to subjectivity," "disintegration of personality," and "disintegration of the outer world" fundamental to modern fiction were, to Lukács, false and dangerous, features of a bad "ideology" rather than authentic aesthetic choices.[3]

To Lukács and others, the modern novel would have to match its new interior aesthetic with new forms of external responsibility. It would have to find new ways to be political, new ways to be engaged, lest it dematerialize completely and become an airy, precious, and complacent indulgence. To find these new ways would be hard. How can you write both the fluid streams of consciousness and the hard edges of political commitment? How can you combine the subjective and the objective, if these are in fact opposite ways of understanding and presenting the world? These questions remained to be answered, if the modern novel were to make it past the challenges of postwar modernity.

Then again, the modern novel might have to become even more experimental. In its treatments of time and space, for example, maybe the modern novel had to do more, if it were going to fully trace out the new contours of the world. New places were beginning to come into their own, and to contribute new ways of conceiving spatial relations. New notions of history, new increases in speed, were in the making. Perhaps the problem was that the experimental novel had not become experimental enough to take these in.

And then there were also other questions about the value of the modern novel: did it really engage with the technological modernity that had seemed to be one of its main provocations? Was it too "highbrow" – too exclusive, too particular, too elitist? And why was it so unwilling just to tell a good story?

Airplanes and factories and film did, to some degree, inspire new styles of perception in the modern novel, but it is fair to say that fiction

had only just begun to respond to the challenge of modern technology. For the most part, even the modern novel still took a distant or defensive view of it. Such a view would perhaps always have to be part of the novel's response: perhaps it should always be the novel's job to resist or refuse what technology advances, in order to assert human values against mechanical ones. But the better part of the novel's response, some have felt, must be more absorptive, more aggressive. It must also take in the forms technology creates, make them its own, and in so doing provide the countermeasures necessary for us to take technology in hand. This the modern novel had not yet done: to become fully modern, it would in the future have to innovate forms more actively involved with those of the machine and digital ages.

It would also have to engage more openly with "lower" forms of culture. In its aesthetic pride the modern novel seemed inattentive to less aesthetic arts. It seemed too much geared to the cultural elite – for those with excellent educations, fine tastes, and aristocratic priorities. Not always, of course, since many novels (especially those by Lawrence, Joyce, Hemingway, and Cather) aimed deliberately to bring the novel down to earth. *Ulysses*, for example, revels in the popular songs and advertisements of its times, making aesthetic experiment dependent upon the energies of mass and consumer culture; Hemingway happily covered bullfights and wrote in Hollywood styles. But despite these exceptions, modern writers tended to cultivate a high audience, and therefore to suffer from what Orwell called a "severance from the common culture of the country."[4] They would rarely engage with pulp fictions, or encourage real interest in trashy popular culture, or try to be fully inclusive, and to some people this seemed to set them too much apart. Perhaps the modern novel was too precious, too "bourgeois"; it needed to rub elbows with the cheap stuff, to absorb the considerable energies of mass-cultural life. Breathing too fine an air, it risked suffocation, when the robust atmosphere of life on the ground could bring real invigoration.

And finally some needed invigoration might come with the inclusion, after all, of some good stories. As we have seen, one of the modern novel's initial gestures was the elimination of plot. Plot was false, plot was an encumbrance, and only without it could the modern novel explore consciousness and present ordinary life as it really happens. But as time passed these presumptions began to seem them-

selves encumbering. Didn't plot, after all, serve a vital cultural purpose? Aren't the shapes of plot often the most aesthetically exciting things about a novel? Don't people hunger for plot for good reasons – for the ways it gives to life just the kind of form that the modern novelists were seeking by other means? Some psychologists note what perhaps the Victorian writers – those authors of allegedly artificial plots – knew as well: that "narrative imagining – story – is the fundamental instrument of thought."[5] So perhaps the wish totally to exclude plot had been excessive. Perhaps plot could be let back in, to certain degrees, without introducing falsity or blocking narrative's access to consciousness. This was the hope of those who came to the modern novel later in its career, who would try now to make its experimental forms more flexible, and better able to engage with the fullest range of modern problems and modern needs.

Would they succeed? Although the modern novel seemed unlikely to survive the war and its aftermath, in many ways it now seems that it has. The impulse to innovate forms in the face of modernity has surely persisted – and the postwar era would produce novels as energetically modern as those of the first flowering of modern fiction. But if so, how exactly did the modern impulse it make it past resistances? If those resistances meant substantial revisions and rethinking, is it right to speak of the persistence of the *modern* novel specifically – or were the changes substantial enough to produce a new literary form? And even if the new form looked a lot like the old, is it right to call it "modern," or should we reserve that term for the specific historical phenomenon that occurred roughly 1890–1940 – before historical changes made a difference? These are the kinds of question that come up as we think about the limits of the genre – the questions we must keep in mind as we follow the modern novel into its questionable future.

In that future there is first strong dissent from everything the modern novel seemed to represent. Among, for example, the writers who in 1954 were called "the Movement," there was a deep and total sense that experimental fiction was both dangerous and dead. Novelists including Iris Murdoch and Kingsley Amis represented the popular sense that it was now necessary to return to a more strictly plain, direct, practical kind of literature, both for the sake of the good health of fiction and for the sake of the social, political, and cultural awareness of which fiction had long been a part. The modern impulse in

fiction had come to seem, to them and to others, precious, pointless, and even reckless, for the way it encouraged people to get lost in self-indulgent explorations of inner lives apart from larger social responsibility. These writers felt that the experimental aspect of the modern novel would betray the more important goal: truly to help people come to terms with modern realities.

For other writers, too, reality was now the thing, if not for the reasons Murdoch and Amis gave, then for the simple reason that reality had become itself creative enough. Philip Roth said so in 1961 in his influential essay on the state of postwar American fiction. Roth pointed out that American life offered up more than enough bizarre material to keep any fiction writer busy forever. It was itself so experimental that modern fiction could not help but be so: "the American writer in the middle of the twentieth century has his hands full in trying to understand, describe, and then make *credible* much of American reality. It stupefies, it sickens, it infuriates, and finally it is even a kind of embarrassment to one's own meager imagination. The actuality is constantly outdoing our talents." But this was not to say that modern fiction ought to press forward its experimental agenda; rather, it was to call for a return to direct, conventional, plain writing, out of a sense that such plain writing would be the best lens through which to let life's real wonders appear.[6]

This anti-experimental attitude marked a kind of end to the modern novel, but also a new beginning. New demands were made of innovation in fiction. It could not get its aesthetic innovations at the expense of the forms of culture to which it ought to be responsible. Aesthetic ideals now had to balance themselves with practical need and ordinary pleasure, with social responsibility and the needs of fantasy. What were some of the ways this new beginning began? How did writers – soon after the war, suspicious of experiment, concerned to be more real – find new grounds for the writing of new fiction?

A diverse set of trends exhibits some of the dynamic ways the modern novel remade and extended itself at this pivotal moment. Writers who wanted to keep it real but also make something new did so in the following ways: in the fiction of the *Angry Young Men* and the *Beat* generation, they got their revolutionary outlook from the real world of disaffected youth; in new fictions of sexuality, they enabled change by unleashing repressed erotic energies; in new philosophical fiction, they made "consciousness" in fiction a matter of exploring the

very nature of man's fate; and, in the case of "commonwealth literature," they simply let the emergence of new world cultures create new forms for new realities.

When the war ended, a new war began, what some called a "class war" in modern fiction – "a conflict between two worlds: the class world of the past and the declassed world of the future." In a 1958 essay on "class war in British literature," Leslie Fiedler noted that "the newer English writers" were "resolved to break at last out of a world of taste which has been, it seems to them, too long confined to the circumference of a tea table." Impatient with precious aesthetics, "the new writers [were] not *gentlemen* like their forerunners," and they represented "an attempt to redeem fiction and poetry in theme, diction and decor from the demands of one social group in the interests of another." But where would it lead? "With the weapons of crudity and righteous anger and moral bluntness, the new writers are trying to deliver literature from the circles which captured it early in this century, and restore it – to whom?"[7] Because the war had finally discredited the world's ruling classes, because the lower and working classes had become ever more conscious of the injustices that limited their lives, and because "welfare states" turned new condescension upon them, many young, less privileged writers began to tap their resentment and frustration for a new fictional form. The form in question got its name, it seems, either from Leslie Paul's *Angry Young Man* (1951) or from a play by John Osborne, *Look Back in Anger* (1956). The "anger" in these titles brought new emotional life to socially conscious fiction. Before, fiction that looked beneath the middle classes tended to do so in order to idealize, to dramatize, or to polemicize; with few exceptions, it tended to see people of lower classes as refreshingly vigorous, or inspiringly primitive, to render their lives in heroic or in grotesque terms, or to make their miseries a focus for direct political arguments. The new view taken in the fiction of the Angry Young Men was far more plain and much more complex. Nothing grand, it tended to deal in the dead ends of lives lived without much opportunity and without much interest in grand cultural growth. Very real, it tended to put plainly the crudities, indecencies, cruelties, and simply bleak acts and feelings these lives may have entailed.

This fiction's new approach to working- and lower-middle-class life dealt in no heroic emotions: its "anger" is never very specifically

justified or very ably expressed by the fiction's protagonists; instead, they are "often losers and boozers, liars, wanderers, and transients," and what you get is the quick temper, the sullen scowl, the petty furies that might in fact more realistically characterize the discontent felt by those who live at the bottom without any real sense of why or how things might change.[8] This more mitigated "anger" gives this fiction a painful precision, and the sort of blunt poetry that comes when language suits itself closely to lesser but truer emotions. A truer dialect results – not that which mimics sensationally the colorful peculiarities of the *demotic* or common way of speaking, but that which taps the energies of the emotions beneath a language whose cultural frustrations force its speakers into dynamic creativity. Here we get a variation on the sort of minimalism that an earlier generation of modern fiction had innovated in order to suggest, rather than overstate, emotional truths. It combines with the socio-political conscience of the 1930s, perhaps, to make a synthesis of spare modernist language and social realism's plots and themes.

Alan Sillitoe grew up the son of a laborer who was often out of work, and he himself did factory work at the age of 14. He didn't read much, or write anything at all, until illness during the war landed him in hospital for eighteen months. Before too long he published his first novel: *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1958) reflected his personal experiences and his relation to the tradition of literature, for it not only tells the story of a factory worker, but does so according to the rebellious impulses of the worker himself. Arthur, the book's protagonist, has no "valid" motivations. After a week's work at the bicycle factory, he just gets drunk and hits on women, and though he has some wildly violent political aspirations, things stay raw. If there is any hope, finally, for decency, it comes only romantically at the end of a book more generally given to pub high jinks and visceral acts. And following these brutal doings is a style perfectly willing to treat as normal and as literary every aspect of unconscious or vomiting drunkenness, every lascivious or sleazy mistake, and to put these aspects of an ordinary life onto a scale of values different from those which had tended to guide literary plots into cleaner, more heroical outcomes. Arthur begins *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* falling "dead drunk . . . with eleven pints of beer and seven small gins playing hide-and-seek in his stomach," down a flight of stairs at the pub, "from the top-most stair to the bottom"; he ends the novel with the thought that "there's bound

to be trouble in store for me every day of my life, because trouble it's always been and always will be." In between, we get reality unredeemed by false symbolic hopes and undramatized by "consciousness," but therefore all the more true to this moment of modern rancor.

The most famous work of angry young fiction must be Kingsley Amis's *Lucky Jim* (1954). The book's anti-hero, Jim Dixon, is a junior professor out of the lower middle class who tends toward two emotions: "real, over-mastering, orgiastic boredom, and its companion, real hatred." What bores him and rouses his hatred is the pretensions and hypocrisies of cultured intellectual life. These he constantly lampoons – most often to his own detriment – as when he characterizes his own academic work in terms of its "niggling mindlessness, its funereal parade of yawn-enforcing facts, the pseudo-light it threw on non-problems." Dixon is a very funny incompetent, whose incompetence seems wholly justified by the absurdity of what counts as success and sophistication: the fact that he never fails to make a "bad impression" counts in his favor; the fact that he perpetually makes this worse is a sign of his authenticity. At one point, he has a sort of epiphany that makes it very clear how this authenticity differs from that of Amis's modernist precursors: "The one indispensable answer to an environment bristling with people and things one thought were bad was to go on finding out new ways in which one could think they were bad." Not to redeem them, or make them the basis for psychic drama or dramatic angst, but just to keep on. As an expression of anger, *Lucky Jim* is far more interested in the sheer youthful energies of pointless rebellion than in any substantial, effective critique of the establishment. It is more concerned with emotional vigor and with social absurdity; these never come together into any positive outcome for anybody, and agitate instead toward the perpetual setting-off of low-comic, slapstick explosions.

Lucky Jim is far less serious than *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, but the books nevertheless have some important things in common. Both strongly reject the connection in high culture between truth and sophistication, seeing truth instead as the more likely property of crudity and honest plainness; both celebrate the unproductive vitalities of youth, and draw an unexpected link between that vitality and postwar youthful disaffection; both try to find styles of expression to match their new views of youth and truth – styles that would not amount simply to some zesty dialect; both get a lot of mileage out of

catastrophic drunkenness; and both assert a manic masculinity. This last shared trait is perhaps that which all Angry Young Man fiction most notably has in common: at a time in which there seemed fewer and fewer productive outlets for male striving and strength, these books seem to show us men acting out, even lashing out in order to give gladly purposeless expression to male energies that might once have been put to heroic uses.

More notorious than the Angry Young Men in England (and more fully a movement) were their contemporaries in America: the Beats. A similar cultural context – one in which cultural values seemed worn out or discredited by the war, one in which it seemed vital to give new expression to discontent – was felt as well in America, especially by a group of young poets and fiction writers who tried to turn the state of feeling *beat* into a new means of primal openness, truth, and expressive power. Jack Kerouac defined the "beat generation" as "members of the generation that came of age after World War II–Korean War who join in a relaxation of social and sexual tensions and espouse anti-regimentation, mystic-disaffiliation and material-simplicity values, supposedly as a result of Cold War disillusionment." Passionate but aimless, blasé and yet also committed to the intensities of art, and very often drunk or drugged or freaked, the Beats were a second wave of modernists: as worn out as anyone by the disasters of mid-century culture, and also disillusioned and alienated by the complacency and regimentation of postwar culture, they nevertheless felt certain that a rejuvenated and regenerated art could re-enchant the world, and they set out to prove it in part by breaking new paths for literature. These paths, spatial and emotional, took the Beats searching for authenticity and for intensity; simplicity, rejection of materialism, new mystical and otherwise heightened experience, as well as extremes of sexual and narcotic adventure were the goals, and they were goals as much in their art as in life. The movement began with a group of friends who identified with the down-and-out side of New York City, finding something real in its frank exhaustion and disaffection; it then became a full-fledged literary movement as general impulses focused into a kind of countercultural cool aesthetic. The public reading of Allen Ginsberg's poem *Howl* (1955) proved a huge and pivotal event for this counterculture – as did the publication in 1957 of Jack Kerouac's novel *On the Road*.

For better and for worse, *On the Road* shows how the cultivation of new social freedoms could reinvigorate the modern novel. The shape of life on the road demands all of the randomness, skepticism, and plotless progress of modernist narration; and the pursuits of life on the road contribute the transcendent, essential style of seeing and feeling that gave modernist randomness its higher purpose. When they all come together here, however, the result has a sort of authenticity to which few modernists could lay claim: for this transcendent randomness weaves through not just "ordinary" life but low life, and the difference is substantial.

On the Road proceeds in episodes that vary a lot but stay essentially the same. Sal Paradise hits the road with his bad-influence drifter friend Dean, and does so again and again, whenever time spent in any particular place gets played out. In its stray-dog, empty-sky movements, the realism here gets harsh, and yet it mixes with a kind of mysticism that outstrips even modernist transcendence. At one point, for example, Sal hits an ecstasy that almost parodically outdoes most modernist epiphanies:

> I had reached the point of ecstasy that I always wanted to reach, which was the complete step across chronological time into timeless shadows, and wonderment in the bleakness of the mortal realm . . . into the holy void of uncreated emptiness, the potent and inconceivable radiancies shining in bright Mind Essence, innumerable lotus-lands falling open in the magic mothswarm of heaven.

The excuse for this outlandish mysticism – in a time when literary experiment had come to seem trivial and precious – was the reality of extreme states produced by drugs, alcohol, and free, wild living. So there is no distinction between the real and the unreal, the actual and the aesthetic. This joining, so helpful to the down-and-out modern novel, happened as a result less of deliberate aesthetic experiment than of the recklessly total experiment of Beat culture. A Sal puts it, "the road is life," and even if it screws you up, that is a "holy goof," and you arrive perpetually at "the ragged and ecstatic joy of pure being."

The Beats and the Angry Young Men represented a new postwar counterculture – the alternative culture that emerged to fill the vacuum left when high-cultural values proved inauthentic and

conventional "bourgeois" life lost its hold. Since the novel was fundamentally a "bourgeois" form, however, this emergence required some serious retooling, and that is why the fiction of these writers sounded so unlike that of the past. The difference was mainly one of tone: even in the most radical and experimental novels of the past you could expect to hear some echoes of the faith and hope upon which the classical novel had been built. But here, nihilism prevailed – and not the sort of noble, tragic nihilism characteristic of the modernist novel at its darkest. This nihilism was bland, blasé, and very distant from any sense of the alternative. If the earlier modernist writers went nihilistic, they did so with a keen sense of what they were missing – with a tragic sense of past opportunities lost. But the angry young writers of this newer generation were far more aimless; their anger was undirected, and their stories lacked the edge of those striving to rebuild or rediscover a lost world. Did the difference detract from the modern novel – or did it perhaps make it a more authentic register of the psychic pattern of modernity?

The answer to this question perhaps comes in fiction by writers less central to these essentially social movements. For example, Beat and Angry energy is channeled into powerfully meaningful allegory by Ken Kesey. In *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1962), he makes this energy the basis for social symbolism. In a mental institution, an outcast and anti-social group of men comes to symbolize, individually and together, the anger and exhaustion but also the idealism of angry-young-male disaffection. The novel's anti-hero, McMurphy, is a sort of Beat savior, defying the hospital administration and getting his fellow inmates to rediscover their lost powers of honor and virility. His character, and its power of redemption, are summed up the first time he lays a symbolic hand on the narrator, an inmate he will ultimately rescue:

> I remember real clear the way that hand looked: there was carbon under the fingernails where he'd worked once in a garage; there was an anchor tatooed back from the knuckles; there was a dirty Band-Aid on the middle knuckle, peeling up at the edge. All the rest of the knuckles were covered with scars and cuts, old and new . . . The palm was callused, and the calluses were cracked, and dirt was worked into the cracks. A road map of his travels up and down the West. That palm made a scuffing sound against my hand. I remember the fingers were thick and strong

> closing over mine, and my hand commenced to feel peculiar and went to swelling up out there on my stick of an arm, like he was transmitting his own blood into it. It rang with blood and power.

McMurphy's hand is a symbol of a movement, and its transfusion of power is what both that movement and its fiction might have hoped for: intensity channeled through real strength and tough experience, to bring culture back to life. To "ring with blood and power" is to tune anger to symbolical expression, and to make this generation's war a "restoration."

Were there Beat and Angry young women? Was there a comparable women's style of writing, which expressed a specifically female disaffection or anger? Even if women could not have had the freedoms that enabled such negative emotions to find social forms of expression, they nevertheless mounted similar rebellions against the force of modern conventionality. The target here was sexist ideology, rather than bourgeois conformity and other such stifling distinctions of class. Ultimately these rebellions would take shape in the shattering feminist experiments of later decades. At this stage, they prompted influential expressions of dawning feminist consciousness.

An apt partner to Beat fiction is a novel that also sets up a strong dramatic contrast between a corrupt world and an idealistic young person: Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963). The disaffection in question here is specifically that felt by a brilliant young woman with few options: Esther Greenwood, were she a man, would have had any number of outlets for her superior intelligence and imagination, but as a woman she can either get married or work as a typist. Such seem to be her options when she wins a contest to become a guest editor at a women's magazine, and these options soon pitch her into a massive state of depression. Plath's novel then becomes ironic: institutionalized and insane, Esther nevertheless sees things with acid clarity, and the paradox here perfectly defines the trap that feminists would subsequently turn into an object of political complaint. In Esther's case, the irony is merely crippling, until a good woman doctor lets her know that her anger is not pathological but justified. Then, she recovers, but not before Plath has endowed the modern novel with her irony's creative contribution: new with her is the voice of the angry young woman, unique and notable for the way it sharpens feminine sweetness with a lacerating, vindictive edge, so that the gentleness and

indirection of a woman's voice become the better half of satire. For example, when Esther is asked to reflect upon the benevolence of her benefactress, who has endowed her scholarship and is one of the women who seem to offer Esther no model for happy womanhood, she says,

> I knew I should be grateful to Mrs. Guinea, only I couldn't feel a thing. If Mrs. Guinea had given me a ticket to Europe, or a round-the-world cruise, it wouldn't have made one scrap of difference to me, because wherever I sat – on the deck of a ship or at a street café in Paris or Bangkok – I would be sitting under the same glass bell jar, stewing in my own sour air.

Here we get the novel's main metaphor, and also its typical tone: always restraining anger and resentment, always a good girl, Esther makes the bell jar she stews in, but indicates she knows so in every mildly bitter word she says.

In the work of Doris Lessing, we might see finally how this generation's anger could truly renew the modern experiment. Lessing shared Plath's discontent with the roles open to women and with the effects of sexist ideologies upon their states of mind. For her, however, the experimental forms of literature become means of freedom and sources of redemptive psychic strength. *The Golden Notebook* (1962) is a novel with six sections, each devoted to a different aspect of a woman's effort to find independence and freedom. Each different "notebook" takes on a different aspect of the ideologies that perniciously shape a woman's world. A "blue" notebook ultimately tries for a sense of reality beyond these ideologies – beyond the linguistic and social rules a woman normally must follow. But the effort falls to pieces, as if to say that such a "modernist" approach can only end in madness and disaster. What's needed, instead, is what finally comes in the "golden" notebook, where a new psychic integrity takes shape. "The essence of the book, the organization of it, everything in it, says implicitly and explicitly, that we must not divide things off, must not compartmentalize": with this summary statement, Lessing indicates a wish to shape the modern novel into new unity.

Lessing's novel finally gives us a new forms for fragmentation and perspective. Taken as a broken whole, it marks a pivotal advance upon the kind of fragmentation and perspective at work in the prior gener-

ations of modern fiction. For Lessing's notebook-fragments take a more actively organizing approach to the breakdown of society. What would have been smaller pieces, in the more fully shattered works of an earlier generation's modernism, here are full facets of our broken world. They do not fit together – that is the problem for Lessing's heroine – but each of them is a fully self-conscious take on distinct versions of life. Modernism revives here, with a difference. What had been falling apart is taken in hand and investigated, reshaped. Not pieced back together, however, since Lessing does not at all want to suggest that the world has regained coherence. Not reformed, but concerted: the "notebooks" of *The Golden Notebook* show us modern fragmentation taking a new shape. These fragments are lenses, diverse ways of seeing what now fractures the modern world. The break is caused less by chaos than by *reflexivity* – the self-conscious dismantling of the parts of a book, the deliberate self-scrutiny of the workings of different ideological views. Lessing's novel shows us modernism developing, through anger, to new kind of self-awareness, addressing some of the problems that had made the modern novel insufficient to modern needs, and moving forward into styles that would soon bring the modern novel into wholly new territory.

Anger, disaffection, and worn-out resignation at first gave the modern novel new ways to respond to modernity. Modernity meant excessive rationality, materialism, and conformity, and so the modern impulse was to become brutal, rebellious, mystical, and ascetic – in plot and in theme, but also in form. Modernity, however, also meant new freedom, and in their new freedom the Beats and the Angry Young Men could hit the road or act out and let their novels do the same. Women were somewhat less free, and perhaps that accounts for the greater formal freedom found in *The Golden Notebook*. Imaginative forms – this new, self-conscious use for the fragments into which life's aspects have broken – become for Lessing the means of rebellion. Soon enough many more writers, men and women alike, would find that freedom demanded the sort of reconception of life's fundamentals that imaginative fiction could enable. Then, as we will see, the modern impulse revives, and even exceeds itself by becoming *postmodern*.

If the question for the modern writer now was how to be experimental without losing practical engagement, how to have newness without preciosity, power without naive idealism, politics without preaching, then answers came in various modes of writing that seemed

to make rebellion rigorous and vigorous – in Angry fiction, as we have seen, and also when the novel spanned the heights and the depths of *existentialism* and *sex*.

Back in 1938, Samuel Beckett published *Murphy*, a novel that had seemed too unreal even for Modernism. Its protagonist is alienated beyond reason: Murphy spends much of his time sitting alone strapped into a chair, confining his body so that his mind can escape the world and become fully free of all social, cultural, and physical realities.

> He sat naked in his rocking chair . . . Seven scarves held him in position. Two fastened his shins to the rockers, one his thighs to the seat, two his breast and belly to the back, one his wrists to the strut behind. Only the most local movements were possible . . . Somewhere a cuckoo-clock, having struck between twenty and thirty, became the echo of a street cry . . . These were the sights and sounds he did not like. They detained him in the world to which they belonged, but not he, as he fondly hoped . . . He sat in his chair in this way because it gave him pleasure! First it gave his body pleasure, it appeased his body. Then it set him free in his mind. For it was not until his body was appeased that he could come alive in his mind.

Here is solipsism beyond anything found in any modernist consciousness; and here there is also a skepticism so withering that nothing seems any longer to matter or even really to exist. Absurdity has taken over, and Beckett has taken the modernist tendency to question reality to a farthest extreme. But it might make more sense to call his experiment by another name. It seems too philosophical, too absurd, and too unreal to count as modernist – since modernist fiction tends to dislike explicit philosophy and to covet more ordinary intensity. As Murphy's chair becomes a way for him to see himself as "a mote in the dark of absolute freedom," *Murphy* seems instead to become an example of the kind of fiction inspired by existential philosophy.

"Existence comes before essence": persons have no essential being, no god-given necessities, but must make themselves in the process of doing and living; according to the existentialist philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre, they are fully, painfully free to make themselves who they are. But the freedom here is good and bad. It means total self-determination, but it was a terrible source of dread, for it means that there is nothing certain to fall back on: human realities, ideals, ethics,

and actions have constantly to be made up on an individual basis. This is a total responsibility: "it puts every man in possession of himself as he is, and places the entire responsibility for his existence squarely upon his own shoulders."[9] Not to bear the responsibility is to live in bad faith – to be *inauthentic*. To pretend that life is not a very daunting matter of free choice, and to shirk the responsibility always to create the meaning of existence, is to live a lie. To exist authentically, it is necessary to embark perpetually on existential quests – quests for meaning threatened always by the intrinsic absurdity of existence. As Albert Camus put it, authenticity in the face of absurdity means that

> the absurd man . . . catches sight of a burning and frigid, transparent and limited universe in which nothing is possible but everything is given, and beyond which all is collapse and nothingness. He can then decide to accept such a universe and draw from it his strength, his refusal to hope, and the unyielding evidence of a life without consolation.[10]

Authenticity demands something like what Murphy takes to such an absurd extreme: a search beyond the false consolations of conventional life and conventional perception for the meanings true freedom can create.

If we think about existentialism in the context of the development of the modern novel, we might see how it helped the modern novel get past its problem with reality. For what we get in existentialist fiction is both extreme experiment and extreme responsibility. Indeed, the whole point of existential philosophy is to "commit." This commitment is a perfect point of connection between creativity and realism. It was strangely both pragmatic and unreal – seriously pledged and absurdly detached – and the combination gave the modern novel a way at once to speak purposeful truths and dissolve into the "nothingness" of creative consciousness.

A fine example of the combination is Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952). The central concern here is racism, and the dilemmas it creates in the life of a young man in New York City who must choose between responsibility to racial progress and the freedom simply to be an individual self. The title's key word, "invisible," refers to a couple of things: on the one hand, it refers to the protagonist's invisibility as a black man in a white world ("I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me"); on the other hand, it refers to his chance

to step "outside history," into total freedom, and give up on painful struggles toward racial equality. Already in invisibility's double meanings we can see how this story about racial identity takes on an existential cast. It is all about the anxiety one feels in a wholly random, pointless world, all about the painful necessities of responsibility created by the fact that meaning is only what one makes, even if that freedom seems a good excuse not to take action. The racial problem intensifies the existential anxieties and aspirations, for they take on an added socio-political charge. Ellison's invisible man is "free" in a truly terrible way – free from personhood, due to racism; his responsibilities, as a result, are vastly unbearable; and the temptations of inauthenticity, or invisibility, are great. But then so are the possibilities of heroism, for insofar as the protagonist here makes invisibility's freedom a positive force – mainly by associating it with the powerful immateriality of modern writing – he triumphs. "Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak to you?": in this last question, *Invisible Man* speaks the triumph of an existentialist modern novel that can *freely engage*, of what Ellison himself called "that fictional *vision* of an ideal democracy in which the actual combines with the ideal and gives us representations of a state of things in which the highly placed and the lowly, the black and the white . . . are combined to tell us of transcendent truths and possibilities."[11]

The moment of existential fiction quickly passed, but left lasting legacies. The existential dilemma would become a permanent feature of novelistic characterization. The quest for the purpose of existence would afterwards frequently mix in this fashion with a character's real-world obligations and values. And so the existential mix – its way of questioning fundamentals while forcing engagement – would set the pattern for future efforts at a pragmatic kind of experimentation. Whenever abstract questions sound over visceral or brutal events, or characters express anguish about *nothing*; when detachment seems at once a curse and a kind of sweet oblivion, within which characters must choose a definitive fate, then we see existentialism contributing its particular philosophical questioning to the modern novel's long-standing effort to question reality.

And we also see it renewing philosophical fiction more generally. Explicitly philosophical fiction had gone out of style with the advent of the modern novel. As we have seen, modern writers disliked the preachy, objective, lifeless styles that philosophical writing seemed to

demand. Those writers were certainly philosophical in their own way, but their way meant philosophy by implication, or dramatic speculation, rather than any overt philosophizing. But as a result of the existential influence – its inherent drama and intensity – philosophy was able once again to become a more explicit part of fiction. In Iris Murdoch, for example, we have a writer initially influenced by existentialism but ultimately a more broadly philosophical novelist, one who made the "novel of ideas" once again a kind of modern fiction.

Murdoch was a member of "the Movement," that group of writers that demanded a revolt against precious modernist experiments and a return to a more sensible kind of fiction. But she also knew that fiction could not be plainly realistic and survive. In her essay "Against dryness," she laments the loss of a sense of fundamental and transcendent values, the absence now of a full theory of human personality and existence. "We have been left with far too shallow and flimsy an idea of human personality," she writes, as a result of the fact that "we no longer see man against a background of values, of realities, which transcend him."[12] Writers, she felt, had lost serious connections to serious explanations. Things had dried up, gone small-scale, and while the "crystalline" alternative of modernist writing had been evasive in its own way, it at least had longings toward some supreme reference. Something like it, but more morally serious, and more responsible, seemed necessary to Murdoch, and so she came up with a new kind of philosophical fiction. At first, she did so in an existential vein, but ultimately she moved beyond the excessively romantic freedom of existentialism to develop a unique philosophical style – less anxious, more practical, and yet also more engaged with re-establishing a background of values.

In *The Sea, the Sea* (1978), Murdoch takes a powerful man and sees what happens when he tries to leave reality and become master of a self-contained world of his own. Charles Arrowby has been a hugely successful stage-director, and he decides to retire to a house by the sea – to isolate himself and thereby to make his world pure and perfect. Of course he fails, and in the process we are treated to what is really a philosophical speculation about the nature of the will and the fallacies of desire. He finally realizes something like what Murdoch herself had to say about moral realities: "What innumerable chains of fatal causes one's vanity, one's jealousy, one's cupidity, one's cowardice

have laid upon the earth to be traps for others. It's strange that when I went to the sea I imagined I was giving up the world." Such a statement must seem entirely unmodern, being so explicitly "viewy," and coming as it does at the end of a novel whose form is apparently fully conventional. Murdoch narrates in Arrowby's first-person, subjective voice, but we get little of the confusion and uncertainty that had been the hallmarks of modernist fiction. But even so, the philosophical mode becomes experimental, because Murdoch has remade "the now so unfashionable naturalistic idea of character": showing how "real people are destructive of myth," how "contingency is destructive of fantasy and opens the way for the imagination," and how both can "give us a new vocabulary of experience, and a truer picture of freedom," Murdoch faces the loss of fundamental values caused by modernity by proposing conceptual frameworks that might take their place.[13]

Insofar as such philosophical fictions could make the "novel of ideas" a way to experiment with form (as in the case of Beckett's existential departures, Ellison's invisible freedom, Murdoch's morality), then it also helped the modern novel to solve its problems with reality. For these were ways to arrive at the responsibility wanted by the fiction writers of the day while also pushing off into new worlds of aesthetic imagination.

Inverse to this approach was another way of getting innovation and reality at the same time. Inverse to philosophy, in a sense, was sexuality. Letting sexuality express itself in fiction, many mid-century writers got in touch with the most visceral of realities; at the same time, the dynamics of sexual desire forced fiction into new – and newly experimental – styles and techniques.

We have already seen how this began to happen in the first phases of modern fiction. In *Ulysses*, Leopold Bloom's status as an anti-hero has a lot to do with his tendency toward masochism: he likes the idea of being dominated by women, and chapter 15 of the novel is devoted to fantasies of domination by a manly prostitute: to the dominatrix Bella Cohen, who booms, "henceforth you are unmanned and mine in earnest, a thing under the yoke," Bloom cries, "Exuberant female. Enormously I desiderate your domination . . . Master! Mistress! Mantamer!" Such dark erotic fantasies made a big difference to fiction: they proved that desire can unman reason, can work against you, and

dramatized the changing roles our desires force us to play. In the novels of D. H. Lawrence, sex comes to rule over thought: Lawrence's belief that modern culture had grown too abstract and too intellectual led him to physicalize his fiction, to let instincts reshape it. One main way he did so was to emphasize the power of erotic motives. His *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928) scandalized the world with its frank treatment of sexual desire. What was really shocking about it was the way it put erotic motives first: the story of an upper-class woman who invites the sexual dominance of a lower-class man, it suggested that sex had far more power to it than all other priorities. Sexual transgression here becomes a new way to tell the truth about human motivation. Before, it had been demonized, or sex had been repressed; once the subject of Lawrence's idealization, however, it became the essence of modern rebellion, and one of the best ways to refute the lies and hypocrisies of civilized society. Moreover, eroticism gave new patterns to fiction. Visceral inconsistency replaced reasoned progressions; explosive feeling broke the evenness of objective narration. Such changes would continue to happen as eroticism became an ever more potent way to challenge social norms and to wake fiction up to reality.

In the same year as Lawrence published *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, another book appeared that was similarly deemed "obscene": *The Well of Loneliness* by Radclyffe Hall. Hall broke the silence about lesbianism, which had hardly ever been publicly acknowledged even as a possibility. *The Well of Loneliness* shares with these other modern novels the sense that the erotic body needed to speak new truths to the world. At a more brutal level the same need is manifest in Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer* (1934). Miller's book is the story of an American drifter in Paris, scraping by in bohemian style, dissolving into drink, but indulging also in erotic specialties that put sex into an entirely new class of experience. The book made sex a form of dissent, a new kind of self-disclosure, and brought fiction to new heights of obscenity. To a shocked readership, when Miller's anti-hero disregards all civilized rules and expectations, and subjects himself, women, and language to the primal appetites of erotic life, he seems to reduce fiction to mere brutality. But in doing so he also fights the dehumanizing forces of modernity, by trying to get far past conventional morality to discover the desires that make people authentically human. As Anaïs Nin wrote about *Tropic of Cancer*, "here is a book which . . . might restore our appetite for the fundamental realities," by fighting against the bad

detachment of modern life: "In a world grown paralyzed with introspection and constipated by delicate mental meals this brutal exposure of the substantial body comes as a vitalizing current of blood." For the modern novel, this revitalization meant "a swing forward into unbeaten areas": like other modern writers, Nin said, Miller wanted "to shock, to startle the lifeless ones from their profound slumber," but he did so knowing that "art is passing" because it had become bloodless. He knew, in other words, that the experiments of modern fiction could be a kind of "anaesthesia," and that only total erotic honesty could give the "blood transfusion" modern fiction needed to survive.[14]

What writers like Woolf and James had wanted of essential truth and obscure motivations is delivered here without loss to fiction's flesh and blood. In fact it is possible to say that these things are not only not lost, but aesthetically regained – and for that reason, modern sexuality became one of the best ways for the modern novel to renew itself. It all comes down to the strange implications of the key term: sexual freedom. Freedom could encourage the higher liberties the modern novel had always wanted to take, but sexuality guaranteed the vitality the modern novel had not always enjoyed.

Vladmir Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955) is perhaps the best example of this trend – of the way the theme of shocking sexuality enhanced the vitality and viability of modern fiction. Humbert Humbert is a pederast: he is desperate to have sex with a pre-adolescent girl, to explore the "perilous magic of nymphets," and succeeds in doing so, after no small amount of maneuvering and manipulation. This would hardly seem promising material for a modern novel: the iconoclasm is typical, but too sensational, too irreedemable; this plot would seem completely at odds with the superiority and subtlety modern novels have tended to value. But Nabokov's goal is not simply to tell a shocking story. He challenges this most unchallenged of taboos not just for the sake of sensational iconoclasm, but to pursue truth anywhere, as long as it will invigorate language and art. He pushes the *aesthetic* motive to its furthest extreme – achieving in the voice of his narrator the most fantastic eloquence, even at the risk of the most abysmal corruption. Reflecting on the allegedly meaningless obscenity of *Lolita*, Nabokov wrote, "For me a work of fiction exists only insofar as it affords me what I shall bluntly call aesthetic bliss, that is a sense of being somehow, somewhere, connected with other states of being where art (curiosity, tenderness, kindness, ecstasy) is the norm."[15] Where art is

the norm, morality is irrelevant: this is the aesthetic position, perhaps the key motivation for modernist experimentation, but pushed self-consciously to an extreme in order to test and clarify the power of art. Outlaw sexuality enables Nabokov to advance the aesthetic agenda without departing into the aesthete's notorious detachment; when Humbert Humbert realizes in despair that without Lolita, "I have only words to play with!," we realize that this is much to play with indeed, and that aesthetic bliss is our reward, at least, for Humbert's criminality.

Narrative perversity here becomes the place where experiment and reality meet. It is so also in the early fiction of Angela Carter, for whom sex is always *gothic* – always the expression of the cultural imagination's most grotesque fantasies. Sex therefore endows Carter's books with fantastic enrichments, even as it enables her to analyze the darker motives of desire. In *The Magic Toyshop* (1967), Carter makes something that ought to be charming and delightful (a magic toyshop) an elaborate metaphor for men's sadistic sexual domination of women. A young girl has been orphaned and sent to live with her uncle, whose toyshop is a scene of obscure violence and horror: severed hands turn up in drawers, family members are brutalized into muteness, and all are subjected like puppets in a grotesque parody of children's theater. At the climax of the novel, Melanie is forced to play the role of Leda to a massive puppet swan – to be raped by it, in a scene of absurd horror:

> Now she herself was on stage with an imitation swan . . . Looking up, she could see Uncle Philip directing its movements . . . The swan made a lumpish jump forward and settled on her loins. She thrust with all her force to get rid of it but the wings came down around her like a tent and its head fell forward and nestled in her neck. The gilded beak dug deeply into the soft flesh. She screamed, hardly realising she was screaming. She was covered completely by the swan but for her kicking feet and her screaming face. The obscene swan had mounted her.

The excessive symbolism here is Carter's way of getting at the horrors of female sexual subjugation. Anything more subtle might have lost just how much sexual initiation, for a girl like Melanie, really is absurd and horrid; patriarchy, Carter wants to suggest, is as excessively dehumanizing and sexually violent as this scene is silly and crude. As

with Nabokov, we get a perverse imagination able at once to tell new truths and achieve rare aesthetic intensity; again, we get the modern combination, now by other (sexual) means, and without the limiting delicacy of some modern writing.

In erotic and existential fiction we get two of the new approaches to reality that enabled modern experimentation to ground itself in the fundamentals of real life. They were powerful means toward this end because of the way they could be at once so fundamental and so fantastic. They could run the range from strong social engagement (in *Invisible Man* and *The Magic Toyshop*) to bizarre lost minds (in the complicated pseudo-reason of *Murphy* and *Lolita*); they could give us both the real life of the body and the aesthetic creativity of the wildest imagination; they could widen the range of the modern fiction to novels of ideas (those of Iris Murdoch) and to stories of raw sex (in *Tropic of Cancer*). And so we see the modern novel pressing on by finding more chances for its way of shaping experience to mold modernity into livable forms.

But the novel found such chances even more abundantly by looking in places it had not gone before. For the first modern novelists, change took formal effort; to make the novel modern, it was necessary to try for new forms of description, characterization, narration, and the effort was optional, since it was possible (though to these novelists undesirable) to write traditionally despite the widespread changes of modern times. For a later group of modern novelists, however, change was not optional. Simply by virtue of living and writing in emerging cultures – in cultures emerging from imperial domination into self-determination – these novelists could only write in new ways about new things. As writers in Africa, India, the Caribbean, and other places that had not yet made the novel their own began to tell their stories, they modernized fiction – making it find ways to speak the languages and perspectives of cultures created by modernity but not yet a part of fiction's way of being new.

As a boy, V. S. Naipaul wanted to be a writer, but "together with the wish there had come the knowledge that the literature that had given me the wish came from another world, far away from our own." He came from a family of Indian immigrants who lived in Trinidad, and he would ultimately become a Nobel-Prize-winning novelist, but found at first that his "commonwealth" background kept him distant

from literary culture. He loved to read Conrad and Huxley and wanted to imitate them, but "when it came to the modern writers their stress on their own personalities shut me out: I couldn't pretend to be a Maugham in London or Huxley or Ackerley in India." "The books themselves I couldn't enter on my own. I didn't have the imaginative key": the modern novel lacked the range to reach him, and he could not unlock it until travel and education in London and Oxford closed the distance. But then Naipaul turned around and closed the distance in another way. From London, he discovered the theme and the voice that would make him a writer and also help change the future of the novel. At first unable to write (still without the "imaginative key"), Naipaul realized his material had to be the "mixed life" of the city streets of Trinidad, mixed further with "the ways and manners of a remembered India," and captured in a "mixed voice" – Indian, Spanish, British. The mixed life in the mixed voice became Naipaul's first novels, *The Mystic Masseur* (1957) and *Miguel Street* (1959), early advances in the modern novel's progress into other worlds.[16]

This was the phase of "commonwealth" fiction – a moment between anti-imperialist writing written by outsiders (Conrad, Forster) and the later moment in which more fully "postcolonial" novelists would really develop wholly new political concepts and languages. It was an interim phase of first experiments, from English-speaking nations in the first phases of postimperial independence – from India, independent in 1947, and countries in Africa that began to fight for and get independence throughout the 1950s and 1960s. It was the first moment of a change that would prove crucial to the life of the modern novel, by creating a new demand for fiction's experimental means of reckoning with modernity's upheavals.

A key novel here is Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958), the book that was among the first to shift the international focus of fiction to make it include new cultural forms and new political perspectives. *Things Fall Apart* is the story of imperial adventure into Africa, a familiar story – but told now from the point of view of the colonized. The book focuses on one heroic Ibo warrior and leader, Okonkwo, who has a tragic flaw: his father had been an embarrassment, a lazy man who never worked hard enough or attained honor sufficient to take the "titles" that made Ibo men great. Determined to make up for his father's inadequacies, Okonkwo becomes too rigid, too single-minded, and too proud, so that when white men come to his land he is unable

to adapt. "His whole life was dominated by fear, the fear of failure and of weakness," and ironically that fear makes him unable to succeed – unable to help his clan change with the times. The inability here is, in part, heroical: Okonkwo resists the encroachments of white rule, at a moment in which the willingness to adapt would lead to the ruin of Ibo culture. But his inflexibility is also weakness, for it leads to his suicide – an utter disgrace according to Ibo values. Focusing on Okonkwo, Achebe presents a complex account of the "contact" between African and western cultures. Had he simply described a wholly good character ruined by imperialism, his novel would have been politically effective but two-dimensional; had he described a faulty Ibo culture giving way easily to imperialism, he would have made no difference to the tradition of books that had been, for some time, describing Africa as if it had no valid cultures of its own. But by combining these two approaches – stressing both the strengths and weaknesses of Ibo culture – Achebe gets at the complexity of the situation of "contact" and the worthy complexity of African peoples. For his treatment of them describes the full range of cultural attributes; it allows them weakness as well as strength, and above all the sort of ambiguity in cultural traditions that reflects a rich history and a rich tradition of legal, economic, and spiritual development.

Another notable "commonwealth" novel is Naipaul's best early book, *A House for Mr Biswas* (1961). It tells the story of a man's effort to build himself a suitable house amid a culture both rich and repressive – the culture of the Indian immigrant community on the Caribbean island of Trinidad. Ultimately he succeeds, and even if the house he builds falls far short of his hopes, its symbolic meaning is unquestionable. "As a boy he had moved from one house of strangers to another" – and since then it had been one decaying, clumsy, rented or borrowed house after another, living shabbily or in someone else's space. But finally he gets his "own portion of the earth," and the satisfaction is vital:

> How terrible it would have been, at this time, to be without it: to have died among the Tulsis, amid the squalor of that large, disintegrating and indifferent family; to have left Shama and the children among them, in one room; worse, to have lived without even attempting to lay claim to one's portion of the earth; to have lived and died as one had been born, unnecessary and unaccommodated.

Clearly, the house symbolizes a kind of postimperial emergence, from a "large, disintegrating and indifferent" empire into one's own place on earth. But the house also becomes more specifically an allegorical symbol for the emergence of the "commonwealth" writer. Houses had long been symbols for fiction itself – in, for example, Henry James's treatment, in his preface to *The Portrait of a Lady*, of "the house of fiction" – and Naipaul falls into that tradition by having Mr Biswas simultaneously seek his house and a career as a writer. But Naipaul also make that tradition new, for this "house of fiction" raises different questions: what should it be like, this "house" built with few resources by a man out to defy both the expectations of his immigrant culture and the possibilities open to the immigrant entrepreneur? What fiction can be built by him, or by Naipaul, trying to cobble together the means to make it from what material comes to Trinidad, and from the "mixed" material passed down through the different cultures that live there? As the novel attempts to answer these questions, it tries to customize the materials of fiction for new cultural structures, and in the process it makes fiction accommodate new modern needs – those of a Mr Biswas, now, who "had lived in many houses," and found it all too easy to "think of those houses without him."

The great virtue of commonwealth fiction for the modern novel was an unprecedented justification of the aspiration to face modernity with new forms. It gave this justification because "modernity" was perhaps nowhere more palpable than in the former colonies of the world, where ambiguous change was the essence of every aspect of life. It did because new forms were natural to writers starting whole new traditions, and so clearly at work in such things as the "contact" novels and house-fictions of writers like Achebe and Naipaul. And it did because these novels had such enlarging effects on the political consciences, the psychologies, and the aesthetic boundaries of the cultures that the writers wanted to change. Many people object to the naming these novels "commonwealth fiction," because that name implies that the writing done in these other places is one thing and subject to the British empire. Salman Rushdie, for example, thought the term "unhelpful and even a little distasteful," for the way it created a "ghetto," the effect of which was to "change the meaning of the far broader term 'English literature' . . . into something far narrower, something topographical, nationalistic, possibly even racially segregationist." And indeed this writing would not fully come into its own

until it went more fully "post"colonial in later decades. But "commonwealth" does mark a first stage of emergence – a stage in fiction we might usefully place after "imperial" but before the "post-colonial" in the sequence of modern fiction's advancement into global cultures.[17]