

**Thatcherism and the Fiction of Liberal Dissent: The 'State
of the Nation' Novel in the 1980s**

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Abstract

This thesis provides an examination of a revival of the 'state of the nation' novel in response to political and cultural conditions of Britain in the 1980s. Encompassing individual authors such as Ian McEwan, Martin Amis and Margaret Drabble as well as examples of campus fiction and zeitgeist personification, it analyses a variety of fictional critiques of Thatcherism and the 'enterprise culture'. It addresses both the cultural position of these works within the context of liberal dissent and the political implications of their fictional modes of opposition. Adopting the end of the post-war consensus and its cultural ideals as an informing framework, it investigates the ideological and aesthetic challenges posed by a period of social, economic and political transition. Drawing attention to the connections between the 'state of the nation' form, liberal realism and the idea of a common culture, it explores the engagement of these novels with the difficulties of representing, and responding to, the fractured condition of Britain in the 1980s. It identifies a series of narrative tensions that highlight an intensification of the traditional problems of delineating and encapsulating the 'nation'. Furthermore, these formal tensions are examined in relation to the political limitations of liberal-humanism and the discordance between consensus ideals and the ideological and cultural directions of the decade. Ultimately, this thesis evaluates the cogency of these fictional expressions of liberal dissent in the context of the 1980s and addresses the question of whether the 'state of the nation' novel remains an adequate aesthetic framework for the analysis, and critical dissection, of contemporary Britain.

For Susan and Patricia

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Introduction

Critical and Literary Contexts

More than any change of government since 1945, Margaret Thatcher's election victory was taken as marking a decisive shift in the national mood, politically, intellectually, and culturally.¹

As a subject for cultural and literary analysis the 1980s carries the obvious attraction of being one of the most clearly circumscribed decades of the twentieth-century, conveniently bounded by Margaret Thatcher's premiership and politically dominated by the combination of policies and doctrines designated as 'Thatcherism'. Of course, this circumscription is not entirely unproblematic, the use of 1979 as a demarcation tends to elide continuities in economic policy from the previous government, while the implication of a consistent political project threatens to ignore the skilful pragmatism that became a defining characteristic of Thatcherite politics. Yet in spite of these important qualifications the decade retains a 'basic coherence'² as a critical framework, perhaps most notably because the 'Thatcher era' was coetaneously apprehended as a radical political departure that transformed the political, economic and cultural climate of the nation. However, this coherence exists in stark contrast with the splintering directions of the British novel in the 1980s and the emergence of a fictional scene that did 'little to help those critics who like their literature to come in the forms of clear movements, tendencies, and ideologies.'³ Unlike the political engagement that characterises British cinema of the period,⁴ the turbulent social changes wrought by Thatcherism

¹ Kenneth O. Morgan, *The People's Peace: British history since 1945*, 2nd edn. (Oxford: OUP, 1999), p. 437.

² John Hill, *British Cinema in the 1980s* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), p. 3.

³ Malcolm Bradbury, 'Introduction', in Malcolm Bradbury and Judy Cooke (eds.), *New Writing* (London: Minerva, 1992), p. 8.

⁴ This engagement underpins the analysis of both Hill, *British Cinema in the 1980s* and Lester Friedman (ed.), *British Cinema and Thatcherism: Fires Were Started* (London: UCL Press, 1993).

did not become the dominant subject for contemporary fiction. Indeed, the revival of the 'state of the nation' novel was something of an exception amidst a prevalent inattention to the domestic sphere, a disparity illustrated by Kemp's observation that 'the most striking feature of British fiction of the 1980s is how much of it is set neither in Britain nor the 1980s.'⁵ As this implies, the decade has been commonly viewed as marking an expansion from the limited thematic scope of post-war realism. It witnessed a revival of the grotesque and apocalyptic visions; examinations of an imperial past and the fiction of historical 'archaeology';⁶ the intensification of place in the British regional novel; and a new international geography provided by a diversity of ethnic, racial, and bi-cultural perspectives. This expansion was also evident in a diffusion of narrative styles, an 'aesthetic pluralism'⁷ in which conventional genres and forms coexisted, combined, and were transfigured by a trend towards modes of fabulation, metafiction and the grotesque. As many critics have noted, the aesthetic and cultural diversity that emerged during the 1980s fundamentally challenged the traditional parameters of the 'English' novel, the heterogeneous national identifications represented by these novels invalidating conceptions of Britain and Britishness as 'something single, whole, white, male, centralised, predictable, pure.'⁸ Although this may exaggerate the narrowness of the British novel prior to the 1980s,⁹ the increasingly multicultural and international dimensions of fiction undoubtedly render the 'state of the nation' novel a somewhat atypical development within the literary directions of the decade.

⁵ Peter Kemp, 'British Fiction of the 1980s', in Bradbury and Cooke (eds.), *New Writing*, p. 216.

⁶ Malcolm Bradbury, *The Modern British Novel* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1993), p. 406. This term is particularly associated with the novels of Peter Ackroyd and Graham Swift.

⁷ David Lodge, 'The Novelist Today: Still at the Crossroads', in Bradbury and Cooke (eds.), *New Writing*, p. 209.

⁸ Kemp, 'British Fiction of the 1980s', p. 239.

⁹ An interesting defence of the historical novel in the 1970s has been mounted by A.S. Byatt, *On Histories and Stories: Selected Essays* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2000).

Before examining this discordance in more detail, it is important to outline briefly the critical debate surrounding this fictional diversity and within which 'state of the nation' fiction has been apprehended and evaluated.

What is particularly striking about the earliest overviews of 1980s' fiction is the extent to which they mark a continuation of the 'state of the novel' debate that became prevalent during the 1970s. Evinced by the despondent responses to a 1978 *New Review* symposium, the British novel was widely perceived as aesthetically conservative and thematically parochial, sharing 'the fortunes of [the] country in the Seventies, becoming poorer, more cost-conscious, and less out going.'¹⁰ As this contribution suggests, such discussions of fictional 'health' were often underpinned by a connection between the state of the novel and the declining economic and international status of the nation in the post-war period.¹¹ For many critics, the new fictional voices and directions of the 1980s did little to halt this downward trend, British fiction continuing to suffer in comparison with both its international counterparts and its illustrious past. According to D.J. Taylor the fiction of the period was simply 'frightfully bad', adopting forms of 'stylization' that exemplified the inability, or unwillingness, of authors 'to write meaningful books about the society they inhabit.'¹² A similar negativity appears in surveys that directly employ the critical framework of imperial retraction. In Robert Barnard's view the 1980s merely continues the spirit of the 1970s as 'a time of shrinking expectations, national cynicism; a time for pulling the bedclothes over one's head and having as

¹⁰ Brian Aldiss, quoted in 'The State of Fiction: A Symposium', *The New Review* (Summer 1978), p. 16.

¹¹ Steven Earnshaw, 'Novel Voices', in Clive Bloom and Gary Day (eds.), *Literature and Culture in Modern Britain*, Volume Three: 1956-1999 (Harlow: Pearson Education, 2000), p. 51.

¹² D.J. Taylor, *A Vain Conceit: British Fiction in the 1980s* (London: Bloomsbury, 1989), pp. 14, 16.

good a time as possible underneath.’¹³ For Andrew Sanders, evidence of innovative multiculturalism was limited to a few isolated examples, contemporary fiction generally remaining blind to the truly significant events and forces of world history due to the prevalence of a ‘[s]tuffy, smug little-Englandism.’¹⁴ However, a more positive interpretation of Britain’s post-imperial situation is provided by Randall Stevenson, his Bakhtinian reading of 1980s’ fiction holding out the possibility of a ‘carnival of diverse linguistic, cultural and racial possibilities.’¹⁵ While mainstream fiction continued to reflect a lost national confidence through the restrictions of post-war realism, writers from the margins of British society offered a ‘vitality and disposition for change, experiment and progress.’¹⁶ From their positions of separation or partial exile from the official culture of mainland England, the revitalisation of fiction is primarily attributed to the perspectives of post-colonial ‘migrants’, women novelists, the ‘Scottish Renaissance’ and developments in Irish fiction. Whether or not these frameworks recognise ‘state of the nation’ novels as a collective group, they are implicitly positioned on the negative side of a division between tradition and innovation: either displaying the ‘staid, conservative aspects’¹⁷ of a cultural centre or clinging to a narrative form that is no longer commensurate with the social and global complexities of the modern world.

In contrast, the criticism of Malcolm Bradbury enthusiastically affirms the reinvigoration of British fiction as the by-product of a *fin-de-siecle* quickening, dispensing with the qualifications of Stevenson’s centre/margin model by including both experimental and traditional novels within a tendency towards innovation,

¹³ Robert Barnard, *A Short History of English Literature*, 2nd edn. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), p. 201.

¹⁴ Andrew Sanders, *The Short Oxford History of English Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), p. 634.

¹⁵ Randall Stevenson, *A Reader’s Guide to the Twentieth-Century Novel in Britain* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf), p. 141.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 135.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 134.

expansion and adaptation. Drawing parallels with the closing decades of the nineteenth century, the end of the liberal consensus and dissolution of a cold-war geography are viewed as productively challenging writers with a shapeless and uncertain 'post-post-war world'.¹⁸ Following a gradual evolution from post-war realism, the 'contentious variety'¹⁹ of British fiction by the late 1980s exhibits a radical diffusion of cultural and literary values that signals the anxiousness of an historical cusp: 'the trembling of the veil, the coming of the new.'²⁰ For Bradbury, 'state of the nation' fiction reflects this moment of social and aesthetic transition through its apocalyptic dismay towards the fading of the liberal-left consensus and Thatcherism, and the 'stylistic promiscuity'²¹ through which it expanded the boundaries of the genre. Although not sharing Bradbury's prophetic optimism, the collapse of the post-war consensus is also central to Patricia Waugh's expansive outline of the literary and cultural patterns that emerged and developed from the 1960s. In essence, the late-1970s and 1980s are interpreted as marking the final demise of the ideals of a common culture 'projected by the planners of 1945, the liberal middle classes of the fifties, and the New Left of the sixties.'²² While the failure of consensus to live up to its inclusive ideology had inspired a strain of cultural disaffection since the 1950s, it was not until the political, economic and cultural crises of 1976 that the underlying assumptions of welfare capitalism were strained to the point of collapse.²³ In terms of fiction, the dissolution of the cultural authority of consensus brought to fruition the splintering directions of the novel

¹⁸ Bradbury, *The Modern British Novel*, p. 400.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 447.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 456.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 407.

²² Patricia Waugh, *The Harvest of the Sixties: English Literature and its Background, 1960-1990* (Oxford: OUP, 1995), p. 14.

²³ This constitutes merely an outline of the complex patterns outlined by Waugh, *The Harvest of the Sixties*, and Alan Sinfield, *Literature, Politics and Culture in Postwar Britain* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989).

since the 1960s and intensified a movement away from the 'consensus aesthetics'²⁴ of post-war social realism. In effect, the diversity of the British novel in the 1980s reflected a shift in emphasis from 'cultural democracy' to the 'democratization of culture': 'the emergence of a plurality of voices, the embrace or acceptance of irreconcilable difference, the acknowledgement of a multiplicity of cultures and subcultures each with its own orders of value and social and aesthetic norms.'²⁵ The significance of this context is that while not invalidating Bradbury's generic development, it raises more fundamental questions about the viability of the 'state of the nation' perspective within a culture increasingly resistant to its traditional forms and diagnostic ambitions. Thus while continuing within a tradition of post-war literary disaffection, Waugh perceives 'state of the nation' engagements with Thatcherism as reflecting a broader zeitgeist of belatedness; their aesthetic modes and social critiques exemplifying the problems of locating a position of political or ethical authority amidst a period of collapsing ideologies and meta-narratives.

In spite of the problematic cultural position of the genre, which I shall examine in due course, Thatcherism undoubtedly provided the impetus for a widespread return to structures that sought to address the large-scale problems of British society in a period of rapid social, economic and ideological change. In addition to fictional examples, analyses of the state of the nation were also prevalent in television dramas such as *Edge of Darkness* and *A Very British Coup*; and a spate of British films that included *Britannia Hospital*, *The Ploughman's Lunch*, *High*

²⁴ Waugh, *The Harvest of the Sixties*, p. 21. This aesthetic is characterised by 'narratorial reliability and authority, modulation and integration of points of view, the assumption of an intrinsic and even moral organic relationship between the form and structure of the literary text and the relations in the world outside it.'

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 208.

Hopes, Sammy and Rosie Get Laid, Defence of the Realm and Last of England.²⁶ In essence, these narratives emerge from a position of uncertainty and attempt to capture and interpret the ambivalent directions of a nation in transition through the ‘wholeness’²⁷ of their perspectives. For many novelists this involved a self-conscious return to the nineteenth century ‘condition of England’ novel, the narrative structures that emerged in response to the economic inequalities of Victorian Britain appearing concordant with the polarised society of the 1980s. However, the interpretative value of this generic inheritance should not be overestimated, the use of intertextual allusions either operating at a superficial level or self-referentially employed to acknowledge the incompatibility of contemporary Britain with the fictional models of the past. Furthermore, it fails to account for representations that adapt the frameworks of other genres, the metaphoric extensions of the campus novel and the zeitgeist personifications that update the social mobility narratives of 1950s or operate within the conventions of the political thriller. As a result the criteria for selection that informs this thesis is premised upon a broader ‘state of the nation’ designation, focussing upon novels that are characterised by a tendency towards ‘national allegory’ through structures that assert or encourage the interpretation of ‘narrative actions according to a more general pattern of political and ‘national’ events.’²⁸ As in the case of the ‘condition of the England’ novel, the imprecision of this classification stems from the absence of any formal substructure, the distinctiveness of these texts primarily based upon

²⁶ For further discussion, see Hill, *British Cinema in the 1980s*, pp. 133-165, and Leonard Quart, ‘The Religion of the Market: Thatcherite Politics and the British Film of the 1980s’, in Lester Friedman (ed.), *British Cinema and Thatcherism: Fires Were Started*, pp. 15-34.

²⁷ C.F.G. Masterman, *The Condition of England*, ed. with notes by J.T. Boulton (London: Methuen, 1960 [1909]), p. xxvi.

²⁸ Hill, *British Cinema in the 1980s*, p. 136.

their ‘non-literary’²⁹ rather than stylistic ambitions. In the context of the 1980s, what unites such literary and visual representations is a shared opposition to the ideological frameworks and social impact of Thatcherism, a desire to impugn the ‘brightly coloured’ rhetoric of the government by exposing ‘the darkness, the social cruelty and suffering behind the numbingly neo-bright phrases’.³⁰ Whether achieved through panoramic visions of socio-economic disharmony or more finite critiques of the moral indifference of the ‘enterprise culture’, there is a striking unanimity across these narratives concerning the pernicious nature of the Thatcherite revolution and its apocalyptic consequences for the moral and social fabric of the nation.

Thatcherism and the fiction of Liberal Dissent

Within the wider context of the decade, the reappearance of the ‘state of the nation’ critique constitutes only one strand of a broader culture of dissent engendered by the ideological rhetoric, economic policies and ‘conviction politics’ of Thatcherism. Indeed, Thatcherism displayed a remarkable ability to inspire hostile reactions from a vast range of social groups who felt alienated or attacked by virtue of their class, ethnic, regional, sexual or professional identities. Furthermore, the decade became characterised by an adversarial political culture that found notable public expressions in the violence of inner-city riots and trade union actions, the anti-nuclear demonstrations at Greenham Common, the left-wing militancy of Liverpool City Council and the cultural programs of the Greater London Council.

²⁹ Josephine M. Guy, *The Victorian Social-Problem Novel: The Market, the Individual and Communal Life* (London: Macmillan Press, 1996), p. 4.

³⁰ Quoted in George W. Brandt, ‘Introduction’, in Brandt, *British Television Drama in the 1980s* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 9.

However, while many of these public and institutional protests constitute an exacerbation of pre-existing conflicts and disaffections, the period also witnessed expressions of dissent from sources traditionally averse to direct political intervention. As Anderson has noted, the ‘radicalization of Centre opinion’ was a distinctive feature of the 1980s, the ‘moderate liberal verities’³¹ of the intellectual establishment having remained largely unaltered by the growing antagonism between the New Right and radical Left during the 1970s. Although this ‘radicalization’ was evident in calls for political reform by the Social Democratic Party and Charter 88 movement, its characteristics are better exemplified by the increasingly critical voices that emerged from sections of the Civil Service, the BBC, the Church of England,³² the arts establishment,³³ and ‘the softer corners of the City.’³⁴ Perhaps the most emblematic act of protest came with the decision of Oxford dons to refuse Margaret Thatcher an honorary doctorate in 1985, an award that her immediate predecessors had received within a year of taking office.³⁵ Although often motivated by particular circumstances, these voices collectively represent a liberal establishment whose values, and the institutions that embodied them, had been revered within the post-war consensus as inalienable aspects of a national culture. In spite of the erosion of prestige and resources that had accompanied the economic and social failures of consensus in the 1970s, a broad adherence to the cultural values of the liberal establishment continued relatively unscathed until the 1980s. However, the advent of Thatcherism was marked by a

³¹ Perry Anderson, ‘A Culture in Contraflow-I’, *New Left Review*, no. 180 (March/April 1989), p. 46.

³² In particular, the Archbishop of Canterbury’s *Faith in the City* (1985) and the Archbishop of York’s *Changing Britain: Social Diversity and Moral Unity* (1987).

³³ As Sir Peter Hall commented in 1988: ‘well over 90 per cent of the people in the performing arts, education and the creative world are against her.’ Quoted in Hugo Young, *One of Us* (London: Macmillan, 1989), p. 411.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 404.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 401.

comprehensive rejection of consensus orthodoxy that included a fundamental attack upon the assumed worth and centrality of the liberal establishment. Although initially following an established pattern of reductions in state funding, traditional concerns over economic efficiency were increasingly replaced by politically motivated reforms designed to expunge the complacency of consensus culture. For many in the liberal establishment the 1980s became a period of profound upheaval, characterised by a progressive and wilful dismantling of their intellectual ethos and institutional structures. In this context, the ‘radicalization’ of centre opinion emerged from an unaccustomed sense of alienation and disinheritance, responding to an administration that appeared ideologically committed to the disestablishment of liberal values from the public and cultural life of the nation.

On one level, this disestablishment stemmed from a radical alteration in the conventional rules of engagement between government and state-maintained culture, in particular, Thatcherism’s curtailment of the ‘arms-length’ principle that had assured a relative autonomy and self-regulation for cultural institutions. In effect, the consensus framework for disinterested reform was replaced by a more interventionist model with traditional quangos of the ‘Great and the Good’ giving way to ‘far more active, partisan and managerially-minded bodies’³⁶ that espoused the economic values of the government. Applying pressure through a combination of financial restraint and political redirection, Thatcherism sought to transform the welfare ethos of the Universities, public broadcasting and the Arts Council through the enforced introduction of an enterprise culture responsive to the demands of the market place. In addition to the rapid and often haphazard contractions that resulted from funding cuts, the instigation of new economic and performance criteria marked

³⁶ Peter Kemp, quoted in Hewison, *Culture and Consensus: England, Art and Politics since 1945* (London: Methuen, 1995), p. 231.

a renunciation of a post-war commitment to the general availability of ‘good’ culture. While in practice this state provision had always disproportionately favoured the middle-classes,³⁷ the ideal of egalitarian access to culture conferred a national importance upon the liberal establishment’s role within education and the arts. However, this respectability offered little defence against Thatcherite demands for commercial relevance, popular appeal and financial self-sufficiency. Faced with the logic of competition and consumer choice these institutions could not appeal to either the absolute value of ‘good’ culture or its ‘relative value as means of improving national unity and self-esteem’.³⁸ Furthermore, Thatcherism’s structural and economic reforms were conducted with an enmity that reflected the Prime Minister’s personal antipathy towards the privilege and paternalism of traditional cultural quangos: ‘They were, as she saw them, anti-business, anti-merit and even anti-British’.³⁹ This antagonism informed a broader critique of the intellectual values of the liberal establishment, their consensus ethos as the impartial custodians of a national cultural heritage construed as the ‘self-serving justification of a subsidised left-wing elite’.⁴⁰ Accompanied by professions such as teaching, medicine and the law, higher education and the arts were perceived as areas ‘in which special pleading of a powerful interest group [came] disguised as high-minded commitment to some greater good.’⁴¹ By extending issues of ideological

³⁷ Sinfield, *Literature, Politics and Culture in Postwar Britain*, p. 55.

³⁸ Brian Appleyard, ‘The Arts’, in Dennis Kavanagh and Anthony Seldon (eds.), *The Thatcher Effect* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 302.

³⁹ Young, *One of Us*, p. 412.

⁴⁰ Alistair Davies, ‘Class, consumption and cultural institutions’, in Alistair Davies and Alan Sinfield (eds.), *British Culture of the Postwar: An Introduction to Literature and Society, 1945-1999* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 141.

⁴¹ Margaret Thatcher, quoted in Hewison, *Culture and Consensus*, p. 230.

allegiance across public life⁴² Thatcherism created a climate in which ‘detachment was held to be a chimera and objectivity a fraud’,⁴³ effectively invalidating the discursive authority of consensual institutions. While politically evident in the rejection of consultative committees and The Royal Commission, its success in alienating the liberal establishment is more clearly exemplified by a series of personal attacks upon the philistine character of the Prime Minister. These are commonly typified by Dr Jonathan Miller’s claim that he found her ‘loathsome, repulsive in almost every way’, reserving particular scorn for ‘her odious suburban gentility and sentimental, sub-saccharine patriotism, catering for the worst elements of commuter idiocy.’⁴⁴ Beyond the obvious social and intellectual snobbery of this remark lies a profound sense of impotence, the virulence of Miller’s contempt indicative of Thatcherism’s indifference to the intellectual foundations of traditional liberal dissent.

Accompanying this assault upon institutional embodiments of an establishment elite, Thatcherism also attempted more broadly to discredit the values of liberal culture through their attacks upon the counter-culture and ‘permissive society’ of the 1960s. As Waugh has argued, these attacks served an important early function by disassociating the ‘vocabulary of freedom and individualism’⁴⁵ from its counterculture connotations, thereby permitting the New Right to incorporate this rhetorical framework within its monetarist ideology. Yet as the decade progressed the residual influence of the 1960s was also invoked for more direct political ends, initially established as a cultural explanation for the inner-city

⁴² ‘The rules of engagement in public life have been rewritten, in particular the concepts of neutrality and objectivity, ... so close, some would say, to the very essence of British civilisation, have been abolished.’ Hugo Young, ‘A deadly blackball kills the status quo’, *The Guardian* (24 Sept. 1984).

⁴³ Young, *One of Us*, p. 413.

⁴⁴ Dr Jonathan Miller, quoted in Shirley Robin Letwin, *The Anatomy of Thatcherism* (London: Fontana, 1992), p. 319.

⁴⁵ Waugh, *The Harvest of the Sixties*, p. 17.

riots of 1981 and gradually expanded to include rising crime rates, social violence, drug abuse, homelessness and single parenthood. The 'permissive society' acquired the status of a *bête noire* in Thatcherite social policy, a malignant value-system that necessitated a return to the traditions of family and patriotism, Victorian virtues, and the authority of 'law and order'. More specifically, this rhetorical framework acquired a new emphasis during Thatcherism's second term in office, shifting 'from the actual excesses of the 60s to the craven cowardice of those who enabled and allowed those excesses to occur.'⁴⁶ Aspects of social disorder were increasingly attributed to a middle-class intelligentsia, a change of focus epitomised by Norman Tebbit's televised comments that 'the permissive society was generated in the cocktail bar circuit' and that 'drug peddling and addiction ... started in the sloppy Hampstead suburbs and spread downwards.'⁴⁷ Having vanquished the evils of inflation, socialism and trade unionism, Thatcherism found a new 'internal enemy' in a middle-class liberalism that had engendered anti-establishment attitudes and subsequently excused the incivility and decadent excesses they produced. In the 1980s this was harnessed into an accusation of moral abstention, a means of repudiating liberal-left critiques of Thatcherism by characterising them as hypocritical refusals to accept responsibility for the socially destructive forces unleashed by their progressive ideology.

These are the people who robbed a generation of their birthright. It's not advice we require from these people, it's an apology ... They were well educated, sophisticated, but their philosophy was simple: in dealing with the trade-union negotiator, with the criminal, with our international adversaries, or even the child in the classroom, the answer was always the same: "never say no". And now they see the legacy they've left, they try to pin the blame on us.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ David Edgar, 'Culture Vulture', *Marxism Today* (May 1989), p. 21.

⁴⁷ Norman Tebbit, quoted in *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ Margaret Thatcher, quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 18.

Of course, the importance attributed to this social group within ‘Thatcherite demonology’⁴⁹ is an ironic testament to the resilience of their cultural values, and evidence of the government’s continuing failure to win the ‘hearts and minds’ of a large proportion of university-educated middle-class voters.⁵⁰

It is this combination of institutional disestablishment and rhetorical vilification that prompted a ‘radicalisation’ of centre opinion, or more precisely in relation to the arts, the increasing prominence of a liberal-left strain that Sinfield has termed ‘middle-class dissidence’.⁵¹ Appearing throughout the twentieth-century in the cultural criticisms of E.M. Forster, Leavisism and the ‘New-Left-CND nexus’,⁵² this tradition of protest is characterised by a tendency towards universalised perceptions based upon the principles of liberal-humanism and affirmations of ‘good’ culture against the ‘aggressive commerce’⁵³ of their own class. However, if early forms of such dissidence found their ‘crowning achievement’ in the establishment of the welfare state and subsequent movements sought to ‘hold welfare-capitalism to its promises’,⁵⁴ Thatcherism’s attempts to disestablish and discredit liberal culture provided a more unequivocal threat to the foundations of this middle-class faction. In response, expressions of liberal dissent in the 1980s acquired a greater political and ideological hostility, their traditional tendency towards inclusiveness translated into critical diagnoses that indicted the ‘Thatcher revolution’ for instigating a comprehensive dissolution of cultural and national coherence. Evident across the arts, media and even in commissioned reports by the

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 18.

⁵⁰ For an analysis of their electoral responses, see Doreen Massey, ‘Heartlands of Defeat’, *Marxism Today*, (July 1987), pp. 18-23.

⁵¹ Sinfield, *Literature, Politics and Culture in Postwar Britain*. This term appears in various contexts across the study.

⁵² Ibid., pp. 238-245.

⁵³ Ibid., pp. 41, 273.

⁵⁴ Ibid., pp. 238, 249.

Church of England, the decade witnessed a trend towards analytic perspectives that interpreted Thatcherism not merely as an amalgamation of political and economic policies, but as an ideological spirit that either reflected or incited an ominous transformation in national consciousness. As Salman Rushdie commented on the eve of the 1983 General Election:

I find myself entertaining Spenglerian thoughts about how there can be times when all that is worst in a people rises to the surface and expresses itself in government. There are, of course, many Britains, and many of them – the sceptical, questioning, radical, reformist, libertarian, non-conformist Britains – I have admired greatly. But these Britains are presently in retreat, even in disarray; while nanny-Britain, strait-laced Victorian Values Britain, thin-lipped jingoist Britain, is in charge. Dark goddesses rule; brightness falls from the air.⁵⁵

It is the artistic desire to apprehend and denounce this ‘new spirit’⁵⁶ of Britain that informs the revival of the ‘state of the nation’ form, its narrative propensity for the simultaneous representation of divergent social groups and conflicting ideologies particularly suited to a period of rapid and momentous cultural change. Furthermore, these ‘national allegories’ constitute significant acts of ideological opposition within a political climate that appeared to confirm Thatcher’s maxim that ‘there is no alternative’. Through visions of social discordance and selfish individualism, they are implicitly critical of the nation’s increasing detachment from liberal ideals of community, social justice and moral interdependence. While it could be argued that the reactive rather than progressive nature of these texts reflects an ideology in retreat, they are indicative of a strain of liberal opinion that

⁵⁵ Salman Rushdie, quoted in D.J. Taylor, *After the War: The Novel and England since 1945* (London: Flamingo, 1994), p. 271.

⁵⁶ ‘Great Britain began to feel like a quite different place as this new spirit took hold ... I wanted to catch something of all this and leave it free to condemn itself.’ Ian McEwan ‘Preface’, *A Move Abroad: or Shall We Die? and The Ploughman’s Lunch* (London: Picador, 1989), p. xxiv.

refused to accept Thatcherism's ideological agenda by upholding the values of liberal-humanism and/or the consensus principle of an '*inclusive social ethos*'.⁵⁷

However, it is important to recognise that literary, televisual and cinematic examples of this liberal dissent did not immediately appear in response to Thatcherism. While there were early examples around the Falklands conflict and the General Election of 1983, the vast majority of texts and films only appeared in the latter years of the decade. In relation to fictional responses this has been attributed to the fact that novelists are 'often imperfect historians',⁵⁸ the time span of composition making the form inherently unsuited to topical issues or 'catching on the wing a changing social mood'.⁵⁹ Yet this delay also appears to lend some credence to Edgar's Left-wing attack upon the cultural establishment's abstention, his sardonic invocation of Nazism to indict 'maverick-liberal' opinion for remaining silent until 'she came for them'.⁶⁰ While with hindsight this criticism is difficult to repudiate, the radical character of late Thatcherism was not clearly evident in the 'erratic, even hesitant'⁶¹ progress made by the government during its first term in office. For many the violent social disorder and gathering public opposition to Thatcherism in the early 1980s seemed to assure its political downfall, a sentiment reflected in a popular dissent that was 'as often marked by amused incredulity as by moral indignation.'⁶² The transformative effect of the Falklands conflict is registered in Rathbone's *Nasty, Very*, with disbelief towards the discourse of Thatcherism acquiring a sense of despair as electoral success was ensured and

⁵⁷ Alan Sinfield, 'Culture, consensus and difference: Angus Wilson to Alan Hollinghurst', in Davies and Sinfield (eds.), *British Culture of the Postwar*, p. 89.

⁵⁸ Bradbury, *The Modern British Novel*, p. 397.

⁵⁹ McEwan, 'Preface', *A Move Abroad*, p. xxv.

⁶⁰ This is a paraphrase of 'Now she has come for them', Edgar, 'Culture Vulture', p. 19.

⁶¹ Morgan, *The People's Peace*, p. 466.

⁶² Alan O'Shea, 'Trusting the People: How does Thatcherism Work?', in *Formations of Nation and People* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), p. 39.

political opposition fragmented. While this novel portrays the government as exploiting rather than instigating a national crisis, the mid-to-late 1980s produced more politically censorious depictions of authoritarianism and institutional dismantlement as Thatcherism introduced the radical reforms of 'enterprise culture' and consolidated its position through the centralisation of state power. Coinciding with the 'high noon' of the government's ideological ascendancy, these novels are permeated with despondency towards the potential annihilation of liberal cultural values, an attitude typified by Margaret Drabble's comment in 1989 that '[e]ven the underpinning is being taken away after all our progressive dreams.'⁶³ By 1988 artistic visions of apocalyptic decline had become prominent enough to warrant an attack by Norman Stone upon the 'ragged, rancidly provincial'⁶⁴ offerings of British filmmakers and a leader article in the *Sunday Times* that reproached 'a small band of disillusioned intellectuals' for presenting a 'one-sided and inaccurate'⁶⁵ portrait of the nation. It was not until the close of the decade that 'state of the nation' perspectives displayed a limited return to critical confidence as evidence of electoral, economic and internal weakness inspired satires that, although still unable to imagine an alternative to Thatcherism, contain a hopeful recognition of its propensity for self-destruction.

In spite of differences in thematic emphasis and narrative tone that arise from this progression, these novels display an underlying concordance in registering the 1980s as a period of 'social discommunity' and 'lost wholeness'.⁶⁶ At a fundamental level this is indicated by the prominence of binary or 'two-nations'

⁶³ Margaret Drabble, quoted in Olga Kenyon, *Women Writers Talk* (Oxford: Lennard, 1989), p. 35.

⁶⁴ Norman Stone, 'Through a Lens Darkly', *Sunday Times* (10 Jan. 1988), rpt. in *Black Film British Cinema*, ICA Documents no. 7 (London: ICA, 1988), p. 23.

⁶⁵ *The Sunday Times* (24 Jan. 1988), quoted in Edgar, 'Culture Vulture', p. 21.

⁶⁶ Bradbury, *The Modern British Novel*, p. 401.

narrative structures, the juxtaposition of antithetical characters and social domains critically delineating the fractured state of Britain under Thatcherism. The most traditional usage occurs in the early chapters of *The Radiant Way*, the regional demarcations of the nineteenth-century novel reappearing in the form of a North-South division that reflects popular conceptions of a national rift between an affluent south-east and the depressed industrial hinterlands of the North, Midlands and South Wales. In other novels the government's 'two-nation strategy'⁶⁷ is less geographically circumscribed, the architectural contrasts of Bradbury's northern town and Lodge's varieties of 'nice work' depicting a more complex polarisation between those benefiting from a boom in the service, high-technology and financial sectors and those disadvantaged by a decline in the nationalised industries, manufacturing and the public sector. While many novels do not explicitly address the macroeconomic dimensions of national change, this division between the winners and losers of Thatcherite Britain also functions as the symbolic core for less encompassing oppositions: resonating through the local community of *The Child In Time*; the social geography of Oxford in *Dirty Tricks*; the political and class antagonisms of *Veronica or The Two Nations*; and the incompatibility between the practices of commerce and academia in campus fiction. A notable variation upon this narrative structure appears in the transatlantic oscillations of *Money*, the contrasts between New York and London revealing a developing uniformity that implicitly questions the relevance of the nation-state and domestic economic boundaries by asserting the subsuming power of multi-national corporations, international finance capitalism and global consumerism. Yet despite the varied

⁶⁷ For further discussion, see Bob Jessop, Kevin Bonnett, Simon Bromley, and Tom Ling, *Thatcherism* (Oxford: Polity Press, 1988) and John Mohan, 'Britain's gulf war', *Times Higher Education Supplement* (19 June 1987). p. 11.

contexts through which the 'economic realism' of the 1980s is elucidated, the principles of the market place are equated with the inauguration of a new cultural formation marked by social tribalism, political antagonism and personal intolerance.

In the majority of 'national allegories' this loss of social coherence is implicitly associated with the demise of the welfare-capitalist principles of consensus, the economic and institutional framework through which post-war governments sought to alleviate the extremes of unfettered capitalism and ensure the participation, well being and betterment of the populace. In contrast, Thatcherism's rejection of inclusivity and 'one-nation' Conservatism was premised upon an attempt to 'roll back the frontiers of the state' and eradicate the 'dependency culture' of welfare provision by conferring choice and responsibility upon the individual. In the context of a recession and high regional unemployment, Thatcherism's financial and structural reforms of the National Health Service and Social Security system appeared indicative of a profound lack of social compassion, a willingness to accept economic exclusion as an unavoidable, even necessary, consequence of dynamic competition.⁶⁸ Furthermore, the issue of exclusion was rhetorically justified through a framework of laissez-faire morality, Norman Tebbit's entreaty to 'get on your bike'⁶⁹ and Thatcher's distinction between the 'deserving' and 'undeserving poor'⁷⁰ associating social disadvantage with weaknesses of character rather than macro-economic policy. Fictional opposition to this aspect of Thatcherism is evident in the numerous representations of neglected and disenfranchised communities, and areas of urban and industrial dereliction inhabited by an impoverished and demoralised underclass. Although often not

⁶⁸ Sinfield, 'Culture, consensus and difference', p. 92.

⁶⁹ Norman Tebbit, quoted in Morgan, *The People's Peace*, p. 469.

⁷⁰ Margaret Thatcher, quoted in Eric J. Evans, *Thatcher and Thatcherism, The Making of the Contemporary World* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 122.

employed as primary locations, these communities operate as symbolic illustrations of the vast inequalities and human dissipation produced by Thatcherism's untempered adherence to market-forces. However, in some cases the issue of alienation acquires an additional significance through a connection with rising criminality and violent disorder, the degradation of specific areas foreshadowing a wider destabilisation of society. In both *The Child in Time* and *The Radiant Way* the competitive ethos of Thatcherism is portrayed as unleashing and exacerbating social conflicts that had been relatively contained by the inclusive ideology of welfare-capitalism. Developing from earlier parallels between violent incidents and the decline of the welfare state, *The Radiant Way* presents the Mozart estate and decapitation of Jilly Fox as symptomatic of a society in which community and compassion have been finally defeated by fragmentation and fear. Although also representing the inhumanity of market forces through the symbolic death of a vulnerable figure, McEwan's dystopian projection of post-welfare Britain offers an alternative to Drabble's dissolution by presenting social disorder as controlled through the apparatus of an authoritarian state. Epitomised by the manipulation of an Official Commission and the licensing of beggars, *The Child in Time* foresees the preservation of economic inequality as dependant upon the stifling of social liberties through the forces of 'law and order', government bureaucracy and ideological indoctrination.

These divergent visions of dissolution and reconfiguration reflect a significant tension within Thatcherite ideology between 'economic neo-liberalism' and 'social neo-conservatism',⁷¹ the stimulation of individual autonomy being essentially at variance with the preservation and reinforcement of social coherence.

⁷¹ These terms are drawn from Hill, *British Cinema and Thatcherism*, p. 8.

These competing directions also inform depictions of the political culture of post-consensus Britain, the disparate interpretations of Thatcherism's ascendancy premised upon the supremacy of either ideological tendency. Mirroring the social analysis of *The Radiant Way*, Drabble portrays the government as sustained by a fragmented political opposition. Through the moderate figure of Alix, the novel indicts the divisions and increasing militancy of the Left for exacerbating the factiousness upon which the appeal of 'authoritarian populism'⁷² depends. Following the fleeting optimism generated by the electoral successes of the Social Democratic Party, the potential for a 'rational' and consensual political discourse is finally dissipated by the voices of 'unreason' that emerge from both sides of the miner's strike. A similar complicity informs both *Nasty, Very* and *Veronica or The Two Nations*, the former depicting the Tory landslide of 1983 as ensured by a shameful collusion across the party-political spectrum; the latter invoking the 1980s as the culmination of a post-war decline in the integrity of both major parties, the principles of their political traditions supplanted by a public culture of cynical self-interest, tabloid populism and moral hypocrisy. A different conception of Thatcherite politics is apparent in those novels that subscribe to McEwan's vision of authoritarianism, the rejection of consensus presented as intrinsically allied to an ominous shift in 'the balance between state power and individual self-expression'.⁷³ What lies beneath these perspectives is a dark recognition of the government's political invulnerability in the mid-1980s and an implicit concern with the extreme social counter-forces that such a situation may inspire:

The dangers to the Thatcherite regime, it appeared, came not from revolts or putsches on the back benches ... [s]till less did the danger lie in overthrow by Labour or by

⁷² Stuart Hall, *The Hard Road to Renewal: Thatcherism and the Crisis of the Left* (London: Verso, 1988), esp. ch. 8.

⁷³ Morgan, *The People's Peace*, p. 486.

assorted dissidents or intellectuals. It lay rather in its rigidity, in the way that centralization was hardening, some felt, into something approaching personal dictatorship. Like Louis XIV before her, Mrs Thatcher might provoke an eventual revolution.⁷⁴

Although most coherently represented in *The Child in Time*, the subversion of civil liberties and suppression of dissenting minorities is also evident in the shadowy Whitehall department of *Fixx* and the dictatorial vice-chancellors and campus police states of *The Mind and Body Shop* and *A Very Peculiar Practice: The New Frontier*. Reflecting common concerns during the decade over increased defence expenditure, the curtailment of local government and the politicisation of policing and the security services, these novels discern a hidden agenda within Thatcherism to progressively degrade social democracy through the centralisation and augmentation of state authority. Although primarily represented through the autocratic methods of government departments and entrepreneurial managers, this directive political culture is also significantly associated with the martial forces, covert tactics and paranoia of a new cold war mentality.

For many novelists, Thatcherism's combined attack upon the inclusive principles of welfare-capitalism and consensus culture appeared to be symbolically encapsulated by the refashioning of state education. As a central pillar of the post-war settlement and closely associated with the progressive ideals of the 1960s, the educational system functioned as an important symbol of the egalitarian spirit of consensus and the ambitions of 'left-culturalism'.⁷⁵ In addition to offering class mobility through a widening of professional opportunities, education became imbued with an ideology (particularly in the humanities) that stressed the national importance of realising individual potential and encouraging a 'fuller humanity'

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 482.

⁷⁵ For a fuller discussion, see Sinfield, *Literature, Politics and Culture in Postwar Britain*, ch. 11.

through exposure to ‘good’ culture.⁷⁶ A retraction from these principles in the 1980s became transparent with radical changes in the ethos of state funding and the post-war commitment to progressive expansion abandoned by a series of reforms that allied financial reductions with a utilitarian insistence upon productivity, financial accountability and commercial relevance. However, the dissenting voices of fiction present Thatcherism’s rhetoric of streamlined efficiency as concealing a malicious and systematic decimation of public education, extending from the abolition of Home Office courses for young offenders in *The Radiant Way* to the staff reductions, departmental closures and liquidation of entire Universities in campus novels. In each case the economic structures of Thatcherite reform are construed as an ideological assault upon the liberal foundations of post-war education: McEwan’s childcare handbook marking a shift from ‘progressive’ teaching to overt indoctrination; Drabble’s scholarship women inferring the demise of a ‘great social dream’;⁷⁷ and the contraction of higher education represented as the decisive culmination of an elongated retreat from the ideals enshrined by the Robbins Report. Although often involving an awareness of the deficiencies and unrealised ambitions of consensus, the imposition of a competitive and commercial ethos into education is universally conceived as fundamentally hostile to the liberal principles of a humanist pedagogy, intellectual freedom and academic diversity. Furthermore, this inimical relationship between the liberal philosophy of education and the utilitarian concerns of business underpins a broader dismay towards the diminishing status of culture within an increasingly materialistic society. Whether illustrated through Bradbury’s philistine media mogul, Lodge’s juxtaposition of industrial and cultural production or the failure of Drabble’s Leavisite teacher to

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 244.

⁷⁷ Margaret Drabble, *The Radiant Way* (London: Penguin, 1988 [1987]), p. 88.

establish connections, the divided state of the nation is implicitly associated with a withdrawal from intellectual and cultural experiences that promoted a liberal-humanist ideology of social plurality, moral responsibility and personal tolerance.

As Hanif Kureishi commented in 1988:

Britain is such an unpleasant and cruel country to live in at the moment ... because variety and criticism in all their forms, sexual, political and cultural, are being seen as aberrant, as unnecessary, in the paradise of money being established. Creativity, the human imagination, culture itself, which is a live thing or it is nothing, are being stifled.⁷⁸

An alternative perspective upon the demise of consensus culture is provided by the fictional harbingers of New Right or Thatcherite ideology, John Self's celebration of money typifying a number of first-person satires that ironically appropriate the rhetoric of liberation through consumer choice. Disregarding the traditional hierarchies of class and education, the protagonists of these novels reveal the emergence of a new meritocracy in which social status and personal development are determined by the acquisition of wealth. Their modes of critique essentially involve the equation of economic individualism with moral and cultural desensitisation, the new culture repeatedly personified by callous, anti-social philistines who rationalise acts of selfish gratification and unscrupulousness through the discourse and logic of free-market capitalism. However, there is a perceptible difference between the opportunistic figures of *Money* and *Nasty, Very* and the demonic caricatures of *Fixx* and *Dirty Tricks*. In the latter, the impact of the Big Bang, government privatisation and the 'enterprise culture' is represented as accrediting even more Darwinian creeds of ruthless economic preservation and murderous social advancement. Although less concerned with specific aspects of consensus culture, these satires implicitly register a loss of national coherence

⁷⁸ Hanif Kureishi, 'England, bloody England', *The Guardian* (22 Jan. 1988), rpt. in *Black Film British Cinema*, p. 25.

through the social estrangement of characters that apprehend all human relationships through metaphors of economic exchange and commercial competition. The resulting fragmentation is measured both externally and internally; *Bildungsroman* traversals of a new and brutal socio-economic geography reinforced by narrative omissions that reveal psychologically divided or splintered identities. Exemplified by the four voices of Self's consciousness and dissimulation of Fixx and Dibdin's unnamed narrator, the values of economic individualism are envisaged as suppressing, but not extinguishing, the innate compassion and morality of its adherents. Similar connections between Thatcherite figures and psychological neurosis appear in other 'state of the nation' novels: in the megalomania of vice-chancellors and media moguls in campus fiction; Charles's nostalgia for a former (better) self in *The Radiant Way*; and Darke's childhood regression and suicide in *The Child in Time*. It is perhaps indicative of the literary hostility inspired by Thatcherism that the ideology of self-reliance and 'enterprise' is so consistently associated with states of delusion, the few positive representations of its opportunities confined to commercial melodramas of 'sex, money and power'.⁷⁹

Nationalism, the 'nation', and the problems of the liberal novel

In addition to offering thematic critiques that reflect the specific social concerns of liberal dissent, the appearance of 'national allegories' in the 1980s can also be understood within the context of an invigorated political and cultural debate over the meanings, values and parameters of the 'nation' and 'nationhood'. Following Homi K. Bhabha's idea that conceptions of the 'nation' are significantly

⁷⁹ Taylor, *After the War*, p. 285. The novels of Geoffrey Archer typify this through narratives structured around a progression from comparative ambition towards individual triumph, esp. *First Among Equals* (London: HaperCollins, 1997 [1984]).

determined by forms of narrative, the rhetorical structures of Thatcherism can be interpreted as a striking attempt to intercede and reconfigure the 'story' of Britain, promoting a national identity that involved a realignment of pre-existing national myths in accordance with its socio-economic ideology. This attempt was conditioned by the New Right perception of a 'malignancy'⁸⁰ in British identity during the 1970s caused by the economic relegation of the nation to 'the sick man of Europe'. As a result, Britain experienced a diminishment of national pride that was reflected in social tensions over race and immigration, the partial successes of nationalist movements and cultural expressions of imperial guilt. In response, Thatcher 'had a new story to tell about Britain and Britishness'⁸¹ with rhetorical invocations of Victorian values and Churchillian self-determination underpinning a political manifesto of hostile anti-communism, strong state authority, family and patriotism, and the dynamism of enterprise and free-market competition. What Thatcherism promised was a renewal of national identity through a return to British 'greatness', an economic revolution that would foster self-respect and international prestige by re-establishing Britain as an independent 'island power'.⁸² While this conceptual framework is evident from the mid-1970s onwards, the Falklands Conflict served to crystallise and intensify Thatcher's 'aggressive self-sufficient nationalism'.⁸³ The 'spirit of the South Atlantic' was adopted as a moment of transition between a nation in 'retreat' and a Britain confident enough to 'face the facts of life'.⁸⁴ As this suggests, the government interpreted the popular solidarity of the 'Falklands Factor' as the basis for a radical programme of reforms, the

⁸⁰ Letwin, *The Anatomy of Thatcherism*, p. 89.

⁸¹ Philip Dodd, *The Battle over Britain* (London: Demos, 1995), p. 26.

⁸² Letwin. *The Anatomy of Thatcherism*, p. 37.

⁸³ Morgan, *The People's Peace*, p. 453.

⁸⁴ Margaret Thatcher, quoted in Anthony Barnett, *Iron Britannia* (London: Allison and Busby, 1982), pp. 150, 152.

completion of Thatcherism's national regeneration finally announced with the economic growth and rising prosperity of the mid-1980s.

The old Britain of the 1970s, with its strikes, poor productivity, low investment, winters of discontent, above all its gloom, its pessimism, its sheer defeatism – that Britain is gone. And we now have a new Britain, confident, optimistic, sure of its economic strength – a Britain to which foreigners come to admire, to invest; yes, and to imitate.⁸⁵

While this narrative of regeneration was not accompanied by a coherent or consistent politics of nationhood,⁸⁶ it was significantly supported by the discursive construction of a 'national-popular'⁸⁷ identity. Epitomised by the rhetorical style of the Prime Minister, Thatcherism adopted a mode of address that sought to speak to, or more accurately for, the common sense of the 'British people' or 'we'. This was employed to define a variety of characteristics and moral values as quintessentially British, the constituents of a trans-historical national identity that had underpinned the 'glory' of Empire and the defence of freedom during the Second World War. Unsurprisingly, this identity supported the 'moral absolutes' through which Thatcherism challenged the sociological frameworks of liberal ideology,⁸⁸ the rhetoric of 'law and order', welfare dependency, and the 'vigorous virtues' of enterprise all justified as concordant with the innate principles and character of the nation. Furthermore, this discursive creation of an 'imagined community'⁸⁹ reinforced government assertions that its political agenda had engendered a new era of national solidarity, confirming Thatcher's personal apotheosis as the torchbearer of the traditions and spirit of Britain. Yet as with all nationalist mythologies, this

⁸⁵ Margaret Thatcher, Speech to the Conservative Party Conference (10 Oct. 1986), in Robin Harris (ed.), *The Collected Speeches of Margaret Thatcher* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997), p. 284.

⁸⁶ Philip Lynch, *The Politics of Nationhood: Sovereignty, Britishness and Conservative Politics* (London: Macmillan Press, 1999), pp. 48-65.

⁸⁷ Alan O'Shea, 'Trusting the People: How does Thatcherism Work?', p. 23.

⁸⁸ Jim Leach, "'Everyone's an American Now': Thatcherist Ideology in the Films of Nicolas Roeg', in Friedman (ed.), *British Cinema and Thatcherism*, p. 208.

⁸⁹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

assumed unity of people and values acquires a secure definition only through the exclusion of alternative identities and ideologies as either alien to the national spirit or opposed to its essential interests. As O'Shea has noted,⁹⁰ Thatcherism was particularly adept in conflating external and internal aspects of 'otherness' as inimical to the historic freedoms and 'common-sense' of the British people: trade-unionism and welfare-state collectivism were equated with the 'foreign' implants of socialism and communism; the nation's heritage was threatened by the 'alien cultures' of immigrant minorities;⁹¹ and the instinctive morality and practicality of ordinary citizens undermined by both the 'progressive' values of the liberal establishment and the esoteric jargon of experts and intellectuals. As this suggests, these 'national-popular' constructions are essentially an extension of the antagonistic mode of Thatcherism's 'conviction' politics. Premised upon a 'sustained process of *purification* and *exclusion*', this type of rhetorical construction displays a far greater certainty about the values it opposes than those that it advocates: 'In [Thatcher's] British story, enemies were here, there and everywhere. Britishness was singular, not plural and it was enough to be one of 'them' by not being 'one of us'.'⁹²

What resulted was a particularly narrow definition of a British, or more specifically English, identity which sought to displace national, political and regional alternatives as well as presenting a version of 'Englishness' that appeared

⁹⁰ O'Shea, 'Trusting the People: How does Thatcherism Work?'

⁹¹ '... people are really rather afraid that this country might be swamped by people of a different culture. The British character has done so much for democracy, for law, and done so much throughout the world that if there is any fear it might be swamped, then people are going to be rather hostile to those coming in. We are a British nation with British characteristics.' Margaret Thatcher, quoted in Manthia Diawara, 'Power and Territory: The Emergence of Black Film Collectives', in Friedman (ed.), *British Cinema and Thatcherism*, p. 147.

⁹² Dodd, *The Battle over Britain*, pp. 26, 27.

synonymous with 'whiteness'.⁹³ One unintended consequence of this exclusivity was a strengthening of the marginal voices that had been gathering impetus since the late-1960s with the fragmentation of consensus culture.⁹⁴ In effect, Thatcherism's 'national-popular' identity provided a source of negative reinforcement for the diverse ethnic, racial, regional and subcultural perspectives that proliferated during the 1980s. This is particularly evident in the continuing resurgence of Scottish nationalism and literature where interest in a distinctive national culture and identity was partially fuelled by an 'antagonistic dialogism with that bellicose and ruthlessly self-serving version of Englishness peddled through Thatcherism'.⁹⁵ Further traces of this antagonism can also be perceived in Irish and Welsh literature; in the regional and class alienation of Ken Loach's films and the fiction of Pat Barker and Livi Michael;⁹⁶ and through the critical comparisons between an imperialistic Englishness and racial heterogeneity in Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* and the films of Hanif Kureishi and Stephen Frears.⁹⁷ However, the influence of Thatcherism should not be over-estimated in relation to this splintering of British identity as the motivating agents and essential directions of cultural fragmentation had been clearly evident in the late 1970s.⁹⁸ Indeed, some critics have interpreted Thatcherism as symptomatic of the expiration of a common national identity: 'the final twitchings of the corpse before rigour mortis sets in.'⁹⁹ In this context the nationalist rhetoric of regeneration constitutes an extravagant

⁹³ Paul Gilroy, *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack: The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation* (London: Hutchinson, 1987).

⁹⁴ Waugh, *The Harvest of the Sixties*, p. 209.

⁹⁵ Tim Middleton, 'Constructing the contemporary self: the works of Iain Banks', in Tracey Hill and William Hughes, *Contemporary Writing and National Identity* (Bath: Sulis Press, 1995), p. 19.

⁹⁶ For example, Ken Loach's *Riff Raff* and *Raining Stones*, Pat Barker's *Blow Your House Down* (London: Virago, 1984), and Levi Michael's *Under a thin moon* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1992).

⁹⁷ For further discussion, see Hill, *British Cinema in the 1980s*, esp. ch. 10.

⁹⁸ Waugh, *The Harvest of the Sixties*, p. 14.

⁹⁹ Patrick Brantlinger, *Fictions of State: Culture and Credit on Britain, 1694-1994* (Ithica: Cornell University Press, 1996), p. 238.

attempt to conceal the real circumstances of Britain in the 1980s: the acceleration of the nation's post-imperial decline; the increasing influence of the global economy and the European Community; the internationalisation of culture; and the irreconcilable diversity of a multiracial and multicultural society. As Raymond Williams observed in relation to the Falklands conflict: 'It is because the real national self-identification and self-confidence ... have gone, that a certain artificial, frenetic, from-the-top, imagery of a nation can be injected.'¹⁰⁰

What is distinctive about the participation of 'state of the nation' novels within this cultural debate is that they challenge the nationalist mythology of Thatcherism whilst attempting to preserve the conceptual framework of a coherent nation. Although the transatlantic meta-narrative of Amis's *Money* provides an obvious exception, the majority of these novels retain the nation-state as a relatively 'unproblematic unit for cultural enquiry'.¹⁰¹ By depicting the 'Thatcher revolution' as affecting a transformation of Britain, they implicitly accept the broad economic and political boundaries of a sovereign nation. Furthermore, the allegorical designs of these narratives continue to reflect the traditions of liberal dissent through their tendency towards 'universalized perceptions' of the nation. What underpins such perceptions is a liberal-humanistic faith that there exists a fundamental level at which socio-cultural diversity can be imaginatively reconciled and apprehended. Through the combination of these two factors these novels can be seen to fulfil a traditional role in shaping or supporting the 'imaginary constructs' of collective national identity.

It was the *novel* that historically accompanied the rise of nations by objectifying the 'one, yet many' of national life, and by mimicking the structure of the nation, a

¹⁰⁰ Raymond Williams, quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 238.

¹⁰¹ Anderson, 'A Culture in Contraflow – I', p. 47.

clearly bordered jumble of languages and styles ... [i]ts manner of presentation allowed people to imagine the special community that was the nation.¹⁰²

Of course, in the 1980s such representations become the basis for ideological contention, the 'special community' imagined by Thatcherism perceived by liberal opponents as inimical to the concept of a pluralistic but essentially integrated British society. In this respect, the critical function of these 'national allegories' extends to an attempt to reclaim the 'nation', and the values it signifies, by the implicit presentation of a liberal 'countermyth' to the constructions of Thatcherism. What lays behind the critiques, and in some instances the resolutions, of these novels is an alternative narrative of Britain and Britishness that upholds the inherent potential for a more humane and inclusive configuration. Yet while assured about their reasons for opposition, these narratives display an internal struggle to realise both the aesthetic and social aspects of this liberal countermyth. Although it could be argued that these struggles are a perennial feature of the genre, the 1980s witnessed an intensification that threatened to invalidate even a tentative confidence in the formal capacities and ideological relevance of 'state of the nation' dissent.

The aesthetic dimensions of this struggle essentially revolve around the difficulties of apprehending and encapsulating the 'special community' of a divided and heterogeneous Britain. As I have already suggested, these novels primarily affirm a national coherence through the assumptions of their generic forms. It is possible to argue that all examples of 'state of the nation' fiction are inherently premised upon the principles of universality and synthesis: '[s]uch novels depend upon a certain kind of making common, drawing into commensurability sundered areas of social experience and staging them in the thickened space and time of

¹⁰² Timothy Brennan, 'The national longing for form', in Homi K. Bhabha (ed.), *Nation and Narration* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 49.

national identity.’¹⁰³ Thus rather than contemplating the possibility of an irreconcilable fragmentation, these novels continue in the tradition of Masterman’s 1909 analysis by inviting ‘us to consider England as a social organism whose health is suspect’.¹⁰⁴ Their representations may be characterised by metaphoric patterns of disunity and antagonism, but the fact that the nation remains imaginable as a totality carries with it an implicit potential for ‘organic’ unity. Although coherence at the level of narrative obviously does not offer a blueprint for the nation, it does provide a tentative assertion that a basis could exist for such a reconciliation of difference and division. This is particularly evident in the allusive use of nineteenth-century structures; ‘the very teeming inclusive of which seemed to be both an enactment of the problems of imagining the whole of a nation and a utopian prefiguring of such a vision of healing unity.’¹⁰⁵ In spite of self-referentially acknowledging a distance from the panoramic assurance and didacticism of these antecedent texts, these novels remain imprinted with the ‘spirit’ of their inclusiveness because, as Eagleton has recognised, ‘to take over another literary text is to appropriate something of its built-in ideology in the very act of defacing it’.¹⁰⁶ Although less applicable to novels that address ideological change through zeitgeist personification, an intrinsic commonality is inferred through their satiric appeals to the moral discrimination of an ‘implied reader’. While in *Nasty, Very* a shared value-system is broadly assumed, the confessional narratives of *Fixx* and *Dirty Tricks* directly address, and thereby construct, the ‘reader’ by foregrounding specific episodes and statements as benchmarks for moral judgement. While this satiric mode acquires a greater

¹⁰³ Steven Connor, *The English Novel in History, 1950-1995* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 83.

¹⁰⁴ David Lodge, *The Language of Fiction: Essays in Criticism and Verbal Analysis of the English Novel*, 2nd edn. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), p. 217.

¹⁰⁵ Connor, *The English Novel in History*, p. 44.

¹⁰⁶ Terry Eagleton, ‘The Silences of David Lodge’, *New Left Review*, no. 172 (1988), p. 99.

ambivalence with the ‘addressivity’¹⁰⁷ of *Money*, Self’s construction of an antithetical ‘reader’ is complicated, but ultimately not invalidated, by the metafictional intrusions of an author-figure. Although these novels may not exemplify a moral framework within their narratives, the outward projections of their narrators imply a world beyond Thatcherism and ‘economic realism’ in which the social and moral ethos of liberal-humanism remains ascendant.

However, these appeals to coherence or commonality appear incongruous within a decade that witnessed the final demise of a spirit of national unity that had inspired the post-war settlement and underpinned the cultural ideals of consensus. As this suggests, the 1980s did not mark a sudden break-up of a common national culture but the culmination of a gathering post-war disparity between the ideal of unity and the reality of an increasingly diverse and plural society. In accordance with this progression, the evident difficulties of representing Britain in the 1980s form part of a continuing debate within the post-war ‘state of the nation’ novel:

Throughout such novels, an inherited ambition to represent England and Englishness goes along with – is even to large extent driven by – the apprehension that the condition of England was resistant to the kinds of novelistic and narrative representation that had previously seemed adequate.¹⁰⁸

The decade that followed the collapse of consensus offered a particularly extreme version of this counterbalance in which the drive to critically register stark economic divisions was accompanied by an underlying cultural and political fragmentation that fundamentally impeded coherent representation. Of course, it could be argued such problems are almost a prerequisite for a genre that has traditionally sought to articulate the potential dangers of rapid social change. In

¹⁰⁷ ‘The addressivity of a text concerns not only the kinds of reader or reading it may seem to imply or require ... but also the manner in which the text may reflect on these acts of address.’ Connor, *The English Novel in History*, p. 10.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

addressing Edwardian England, Masterman's endeavour 'to tear out the inner secret of the life of the people' was based upon the assumption that 'such temper and character are usually only revealed in times of national crisis'.¹⁰⁹ However, in the 1980s this collective identification of the 'people' was no longer plausible, the 'democratization of culture' illuminating a variegated society of regional, racial, ethnic and subcultural identities. Furthermore, the rising neo-nationalism within the United Kingdom and the escalating influence of global capitalism questioned the validity of circumscribed apprehensions of the nation-state. These circumstances posed new and fundamental challenges to a genre premised upon the delineation of a national totality through the orchestration of typifying patterns of social experience. For some critics this rendered the traditional 'state of the nation' novel obsolete, a view exemplified by Taylor's criticism of Margaret Drabble for her failure 'to see that you *cannot* write like that any more, that any attempt at the panoramic effect is bound to fetch up as a queerly narrow perspective.'¹¹⁰ In terms of the broader aesthetic context, the 'state of the novel' debates had also raised questions about the capacities of post-war social realism and the relevance of its liberal ideology. Writing from a position beyond consensus culture, the realist ambitions of 'state of the nation' fiction confronted an obvious exacerbation of the tensions recognised by Lodge in the early 1970s: 'The aesthetics of compromise go naturally with the ideology of compromise, and it is no coincidence that both are under pressure at the present time.'¹¹¹

This is not to suggest that novelists did not respond to these problems as the 1980s witnessed significant deviations from generic convention and the introduction

¹⁰⁹ Masterman, *The Condition of England*, p. 10.

¹¹⁰ Taylor, *A Vain Conceit*, p. 38.

¹¹¹ David Lodge, 'The Novelist at the Crossroads', in Malcolm Bradbury (ed.), *The Novel Today: Contemporary Writers on Modern Fiction* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1977), p. 33.

of numerous self-referential and intertextual devices. This is most clearly exemplified by the narrative modifications that occur across Drabble's trio of 'national allegories', her progressive use of self-reflexive elements responding to the difficulties of 'finding a form to represent the simultaneity of things going on.'¹¹² In addition, McEwan's humanistic realism acquired greater scope through a dystopian projection that reflected the influence of science fiction and fantasy;¹¹³ and Lodge's *Nice Work* extended Drabble's allusive recognitions into an intertextual dialogue with the conventions of the nineteenth-century 'industrial novel'. Yet these developments disturb, rather than repudiate, the social-realist ambitions of the 'state of the nation' form, constituting attempts to either mitigate or circumvent the contemporary limitations of their diagnostic structures. Even the most sophisticated narrative structures cannot disguise a tension between the genre's liberal ideology and the incoherence or irreconcilable divisions of the nation they address. The obvious exception to this is *Money*, a novel that examines the state of Britain through the 'flagrant violation of every requirement of the condition of England novel.'¹¹⁴ Instead of preserving the nation as a bounded entity, Amis directly reflects the loss of political, economic and cultural autonomy within the global meta-narratives of international finance capitalism and multinational consumerism. Marking a culmination of the post-war debate within the genre, *Money* asserts the impossibility of fictional circumscription and cultural synthesis by eschewing liberal realism in favour of the cacophonous, arbitrary and dehumanised language of money.

¹¹² Margaret Drabble, quoted in John Hannay, 'Margaret Drabble: An Interview', *Twentieth Century Literature: A Scholarly and Critical Journal*, vol. 33, no. 2 (Summer 1987), p. 133.

¹¹³ Bradbury, *The Modern British Novel*, p. 410.

¹¹⁴ Connor, *The English Novel in History*, p. 92.

In addition to these self-conscious acknowledgements of aesthetic inadequacy, the struggle to encapsulate Britain is also apparent in the similitude of emblematic characters, topical references and structures of division. In common with the cinematic portrayals of the decade, these novels can be collectively perceived as recycling ‘a number of motifs, narratives, and images as a kind of identikit rather than an identity of Britain.’¹¹⁵ This can be attributed to what Connor describes as the ‘overdefinition’ of the nation, that ‘excessive self-production in fantasy and media facsimile which is the proof of its disappearance.’¹¹⁶ From this perspective the north/south divisions, political stereotypes and underclass communities revisit media images and definitions in the absence of an authentic means of representing national diversity. However, an alternative interpretation is provided by Taylor’s scathing attack upon the imaginative poverty of 1980s’ novelists, their disengagement from political realities signalled by the schematic and ‘stylized’ quality of their narratives:

... a handful of catchphrases about Mrs Thatcher and English life in the 1980s formed the basis for a great many doubtful ‘state of the nation’ novels. The novelists of the 1980s, you feel, did their ‘research’ in the cuttings libraries of national newspapers: their ‘observation’ was of headlines and government statistics, their conclusions could be found in leader-page articles in the *Guardian* ... If our view of Mrs Thatcher’s Britain was founded on a few strategically manipulated images and handful of tabloid headlines, then it was perhaps unreasonable to expect novelists to investigate any further.¹¹⁷

While Taylor underestimates both the political commitment of individual novelists and their close associations with specific locations (Lodge with Birmingham, Drabble with Sheffield), his critique is significant in highlighting the political implications of recycling images of the nation. The ‘overdefinition’ of Britain may have been heightened by the heritage industry and the ‘image’ culture of

¹¹⁵ Thomas Elsaesser, ‘Images for Sale: The “New” British Cinema’, in Friedman (ed.), *British Cinema and Thatcherism*, p. 64.

¹¹⁶ Connor, *The English Novel in History*, p. 64.

¹¹⁷ Taylor, *After the War*, p. 286.

advertising, but the 1980s witnessed a significant, and for many highly undemocratic, alliance between Thatcherism and powerful sources of zeitgeist definition. Through a combination of the so-called 'Saatchi effect' within politics and the government's 'balmy intimacy'¹¹⁸ with the Murdoch empire, the images and discourses of the media frequently validated Thatcherism's patriotism and free-market values. This inevitably prompted a contradictory vision of the nation, the 'identikit' of a disintegrating Britain recycled by the political Left, the liberal establishment and the dissenting voices of 'state of the nation' fiction. The potential danger of this antagonistic framework is that it ultimately reflects Thatcherism's ability to determine 'the terms and boundaries' of national analysis by 'establishing its concerns as the implicit basis for political debate.'¹¹⁹ By accepting the parameters of this public debate through their diagnostic similitude, some of these novels not only reveal the problems of representation but also risk an ironic complicity with the concepts of nation and nationhood they seek to oppose. As Thomas Elsaesser has stated:

Such a circulation of representations is useful politically (as the Thatcher government knew full well) insofar as it fixes a complex and shifting reality (e.g. nationhood and social cohesion at times of crisis and decline) into images commonly accepted as true and meaningful as soon as they crop up everywhere, forcing even the opponent to do battle on the same terrain.¹²⁰

At its broadest level, this acceptance of terrain involves the national boundaries of Thatcher's patriotic mythology, the imagined 'nation' commonly premised upon a conflation of Britain and England in which the specific circumstances of other constituents of the United Kingdom remain either marginal or undifferentiated. Although this slippage between designations is undoubtedly an

¹¹⁸ Nicholas Rance, 'British Newspapers', in Bloom and Day (eds.) *Literature and Culture in Modern Britain: 1956-99*, p. 130.

¹¹⁹ O'Shea, 'Trusting the people: How does Thatcherism Work?', p. 35.

¹²⁰ Elsaesser, 'Images for Sale: The "New" British Cinema', p. 68.

inherited cultural and literary assumption, its preservation beyond the 'break-up of Britain'¹²¹ unintentionally mirrors the exclusivity of Thatcherite rhetoric by focussing upon 'Englishness' as the primary issue of contention. In addition, there is a tacit acceptance of Thatcher's 'island independence' through critiques that negatively reveal the nation's capacity for economic and political self-determination. It is significant that both McEwan and Drabble shift from fatalistic perceptions of a disintegrating and ungovernable Britain, powerless within a subsuming international recession, to conceptions of socio-economic problems as both nationally distinctive and internally imposed, the systematic design of a government rather than the by-product of global conditions. In some cases this circumscription acquires a totalitarian emphasis which ignores wider economic contexts and political pragmatism and results in postulations of hegemonic influence that are perilously close to affirming Thatcher's revolutionary self-image and claims to have 'changed everything.'¹²² Such risks of collusion take a different form in zeitgeist personifications, the dynamic villainy and upward mobility of Thatcherite figures reinforcing, and potentially aggrandising, the media myths of an entrepreneurial meritocracy. Although less specifically related to Thatcherism, a similar danger is evident in Amis's use of a 'capitalist style par excellence',¹²³ the meta-narrative of 'money' assimilated into the consumerist idiolect of John Self and mirrored by the capricious and self-reflexive quality of the novel's structure.

The difficulties of locating an aesthetic basis for a liberal countermyth of Britain also extend to the problems of constructing a political or ideological response. The obvious framework for opposition is provided by the repudiation of

¹²¹ Tom Nairn, *The Break-up of Britain: Neo-Nationalism and Crisis* (London: Verso, 1981).

¹²² Margaret Thatcher, quoted in Morgan, *The People's Peace*, p. 438.

¹²³ James Lasdun, 'Pre-modern, Post-modernist', *Encounter*, vol. LXIV no. 2 (Feb. 1985), p. 46.

Thatcherism's narrative of regeneration and solidarity, the depiction of economic inequality, social disorder and unethical acquisition critically illuminating the disparity between political rhetoric and the 'real' state of the nation. Yet rather than existing as discrete examples, these images of social malaise are orchestrated within chronicles of the decade that assert a progressive transition from collective identification towards irreparable fragmentation and social antagonism. While in some novels this narrative is explicitly measured by the disestablishment of the ideology of welfare-capitalism, others reflect a more general decline in liberal culture and moral interdependence. In either case, the perception of Thatcherism as imposing radical and destructive change is accompanied by the implicit or explicit traces of what Žižek has described as a 'myth of Origin'; 'an epoch preceding oppression'¹²⁴ from which a resistant national identity achieves definition. Although in this instance the myth is better understood as a set of ideals rather than a bounded historical period, the opposition of these novels is nonetheless underpinned by allusions to the national and cultural formations that preceded Thatcherism. Whether returning to the social unity of wartime Britain, the institutions of the post-war settlement, or the progressive ambitions of 'left-culturalism',¹²⁵ Thatcherism is indicted for either instigating or exacerbating a descent from the inclusive cultural ideals supported by consensus. While a popular or political revival of this spirit appears remote, the endurance of its liberal principles is assured by a series of characters and social groups that remain alienated from the zeitgeist of the 1980s. Ultimately, an alternative nation is envisaged through symbolic individuals and microcosmic communities: the utopian visions of the University in *Nice Work* and *A Very Peculiar Practice: The New Frontier*; the harmonious gatherings of family and

¹²⁴ Slavoj Žižek, quoted in Brantlinger, *Fictions of State: Culture and Credit in Britain*, p. 242.

¹²⁵ Sinfield, *Literature, Politics and Culture in Postwar Britain*, pp. 241-6.

friends in *The Middle Ground* and *The Radiant Way*; the revival and expansion of love in *The Child in Time*; and the possible revival of collective ideals in the tolerant multiculturalism and counter-cultural protests of a new generation.

In accordance with the challenges facing the liberal aesthetic of the genre, these novels display a struggle to affirm the potency of their social and ideological principles against the prognostic implications of their national diagnoses. Once again, this struggle can be perceived as reflecting a traditional fault-line within 'condition of England' fiction: the inability to translate the liberal-humanist values of universality, connection and synthesis into a manifesto for political and social advancement. Whether exemplified by the contrived resolutions of nineteenth-century novels or the Romantic utopianism of Forster, potential solutions to large-scale social problems invariably remain premised upon the actions and development of the liberal individual. However, the political and cultural circumstances of the 1980s were notably resistant to moderate pleas for reform and the symbolic claims of humanism and liberal integration. In terms of directly criticising Thatcherism, these novelists not only addressed a politically ascendant government but also were confronted by an ideology that actively defined itself against the values and discourse of liberal culture. While Forster's promised 'connection' in *Howards End* is based upon the Schlegels and Wilcoxes being antithetical examples of middle-class values, mutual difference becomes alienation and aversion towards the moral imperatives, anti-intellectualism and economic individualism of 'conviction' politics. Furthermore, appeals to a 'myth of Origin' are obviously weakened by the fact that the socio-political formation that enshrined the values of liberal culture was based upon an economic theory that had been invalidated by events in the 1970s. Thus while the principles of consensus culture may be affirmed against the divisive

effects of Thatcherite policies, their invocation offers a source of critical comparison without providing a direction or blueprint for structural reform. However, the predicament of dissidence that emerges from a consensual standpoint extends beyond the climate of Thatcherism, for as David Watt recognised in relation to the BBC, '[t]he problem is really much deeper than political ideology. National consciousness is at present dissolved to the point where no single organisation can possibly "represent" it'.¹²⁶ Analogous to the universalised perspectives of the 'state of the nation' novel, the diversification of culture in the 1980s questions the validity of liberal dissent by revealing the problematic status of the exemplary individual. To symbolically encapsulate the future at the level of the individual is to assume a national resonance that appears increasingly untenable in a multicultural and multiracial Britain.

It is the dynamics of these aesthetic and political struggles that inform, and ultimately define, the character of the 'state of the nation' novel in the 1980s. As expressions of liberal dissent they seek to challenge the national discourse of Thatcherism through a liberal countermyth and intervene within the network of competing stories which produces 'our notions of reality, and hence our beliefs about what we can and cannot do'.¹²⁷ As Sinfield goes on to argue, a dominant cultural discourse remains prevalent through 'the criteria of plausibility', that in the absence of alternatives 'people believe that things have to take more or less their present form – that they cannot, realistically, be improved upon, at least through the methods to hand'.¹²⁸ It is this question of plausibility that pervades these responses to the changing nation of the 1980s, the struggle to find a vantage point outside the

¹²⁶ David Watt, quoted in Hewison, *Culture and Consensus*, p. 236.

¹²⁷ Sinfield, *Literature, Politics and Culture in Postwar Britain*, p. 23.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 27-8.

discourse of Thatcherism and a story of ‘authority in the dispute about how to extend our sense of the possibilities of human lives.’¹²⁹ Furthermore, the inherent assumptions of their aesthetic forms and national critiques expand the issue of credibility to include questions about the foundations of a liberal-humanist culture and the viability of the fictional modes it engendered. While primarily addressing a hostile political ideology, these novels are forced to confront the deeper reasons for its emergence. Behind their critiques lies an awareness of the underlying movement of Britain from the common national culture of consensus towards an undefined, and for the fiction of liberal dissent, potentially indefinable future.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

The Politics of Possibility and the Possibility of Politics:
Ian McEwan's *The Child in Time*

Although the dystopian vision of Britain offered by *The Child in Time* is McEwan's only fictional engagement with Thatcherism, it is important to recognise that it marks the culmination of a prolonged shift away from his early short stories and novellas. In criticism this movement has been adapted into '[a] familiar moral fable' about a writer 'who gradually grows out of his nasty adolescent fantasies and into a responsible adult novelist.'¹ As McEwan has revealed in interview, this growth stemmed from a conscious decision to move from the private to the public arena: from 'exaggerated psychopathic states of mind' to stepping 'out into the world.'² However, there is a danger in overstating this differentiation by interpreting it as a novelistic sea change rather than as an extension and refinement of established formal and thematic elements. While *The Child in Time* undoubtedly moves beyond the Kafkaesque terseness and psychosexual extremities of the earlier writings, there are significant continuities in both McEwan's prose style and his thematic interest in sexuality, gender, regression and loss. Furthermore, this 'move abroad' does not diminish the elusive quality of unease that characterised the earlier writings: the 'power to unseat our moral certainties and sap our confidence in snap judgements.'³ Nevertheless, these continuities were accompanied by an expansion of social and political concerns; an engagement with the 'state of the nation' motivated by a dismay towards the New Cold War and Thatcherism's rapid transformation of British society. Although retaining a single protagonist as his primary narrative focus, the cultural environments of these figures develop from the

¹ Kiernan Ryan, *Ian McEwan* (Plymouth: Northcote House, 1994), p. 2.

² John Haffenden, *Novelists in Interview* (London: Methuen, 1985), p. 173.

³ Ryan, *Ian McEwan*, p. 5.

enclosed houses and urban districts of the early writings, to the symbolic fulcrums of national and global change in *or Shall We Die?*, *The Ploughman's Lunch* and *The Child in Time*.

Although this broader social awareness is less evident in McEwan's short stories and novellas, there are indications of its existence in the contexts in which the private dramas of psycho-sexuality and familial power are enacted. In the short-story collections there are representations of materialism and consumerism in 'Dead As They Come'; a declining and inadequate welfare system in 'Conversations with a Cupboard Man'; and post-industrial dereliction in the polluted rivers and canals of 'Butterflies' and 'Last Day of Summer'. Yet while these social backdrops reinforce the psychological and moral disintegration that leads to extreme neuroses and sporadic brutality, they remain largely peripheral and atmospheric aspects of highly focused narrative structures. A greater integration becomes apparent in McEwan's first novella *The Cement Garden*, the urban wasteland that surrounds the family home a symbolic image of social alienation and the entropic decline of the state.

Our house had once stood in a street full of houses. Now it stood on empty land where stinging nettles were growing round torn corrugated tin. The other houses were knocked down for a motorway they had never built ... [s]een from across the road it looked like the face of someone concentrating, trying to remember.⁴

Significantly, the personification of Jack's house within this environment establishes a parallel with the loss of community and stasis that conditions the siblings' departure from conventional morality. Although geographically limited, the urban wasteland becomes indicative of a broader world of inexorable decline and social disintegration. In many ways the exaggerated bleakness of this vision is in accordance with the prevalent gloom towards the state of the nation in the late-1970s. Britain appeared to be beset by social and racial unrest, global recession, the

⁴ Ian McEwan, *The Cement Garden* (London: Picador, 1980 [1978]), p. 21.

collapse of the welfare state, and the economic and political relegation of the nation's international standing. As Bart Moore-Gilbert has summarised:

[Britain's] ... steady deterioration in a number of key areas as the decade progressed gave much contemporary analysis an apocalyptic tone. Nairn talks of a 'rapidly accelerating backwardness, economic stagnation, social decay, and cultural despair' ... as indicative of a society 'decayed to the point of disintegration'.⁵

While this disintegration is inferred by *The Cement Garden*, it is explicitly represented in McEwan's only socio-political short story, and obvious pre-cursor to *The Child in Time*, 'Two Fragments: March 199-'. The narrative revolves around the protagonist's attempt to preserve himself and his daughter in a society beyond 'the age of machines and manufacture'.⁶ Premised upon the total collapse of Britain's commercial system and social infrastructure, the story offers a dystopian vision of London in which the topography of economic confidence has given way to a Darwinian culture of survival for an impoverished and destitute population:

The Ministry rose from a vast plain of pavement ... The stones were cracking and subsiding. Human refuse littered the plain. Vegetables, rotten and trodden down, cardboard boxes flattened into beds, the remains of fires and the carcasses of roasted dogs and cats, rusted tin, vomit, worn tyres, animal excrement. An old dream of horizontal lines converging on the thrusting steel and glass perpendicular was now beyond recall.⁷

What is significant about this vision in comparison with *The Child in Time* is an absence of institutional and political authority, the depiction of the 'Ministry' suggestive of a once organised and centralised state that has descended into impotence and meaningless bureaucratic ritual.

All the typists were smoking as they worked and the air was thick and sharp with smoke, not of this day alone but of ten thousand previous days and ten thousand days to come. There seemed no way forward. Henry lit a cigarette and waited.⁸

⁵ Bart Moore-Gilbert, 'Cultural Closure or Post-avantgardism?', in Bart Moore-Gilbert (ed.), *Arts in the Seventies: Cultural Closure?* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 1.

⁶ Ian McEwan, *In Between the Sheets* (London: Picador, 1979 [1978]), p. 56.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

The obvious source for this projection is the apparent weakness of consensus politics by the late-1970s, its inability to reverse, direct, or even influence the nation's escalating economic and social problems. As David Marquand has noted, while the 'Keynesian social democrats still controlled the commanding heights of Whitehall ... they no longer knew what to do ... [i]t was as though a sleek ocean liner had suddenly become a rudderless craft.'⁹ As in Margaret Drabble's *The Ice Age*, 'Two Fragments: March 199-' imagines a Britain in which progression is unimaginable and fatalism endemic. Within this frozen culture the individual citizen is denied the possibility of any meaningful action beyond the immediate demands of protection and survival. While the story's central character seeks to challenge this stasis by claiming 'that you cannot survive now without a plan',¹⁰ it is precisely the absence of structures of order and possibility that characterise the degeneration of the social fabric. As a result, he retreats into memory and a dream of being reunited with his mother and the natural environment of his childhood. Similarly, his lover exhibits a desperate nostalgia for industrial mass production, the human inventiveness of crafted objects, and the experience 'of travelling within a set of rules.'¹¹ The only positive symbol of an alternative future is the innocence, humour and inquisitiveness of Marie; although as in many of McEwan's early works, it is an innocence constantly threatened by corruption. As indicated by the brutality of the father/daughter relationship of the street performers, the desperate hostility of this projected Britain appears to offer little hope for the survival of her unfettered spirit.

⁹ David Marquand, 'Moralists and Hedonists', in David Marquand and Anthony Seldon (eds.), *The Ideas that Shaped Post-War Britain* (London: Fontana, 1996), p. 8.

¹⁰ McEwan, *In Between the Sheets*, p. 53.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

Although exceptional in the context of the short stories, 'Two Fragments: 199-' provides an early example of McEwan's predilection for structural oppositions that posit the individual against dehumanising influences of political, social and ideological systems. As his preface to the libretto and screenplay illustrates, McEwan's conception of the 'political' novel is drawn from his admiration for a twentieth-century tradition of anti-totalitarian fiction that encompasses Kafka, Solzhenitsyn, Orwell, Heller, Kundera and Rushdie.¹² For McEwan, what underpins this tradition is a narrative emphasis upon the structures of power as they impact upon the humanity of the individual: the opposition between 'public policy' and 'private fear'.¹³ Rather than offering a schematic delineation of the mechanisms of social control or engaging in the abstractions of ideological debate, McEwan upholds the importance of a humanistic exposition through the moral and social landscape of the autonomous individual. This approach is informed by his belief in the novel as an act of imaginative possibility, an 'open-ended' process that is fundamentally inimical to the enclosures of didacticism, demonstration or ideological conviction:

... a moral or political scheme draws you away at the very beginning, at the moment of inception, from the specific, from the detail, from the strange combination of details that give novels their curious power. When the specific becomes subservient to the scheme the expressive freedom that seems to be the essence of this form is compromised.¹⁴

In one respect, this conception of the novel is exemplified by McEwan's preference for modes of fictional realism and precise details of human experience; *The Child in Time* notably characterised by an eschewal of the hyperbole that so often

¹² Ian McEwan, *A Move Abroad: or Shall We Die? And The Ploughman's Lunch* (London: Picador, 1989), p. xi.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. xviii.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. x.

accompanies dystopian extrapolations.¹⁵ As Knights has argued, the environmental degradation of his futuristic Britain is ‘all the more chillingly brushed in for being an accepted aspect of the fabric of the world which narrator and speaker take for granted.’¹⁶ Furthermore, the ‘strange combinations’ and mutability of writing are analogous to McEwan’s faith in the potential of the individual, his adherence to the liberal-humanist idea that ‘people are always better than the systems in which they live.’¹⁷ Whether illustrated by symbolic images of optimistic regeneration or implied through a moral pessimism, his opposition to the restrictive systems of power focuses upon the individual rather than the possibilities of collective action. Similarly, the political effectiveness of his ‘political’ fiction derives from its imaginative non-conformity, the discovery of ‘its values not through cerebral analysis so much as by exploration, by accident, and by the mere exercise of its freedoms.’¹⁸ In effect, McEwan provides a classic liberal defence of fiction by asserting its inherent openness and plurality as a counter-force to the dehumanising effects of institutional power and monological discourses of religious and political dogma:

... it is these qualities, rather than reducible ideas or encoded messages, that a novel at its best has at its command when it finds itself the adversary of a thought system. The very form of the novel, or the very nature of the possibilities it affords - imaginatively pluralistic, humanistic, intrigued by the fate of individuals, sceptical - suggests a clamorous democracy ...¹⁹

Although this opposition between totalitarian systems and the ‘fate of individuals’ informs the underlying narrative structures of both ‘Two Fragments 199-’ and the

¹⁵ For an example of dystopian hyperbole in relation to Thatcherism, see Pete Davies, *The Last Election* (London: Penguin, 1987).

¹⁶ Ben Knights, *Writing Masculinities: Male Narratives in Twentieth-Century Fiction* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1999), p. 207.

¹⁷ Quoted in Laurie Muchnik, ‘You Must Dismember This’, *The Village Voice* (28 August 1990), p. 102.

¹⁸ Ian McEwan, ‘A new licence for liberty’, *The Guardian* (30 April 1990), p. 19.

¹⁹ McEwan, *A Move Abroad*, p. xviii.

later works, there is a significant intensification of the authoritarian character of these systems and their potential threat to the liberties of the individual. In the short story, the impotence of the 'Ministry' is indicative of a post-political nation in which the ideological outlines of the past have become blurred by a retrospective acceptance of inevitability: '[s]he wondered which government and which set of illusions were to blame and how it could have been otherwise.'²⁰ Reflecting the disillusionment of post-war progressive thinking during the final years of consensus, McEwan presents a state system that has totally withdrawn from its responsibilities for the welfare and enhancement of society and the citizen. In contrast, the 'set of illusions' that became ascendant in the early 1980s offered a more definitive, and ideologically directed, threat to liberal society and the freedoms of the individual. With a revitalised antagonism between the nuclear superpowers and the 'conviction' politics of Thatcherism, McEwan's fiction shifted from a vague fatalism concerning the nation's future to the clarity of dissenting voice against new forms of 'tyranny'.

Before examining the expression of this dissent in *The Child in Time*, it is important to briefly outline the appearance of its central themes in the two digressions from fiction that immediately preceded it. The first of these, a libretto entitled *or Shall We Die?*, constructs the opposition between individual and system through the figure of a mother in an age of masculine values and heightened nuclear tension. In combination with the realisation of her 'private fear' through the death of her daughter, she is also associated with an understanding of the powerful and joyous interconnections between the human and natural world. Posited against these values is the stoical figure of Man, a composite of the scientific distance,

²⁰ McEwan, *In Between the Sheets*, p. 50.

jingoistic hostility, and military-industrial secrecy that McEwan recognises as underpinning the production and justification of nuclear weaponry. This dualism of male and female principles is augmented by a division between Newtonian and the 'new physics'; the logic, materialism and objectivity of the former contrasted with the latter's recognition of a universal interdependence and its potential for new forms of spiritual consciousness and ecological holism:

WOMAN

Grieving moon, do our virile times
suggest to you the metaphor of rape,
the conquest of nature, the slaughter of species,
the burning of forests, the poisoning of ocean and air,
the tyranny of scale, the weapons, the weapons

MAN AND WOMAN

Our science mocks magic and the human heart,
our knowledge is the brutal mastery of the unknown.

The planet does not turn for us alone.
Science is a form of wonder, knowledge a form of love.
Are we too late to love ourselves?
Shall we change, or shall we die?²¹

While the freedom of the libretto form allowed McEwan to affirm his unilateralism and explore the utopian possibilities of 'womanly times', his subsequent 'move abroad' witnessed a counter-movement towards character realism and contemporary pessimism. In contrast to the 'evolutionary test' facing mankind in the nuclear age, the screenplay for *The Ploughman's Lunch* provides a more focused critique of private and public morality in the Thatcherite culture that McEwan censoriously dissects in *A Move Abroad*:

Money-obsessed, aggressively competitive and individualistic, contemptuous of the weak, vindictive towards the poor, favouring the old American opposition of private affluence and public squalor, and individual gain against communal solutions, indifferent to the environment, deeply philistine, enamoured of policemen, soldiers and weapons - virile times indeed.²²

²¹ McEwan, *A Move Abroad*, p. 23.

²² *Ibid.*, p. xxiv.

Operating on multiple levels, the screenplay constructs a dark vision of the superficiality of the 1980s through the deceit and hypocrisy of James Penfield and the cultural diminishment of historicity. As Hill has recognised, Penfield's ambition connects *The Ploughman's Lunch* with the narrative structures of the 1950s; his upward mobility employed to 'comment upon the quality of the society to which he aspires.'²³ Reinforcing the moral shallowness of both Penfield and the upper class world he pursues through Susan, McEwan interweaves examples of the nation's cultural and historical 'emptiness'. Metaphorically encapsulated by the commercially fabricated 'Englishness' of the 'ploughman's lunch', the screenplay indicts the cynicism of an emergent enterprise culture and the self-interest of those involved in the production and transmission of the images and values of the nation. It is significant that Penfield's individualistic ascent involves numerous representatives of a media culture that share his lack of intellectual, moral and political principles. Cynical political journalists, the patriarchal culture of television production, the economic priorities of publishing, and the ethical indifference of commercial advertising variously exemplify the shallowness of the decade. In terms of Penfield's personal quest to escape his lower-middle class background, the screenplay represents his rise as a series of personal betrayals, sexual manipulations and social deceptions. Ultimately, his failure is ensured by his own betrayal by the 'old allies' of Jeremy and Susan, an event, which illuminates the impenetrability and comparable 'emptiness' of the class, he admires. However, rather than prompting self-analysis or a reconnection with his family roots, Penfield performs another act of emotional betrayal with his final impatient glance to his watch during his mother's funeral.

²³ John Hill, *British Cinema in the 1980s* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), p. 142.

The connection between this culture and a loss of history is provided by Penfield's self-serving attempt to rewrite the humiliation of Suez and its parallels with the 'renewal' of national pride claimed by Thatcherism following the Falklands conflict. For McEwan, both these events are more significant in relation to national consciousness than territorial politics; expressions 'who we thought we were, who we wanted to be.'²⁴ As distortions of the past in the service of contemporary exigencies, the screenplay reveals the dangerous connection between a nation without a 'sense of history' and the acceptance of the self-generating 'truths' of political propaganda. Revisiting the threats of authoritarianism and militarism in the libretto, the agenda of Thatcherism is tacitly supported by a media that retains an essentially masculine perspective of war whilst marginalizing the dissident voices of anti-war protests and the women of Greenham Common. This creeping political orthodoxy is reinforced by references to the communist regimes of Eastern Europe, a discussion of *Man of Iron*, and the quotation of Kundera's famous maxim: 'the struggle of man against tyranny is the struggle of memory against forgetting.'²⁵ However, in sharp contrast to the utopian possibilities of *or Shall We Die?*, *The Ploughman's Lunch* maintains the 'courage' of its pessimism²⁶ by expressing 'moral values' through narrative structure rather than the punishment or reform of the protagonist. Indeed, the anti-heroic Penfield not only remains unaltered but also achieves success with the publication of his book on Suez; the validation of his 'correction' of history ominously juxtaposed against segments of Thatcher's patriotic rhetoric at the 1982 Conservative Party conference. As many critics have noted, the pessimism of the screenplay is significantly reinforced by the absence of

²⁴ McEwan, *A Move Abroad*, p. 29.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. xv. A quality McEwan specifically associates with Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

an alternative culture and scepticism towards the possibilities of political opposition. Unlike the novels of the 1950s, Penfield's family is not associated with a 'countervailing set of values or cultural tradition'²⁷ through which his shallowness can be critically measured. Although the protest at Greenham Common is construed as admirable, the representation of individual figures carries the suggestion of political naïveté and ineffectiveness. This scepticism is also apparent in the waning of Ann Barrington's academic socialism; her political opposition reduced to weary and impotent critiques delivered from a position of isolation and affluence.

As the 'groundwork' for his return to the novel form, these 'moves abroad' clearly establish the basis for the division within *The Child in Time* between the utopian humanism that surrounds Stephen's redemption of time and the dystopian projection of a Thatcherite Britain. In the view of one critic the novel brings 'the visionary lyricism of the one into collision with the disenchanting realism of the other.'²⁸ However, it is important not to overstate the aesthetic dimensions of this collision, the archetypal voices of the libretto and austere characterisation of the screenplay inevitably modified by their incorporation within fictional realism. While the universal and metaphysical concerns of the former acquire a more limited expression through a physics lecturer and a single moment of temporal transcendence, the dramatic emphasis of *The Ploughman's Lunch* is replaced by a return to the psychological depth and sensual precision of McEwan's earlier fiction. Nevertheless, *The Child in Time* undoubtedly reveals a 'collision' between the political and philosophical implications of the preceding works, the pessimism of the screenplay's 'public policy, private fear' co-existing with an assertion of the redemptive capacities of the individual. This attempt to mediate between these texts

²⁷ Hill, *British Cinema in the 1980s*, p. 146.

²⁸ Ryan, *Ian McEwan*, p. 48.

is signalled by a narrative structure that, unlike both 'Two Fragments: 199-' and *The Ploughman's Lunch*, preserves a sense of individual autonomy. The protagonist is neither totally immersed nor utterly defeated within the social structures that surround him, McEwan's humanistic narrative granting the potential for development and resistance through his personal crisis and professional position. Yet as I shall seek to demonstrate, *The Child in Time* continues to display the structural and political problems of reconciliation and the ambivalent optimism of its author.

My own belief in the future fluctuates. There are sudden insights into the love and inventiveness of individuals to give me hope for all humankind; and then there are acts of cruelty and destruction that make me despair.²⁹

As a 'state of the nation' novel, *The Child in Time* offers a prophetic warning of the consequences of Thatcherism by projecting the policies and ideological directions of the mid-1980s upon a Britain of the mid-to-late 1990s.³⁰ The historical background of this projection is established through an opening parallel between the popular view of subsidised public transport as a 'denial of individual liberty', and a grid locked London in which 'the pursuit of liberty was more resigned than passionate.'³¹ This parallel reveals the two essential premises of the novel's imagined future: that Thatcherism has succeeded in discrediting the collective and managerial ethos of consensus, and that the dynamism of Thatcher's 'great car economy' has dwindled to 'a sense of relative motion, of drifting slowly backwards.'³² What lies behind this vision of atrophy is a perception of the political and social transformations of the 1980s as an essentially reactionary rather than a progressive revolution. Indeed, the continuing ascendancy of Thatcherite ideology

²⁹ McEwan, *A Move Abroad*, p. 16.

³⁰ Adam Mars-Jones has made a relatively convincing case for the year actually being 1996 in *Venus Envy*, *Chatto Counterblasts* No. 14 (London: Chatto & Windus, 1990), p. 20.

³¹ Ian McEwan, *The Child in Time* (London: Picador, 1988 [1987]), p. 7.

³² *Ibid.*

meteoric rise and self-serving attitudes of Charles Darke. Contrasting his admission that '[i]t doesn't matter what I think'³⁵ with the urban degeneration he defends, Darke comes to epitomise the callousness of political culture in which belief and responsibility are replaced by rhetorical performance:

By removing the dross of pre-legislation days, and aiming for a leaner, fitter public charity sector, the government has provided itself in microcosm with an ideal towards which its economic policies should aspire. Tens of millions have been saved in social security payments, and a large number of men, women and children have been introduced to the pitfalls and strenuous satisfactions of self-sufficiency long familiar to the business community in this country³⁶

In spite of carefully avoiding gender attribution, the novel also offers a depiction of Margaret Thatcher that hesitates between satirical parody and the desire to humanise her media persona. Of course, the primary purpose of this characterisation is to establish the Prime Minister as a parallel to Stephen as 'the nation's parent' and the 'repository of collective fantasy'.³⁷ Nevertheless, it may be significant that Stephen's instinctive hostility towards her is tempered by the recognition that she was 'neither institution nor legend, and bore little resemblance to the caricatures of political cartoonists. Even the nose was much like any other.'³⁸ Furthermore, McEwan's conventional attacks upon her domineering manner and lack of culture are accompanied by her personal attachment to Charles and digressions upon the emotional confines of leadership. While this vision of a repressed romantic could be interpreted as merely crude satire, it may also illustrate McEwan's determination to contemplate the human dimensions of political tyranny:

If you want to argue with Caesar on Caesar's terms, then you had better ... propound in the clearest terms your vision of an alternative social order. But if you want to

³⁵ Ibid., p. 39.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 39.

³⁷ McEwan, *The Child in Time*, p. 83.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 83. This is an obvious reference to the caricatures of Thatcher produced by Gerald Scarfe, Ralph Steadman and the Spitting Image puppeteers.

understand Caesar, and why he recurs and how we are in him as much as he is in us, then tilt back your chair ...³⁹

Whether or not McEwan's portrayal succeeds in penetrating the remoteness and puritanical dedication of Mrs Thatcher is hard to judge, but it is difficult not to include it within Taylor's list of characterisations that struggle to capture a constructed political persona that 'was conspicuously in want of a third dimension.'⁴⁰

While a progression from *The Ploughman's Lunch* is evident in this socio-political diagnosis of the nation, the novel also reflects the issues of *or Shall We Die?* through millennial warnings of nuclear and ecological apocalypse. Indeed, Knights has interpreted *The Child in Time* as a 'green parable' that focuses upon the 'vulnerability of human life, and the fragility of the collective arrangements for the maintenance of that life.'⁴¹ This reading is undoubtedly supported by the nuclear stand-off prompted by events at the Olympics; references to the freak weather conditions and the absence of Autumn; and a countryside decimated by vast plains and 'geometrical' forests that are 'uncomplicated by undergrowth and birdsong.'⁴² Although important in reinforcing the associations between Thatcherism and a destructive masculinity, these examples of the vulnerability of the individual remain primarily associated with a specific political ideology rather than an overarching patriarchy or global ecological crisis.

In accordance with McEwan's liberal-humanist oppositions, the effects of this ideology, and the policies it supports, are specifically measured through the behaviour of individuals. The essence of the novel's political critique is apparent in

³⁹ McEwan, *A Move Abroad*, p. xviii.

⁴⁰ D.J. Taylor, *After the War: The Novel and England since 1945* (London: Flamingo, 1994), p. 269.

⁴¹ Knights, *Writing Masculinities*, pp. 207, 208.

⁴² McEwan, *The Child in Time*, p. 51.

Stephen's numerous encounters with the deprivation and stoical professionalism of licensed beggars. As Darke's public statement illustrates, the government's attitude to this community epitomises a shift from public provision to self-sufficiency: the privatisation of beggars offering a gloomy recognition of the increasing destitution of the 1980s. In the opening chapter Stephen is faced with the dilemma that generosity would tacitly support a despicable policy whilst inaction would deny an instinctive humanitarian response. Implicitly indicting the New Right's association of poverty with personal and moral inadequacy,⁴³ Stephen concludes that the 'art of bad government was to sever the line between public policy and intimate feeling, the instinct for what was right.'⁴⁴ This 'art' is also practised in the form of the *Authorised Childcare Handbook*, an extrapolation of the 'back-to-basics' view of education and, according to the fictional Prime Minister, a core reform through which 'the nation is to be regenerated.'⁴⁵ Illustrated through the epigraphs that begin each chapter, the 'official' report constitutes an attempt to shift childcare practices from a libertarian vision of potential towards an authoritarian moulding in accordance with the ideological values of the state. Rejecting the optimism and relativism of the former as a 'social construct', the handbook represents childhood as a disease which distorts 'emotions, perceptions and reason, from which growing up is the slow and difficult recovery.'⁴⁶ Education during this 'privileged' period of non-production should involve the fixing of temporal routines, gender identities, and a patriotic allegiance to the nation. In addition, this emphasis upon business practices and the nuclear family unity is to be generated by an incentive system that

⁴³ Thatcherism and the issues of poverty and the homeless are discussed more fully in Ian Gilmour, *Dancing with Dogma: Britain under Thatcherism* (London: Simon & Schuster, 1992), ch. 6.

⁴⁴ McEwan, *The Child in Time*, p. 9.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 162.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 179.

inculcates a morality of ulterior motives rather than altruism. Akin to the constructions of history in *The Ploughman's Lunch*, the success of the handbook and Stephen's failure to expose the undemocratic nature of its production highlight the power of media 'truths' and the futility of opposing a 'theatrical'⁴⁷ and adaptable political culture.

However, the issue of childhood also provides the basis for a symbolic opposition to the values of the handbook, and by extension the government, through the parallels between Stephen and the Prime Minister. There is an unspecified, but resonant, correlation between Stephen's diminishment following the loss of his daughter and the blight suffered by the nation under Thatcherism.⁴⁸ It is significant that his first projection of the potential existence of his daughter is upon the child beggar that embodies the inhumane social policies of the state. Reinforcing his instinctive political hostility, Stephen embarks upon a regenerative journey from his stultifying grief that follows an antithetical path to the values of the authoritarian handbook. Initially, his role as a children's novelist is informed by a belief 'that maturity was treachery ... and that youth was a blessed state to be embraced for as long as was socially and biologically feasible.'⁴⁹ However, the premise of his journey is not a return to the past but the need to integrate the lessons of early experience with the adult self.⁵⁰ In contrast to the handbook's conception of 'disease', Stephen's regeneration affirms the values of innocence, vitality, and wonder as central to the emotional balance of the individual. In addition to involving a recuperation of a lost childhood self, Stephen's journey is also related to

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 182.

⁴⁸ Paul Edwards, 'Time, Romanticism, Modernism and Moderation', *English: The Journal of the English Association*, vol. 44, no. 178 (Spring 1995), p. 41.

⁴⁹ McEwan, *The Child in Time*, p. 31.

⁵⁰ As McEwan has said of the childhood self: 'We deny that self at our peril, we exaggerate that self at our peril.' Quoted in interview with Amanda Smith, *Publishers Weekly* (11 Sept. 1987), p. 68.

a movement beyond grief through the revival of his daughter's 'good influence, her lessons in celebrating the specific.'⁵¹

Stephen thought that if he could do everything with the intensity and abandonment with which he had once helped Kate build her castle, he would be a happy man of extraordinary powers.⁵²

This quest for a Wordsworthian integration is initially exemplified by Darke's political resignation and regression into a fantasy childhood of short trousers, tree houses and catapults. As this suggests, Darke operates as 'the carrier of a false or unsatisfactory version of the novel's value-system,'⁵³ an example that Stephen must reject before completing his own more complex regeneration. The problem with Darke's regression is that it remains premised upon a divided sense of self, a failure to 'bring his qualities as a child ... into his public life.'⁵⁴ What results is not a return to a 'mystical state' but a nostalgic re-creation of childhood in the form of the 'Just William' stories: 'It was too correct to be convincing, not quite sufficiently idiosyncratic, perhaps even fraudulent.'⁵⁵ As a retreat rather than integration, the 'timelessness' of Darke's childhood is merely an escape from mortal fear and his repressed insecurity within a public and political culture of competition and mastery.

... it was all frenetic compensation for what he took to be an excess of vulnerability. All this striving and shouting, cornering markets, winning arguments to keep his weakness at bay. And quite honestly, when I think of my colleagues at work and the scientific establishment and the men who run it, and I think of science itself, how it's been devised over the centuries, I have to say that Charles's case was just an extreme form of a general problem.⁵⁶

As this quotation suggests, the damaging splits between public and private are overlaid with the gender distinctions of *or Shall We Die?* and the opposition

⁵¹ McEwan, *The Child in Time*, p. 105.

⁵² *Ibid.*, pp. 106-7.

⁵³ Edwards, 'Time, Romanticism, Modernism and Moderation', p. 43.

⁵⁴ McEwan, *The Child in Time*, p. 204.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 113.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 204.

between Newtonian and new physics. As in the oratorio, Thelma's impromptu lectures are based upon the need to shift beyond a 'male principle' in scientific thought based upon enlightenment rationality, impartial observation and a belief in the explicability of the universe. In contrast, she affirms a 'female principle' of indivisibility and subjectivity which is capable of encompassing the 'intuitive [and] spiritual dimension of our existence.'⁵⁷

The observer in the Einsteinian universe believes herself to be part of the nature she studies, part of its constant flux; her own consciousness and the surrounding world pervade each other and are interdependent; she knows that at the heart of things there are limitations and paradoxes ... that prevent her from knowing and expressing everything; she has no illusions of her omniscience, and yet her power is limitless because it does not reside in her alone.⁵⁸

It is this 'female principle' that provides the theoretical model for Stephen's regeneration and redemption of meaningful time. At the beginning of the novel his experience of time is conceived only in terms of loss: his disconnection from childhood, separation from his wife, and the unrealised time he projects upon of his absent daughter: '[w]ithout the fantasy of her continued existence he was lost, time would stop.'⁵⁹ Displaying the same limitations as traditional science, he requires a means of appreciating 'the elaborate time schemes of novelists, poets, daydreamers, the infinite, unchanging time of childhood.'⁶⁰ Within this context, Stephen's return to childhood, unlike Darke's, promises a more profound transformation of his consciousness and apprehension of patterns of space and time. The message of Thelma's physics is reinforced by Stephen's admiration for his wife's capacity for continual transformation, her 'faith in endless mutability.'⁶¹ While constituting an 'aspect of her femininity', men remain frozen by adhering to a selfhood defined by

⁵⁷ McEwan, *A Move Abroad*, p. 14.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 120.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

institutional or social structures. Such identifications with ‘who they thought they were’ deny men the possibility of Julie’s feminine selfhood and the acceptance that ‘being surpassed doing.’⁶² This distinction more precisely establishes the requirements for Stephen’s transformation by asserting the need to challenge a masculine conception of a linear time, thereby opening up the possibility of a positive feminine consciousness.

The first stage of this process is instigated by an experience of temporal dislocation, a visionary connection with a moment in his parent’s lives that pre-dates and conditions the circumstances of his birth. Although the significance of this experience is deferred, it becomes apparent that he is witness to a discussion of his potential abortion, an action prevented by his mother seeing a child (Stephen) watching her from the window of the pub. While Stephen’s immediate response to this incident is a disorientation of selfhood in which ‘nothing was nothing’s own’,⁶³ it provides the catalyst for his subsequent resumption of physical intimacy with Julie. During this fleeting intimacy Stephen experiences a purity and benevolence beyond ‘governments’, ‘publicity firms’ and ‘research departments’; a precursory moment of regeneration: ‘[t]ime was redeemed, time assumed purpose all over again because it was the medium for the fulfilment of desire.’⁶⁴

The second stage of Stephen’s transformation occurs during the journey towards his now pregnant wife, a journey that begins with a symbolic redemption of the ‘lost time and lost landscape’⁶⁵ of his childhood through the realisation of an ambition to ride within the cab of a train. As Edwards has noted,⁶⁶ this serves to

⁶² Ibid., p. 55.

⁶³ Ibid., p. 60.

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 64.

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 12.

⁶⁶ Edwards, ‘Time, Romanticism, Modernism and Moderation’, p. 48.

distance Stephen both from the fraudulent regression of Charles and from the politics of the 'car economy' of the London traffic jam. Furthermore, the connection between railways, childhood and the government is reinforced by the driver's comments upon the closure of the line: '[c]lose it down. Build a motorway. But there's no heart in motorways. You won't see kids on the bridges taking car numbers, will you.'⁶⁷ Subsequently, Stephen's proximity to the pub of his visionary experience prompts a premonition of Julie's pregnancy and a realisation of the cyclical time in which his stasis forms as part of an opaque, but cathartic, pattern of mutability. The abstractions of Thelma's 'new physics' become lived experience through the recognition that 'all the sorrow, all the empty waiting had been enclosed within meaningful time, within the richest unfolding conceivable.'⁶⁸ This redemption of past time positions the birth itself as the culmination of Stephen's regeneration, initiating a process of reconciliation and mutual grief that expands into an idealistic desire to heal 'everyone and everything, the Government, the country, the planet.'⁶⁹ However, the closing passages of the novel suggest the fragility of this optimism, the references to the masculine symbol of Mars and 'hard shoes' of the midwife providing warnings of a 'harsher world' in which the undesignated child will be defined and regulated. Nevertheless, these warnings exist on the margins of a joyous return to love, the origins of time and the foundations of human existence: 'His thoughts were resolving into simple elementary shapes. This is really all we have got, this increase, this matter of life loving itself, everything we have has to come from this.'⁷⁰

⁶⁷ McEwan, *The Child in Time*, p. 209.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 211.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 215.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 219.

The extraordinary sense of completion and possibility of this resolution has been received with both celebration and scepticism, Smoodin's view that it 'amazes one with its rightness' and 'gloriousness'⁷¹ in contrast with Mars-Jones's accusation of a patriarchal act of 'couvade'.⁷² Whether or not one embraces McEwan's optimism, the novel undoubtedly posits a hopeful vision of an expanding humanity against the state's destructive assaults upon 'the individual's sources of energy'.⁷³ However, there remains a question mark over the dénouement's political implications, the world beyond Julie's bedroom into which the couple 'hoped to take their love'⁷⁴ remaining untouched by their private regeneration. Indeed, as Edwards has recognised, the novel's final response to a projected Thatcherism is supplied by a value-system 'grounded on the borderline between nature and metaphysics'.⁷⁵ As this suggests, Stephen's experience of an almost suprasensible love is significantly conditioned by his railway journey from the urban landscape of London to the rural isolation of Julie's cottage. In spite of earlier depictions of a rationalised countryside in accordance with the commercial priorities of the state, the novel maintains the possibility of a Romantic space beyond society in which Stephen can become attuned to a more profound humanity. The problem stems from the fact that Stephen's physical and spiritual journey is also a narrative movement away from the novel's 'state of the nation' diagnosis. The couple's embodiment of an alternative value-system appears predicated upon their exclusion, or temporary removal, from the dystopian condition of Britain. Furthermore, Stephen's visionary appreciation of humanity exists as a moment of sublimity that

⁷¹ Roberta Smoodin, quoted in Jack Slay Jr., 'Vandalizing Time: Ian McEwan's *The Child in Time*', *Critique*, vol. 35, no. 4 (Summer 1994), p. 217.

⁷² This refers to 'patterns of male behaviour that seek to upstage or appropriate potent moments in the lives of women'. Mars-Jones, *Venus Envy*, p. 33.

⁷³ Judy Cooke, 'Time stands still', *The Listener* (17 Sept. 1987), p. 24.

⁷⁴ McEwan, *The Child in Time*, p. 220.

⁷⁵ Edwards, 'Time, Romanticism, Modernism and Moderation', p. 52.

cannot be transmuted into either a practical or collective mode of opposition. As a result of this geographical and philosophical distance from political exigency, the compelling optimism of the ending ultimately assuages, rather than answers, the novel's bleak analysis of an encroaching authoritarian state.

An obvious riposte to this interpretation can be drawn from McEwan's broadly apolitical conception of the 'political' novel, his defence of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and affirmation of humanistic structures offering pertinent reflections upon the approach of his fiction:

It is not the first duty of the novelist to provide blueprints for insurrection, or uplifting tales of successful resistance for the benefit of the opposition.⁷⁶

Instead, what novelists can pit against the overbearing State, the organization or the bureaucracy are the values of the individual attempting, for example, to retain his or her identity, remaining or failing to remain loyal to friends, discovering the ascendancy of love or being crushed in the attempt. By measuring individual human worth, the novelist reveals the full enormity of the State's crime when it sets out to crush that individuality.⁷⁷

From this position the 'political' value of *The Child in Time* stems not from the exemplary nature of Stephen and Julie's regeneration, but through the critical juxtaposition of their expansion and potentiality against the tapering confines of the state. However, this does not entirely resolve the difficulties of the ending as Stephen's development is not merely 'pitted' against the operations of the state. Through his parallel positioning with 'the nation's parent' and Darke's fabricated version of childhood, Stephen's journey also carries the promise of a symbolic resolution of the state's segregation of 'public policy' and 'intimate feeling'. This expectation is generated through a symbolic and thematic structure of oppositions between separation and indivisibility, masculine and feminine principles, linear and discontinuous time, and Newtonian and quantum physics. The problem is that

⁷⁶ McEwan, *A Move Abroad*, p. xv.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. xii.

while Stephen's personal transformation reveals a positive movement across these divisions, there is no apparent alternative to the masculinist ideology of political power and commercial competition. As a by-product of the novel's direction towards resolution, the dénouement acquires a political resonance that it cannot encompass: an affiliation with an ideologically engendered division that can only be addressed at a collective and political level.

According to Knights, this results in the novel displaying the inevitable contradictions of exemplifying 'democratic practice' through a 'pure relationship': 'it is difficult not to see [this argument] as radicalism privatised, intimacy posed as a bulwark against social despair.'⁷⁸ Yet rather than attributing the ambivalence of the ending to the weaknesses of a narrative thesis, *The Child in Time* is better understood as an unconscious illustration of the limitations of a liberal-humanist response to Thatcherism. As an adherent to this intellectual tradition, McEwan has consistently expressed his scepticism towards organised belief as inimical to the 'free imagination' of the individual. However, he has also acknowledged the contradiction between his suspicion that 'politics is the enemy of the imagination' and his recognition that such freedoms are dependent upon 'a political context, a political history.'⁷⁹ It is the impossibility of reconciling these views that leads to the political quietism of *The Child in Time*. While displaying an awareness of an increasingly subjugated nation, the novel also upholds a humanism that precludes the necessary conditions for the preservation or recuperation of individual freedoms. Interestingly, the novel's use of a realist aesthetic and near-future projection intensifies the significance of this quietism, the recognisable extensions from the 1980s conferring a greater probability upon the novel's dystopian vision. In the

⁷⁸ Knights, *Writing Masculinities*, p. 209.

⁷⁹ Ian McEwan, 'A new license for liberty', *Guardian* (30 April 1990), p. 19.

light of the novel's authoritarian prophecy, there is a certain irony in McEwan justifying his scepticism on the grounds that to 'act seriously in a political way is to have in mind a version of the future.'⁸⁰ Having asserted the seriousness of Thatcherism's version of the future, *The Child in Time's* concluding shift from diagnosis to private regeneration raises a contradictory awareness. Following the novel's graphic illustration of the nation's need for an alternative version of the future, the transition towards the dénouement ironically highlights the narrative's disengagement from that exigency.

What remains beyond this disengagement is a humanistic distillation of the future into a moment of glorious possibility that centres upon the healing vision of Stephen and Kate and the unfettered potential of the anonymous and ungendered baby. The child exists as a moment of pure freedom analogous with the acting of writing itself, a blank page upon which the struggle between the freedom of the imagination and the structures of dehumanisation will be resumed once more. Indeed, Knights has taken this further by interpreting the birth as both amends for the cruelties of McEwan's previous fiction, and a culmination of the novel's interpellations of children into reconciliatory narratives:

The figure of the male novelist can father a new child to replace the lost child, and the baby born at the end of *The Child in Time* ... appears as a saviour, a being who may be able to transform the dystopia into which s/he has been born.⁸¹

While a sceptical liberal-humanism precludes a contemporaneous response to the dangers of authoritarianism, McEwan's undiminished faith in the individual human being offers a politics of endlessly deferred possibility through the image of a new child as another unfinished and unfinishable narrative.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Knights, *Writing Masculinities*, p. 220.

Frozen Lives and Broken Promises: Margaret Drabble's *The Ice Age*

To embark upon any critical discussion of Margaret Drabble's later novels inevitably requires a preliminary recognition of their significant dissimilarity from her earlier work. According to Cunningham, Drabble's fiction has grown both in 'complexity and thematic ambition' since *The Needle's Eye*, shifting from the 'meticulously selective' portrayals of the dilemmas of young middle-class women in the 1960s towards the 'more encompassing vision' and multiple perspectives of the later 'state of the nation' novels.¹ This concern with 'the individual's dilemma in the path of History'² effectively unifies the novels published between 1977 and 1987 into a trio of attempts to document the social, political and cultural developments of the period. Her repeated engagement with the contemporary circumstances of the nation has led numerous critics to position Drabble's fiction within the traditions of the nineteenth century 'condition of England' novel.

... she is becoming the chronicler of contemporary Britain, the novelist people will turn to a hundred years from now to find out how things were, the person who will have done for late-20th-century London what Dickens did for Victorian London.³

Although too early to pass judgement on this grand claim, the novels undoubtedly provide a revealing portrait of Britain's transition from the recession and stasis of the mid-1970s, through the end of consensus and cultural uncertainty of the late-1970s, to the emergence of Thatcherism's radical solutions in the 1980s. However, to describe Drabble as a 'chronicler' infers a neutrality of perspective that is incompatible with her ideological commitment to the institutions and social values of the post-war consensus. As a result, her fiction provides an acute representation

¹ Gail Cunningham, 'Patchwork and Patterns: the Condition of England in Margaret Drabble's Later Novels', in James Acheson (ed.), *The British and Irish Novel Since 1960* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991), p. 126.

² William Boyd, 'Beyond the exemplary', *New York Times* (11 July 1980).

³ Phyllis Rose, 'Our Chronicler of Britain', *The New York Times Book Review* (7 Sept. 1980), p. 35.

of the disillusionment of a generation of middle-class liberals who witnessed the decline, and subsequent disestablishment, of their social ideals and cultural assumptions. More specifically, these novels are pervaded by a sense of lost confidence that stems from the dissipation of a consensus narrative of progressive social improvement and national purpose. Through her fiction, Drabble seeks to come to terms with the loss of this optimistic framework and discern a national future from the political and cultural uncertainties that followed in its wake. However, Drabble's attempts to imagine and analyse Britain are inscribed with a tension between values of the past and conditions of the present. Her fiction remains caught between a desire to affirm and recuperate the progressive liberalism of consensus culture and an awareness of Britain's increasing distance from, and resistance to, the unified nation imagined by that ideology.

Such tensions are also apparent in the formal structures of these novels, for as I have already outlined in the introduction, this transition was accompanied by an intensification of the aesthetic problems of maintaining a 'state of the nation' perspective. Indeed, Drabble provides an interesting illumination of these problems through both her adherence to the 'dying tradition' of Victorian social-realism and self-conscious attempts to revise generic conventions in response to the altered circumstances of late twentieth-century Britain. While continuing to uphold the encompassing ambitions of this tradition through panoramic perspectives and 'two nations' structures, her novels reveal a progressive engagement with the difficulties of 'finding a form to represent the simultaneity of goings on ... [of] trying to portray contemporary Britain - social attitudes, the way people behave, the way they dress

or think - through a variety of viewpoints.’⁴ What is apparent across the novels is a process of correction and innovation, the divergent narrative strategies illuminating the development, and refinement, of Drabble’s employment of the genre. However, the shift towards more complex and self-referential aesthetic structures also occurs in response to the demands of imaginatively shaping, and responding to, the particular circumstances of a rapidly changing ‘state’ of Britain. In spite of the increasing literary sophistication, it is important to recognise that Drabble’s awareness of the aesthetic resistance of the contemporary nation does lead to a loss of faith in either inclusive frameworks or the underlying efficacy of liberal realism. As she argued in her conclusion to a 1987 memorial lecture, the uncertainties of the modern world challenge, rather than repudiate, the philosophical foundations of a realist aesthetic:

... novelists today are understandably wary of large claims. They are self-doubting, self-conscious, self-questioning, ironic. They suffer ... from the uncertainties that besiege all of us, in a relativist, pluralist, post-Freudian age ... [a]nd yet, perversely, stubbornly, anachronistically, they continue to write. They take cover, put up smoke screens, produce in some instances immensely complex and sophisticated and devious distractions for the critic; and behind these defences they continue, confidently, immodestly, to explore, to imitate, to represent a reality which does have, I believe, some common sense.⁵

In accordance with this continuing belief in a shared reality, Drabble’s use of metafictional and intertextual elements recognises the challenges of mimesis and inclusivity as necessitating new forms that could offer ‘a rich and varied representation of reality.’⁶

For many critics, Drabble’s fiction palpably fails to reconcile the tensions of this position, a failure that is revealed through imbalances between the demands of

⁴ John Hannay, ‘Margaret Drabble: An Interview’, *Twentieth Century Literature: A Scholarly and Critical Journal*, vol. 33, no. 2 (Summer 1987), p. 133.

⁵ Margaret Drabble, ‘Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in the Post-War British Novel’, *Mosaic*, vol. 20, no. 1 (1987), p. 14.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

characterisation and the encompassing ambitions of the 'state of the nation' perspective. In particular, they have drawn attention to a variety of narrative flaws that they perceive as undermining the panoramic and social-realist ambitions of the novels. Critical accusations range from merciless topicality and 'imaginative poverty',⁷ to the use of schematic structures in which 'plausible recreation ceases to be plausible recreation and becomes dramatised sociology.'⁸ However, rather than adopting an evaluative approach, it is more constructive to perceive these problems as indicative of Drabble's struggle for an aesthetic form that is commensurate with her faith in the commonality of individuals and potential for a unified national culture. Indeed, these novels provide an exemplary illustration of the inherent connections between aesthetic and political ideology in 'state of the nation' fiction of the 1980s. The problems of narrative coherence, inclusion and resolution that are traced through Drabble's trio of novels are ultimately an expression of a period that profoundly challenged her belief in the tenets of liberal-humanism, the social ambitions of consensus, and aesthetic foundations of the 'state of the nation' genre.

The most dramatic exemplification of these problems occurs in *The Ice Age*, Drabble's most ambitious, and according to many critics, least convincing attempt to realise the panoramic and structural aims of the 'state of the nation' novel. As Connor has identified, the novel's design is marked by a series of narrative strategies familiar in contemporary uses of the genre: 'the allegorical character in transition'; 'the concentric circles of characters ranged around him'; 'thematic echoes'; the 'mutual illumination of the small and the large', and 'the slow *pavane*

⁷ Steven Connor, *The English Novel in History, 1950-1995* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 61.

⁸ D.J. Taylor, *A Vain Conceit: British Fiction in the 1980s* (London: Bloomsbury, 1989), p. 54.

of complication yielding to resolution'.⁹ Whilst many of these features are applicable to the other novels in the trio, the first two books of *The Ice Age* remain distinctive in their rigorous organisation of narrative elements around a single totalising core. Although modulating between the lives of a disparate cast of socially representative characters, these figures are extensively interconnected through an intricate web of personal acquaintance, corresponding psychological dilemmas and symbolic motifs. As a result, the afflictions of each character function as extensions of the national malaise that is encapsulated by the prophetic and Olympian voice of the omniscient narrator.

A huge icy fist, with large cold fingers, was squeezing and chilling the people of Britain, that great and puissant nation, slowing down their blood, locking them into immobility, fixing them in a solid stasis, like fish in a frozen river: there they all were in their large houses and their small houses, with their first mortgages and second mortgages, in their rented flats and council flats and basement bedsits and their caravans: stuck, congealed, amongst possessions, in attitudes, in achievements they had hoped next month to shed, and with which they were now condemned to live.¹⁰

As the thematic and symbolic core of the narrative, this voice has been viewed by critics as symptomatic of the novel's formal weaknesses; possessing a panoramic scope and nineteenth-century confidence that is both inappropriate as a means of communicating 'her uncertain contemporary worldview'¹¹ and 'painfully at odds with the cautious contingency of the realistic narrative voice'.¹² Furthermore, the attempt to provide an inclusive vision of the nation's stasis through condensed sections results in a level of generalisation that appears to undermine the diversity that the perspective is designed to represent. Similarly, the catalogue of responses to this national plight from an array of social groups,

⁹ Connor, *The English Novel in History*, p. 60.

¹⁰ Margaret Drabble, *The Ice Age* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978 [1977]), p. 62.

¹¹ Morton P. Levitt, 'The New Victorians: Margaret Drabble as Trollope' in Dorey Schmidt and Jan Seale (eds.), *Margaret Drabble: Golden Realms*, Living Authors Series no. 4 (Edinburg: Pan American University, 1982), p. 169.

¹² Connor, *The English Novel in History*, p. 62.

generations and representative figures appears overly diagrammatic and in the case of the 'real poor', rather perfunctory: 'Let us not think of them. Their rewards will be in heaven.'¹³ As Connor has identified, these weaknesses are significant in revealing a homogenisation of subject and address, 'the imaginative poverty of its evocation of Britain ... displays a kind of narrowness that seems curiously of a piece with the malaise it demands that its reader acknowledges.'¹⁴ In effect, the lack of precision and genuine diversity that is evident in the omniscient voice results in a 'deadening' of the narrative that tonally reinforces the despondency and apathy it seeks to condemn. This unintentional concordance between form and theme is not merely the product of stylistic failure but stems from the fundamental ideological dilemma of *The Ice Age*. The difficulties of narrative inclusion reflect both Drabble's desire to envision the 'people' as an interconnected society and humanity beset by a shared affliction, and the disillusioned realisation that the nation is becoming increasingly unimaginable in these terms. Like the praying bishop who questions the capacity of his own and God's love to suffice the multitude, the omniscient voice appears 'strained, dilute, insufficient'¹⁵ when confronted with the plurality of the nation. Ultimately, the formal weaknesses of these passages are indicative of a struggle to maintain a liberal-humanist perspective upon, and within, a nation in which the principles and institutions of consensus appear in terminal retreat.

It is this sense of retreat that underpins the diagnosis of Britain in the mid-1970s, extrapolating from the symbolic 'icy fist' of recession to pervade the novel with images of cold, constriction and imprisonment. From the initial description of

¹³ Drabble, *The Ice Age*, p. 64.

¹⁴ Connor, *The English Novel in History*, p. 61.

¹⁵ Drabble, *The Ice Age*, p. 65.

Anthony recovering from a heart attack and financial ruin in his poorly heated country home, the characters introduced are either directly incarcerated (Len, Jane); physically incapacitated (Kitty); psychologically frozen (Alison); or socially relegated (Maureen). Through the winter months of the first two books they remain in stasis, their uncertainty and inability to actively resolve their personal situations reflecting the ‘alarm, panic and despondency which seemed to flow loose in the atmosphere of England.’¹⁶ This integration of theme, character and symbolism extends the significance of recession beyond the economic to include a national stagnation of belief, will and determination. Whilst recognising the impenetrability of this malaise by applauding those ‘stunned into honourable silence’,¹⁷ the narrative is despairingly critical of the banal patterns of complaint, self-interest and apathy that form the responses of the majority. On one level, this critical portrait of the nation’s spirit is designed as a direct antithesis to the mythic optimism and fervent call for regeneration invoked by the framing epigrams of Milton and Wordsworth. However, a more immediate historical context is discernible in the accusation that ‘people have short memories’¹⁸ and repeated references to the social deprivations of the pre-war period. In conjunction with the mythic frame, these references illuminate the materialistic pettiness of a population for whom the decline is merely a reduction of their ‘standard of life’ as measured by the loss of consumer power. By asserting the relativity of the present economic situation, these pre-war parallels involve a defensive reminder of the improvements provided by the post-war settlement: ‘they [the real poor] were better off than they would have been in the

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 180.

thirties, for Britain is, after all, a welfare state, and not many slip through its net.’¹⁹ Although remaining subdued in the panoramic narrative, this defensiveness provides a shadowy outline of the novel’s disillusioned thesis that the economic stagnation of the nation also involves a far more serious, and spiritually damaging, retreat from the liberal values of consensus.

A shorter history of this retreat appears in the allegorical transitions of Anthony Keating and the relative positions of other characters around the cultural changes he represents. In the early seventies he was ‘at one with the spirit of the age’²⁰ having abandoned his left-wing arts graduate background and television career and joined the ‘Other England’ of entrepreneurial capitalism and property speculation. This alternative creed is symbolically represented by Anthony’s mentor, Len Wincobank, the self-made property millionaire who seeks to emulate the grandeur, passion and desire of American and Australian architecture in a crusade against ‘[s]habby, lazy, unambitious’²¹ England. While Len remains consistent as a visionary, Anthony is drawn to the independence, excitement and fluidity of the business world as means of escaping the stultifying middle-class liberalism that dominated his upbringing and early career. Anthony celebrates his discovery of a new community in which nobody ‘read the arts pages of newspapers’ or discussed ‘the problems of the under privileged’;²² and adopts a New Right economic philosophy which denounces these values as responsible for the national culture of complacency and stagnation.

Enough apology, enough politeness, enough self-seeking high-minded well-meaning well-respected idleness, enough of the quite-well-paid middle-status gentlemen’s

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 64.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 34.

²¹ Ibid., p. 52.

²² Ibid., p. 33.

jobs, enough of the Oxbridge Arts graduate. They had killed the country, sapped initiative, destroyed the economy.²³

Anthony's position in the vanguard of a new cultural and architectural order is symbolically reinforced by his acquisition of a derelict gasometer and development of a sweet company made unprofitable by American mass production techniques and television advertising. Yet in spite of his initial success, the historical resonance of these sites reveals the insincerity of Anthony's attempts to emulate the 'blinkerred faithful zeal'²⁴ of his mentor. Without Len's genuine passion for modern architecture, it is merely the 'new sharp solvent spirit of free enterprise'²⁵ that allows Anthony to rationalise away his nostalgic admiration for the 'cobbled yard and secret elderberry.'²⁶

With the collapse of the property boom and removal of this 'solvent spirit', Anthony becomes the focus for a re-evaluation of the crusading ambitions of 'Other England'. Forced into a period of introspection and symbolic imprisonment by his heart attack, Anthony questions the morality of ownership, the human consequences of modern architectural projects and the injustice of his own financial escape. In addition, his burgeoning appreciation of rural life and the natural heritage of Yorkshire provide a counterpoint to the novel's indictments of modern urban planning. In particular, Alison's nightmarish experience of Len's Northam development reinforces her urban alienation through a symbolic equation with a dying Alsatian vainly seeking a natural resting place. In a grand restatement of Anthony's guilt over the elderberry tree, this incident highlights the artificiality and inhumanity of building projects that are inimical to both the instinctual and practical

²³ Ibid., p. 34.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 33.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 28.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 30.

conditions of life. Yet in spite of the symbolism of this passage, Drabble's critique extends beyond a rural/urban framework to include the destruction or disfigurement of traditional inner-city communities. This is encapsulated by the eviction and displacement of Aunt Evie from her terrace slum and the 'rewards of old age - honour, civility, [and] streets of friends', to a 'nice suburban semi' in which she 'moped briefly behind lace curtains, despised by her suburban neighbours, and then died: of loneliness'.²⁷ Behind representative victims like Aunt Evie lies the deeper accusation that the property culture of Len and Anthony is motivated by the abstractions of visionary idealism and financial speculation, whilst remaining indifferent to the conditions required to sustain individual lives and bind social communities.

However, while the rise and fall of this culture is thematically important throughout the novel, Anthony's decline and reassessment do not constitute a narrative pattern of punishment and reform. Instead, he becomes an allegorical representative of the stasis of the ice age, unable to fully renounce the exciting possibilities of entrepreneurship, return to the liberal values of his past, or discover any compromise or alternative creed. For the majority of the novel he remains split between the passion of his former existence in London and the quiet decency and natural heritage of his Yorkshire mansion. As Alison concisely summarises:

Which is the real Anthony ... this manic, drinking, speculating, self-destructive gambler, or that quiet sensitive man who was quietly and tenderly and happily roping up a split elm tree when I got back from Krusograd?²⁸

Even following his financial regeneration, his schemes to make another million appear as improbable as the 'fantasies of peace and virtue'²⁹ inspired by his

²⁷ Ibid., p. 88.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 227.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 172.

ambition to grow vegetables and teach in a local school for the handicapped. In addition, Anthony's return to prosperity also marks a significant amplification of his allegorical function, his moment of choice conflated with the nation's discovery of North Sea oil reserves:

A senile Britain, casting out its ghosts. Or a Go Ahead Britain, with oil-rig men toasting their mistresses in champagne in the pubs of Aberdeen. And himself where? A man of the past, the present, the future?³⁰

Although both financial reversals appear as *Deus Ex Machina* interventions, Anthony's continuing hesitancy reveals them as false dawns, potentially alleviating the threat of bankruptcy for character and nation but unable to remedy the deeper cultural stagnation brought on by the collapse of consensus. In essence, Anthony's indecision reflects a directionless nation in which the ideals of the post-war settlement have degenerated into the complacency of the 'comfortable lazy liberal folk'³¹ whilst an alternative creed for the future remains unimaginable. In a rare moment of clarity, Anthony encapsulates this transitional state by recognising both himself and the nation as 'passing through some strange metamorphosis, through the intense creative lethargy of profound self-contemplation'.³² The introspective decadence of this twilight period is illustrated by the parallel figure of Mike Morgan, the 'end of a line'³³ comedian whose sadistic attempts to degrade the petty superiority of his audiences appear the only tenable means of expressing his disillusionment with middle-class Englishness.

While Anthony's contemplative 'ice age' involves a frustrated desire for social change, Alison's experience of this transition provides a perspective of personal loss, cultural disintegration and national decline. An admired former

³⁰ Ibid., p. 201.

³¹ Ibid., p. 209.

³² Ibid., p. 215.

³³ Ibid., p. 214.

actress with facial features as 'typically English as the English Rose',³⁴ her anxieties concerning her own physical decline are symbolically linked with the destructive impact of industrialisation upon the geographical landscape of the nation. 'The country was growing old. Like herself. The scars on the hillsides were the wrinkles round her own eyes: irremovable.'³⁵ As an allegorical figure of decline, Alison's 'ice age' reassessments are designed to provide a more retrospective and international context to the novel's 'state of the nation' analysis. During her travels to and from the communist state of Walachia, Alison becomes acutely aware of her country's fading international reputation; 'a safe, shabby, mangey old lion: anyone could tweak her tail.'³⁶ However, rather than clinging to myths of imperial greatness, she accepts anti-British sentiment as a justified revenge upon the arrogance of a nation state which assumed 'a monopoly not only of money but of morals.'³⁷ Conditioned by her visit to the Walachacian museum which expressed 'the superiority of culture to commerce',³⁸ Alison's return to the dereliction of St. Pancras and Victoria confirms her disenchanted perception of her homeland as a nation which had for two centuries 'spent like lords, and were now bankrupt, living in the ruins of their own grandiose excesses.'³⁹ The cultural remnants of this decline are personified by Humphrey Clegg, the Foreign Office employee whose closet transvestism and memorabilia reflect the sexual prurience and imperial confidence of Victorian England. As Drabble clearly implies, Clegg and the social class he represents have become anachronistic because, in spite of token gestures towards the egalitarianism of the sixties, they 'had produced no new images, no new style,

³⁴ Ibid., p. 37.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 166.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 92.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 110.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 166.

merely a cheap strained exhausted imitation of the old one.’⁴⁰ Ultimately, these grand visions of imperial and economic decline provide a historical context for the nation’s cultural stagnation, an extension of the ‘ice age’ metaphor to include Britain’s broader transition following the post-war collapse of imperial confidence.

In addition to this vision of historical loss, Drabble also uses Alison to represent the more contemporary chronology suggested by the omniscient narrator’s reflections upon the hardships of the pre-war period. In contrast to Anthony’s drive for radical alteration, Alison retains a desire to ‘salvage so much that had been so good’ whilst conscious of herself as part of ‘the last generation that could remember what the good had been’.⁴¹ Whilst her apoliticism makes this nostalgic retrospection necessarily vague, her continuing faith in the ideals of her generation involves an implicit defence of the liberal values and institutions that Anthony’s ‘Other England’ so enthusiastically abandoned. Gradually imbued with the spirit of ‘fear and sadness’⁴² that pervades the population at large, Alison’s progression towards disillusionment mirrors the retractions from, and demises of, the ideals and institutional structures of welfare-capitalism. It is undoubtedly significant that the nadir of her national reassessment stems from the financial contractions afflicting both the Social Services and the National Health Service, the symbolic centrepiece of the post-war settlement and liberal consensus.

She could not understand how normal people, with their eyes, and their ears, and all their limbs all functioning, could refuse to the less well-endowed excess, a largesse, a sumptuous recompense. ... Maybe it is true that we cannot afford to be generous any more, as a nation? If so, thought Alison, then life is not worth living. ... If Britain went down, she would go down with it. At least it had tried.⁴³

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 253.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 93.

⁴² Ibid., p. 165.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 155.

As a measurement of the spiritual malaise of the nation, Alison is forced into the bleak recognition that what was ‘good’, the ideal of social compassion has become economically unsustainable. Coupled with this defeat in the socio-political sphere, the novel also indirectly questions the validity of liberal-humanism as a sustainable creed amidst the carnage of twentieth-century history. As a potential role model for both Alison and Anthony, Kitty Friedmann appears to exist as the epitome of ‘everything that was generous, innocent, unsuspecting, trusting ... a living proof of the possibility of good nature.’⁴⁴ However, as the narrative gradually reveals, Kitty’s selfless optimism is only sustained through a self-imposed blindness, ‘a refusal to contemplate the possibility of evil’,⁴⁵ that is achieved by banishing both personal tragedy and the violence of twentieth-century history to ‘the black outer wastes of incomprehension and impossibility’.⁴⁶ It is a measure of Alison’s personal crisis that in spite of her admiration, she remains unable to accept the insularity of Kitty’s humanism, viewing their shared dedication to the well being of others as the choice of a ‘non-self’.⁴⁷

Thus by the end of the second book Alison has joined Anthony, Mike and the disillusioned academic Linton as a figure of lost belief, confronting the ‘flat and featureless plain’ of ‘ice age’ Britain, ‘older, wiser, but somehow diminished.’⁴⁸ Indeed, it is a testament to the primary significance of Alison’s liberal dismay that she acquires the prophetic scope of the omniscient voice, providing the most concise summation of the indeterminacy confronting the characters in a post-consensus ‘ice age’ nation.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 12.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 61.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 158.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 157.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 225.

Reading the morning papers, trying to follow analyses of Britain's plight, she realized that she had no picture of the future, either her own, or the country's. I belong to the wrong generation, she thought, the generation that had its certainties when young. We worked hard when young, we had a conception. But instead of solidifying into attitudes, opinions, convictions, however bigoted, we have fragmented and dissolved into uncertainty. Lead and water. We are dull, without shape.⁴⁹

This passage marks a watershed in the narrative, effectively concluding Drabble's state of the nation diagnosis and indirectly offering an insight into the problems that force the radical shifts in narrative form and genre that occur in the final section. Essentially, the shapelessness and fragmentation that afflicts both nation and character also presents a narrative dead-end for the liberal and regenerative ambitions of the novel. With the cast of characters splintered both geographically and psychologically into their dissociated positions of retreat and reassessment, any dénouement that attempts a unification or synthesis of perspectives becomes highly improbable. As Connor has remarked in relation to the final section: '[t]he real problem with Britain ... is not so much its unprofitability or powerlessness but its unimaginability, its incapacity to be pictured and integrated.'⁵⁰ Although this is attributed to a modern 'overdefinition' of the nation through 'excessive self-production in fantasy and media facsimile',⁵¹ it is also a product of the novel's attempt to contemporaneously document the shapelessness of the cultural and political transition that occurred in the mid-1970s. In terms of fictional practice, this creates a problematic relationship between form and content, the totalising and regenerative intentions signalled by the symbolic and allegorical framework appearing increasingly incompatible with the national diagnosis reached by the end of the second book. Having so precisely coupled the characters to the cultural shifts and decline of the nation, the novel is effectively immobilised by its reliance upon

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Connor, *The English Novel in History*, p. 64.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 64.

the state of Britain for any meaningful progression or resolution of individual narrative plots. The fact that Drabble, like Alison, remains unable to discover indications of social change or imagine a probable future ensnares the novel within the stasis of its own encompassing metaphor. As Drabble has admitted in interview:

I intended to redeem this overwhelming gloom by some kind of vision of Britain rising out of its chains ... I knew where it had to come, my characters were sitting in a night club and everything was very bad, and one character, my main character, had to have this vision of Britain, an ariel view of recovery, and *I couldn't get it*. I couldn't resolve the problem I'd set myself, which was to have some kind of uplift, optimism, resolution. I think I have finally solved it, but I was stuck with that paralysis for far, far longer than I liked, and I think that was reflecting not art, but life.⁵²

The most compelling evidence of this retraction from an optimistic conclusion is provided by the seasonal structure of the novel and its implicit promise of regeneration. Initiated by Milton's promise of 'a noble and puissant Nation rousing herself like a strong man after sleep', the novel follows a chronological and symbolic progression through the ice of a recessional winter towards the potential of spring. Yet in accordance with Drabble's despondency towards the circumstances of nation in the mid-1970s, this cyclical rebirth is limited to a single day of pastoral and emotional peace enjoyed by Alison and Anthony. The inability to sustain this optimism results in a redesigned final section characterised by a series of thematic and narrative retractions that fundamentally undermine the novel's 'state of the nation' ambitions. From the outset, the encompassing vision of the omniscient voice is replaced by an uncertain, self-reflexive narrator who acknowledges a more limited perspective. This narrowing of scope is continued with the perfunctory dismissal of characters not directly involved with Anthony, Alison and the Walachian plot line. With further progressions Alison is reduced to a marginal figure as the narrative concentrates upon Anthony's

⁵² Valerie Grosvenor Myer, *Margaret Drabble: A Reader's Guide* (London: Vision Press, 1991), p. 106.

rescue attempt with a parodic foray into the generic conventions of the espionage thriller. These alterations constitute an abandonment of the narrative mode of the two previous books, dispensing with the montage pattern of symbolically representative characters through which Drabble sought to delineate significant trends in British society. As many critics have asserted, the dénouement does offer a thematic consistency in Anthony's religious conversion and Alison's unimaginable life of self-sacrifice culminating from earlier meditations upon determinism, arbitrariness and fate. However, these remain discrete and personal resolutions divorced from the allegorical significance that secured the protagonists to the declining health of the nation. While the final assertion that 'Britain will recover' may reflect Drabble's 'great faith in the British nation' and her becoming 'patriotic under pressure',⁵³ it remains incongruous within a novel that remains unable to envision a basis for such optimism in the nation's future.

⁵³ Joanne V. Creighton, 'An Interview with Margaret Drabble' in Dorey and Seale (eds.), *Margaret Drabble: Golden Realms*, p. 31.

Cultural Diversity and the Liberal Community: Margaret Drabble's *The Middle Ground*

Whilst *The Ice Age* remains an inconclusive and problematic example of 'state of the nation' fiction, the formal experimentation and limited geographical scope of Drabble's subsequent novel threatens to dissociate it entirely from the narrative conventions of the genre. Eschewing the panoramic ambitions and omniscient confidence of *The Ice Age*, *The Middle Ground's* specific depiction of middle-class life in London appears to mark a partial return to the character centred and private worlds of Drabble's earlier novels. However, this return is complicated by the distinctiveness of a formal structure that is characterised by authorial uncertainty, dislocations of narrative perspective, and the progressive development of a metafictional sub-text. Although interpreted by some critics as a celebration of arbitrariness or a revolt against the patriarchal authority of linear narrative,¹ *The Middle Ground*, like *The Ice Age*, has attracted numerous dismissals as a 'failed experiment'.² Indeed, Bromberg has argued that many of the negative responses to *The Middle Ground* stem from its atypicality within the author's canon, the fact that it confounds critical expectations by not abiding to the conventions and coherence of 'something like a traditional nineteenth-century novel'.³ Significantly, this remark refers to the *Bildungsroman* designs of the earlier novels rather than the 'state of the nation' structure of *The Ice Age*. Bromberg positions *The Middle Ground* as part of Drabble's continuing movement away from teleology and towards an aesthetic awareness of 'the narrowness of individual perspective in a

¹ Ellen Cronan Rose, 'The Sexual Politics of Narration: Margaret Drabble's Feminist Fiction', *Studies in the Novel*, vol. 20, no. 1 (Spring 1988).

² Phyllis Rose, 'Our Chronicler of Britain', *New York Times Book Review* (7 Sept. 1980), p. 32.

³ Pamela Bromberg, 'Narrative in Drabble's *The Middle Ground*: Relativity versus Teleology', *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 24, no. 4 (Winter 1983), p. 464.

pluralistic world.⁴ Yet in spite of its distinctiveness and the validity of Bromberg's broad trajectory, it remains possible to view *The Middle Ground* as part of Drabble's continuing engagement with the state of contemporary Britain. Although not adopting the allegorical structures of *The Ice Age*, *The Middle Ground* provides an extended, and more concentrated discussion of the central political and ideological dilemmas represented by the figure of Alison. Furthermore, the formal dissimilarities between the two novels actually reveal a complex process of critical reassessment, a reflection of Drabble's developing responses to both the plight of the nation and the inclusive ambitions of the genre. In shifting from narrative confidence to self-referential uncertainty, *The Middle Ground* is indicative of the author's diminished confidence in both the economic regeneration of Britain and the capacity of the novel to adequately represent an increasingly plural, diverse, and de-centred national culture.

In terms of the broad ideological concordance between the novels, there is an evident thematic continuity that arises from the historical proximity of their social contexts; that in addressing the state of Britain in 1979, *The Middle Ground* confronts a society beset by the same fundamental problems of economic recession, welfare retraction and disintegration that existed in 1977. As the similarity between the metaphoric titles suggests, the nation remains in an underlying state of stasis, a 'middle ground' characterised by a cultural formlessness and uncertainty of direction. In this regard, the political core of the novel marks a return to the liberal disenchantment of Alison by offering a more unrelenting analysis of the cultural shift away from the values of the post-war settlement and the liberal consensus. However, this return is also bound up with an act of recuperation, a concentration

⁴ Ibid., p. 476.

upon the watershed moment in *The Ice Age* beyond which Drabble's allegorical pattern and faith in regeneration became irreconcilable with her 'state of the nation' diagnosis. Lacking the optimism of *The Ice Age*, *The Middle Ground* eschews a direct representation of the nation's economic recession but implies its continuing influence as an impenetrable force behind the surface of the narrative. As a result, *The Middle Ground's* economic vision is characterised by a sense of resignation and acceptance, an attitude conditioned by Drabble's greater awareness of the increasingly complex and global dimensions of the problem. In an interview in 1979, she reflected upon the fact that when she wrote *The Ice Age* 'Britain was in a worse economic situation than many other countries. Now everyone's in the same boat ... the whole system has had it.'⁵ Combined with this heightened economic pessimism is a more acute and sophisticated awareness of the problems of social coherence that lay behind Alison's liberal crisis. Moving beyond the divisions of class and business ethics that appeared in *The Ice Age*, *The Middle Ground* depicts a national culture more profoundly fragmented by the influences of globalism, multicultural diversity, generational difference and sub-cultural politics.

It is these developments in Drabble's diagnostic understanding, coupled with the emerging cultural changes of the late 1970s, which ultimately provide the basis for the radical shifts in form evident in *The Middle Ground*. Confronting an altered nation with a different perspective, the novel appears as an 'antinovel' within Drabble's canon: a 'bold attempt to hammer out a new realism consonant with late twentieth-century relativism.'⁶ However, whilst Bromberg again employs the term 'antinovel' in regard to *The Middle Ground's* rejection of the conventions of the

⁵ Joanne V. Creighton, 'An Interview with Margaret Drabble', in Dorey Schmidt and Jan Seale (eds.), *Margaret Drabble: Golden Realms*, (Edinburg: Pan American University School of Humanities, Living Authors Series No: 4, 1982), p. 31

⁶ Bromberg, 'Narrative in Drabble's *The Middle Ground*: Relativity versus Teleology', p. 466.

Bildungsroman, it is equally pertinent to view it as part of Drabble's continuing rejection of the assured omniscience of traditional 'condition of England' fiction. Indeed, the novel consciously seeks to avoid the rigid social patterning, allegorical characterisation and teleological foresight that prompted the generic and narrative retractions at the end of *The Ice Age*. Broadly speaking, the reductions of scale, epistemological uncertainty, and self-reflexivity constitute an abandonment of the genre's aspirations towards social totality, prophetic diagnosis and didactic assurance. The formal correlations to this abandonment appear in the prioritisation of a single demographic group, the complexity of individual characterisation, and a shift from a teleological to a synchronic narrative time frame. In combination, these factors produce a novel of contemporaneous uncertainty, initially devoid of any faith in cultural progression or its aesthetic capacity to interpret, and delineate, the zeitgeist characteristics of Britain. Through disjunctive shifts of perspective and the self-referential hesitancy of first and third person narration, *The Middle Ground* firmly rejects the centrifugal momentum that lies beneath the traditional structure of the genre. Unlike its predecessor, it offers no secure omniscient perspective or clear symbolic pattern around which the diversity of an entire nation can be integrated, and against which moral and political ills may be measured. In this sense, the novel involves a self-conscious dramatisation of one of the fundamental problems of *The Ice Age*: the creation of a narrative centre around which vast cultural disparities can be successfully organised and synthesised.

However, whilst it is important to recognise that Drabble uses self-referential devices to debunk the panoramic and encompassing ambitions of *The Ice Age*, *The Middle Ground* retains a commitment to the mimetic and diagnostic aims of 'state of the nation' fiction. Essentially, Drabble is more concerned with

uncertainty as an experiential dilemma (for both author and character) than with indeterminacy as a cultural or philosophical condition. Behind the formal experimentation and generic revisions is an engagement with the difficulties of fictionally mapping the nation rather than an assertion of the impossibility of that endeavour. More specifically, it constitutes an attempt to forge a new realism consonant with the liberal uncertainties of a particular social and historical situation. In dispensing with some of the grander ambitions of the genre, Drabble seeks more adequately to reflect, through form, theme and character, the increasing difficulties of maintaining a liberal commitment to connection and harmonisation within a national culture that appears increasingly fragmented and pluralistic. As a result, *The Middle Ground* does not attempt an emphatic delineation of the nation's plight, avoiding the use of economic statistics, newspaper topicality and the attribution of complex social trends to representative figures. By remaining focussed upon realistic detail and the idiosyncratic anxieties of individual characters, Drabble chooses to provide a 'state of the nation' diagnosis from the periphery rather than the centre of cultural life. What the novel offers is not an exposition of underlying political and economic conditions, but a capturing of the national zeitgeist as it influences, and impinges upon, the often-mundane lives of individual citizens. As Rose has correctly observed: '[t]hrough the static of fact and opinion, through the luncheon and dinner party chatter, behind the characters' anxieties and implied by their self-questioning, an imposing entity takes shape: contemporary Britain.'⁷ As this suggests, *The Middle Ground's* diagnostic ambitions are only gradually revealed through a subtle interweaving of apparently disconnected personal recollections, anecdotes and ambiguous symbolic motifs. Although initially

⁷ Rose, 'Our Chronicler of Britain', p. 33.

focussed upon a single character, Drabble employs parallel figures and associated incidents to progressively enlarge the thematic scope of the novel. Aided by the shifting connotations of the 'middle ground' metaphor, the dilemmas of individual characters become increasingly representative, eventually cohering to provide a collective diagnosis of the culture in which they exist. In contrast to the isolated retractions of *The Ice Age*, the relative distance established by this mode of correlation provides a means through which the negativity of the cultural diagnosis can be partially mitigated by representative images of renewal and community. However, the sophistication of the novel's structure cannot mask the fundamental problems of representing the nation, the coherence of its final sections offering another example of the tensions between a desire for cultural connection and resistant state of Britain.

At the beginning of this process these broader connections remain undeveloped, seemingly irrelevant to a narrative focused upon the 'middle ground' as a metaphor for the mid-life uncertainties of Kate Armstrong.

She looks at the component parts of her life - her children, her ex-husband, her ex-lover, her work, her parents - and doesn't know what to do or think about any of them. Her implacable progress has been halted, a link has been broken, and the past no longer seems to make sense, for if it did, how would it have left her here, in this peculiar draughty open space?⁸

The extended summary of Kate's past that follows this statement appears to promise a conventional psychological history, an unmasking of the determining forces and hidden epiphanies through which a causal relationship could be established between past and present. Indeed, what follows does provide an amplification of the 'component parts' of Kate's life: her ambivalence towards her parents; the basis for her brother's adult resentment; her turbulent relationships that result in abortion and

⁸ Margaret Drabble, *The Middle Ground* (London: Weidenfield and Nicolson, 1980), p. 10.

sterilisation; and her progress and subsequent disaffection with the methods and concerns of modern feminist journalism. However, while these details function as a means of measuring the depth of Kate's mid-life crisis, they do not accumulate to provide a teleological explanation of her disillusioned state. Through numerous qualifications and asides, Drabble highlights the limitations of the narrator's omniscient knowledge and leaves the entire section heavily reliant upon the retrospectively imposed interpretations of Kate herself. As Bromberg has recognised, what is offered are the 'truncated, flattened remains of a *Bildungsroman*' in which Kate's past exists not as 'story, but as tentative data.'⁹ As the language of this perspective implies, the real significance of the section lies not in the personal details of Kate's development but in her desire to organise them into a coherent and meaningful narrative. By undermining the expectations of a conventional character history, Drabble prepares the reader for the patterns of interpretation and digression that dominate the majority of the novel. In effect, Kate's initial reassessment of her past introduces the 'middle ground' as a state of epistemological uncertainty by illustrating the inescapable distortions that stem from subjective attempts to order information and experience.

Even prior to the summary, this theme had been signalled by the catalogue of images of womanhood that constitute Kate's daily post and her confusion surrounding her status as an exemplary or exceptional 'women of our time'.¹⁰ As a journalist, Kate's career had been based upon typicality, beginning with 'new-wave women's pieces'¹¹ extrapolated from her own experiences and continuing with her later fascination with 'trends, graphs, percentages, emerging patterns, social

⁹ Bromberg, 'Narrative in Drabble's *The Middle Ground*: Relativity versus Teleology', p. 467.

¹⁰ Drabble, *The Middle Ground*, p. 9.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

shifts.’¹² With the growing prominence of the feminist movement she has become ‘sick of bloody women’,¹³ disaffected with a cause that has trapped her in ‘a narrow tunnel’ of ‘stale repetition’.¹⁴ Ultimately, Kate’s mid-life crisis leads her to question the validity of her journalism: ‘[s]he had spent too much of her life turning things into articles, annexing them, distorting them, colouring them in her own limited range of colours.’¹⁵ This ambivalence towards feminist politics and journalistic method also appears in relation to her present work, a television documentary that follows the opportunities and life-choices of women that were her childhood contemporaries. Although designed to offer a clarity of comparison, the interviews actually produce a perplexing array of stereotypes and anomalies which defy categorisation, prompting Kate’s realisation that through the editing process one ‘can make any point one wants, without even faking the evidence.’¹⁶ Unresolved by the end of the novel, the project remains suspended between the differing interpretations of Gabriel, Hugo and Kate; revealing either a ‘picture of women’s innate conservatism’, the conditioning effects of sibling gender groups, or constituting ‘no recognisable pattern [or] general statement about Women Today’.¹⁷

Motivating a return to her childhood home in Romley, this project also involves Kate in a re-examination of the personal and familial patterns of her own past, and an additional opportunity to decipher the origins of her present mid-life crisis. Standing above the ‘mysterious networks’ of London’s and her father’s sewage system, Kate is drawn by the promise of revelation, a means of escaping ‘the prison of the present into the past, where the dark spirits swam in the fast

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 43.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 185.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 196.

moving flood.’¹⁸ Yet in spite of the memories this incident evokes, a single meal with her parents illustrates the radical disconnection between ‘her daylight self’ and the metaphoric underground of her past emotions, ‘the tangled roots in her heart.’¹⁹ A similar sense of impenetrability pervades Kate’s inability to understand the motives behind the secret hatred of her brother’s anonymous letters. Conceding a loss of faith in the ‘bright straight pattern’²⁰ of her memories, Kate attempts to read their relationship through the story of *Alenoushka and her Brother*, a fairy tale in which a brother’s pleas for protection lead to their joint salvation from the temptations and evils of the world. Although once highly affecting, Kate’s adult self rejects the sentimental comforts offered by the tale, characterising herself as both the sister and ‘the ugly old toothless witch’.²¹ Having failed to discern any explanatory patterns Kate eventually comes to regret looking back, realising that the ‘dirty tangled roots of childhood twisted back for ever and ever, beyond all knowing.’²² While the ‘component parts’ of Kate’s mid-life crisis remain idiosyncratic, her failure to configure her past for a second time provides a significant thematic connection with the issues raised by the documentary film. Culminating with a final recognition that ‘anything *could* mean anything’,²³ Kate’s interpretative problems in the first half of novel provide the foundation for the subsequent issues of literary representation and cultural coherence. Most significantly, Kate’s attempts to find meaning provide an implicit link between the distortions of subjective apprehension and the problems of aesthetic form. With her employment of multiple fictional templates (lists, recollected history, journalism,

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 103.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 104.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 117.

²¹ Ibid., p. 144.

²² Ibid., p. 117.

²³ Ibid., p. 119.

documentary realism, psychological metaphor, fairy tale), Kate's fruitless search for patterns and sequence provides an initial example of the epistemological limitations of narrative that are self-referentially addressed through the figure of Hugo.

As numerous critics have noted, the narrative sections dedicated to Hugo are 'pivotal to our understanding of how and why the novel alters its form in mid-course'.²⁴ They mark an abandonment of the conventions of 'an autonomous, self-contained narrative' in favour of a metafictional vision 'of the novelist in search of truth ... baffled by endlessly multiplying perspectives, each of which appears equally valid and compelling.'²⁵ Like Kate, Hugo is also undergoing a mid-life crisis, forced to relinquish a heroic conception of himself as a foreign correspondent through a grenade accident and troubled by his relationships with both an ailing mother and a bitter, grief-stricken wife. However, Hugo's mode of reassessment is distinctively literary, beginning with his struggle to complete a book on the Middle East and continuing through unsuccessful drafts of a fictional autobiography and a sentimental character study of Kate. Appearing after Kate's history, Hugo's parallel crisis acts as both reinforcement and crystallisation, providing a more concise and abstract summary of the confusions of her lived experience.

The middle years, caught between children and parents, free of neither: the past stretches back too densely, it is too thickly populated, the future has not yet thinned out. No wonder a pattern is slow to emerge from such a thick clutter of cross-references, from such trivia, from such serious but hidden connections. Everything has too much history, thinks Hugo, sitting at his table, trying to condense his own into a sentence.²⁶

Adopting Hugo's literary uncertainty, the subsequent sections embark upon a cycle of 'revision and addenda'²⁷ through which prior omissions are successively exposed

²⁴ Ellen Cronan Rose, 'Drabble's *The Middle Ground*: "Mid-Life" Narrative Strategies', *Critique*, vol. 23, no. 3 (Spring 1982), p. 77.

²⁵ Bromberg, 'Narrative in Drabble's *The Middle Ground*: Relativity versus Teleology', p. 473.

²⁶ Drabble, *The Middle Ground*, p. 165.

²⁷ Bromberg, 'Narrative in Drabble's *The Middle Ground*: Relativity versus Teleology', p. 472.

and corrected. Intended as an ‘interlude, a nice dry white perspective’, the admission that ‘things do not work out as one plans’²⁸ effectively conflates Hugo and the narrator through their shared failure to impose any conclusive or meaningful order upon the materials of life. In establishing this connection, Hugo’s interlude becomes a self-reflexive illustration of both the lessons provided by Kate and the formal problems of the novel itself: the isolation of significant patterns from the infinite spirals that arise from the ‘art of selection. The art of omission.’²⁹ However, having ‘stalled the narrative to question the validity of fictive patterns’,³⁰ Drabble then continues by altering the formal pattern of the novel to more adequately reflect the inescapable implications of this epistemological uncertainty. Chronological history is displaced by the fragmented jumble of contemporaneous incident; characters and perspectives multiply with disjunctive narrative modulations; diegesis is condensed into summary; and authorial confidence is increasingly undermined by metafiction: ‘one could go on endlessly, and why not, for there seems little point in allowing space to one set of characters rather than another.’³¹ However, while these formal changes and the displacement of Kate involve a recognition of narrative indeterminacy, they complete ‘a narrative swerve away from an individual point of view and teleology ... [which] also elucidates the moral and political implications of the narrative lessons of relativity’.³²

As a means of expanding the thematic scope of the novel, Hugo’s interlude establishes a crucial connection between the problems of narrative organisation and the difficulties of cultural interpretation, the associations between the ‘middle

²⁸ Drabble, *The Middle Ground*, p. 163.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 163.

³⁰ Bromberg, ‘Narrative in Drabble’s *The Middle Ground*: Relativity versus Teleology’, p. 475.

³¹ Drabble, *The Middle Ground*, p. 164.

³² Bromberg, ‘Narrative in Drabble’s *The Middle Ground*: Relativity versus Teleology’, p. 475.

ground' metaphor and the fragmented state of the nation at the end of the 1970s. As Cunningham has recognised, the 'symptomatic bafflement' of Kate and Hugo's search for personal patterns is also applicable to the novel's analysis of 'cultural diversity, the cosmopolitan condition of modern England.'³³ Informed by the international discord that surrounds a visit to the theatre and his discussions with Mujid, Hugo is forced into the recognition that 'modern life is in some mysterious way too fragmented to be comprehensible'.³⁴ Britain, like Hugo and Kate, displays the confusions of a 'middle ground' condition, burdened by the weight of its own history and uncertain about its economic and ideological future. In keeping with the self-referential duality of his remarks, Hugo's cultural analysis also contains an authorial dimension, a metafictional commentary upon the discursive problems of rendering the 'condition' of a modern nation-state.

The nineteen-seventies, the global decade, as Updike said in an interview the other day. Will anyone ever again be able to write, with confidence, a book that assumes the significance of one culture only, will anyone ever again be able to stand upright in one nationality? Relativity, comparisons.³⁵

It is precisely this loss of confidence that informs the narrative uncertainties of *The Middle Ground* and Drabble's broader ambivalence towards the validity of the 'state of the nation' genre as a template for the diversity and multiculturalism of modern Britain. As Hugo's tone of resignation implies, the literary consequences of cultural relativity are equated with loss and confusion, the acceptance of an inescapable condition rather than an opportunity for progress and innovation. While it is tempting to relate these comments to Drabble's much quoted preference for the 'dying tradition' of fictional realism, their position within the transitional centre of

³³ Gail Cunningham, 'Patchwork and Patterns: the Condition of England in Margaret Drabble's Later Novels', in James Acheson (ed.), *The British and Irish Novel Since 1960* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991), p. 132.

³⁴ Drabble, *The Middle Ground*, p. 165.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 154.

the novel refutes any potential significance they may have as a conclusive statement of defeat or regret. Rather, they function as an explication of the fictional obstacles posed by globalism and social diversity for a novelist who remains committed to the representational and diagnostic aims of the 'state of the nation' novel. In a literary parallel to the interpretative difficulties experienced by her mid-life characters, Drabble too is forced to confront the potential for meaninglessness that lies behind the recognition of cultural relativity. In this context, the alterations of form that undermine the mimetic assurance of traditional realism exist as an acknowledgement of the diagnostic problems posed by the fragmentation and diversity of the nation. The problems of relativity effectively unite the thematic and literary dimensions of the novel, acquiring an important political significance as a source of both narrative indeterminacy and social disconnection. As Harper's somewhat unlikely comparison with Thomas Pynchon illustrates, Drabble's underlying adherence to the values of liberal-humanism results in a novel which displays the uncertainties and devices of a postmodern narrative whilst firmly rejecting postmodernist conceptions of society, language and communication.

Society, in the form of community, is not for her a conspiracy to be resisted but a good to be treasured, and its very foundation seems threatened by the free play of interpretation that Pynchon celebrates. Society consists of individuals with a community of interests, founded upon sympathy and understanding, and this becomes problematic if the speech and behaviour of others are not reliable indicators of thought, emotion, intention.³⁶

Significantly, Drabble uses the narrative flexibility that results from Hugo's interlude to move beyond the retrospective isolation of Kate and Hugo, introducing additional characters to establish a network of connecting friendships and families. However, this impetus towards community is initially belied by a diagnostic

³⁶ Michael F. Harper, 'Margaret Drabble and the Resurrection of The English Novel', *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 23, no. 2 (Spring 1982), p. 58.

concentration upon the negative social experiences of these characters and the apparent disintegration of liberal values within 'middle ground' Britain. As in *The Ice Age*, the diagnosis provided by *The Middle Ground* is predicated upon a historical benchmark, a vision of the nation based upon the welfare ideology of the post-war settlement and the progressive idealism of the 1960s. Prior to her mid-life crisis Kate's pursued the 1960s dream of an 'egalitarian millennium', enjoying 'a freedom of speech and expression hitherto denied to so-called serious people [and] a certain gaiety that earlier pioneers of welfare and democracy in the Beveridge era had carefully eschewed'.³⁷ As Greene has noted, the explicit connection between Kate's golden years and Britain's cultural history ensures that her 'loss of faith in freedom and progress on a personal level is representative of the crisis of liberal-humanism.'³⁸ This connection is further developed through the mid-life crisis of Evelyn, a social worker whose experiences of inter-city poverty lead her to question the ethos of charity and Christian self-denial that underpin her vocation. Furthermore, Evelyn provides a fulcrum for the depiction of a degenerating National Health Service, once again employed by Drabble as an institutional embodiment of liberal-humanist principles and a means of measuring the effects of their abandonment. Mirrored by the doubts of Evelyn, the 'darkening mood' of the nation is equated with a welfare state in which 'all the caring professions ... seemed to be plunging into a dark swamp of uncertainty, self-questioning, economic crisis.'³⁹ The human consequences of this crisis are epitomised by an incident in which an injured old woman is allowed to wander away from Accident and Emergency only to be rescued by the kindness of Evelyn and a bus conductor.

³⁷ Drabble, *The Middle Ground*, p. 44.

³⁸ Gayle Greene, 'Bleak Houses: Doris Lessing, Margaret Drabble, and the Condition of England', *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, vol. 28, no. 4 (Oct. 1992), p. 307.

³⁹ Drabble, *The Middle Ground*, p. 52.

Following the moral pattern of this incident, the novel contains numerous juxtapositions between the instinctive sympathy of individuals and the seemingly callous indifference of professionals and institutions. However, for the majority of the novel the compassionate actions of figures like the conductor, Joan, Mrs Meer and Evelyn remain exceptional, isolated points of light which illustrate the novel's darker warning that '[c]ommon humanity isn't dead ... but maybe we're killing it?'⁴⁰ Threatening this spirit of 'common humanity', the 'middle ground' transition of the nation is portrayed as a consequence of the waning cultural influence of welfare-liberalism, a period of ideological confusion following the demise of a social order which institutionally enshrined the principles of community, compassion and tolerance. It is indicative of the strength of Drabble's beliefs that these values appear in the novel as 'common sense' and 'natural functioning', the antithesis of the inflexible dogmas that inspire Kate's disillusionment with feminist journalism and contemporary society. During the diagnostic sections of the novel, Kate's untheorised faith in freedom and progress leaves her bewildered and dismayed by a culture propelled and maintained by ideological division and confrontation.

[Kate] was sick of opinions, slogans, ideologies, factions, causes ... an ideological epidemic had swept through Britain, perhaps through the world. The raw membrane caught every passing disease. Swollen organs of indignation impeded natural functioning on every side.⁴¹

Although introduced through Kate's inability to reconcile the cultural and political distance between herself and Mujid, the international dimensions of this disease are more succinctly represented by the conversational discord that follows Sam Goldman's apocalyptic dramatisation of technological regression and the

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 53.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 95.

collapse of western civilisation.⁴² Momentarily offering an ‘opportunity for creating a small moment of international sympathy’⁴³ between diverse nationalities, the discussion merely exposes ‘the hopelessness of communication, the bared roots of intransigence.’⁴⁴ Fractured by a defence of British acting, Middle Eastern politics, anti-Semitism and the disparities between British and American feminism, Hugo concedes that the ‘ideologies of the late twentieth century mingled but did not mix.’⁴⁵ While this results in a ‘classic social horror’, the manifestations of ethnic and ideological fragmentation in multicultural London offer a more threatening depiction of social intolerance. The city is represented as an environment pervaded by the hostility of racist graffiti, misogynistic advertising and political enmity: ‘NIGGERS GO HOME ... BRITS OUT OF NORTHERN IRELAND, MUSLIM DOGS, STOP IRAQI SLAUGHTER OF KURDS.’⁴⁶ Influenced by the external perception of Mujid, Kate becomes acutely conscious of the ‘faint red buzzing of hatred’,⁴⁷ the latent atmosphere of violence which effects a cycle of fear and threat that impedes even the most simple acts of human kindness. Conditioned by Susanna’s imagined scenario of a brutal assault and rape following from the return of a dropped biro to a stranger, Kate envisions each act of violence as an ‘expression, a culmination of all that vaguely directed ill-will ... of the terror we each now feel when walking down a concrete underpass’.⁴⁸

As the example of Susanna indicates, the thematic expansion that follows Hugo’s interlude affords a greater significance to the children of the mid-life

⁴² In conjunction with the narcissistic comedy of Mike Morgan in *The Ice Age*, Drabble’s mocking depiction of the pretentiousness of this play suggests an aversion to the gloomy fatalism that pervaded artistic visions of the nation in the late 1970s.

⁴³ Drabble, *The Middle Ground*, p. 87.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 95.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 204.

characters, establishing disparities between generations as a means of illuminating the potential consequences of the ideological and economic condition of 'middle ground' Britain. Reinforcing the semiotic confusion and menace of London, the confrontational attitudes and fashions of the 'punk' generation are mediated through the uncomprehending and divided perspectives of Kate and Evelyn. On a personal level the apparent negativity of this movement is mitigated by their awareness of the 'sick but elevating'⁴⁹ humour of slogans and band names as well as the independence, political responsibility and mundane decency of figures like Puss and Joker. However, whilst acknowledging the humanistic qualities of individuals, there remains an underlying unease about the broader social effects of a sub-culture that musically and visually inscribes the disenchantment and hostility of urban experience.

What could one expect but delinquency, of children reared amidst such prospects? ... No wonder they dressed in battledress, adorned with plate armour of badges on their bosoms and clinking chain mail of staples and safety pins and paper clips. Each day they went into battle, along their own streets.⁵⁰

Contrasted with the more innocent childhood of Evelyn, this despondent vision of the next generation focuses upon their enforced maturity, a hardening of attitudes and defensiveness made necessary by the violent atmosphere of their environment. Reinforcing these concerns about the nation's future, Drabble turns to the more affluent surroundings of the stock-broker belt and Stella's children, less bizarre in appearance but 'if anything, more mercenary' without the 'counter-affectation of working-class culture to keep their aspirations in check.'⁵¹ Although a peripheral element, the effects of competitive materialism and the 'diseases of affluence' constitute another socially divisive component of the ideological epidemic.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 176.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 121.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 125.

Throughout the novel they are admonished for producing a geography of economic enclaves inimical to cultural cohesion; commercially exploiting the success of the feminist movement; and inspiring individual 'feelings of failure and rancour and despair' through the 'impossible dreams'⁵² of advertising.

Signalling another narrative shift that continues through the remaining sections of the novel, Drabble's social diagnosis culminates in the domestic tragedy of Irene and Joseph, an incident designed to encapsulate the multicultural confusions, violence and xenophobia of modern Britain. Significantly, this event is prefigured by Evelyn's comments on Kant's categorical imperative, her belief that society can only function through 'a conspiracy of faith' in which 'everyone must play a part in keeping whole the fabric.'⁵³ Informed by this context, the injured Evelyn becomes a paradigmatic victim of the nation's malaise, a crystallising example of the novel's core distinction between the 'natural functioning' of human communities and divisive forces of 'middle ground' culture. However, Evelyn's exemplary status also positions her as a catalyst for change, an initial focus for the character and narrative dénouement through which Drabble offers a concerted response to the negativity of her diagnosis. Metaphorically 'assaulted' earlier by London's street slogans, Evelyn's eyes are now forcibly kept open, a symbolic prompt for the alterations of perspective and revelations that propel the central characters beyond the stasis of their mid-life crises. In addition, her condition provides the impetus for a wider affirmation of her social ethic by inspiring a collective sympathy that both unifies and regenerates connections between friends, family members and generations. Beginning with the restoration of her son's affections, Evelyn receives an unexpected 'fund of goodwill' which confirms the

⁵² Ibid., p. 128.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 201.

validity of her vocation by reilluminating the most fundamental axiom of her faith: 'why expect results, progress, success, a better society? All we can do is join the ranks of the caring rather than the uncaring.'⁵⁴ Following the pattern of this moral imperative, the final optimism of the novel is predicated upon a retraction from the public sphere that implicitly asserts the inadequacy of any response founded upon the 'ideological' conceptions of politics or sociology. In tandem with this prioritisation of the private and domestic spheres, Drabble integrates the extended families of the central characters into an exemplary microcosm, a community of 'the caring' through which the discordance of cultural diversity becomes subject to the harmonising tolerance and inclusiveness of liberal-humanism.

Although informed by Evelyn's ethical axiom, the values and practices of this community are more clearly exemplified through the recognitions that conclude Kate's mid-life crisis. Anticipating the political and racist bias of newspaper headlines in relation to Evelyn's assault, Kate finally escapes the 'grip of the representative'; 'the deadly notion that everything ... had to be *exemplary*, had to *mean something*, not only for herself, but also for that vast quaking seething tenuous mass of otherness'.⁵⁵ Mirroring the formal developments of the novel, Kate replaces her personal and professional quest for patterns and trends with an acceptance of 'shapeless diversity'.⁵⁶ Immediately demonstrated by a series of familial anecdotes about names and labels, this perspective leads to a partial reconciliation with Ted through Kate's acknowledgement of her submerged guilt concerning the abortion of their child. As Cunningham has recognised, Kate's progression towards clarity is symbolically prefigured by her experiences at the National Gallery, requiring a

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 216.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 205.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 206.

reconciliation between the contrasting visions of life depicted by Peter de Hooch and Claude Lorrain.⁵⁷ Displeased with the ‘complacent claustrophobia’ of Hooch’s ‘fishheads and apple peel’,⁵⁸ she becomes equally frustrated by the limitations of Psyche’s downward gaze in Claude’s allegory: ‘why did not Psyche look up, and see all that glittering expanse? ... She should look up, and move, and go.’⁵⁹ While the tangled connotations of these paintings remain indecipherable to Kate, her responses provide an unconscious recognition of the need for a transforming vision, a means of looking up, and beyond, the boundaries of domesticity and the static detachment of her mid-life condition. Significantly, this transformation finally occurs during a visit with Evelyn, expanding the necessity of her axiom into an encompassing perspective of humanistic faith.

... a gold evening radiance fell on the glittering distance. From the twelfth-floor window London stretched away ... enmeshed, patched and pieced together, the old and new side by side, overlapping, jumbled, always decaying, yet always renewed ... there it lay, its old intensity restored, shining with invitation, all its shabby grime lost in perspective, imperceptible from this dizzy height, its connections clear, its pathways revealed. The City, the kingdom. The ariel view. Kate gazed towards Romley. The little sister is resurrected, dug up, dragged from the river, the stone that weighed her dissolves, she rises up ... The aerial view of human love, where all connections are made known, where all roads connect?⁶⁰

Transcending the epistemological confusions of self and city, Drabble unites and resolves the disparate threads of Kate’s narrative in a moment of epiphany, interweaving the ‘shapeless diversity’ of the urban landscape, Claude’s ‘glittering distance’ and the fairy tale of *Alenoushka and her Brother* into a panorama of redemption and renewal. Significantly, this ‘ariel view’ extends beyond the city to ‘the kingdom’, revealing the harmonising networks of love and human ‘connection’ that exist beneath the ideological confrontations and social fragmentation of the

⁵⁷ Cunningham, ‘Patchwork and Patterns: the Condition of England in Margaret Drabble’s Later Novels’, pp. 132-3.

⁵⁸ Drabble, *The Middle Ground*, p. 199.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 199.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 218.

nation. Following the Forsterian plea to 'only connect', Drabble's response to her despondent diagnosis rests upon an idealistic assertion of faith rather than historical prophecy or political strategy. Like the birth that concludes McEwan's *The Child in Time*, Drabble uses the momentum of Evelyn's assault and Kate's epiphany to reverse the polarity of the novel's perspective, marginalizing the negativity of cultural diagnosis through a concentration upon the potential for individual reformation, familial connection and the co-operative unity of a paradigmatic community.

This reversal is primarily accomplished through Kate's decision to host a party in honour of Mujid's return home, Hugo's departure, Mark's birthday and Evelyn's release. As this list implies, this event functions as a symbolic celebration of change and possibility, encapsulating and prompting resolutions of mid-life stasis, racial difference and generational discord. Completing a reconciliation of her experience in the gallery, Kate's domestic disposal of 'the rotting sediment of ages'⁶¹ inspires a greater resignation towards her brother's malice and the impenetrability of her past. In addition, the communal nature of these preparations replaces her feelings of dislocation and suspension with a 'sense of immense calm, strength, centrality, as though she were indeed the centre of a circle'.⁶² Finally able to contemplate their prospective futures, Hugo returns to international journalism with a newly acquired artificial limb and Kate purchases a bay tree in the expectation that it will outlive her. According to Efrig, this bay tree functions as a symbol for the preservation of the nation, previously inscribed at the centre of an island on a medal cast for Elizabeth I to celebrate the defeat of the Spanish

⁶¹ Drabble, *The Middle Ground*, p. 226.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 246.

Armada.⁶³ However, it also exists as a Christian symbol for the ungodly, an unnoticed association that prompts Hunt to malign the declining standards in modern education and the loss of 'our common culture'.⁶⁴ Although deliberately reminiscent of London's racist hostility and Hugo's liberal concerns about globalism, it is significant that this attitude of insular nationalism appears increasingly irrelevant and outdated amongst the positive images of youth and multicultural accommodation that precede the party. Following on from the example of Rubia, the Pakistani 'child of Britain'⁶⁵ who transcended the ethnic violence of Evelyn's assault, the next generation of Mark, Ruth and Susanna are all revealed as having avoided the 'tatty diversities of tatty distracting modern life.'⁶⁶ Furthermore, the international divisions of ideology and race are symbolically resolved by the deconstruction of the stereotypical classifications that prevented Kate from understanding Mujid. As an act of 'natural functioning', Mujid's gift of Arabian slippers circumvents their cultural distance, compelling Kate to recognise that '[h]e was human after all, he had noticed her, had noticed even her feet, had paid attention to her needs, had felt gratitude.'⁶⁷

Through the random inclusiveness of her invitations, Kate's party encompasses nearly every character in the novel, uniting the representatives of different races, nationalities, creeds, generations and sub-cultures. Demonstrating the two poles of Kate's regeneration, it functions as a celebration of both 'shapeless diversity' and the networks of human connection she perceived from her 'ariel

⁶³ The significance of the bay tree and the inscription *Non ipsa pericula tangunt*, 'No dangers touch her, the bay is eternal' are discussed by Gail Efrig, 'The Middle Ground', in Schmidt and Seale (eds.), *Margaret Drabble: Golden Realms*, p. 184.

⁶⁴ Drabble, *The Middle Ground*, p. 245.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 215.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 242.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 246.

view'. As 'an affirmative statement of the possibility of community'⁶⁸ this event provides a symbolic blueprint for a national rehabilitation founded upon the principles of tolerance, accommodation and social cohesion. Although only remaining a prospective event, any potential regression towards discordance is refuted through a carefully positioned prolepsis involving the previously racist Marylou dancing with 'Ruth's Rastaman'. Ending on a moment of choice for both Kate and England, Drabble returns to the epistemological uncertainties of character and narrative, recasting them as essential to a hopeful recognition of limitless possibility. In sharp contrast with the religious retreat of *The Ice Age*, *The Middle Ground* repudiates the despondency of its diagnosis through a liberal-humanist faith in potentiality, the optimism of Kate's concluding liberation from the downcast gaze of Claude's figure of Psyche.

It is all in the future. Excitement fills her, excitement, joy, anticipation, apprehension. Something will happen. The water glints in the distance. It is unplanned, unpredicted. Nothing binds her, nothing holds her ... She rises.⁶⁹

While the open-endedness of *The Middle Ground's* conclusion avoids the stasis and unsubstantiated economic confidence that weakens *The Ice Age*, it remains an illustration of both the political and aesthetic problems of a 'state of the nation' perspective. Like McEwan's *The Child in Time*, the novel generates optimism through the recovery of the central character and the symbolic unity of a communal microcosm. However, this optimism is similarly premised upon a retraction from the implications of the novel's diagnosis, the recuperation of the possibilities of a national community through the liberal individual. Although it could be argued that the party constitutes a broader affirmation, the compacted examples of resolution and racial transcendence appear to contrive a social

⁶⁸ Bromberg, 'Narrative in Drabble's *The Middle Ground*: Relativity versus Teleology', p. 478.

⁶⁹ Drabble, *The Middle Ground*, p. 248.

harmony rather than exemplify a genuine basis for its realisation. As Boyd has argued, Drabble's Forsterian acts of connection offer only 'tentative solutions and comfort to the beleaguered liberal-humanist outlook in a world of random violence and apparent anarchy.'⁷⁰ Furthermore, the novel's self-referential acknowledgement of the fictional challenges of cultural relativity are displaced, rather than resolved, by Kate's 'ariel view'. Unable to locate an encompassing perspective through a social-realist aesthetic, *The Middle Ground* adopts a moment of epiphany that functions by moving beyond the requirements of delineation. In essence, the nation remains imaginable, like the communal society of the party, not through the existence of coherence but through a belief in its possibility.

⁷⁰ William Boyd, 'Beyond the exemplary', *New York Times* (11 July 1980).

The Setting Sun of Progress: Margaret Drabble's *The Radiant Way*

Although following a seven-year absence, during which she edited *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*,¹ Drabble's return to the 'state of the nation' form provides another example of thematic continuity and formal development. Like its predecessors, *The Radiant Way* continues to chronicle the decline of a national common culture while adapting its narrative structure in response to the technical challenges of the genre. In broad terms, all three novels employ patterns of private/public division in which personal and familial relationships, either implicitly or explicitly, illustrate the struggle to sustain liberal ideals within a culture increasingly resistant to their achievement. However, while the structures of *The Ice Age* and *The Middle Ground* display an alternation of emphasis between the public and private spheres, *The Radiant Way* is distinguished by an attempt to provide a panoramic social analysis without 'collapsing the particularity of specific groups and forms of community.'² From this perspective, it is tempting to view *The Radiant Way* as a culmination of Drabble's developing use of the genre, an attempt to reconcile the encompassing perspective of *The Ice Age* with the detailed characterisation and social observation of *The Middle Ground*. As she acknowledges through a series of self-referential allusions to Austen, Dickens and Cobbett, the form of the novel embodies a methodological debate between width and depth: an 'intimate knowledge of a corner' as opposed to 'a sketchy acquaintance with the globe.'³ Thus while registering the 'state of the nation' through regional divisions, authorial summaries and a diachronic pattern of political

¹ Anne Hulbert has argued that this undertaking significantly informs the expansive scope of the novel. 'Not surprisingly, Drabble was thinking big by the time she surfaced from the classics in 1984.' Anne Hulbert, 'Maggiemarch', *The New Republic*, vol. 197 (14 Dec. 1987), p. 38.

² Steven Connor, *The English Novel in History, 1950-1995* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 65.

³ Margaret Drabble, *The Radiant Way* (London: Penguin, 1988), p. 84.

events, the novel also seeks to preserve a distinctiveness and relative autonomy for the *Bildungsromanisch* progressions of the central characters. Significantly, this combination of generic modes has divided critical opinions of the novel, separating those who view it as too schematic and sociological ‘for the development of character and drama’,⁴ from those who discern an undermining of panoramic ambition through a ‘modernist jumpiness and diffidence’.⁵ Rather than attempt to resolve these contrasting positions, it is more valuable to recognise the episodic shifts and inconsistencies of scale as indicative of Drabble’s problematic adherence to a liberal-realist perspective.⁶ Essentially, the formal diversity of *The Radiant Way* seeks to emulate the fiction of Doris Lessing and Angus Wilson by engaging with ‘an increasingly complex, post-Freudian, self-aware, plural, fragmented society’ whilst producing a novel that ‘is not one of self-doubt, of fragmentation, of failed experiment, but of a rich and varied representation of reality.’⁷

The novel that emerges from this problematic position is ‘exasperatingly diffuse’;⁸ resisting any critically imposed pattern of synthesis or resolution through its profusion of characters, points of view and generic styles. Although beginning with a clear north/south division, the novel quickly becomes a ‘variegated patchwork’⁹ of episodic sections that incrementally construct a portrait of Britain through fluid alignments between representative characters, political commentary,

⁴ Michiko Kakutani, *New York Times* (21 Oct. 1987), p. 25.

⁵ John Updike, ‘Seeking Connections in an Insecure Country’, *The New Yorker* (16 Nov. 1987), p. 157.

⁶ Bromberg perceives the novel as ‘burdened by the tension between Drabble’s post-modernist self-awareness and desire to claim her place in the great tradition of the English novel.’ Pamela S. Bromberg, ‘Margaret Drabble’s *The Radiant Way*: Feminist Metafiction’, *Novel*, vol. 24, no. 1 (Fall 1990), p. 9.

⁷ Margaret Drabble, ‘Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in the Post-War British Novel’, *Mosaic*, vol. 20, no. 1 (1987), p. 12.

⁸ Updike, ‘Seeking Connections in an Insecure Country’, p. 157.

⁹ Gail Cunningham, ‘Patchwork and Patterns: the Condition of England in Margaret Drabble’s Later Novels’, in James Acheson (ed.), *The British and Irish Novel Since 1960* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1991), p. 139.

social observation, psychological symbolism and mystical horror. Without the encompassing omniscience of *The Ice Age* or the inclusive conclusion of *The Middle Ground*, the novel's depiction of the nation becomes fractured across contingent flashbacks, authorial interventions and the temporal juxtaposition of character vignettes around meals and seasonal celebrations. Even the diachronic momentum provided by the journalistic summaries fails to establish a coherent teleological pattern as they rarely 'coincide with major actions and events in protagonists' lives.'¹⁰ For Bromberg, this emphasis upon '[s]ynchrony and the spatialization of narrative'¹¹ involves a rejection of the *Bildungsroman* conventions of nineteenth-century fiction. By eschewing linear causality the novel challenges the traditional patterns, expectations and resolutions of personal growth and romantic fulfilment. In conjunction with the intertextual allusions and the protagonists' communal friendship, Bromberg interprets the novel as work of 'metafictional feminist realism'. It constitutes an attempt to 'write the "new reality" of contemporary women's lives' by subverting the narrative forms and patriarchal ideologies of the 'dominant nineteenth-century novelistic tradition of individualism.'¹² However, the intertextual dialogue that reveals the novel's divergence from this tradition is also informed by Drabble's increasingly sophisticated engagement with the 'state of the nation' genre. By replacing a classic north/south division at the beginning of the novel with narrative diffusion, *The Radiant Way* self-consciously illuminates the problems of delineating a nation through the isolation of representative figures: 'A few families in a Country Village ... Mothers, fathers, aunts, stepchildren, cousins. Where does the story begin and

¹⁰ Bromberg, 'Margaret Drabble's *The Radiant Way*: Feminist Metafiction', p. 10. I am heavily indebted to Bromberg for the entirety of this narrative analysis.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 7, 5, 8.

where does it end?’¹³ By questioning the narrowness of class and locality in Jane Austen,¹⁴ the *Bildungsroman* teleology of *Great Expectations* and the representation of the working class in *Hard Times*, *The Radiant Way* asserts its cultural and literary distance from nineteenth-century fiction. However, rather than pronounce the irrelevance of this ‘dying tradition’, this intertextual dialogue acknowledges the narrative challenges of the contemporary world and affirms the necessity of generic revision. As with the epistemological questions in *The Middle Ground*, these interjected allusions paradoxically reveal Drabble’s continuing commitment to the socially inclusive and diagnostic ambitions of her literary precursors.

In addition to illustrating a process of generic and literary adaptation, *The Radiant Way*’s formal structure also reflects, and is significantly determined by, the contingencies of the non-literary reality that it seeks to represent. As Connor has observed, in displaying an ‘anxiety about its own capacities, the novel succeeds, oddly, in acting out with fidelity more general misgivings about the retreat or failure of the ‘social’ which have proliferated in the last couple of decades.’¹⁵ From this perspective, the irreconcilable diversity and self-reflexivity are indicative of the particular problems posed by the 1980s to a genre traditionally associated with the liberal-humanist values of connection, tolerance and synthesis. While the ‘teeming inclusiveness’ of nineteenth-century social-realist novels promised ‘a vision of healing unity’,¹⁶ Drabble’s self-conscious struggles with the form reveal a creative process in which ‘the divisions of society come to be an assault not merely on social ideals of collectivity but also on the aesthetic ideal of imaginative reach and

¹³ Drabble, *The Radiant Way*, p. 171.

¹⁴ ‘... she should have had ‘a slightly greater awareness of what was going on in the rest of England’, Margaret Drabble, quoted in Valerie Grosvenor Myer, *Margaret Drabble: A Reader’s Guide* (London: Vision, 1991), p. 109.

¹⁵ Connor, *The English Novel in History*, p. 69.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

assimilation'.¹⁷ Although evident in the retractions of *The Ice Age* and the epistemological uncertainties of *The Middle Ground*, this incompatibility between socio-political realities and aesthetic ideology is most apparent in the divergent narrative tendencies of *The Radiant Way*. Thus while displaying an 'augmented confidence in the power of the novel to forge a cohering vision of the social whole',¹⁸ the novel also reveals a corresponding diminishment in Drabble's ability to depict optimistic pockets of social cohesion. In spite of the inclusivity promised by its panoramic perspective, *The Radiant Way* remains distinguished by increasing cultural and personal divisions, darkening metaphors of decline and the negation of potentially positive *Bildungsroman* trajectories. The only significant images of unity are provided by the interspersed meetings between the protagonists, a continuing friendship designed to show 'that even when you're living in a hostile climate politically, you yourself can live well, have a good life, supper with your friends.'¹⁹ However, these examples of simple (often pastoral) pleasure and solidarity remain detached from the novel's social diagnosis, thereby lacking the counteractive impact generated by Evelyn's injury and Kate's party in *The Middle Ground*. They exist as isolated and embattled moments of retreat that merely reinforce the cultural hegemony of Thatcherism by implying the irrelevance of even symbolic gestures of resistance. Through this disjunction between the imposing influence of the public arena and the apparent impotence of private individuals, *The Radiant Way* exemplifies Drabble's deepening anxiety towards the nation following the emergence of Thatcherism.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 68.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 68.

¹⁹ Olga Kenyon, *Women Writers Talk* (Oxford: Lennard, 1989), p. 35.

In terms of *The Radiant Way's* confident delineation of the nation, it is important to recognise that the presentation of a circumscribed context had previously been problematic; subject to the diffusions of an encompassing metaphor in *The Ice Age* and openly repudiated by self-referential statements in *The Middle Ground*. In each case, Drabble's aesthetic form reflected the prevailing attitudes of resignation that accompanied the succession of international crises and weakness of consensus politics towards the end of the 1970s. The 'nation' appeared incapable of self-determination, rendered impotent in the face of its own decline by the subsuming influences of globalism and international economic recession. While these contexts remained influential in the early 1980s, the 'new beginning' offered by a more authoritarian and confrontational government prompted a reinvigorated debate about nationhood and the 'state of the nation'. In seeking to reverse the fatalism of the previous decade, Thatcher employed the populist rhetoric of a restoration of British 'greatness' through a return to the economic, political and moral values that underpinned the imperial dominance of the Victorian period. Following victory in the Falklands conflict, Thatcher triumphantly celebrated this restoration with Churchillian invocations of Britain's isolated resistance during the early years of the Second World War: 'We have ceased to be a nation in retreat. We have instead a new-found confidence – born in the economic battles at home and tested and found true eight thousand miles away.'²⁰ Significantly, these appeals to a patriotic mythology of national self-respect and economic renewal focussed attention upon the 'nation' as a constructed concept, a disputed signifier upon which the ideological factions of the period sought to impose meaning. In effect, the early 1980s established a context in which national appraisals increasingly perceived

²⁰ Margaret Thatcher, quoted in Anthony Barnett, *Iron Britannia* (London: Allison and Busby, 1982), p. 150.

social problems as directly resulting from the internal policies of an ideological crusade rather than as inexorable by-products of international influence. Like many other literary works, films and commentaries of the period, *The Radiant Way* acquires the clarity and coherence of a dissenting voice through its opposition to the myths of nation and nationhood espoused by Thatcherism. Aided by historical distance, the novel presents Britain as a discrete entity and adheres to the framework of an established cultural debate concerning the state of the nation. Through its accumulation of locations, representative characters and political events, Drabble adopts what now appears a familiar mode of critique by seeking to expose the regional inequalities, economic deprivations and social divisions that lay beneath Thatcher's rhetorical depictions of a regenerated nation.

However, the panoramic confidence *The Radiant Way* acquires through dissent is accompanied by an equally prevalent sense of despondency with regard to the social problems and ideological shifts it documents. This is illustrated by Drabble's return to the familiar territory of the lives, marriages and careers of three women who have emerged from 'the great social dream' of the post-war era; exemplary products of 'the brave new world of Welfare State and County Scholarships.'²¹ Like Alison, Kate and Evelyn before them, Liz, Esther and Alix are representatives of a generation produced, and inspired by, the idealism of a social ethos based upon opportunity, equality and progress. In continuing to chart the progress of characters from this seminal moment, Drabble again establishes an ideological and cultural benchmark for her diagnosis of the nation. In the preceding novels, the fate of these ideals was measured by the social decline caused by public spending cuts and the ideological opposition of the ill-defined New Right figures of

²¹ Drabble, *The Radiant Way*, p. 88.

Anthony Keating and Ted Stennett. Yet while these novels offered positive images of economic regeneration and liberal connection in response to an uncertain national future, *The Radiant Way* provides a diagnosis that ‘sinks from distaste to dismay, and finally into despair.’²² The crucial difference is that in addressing the 1980s, Drabble is forced to confront a government whose political methods and domestic policies threatened the elimination of her consensual ideals. As Thatcher famously said to Edward Heath in 1981:

‘To me, consensus seems to be: the process of abandoning all beliefs, principles, values and policies in search of something in which no one believes ... [w]hat great cause would have been fought and won under the banner: “I stand for consensus”?’²³

Although ostensibly concerned with the practice of politics, this rejection of consensus formed the basis of a deeper ideological fault-line that divided the followers of the new ethos of competition and entrepreneurial individualism from those, like Drabble, who saw the nation as fundamentally defined by the principles of collectivism and the ambitions of welfare-capitalism. By attacking the ‘permissiveness’ of the 1960s, the dependency culture of the ‘nanny state’ and proclaiming that ‘there is no such thing as society’, the ‘great cause’ of Thatcherism appeared inimical to a conception of the ‘nation’ based upon community, liberal tolerance and social justice. It is this sense of antagonism that separates *The Radiant Way*’s despondent portrayal of ‘what went wrong in the 1980s’²⁴ from the patterns of muddled deterioration and mitigating optimism that appeared in *The Ice Age* and *The Middle Ground*. At the time of publication, Thatcher’s ‘enterprise culture’ had acquired the validation of successive electoral victories, a political dominance that appeared to make the progressive ideals of a welfare-state society

²² Gabriele Annan, ‘Worriers’, *The New York Review* (4 Feb 1988), p. 17.

²³ Margaret Thatcher, quoted in Robert Hewison, *Culture and Consensus: England, Art and Politics Since 1940* (London: Methuen, 1995), pp. 210-11.

²⁴ Kenyon, *Women Writers Talk*, p. 38.

appear outdated and reactionary. As *Marxism Today* conceded in 1988: ‘while the Left remains profoundly wedded to the past ... it is the Right which now appears modern, radical, innovative and brimming with confidence and ideas about the future.’²⁵ It is this sense of political alienation, of being excluded and dismayed by the self-assurance of an emergent ideology, that informs both the pessimism and unresolved disunity of *The Radiant Way*. In charting the period from 1980 to 1985, the novel forms a retrospective examination of a cultural process that continued to disturb and alienate Drabble in 1989:

‘I am depressed; we ought to have got a bit further by now ... [t]hey are going to sell the National Health Service. Even the underpinning is being taken away after all our progressive dreams. I think our society is mad, and we will look back on these dark days with disbelief.’²⁶

While many political studies have emphasised the gradual and inconsistent emergence of Thatcherism, Drabble’s chronicle opens with a New Year’s Eve party that symbolically and inter-textually asserts the new decade as heralding an instantaneous cultural change. The use of this device not only relates to the expediencies of literary construction but also provides an immediate illustration of the novel’s bleak teleological pattern. From the outset, the decade’s zeitgeist is portrayed as an irresistible and externally imposed force, a culture of division that is ‘not merely a by-product of Thatcherism but also the systematic effect of a top-down class antagonism.’²⁷ Initially, this zeitgeist is delineated through the self-conscious parallels drawn between the party that concluded *The Middle Ground* and Liz Headleand’s social gathering at the beginning of *The Radiant Way*. Following on from the limitless possibilities of Kate’s final preparations, Liz’s party opens with a similar mood of anticipation and potential transformation, the midnight

²⁵ Quoted in Hewison, *Culture and Consensus*, p. 213.

²⁶ Kenyon, *Women Writers Talk*, p. 35.

²⁷ Connor, *The English Novel in History*, p. 65.

promise of 'a new self, a new life, a new, redeemed decade.'²⁸ However, while Kate's inclusiveness leads to an event that celebrates liberal accommodation and diversity, Liz's self-congratulation at having assembled representatives from 'the intersecting circles of society' is undermined by the exclusivity of her upper middle class guest list and admission that the party was primarily intended as an act of 'social vengeance'.²⁹ Although chronologically separated by less than a month, the social cohesion of Kate's party is replaced by a series of personal and political divisions that emerge during the last hours of the decade. Populated by a cross-section of influential businessmen, politicians, media moguls, novelists, artists, scientists, judges and civil servants, Liz's party offers an encapsulation of the cultural changes and political dynamics ushered in by the 1980s. In a passage of prophetic summary, Drabble unifies the diverse discussions through a single metaphor of direction; a 'current' of '[c]utting, paring, slimming, reducing, rationalizing' which curtails the 'idle ebb and flow' of 'an eclectic, fragmented purposeless decade'.³⁰ While the 'woolly shabby old liberal vests' are left 'piled on the shore', an 'emerging race' of 'hard new streamlined man' are inspired to plunge 'naked into the stream'.³¹ The abruptness of this cultural shift is reinforced by the parallel separation between Liz and Charles, the end of a relationship that had maintained a 'symmetry ... with the clock of the century'.³² For Liz, the self-affirmation promised by the evening becomes a 'very expensive charade', the discovery of her husband's planned departure with Lady Henrietta Latchett marking his symbolic emergence as a one of the 'new breed of non-gentlemen of the

²⁸ Drabble, *The Radiant Way*, p. 1.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 27, 7.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 32, 33.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 6.

Right'.³³ As Greene has noted, the 'dissolution' that afflicts both marriage and household by the beginning of the 1980s 'marks the end of a dream of unity, of transcending barriers, not only for individuals, but for England.'³⁴

While the new decade results in dramatic ideological fractures at the cultural centre of the nation, the celebrations in 'The Other Nation'³⁵ of Northam offer a more parochial vision of social continuity, elongated economic decline and quiet desperation. The divisive 'current' of the new decade is still evident amongst the town's civic leadership, separating the Left's anticipation of an 'exhilarating confrontation'³⁶ from Eddie Duckworth's hopes (as the President of the Chamber of Commerce) that an uncompromising government will revitalise a declining manufacturing industry. However, these responses remain isolated from the forces that inform them, uncertain expressions of political faith rather than assured declarations of self-determinism. Indeed, through their local proximity and identical brands of cheap wine, Drabble implies a deeper affinity between the factions based upon their position within a community excluded from socio-economic and political power. This disenfranchisement is further exemplified by the antithetical social occasions hosted by Liz and Shirley, an opposition which echoes the profound cultural dislocations of Disraeli's 'two-nations' division: 'as if they were dwellers in different zones, or inhabitants of different planets; who are formed by a different breeding, are fed by a different food, are ordered by different manners'.³⁷ In contrast to the glittering refinement, expansiveness and dynamism of Liz's party, the accumulated minutia and circular dialogue of Shirley's meal offers a

³³ Ibid., pp. 43, 27.

³⁴ Gayle Greene, 'Bleak Houses: Doris Lessing, Margaret Drabble, and the Condition of England', *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, vol. 28, no. 4 (Oct. 1992), p. 315.

³⁵ Drabble, *The Radiant Way*, p. 47.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 48.

³⁷ Benjamin Disraeli, quoted in David Lodge, *Nice Work* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1989 [1988]), p. 1.

more naturalistic portrait of economic survival and parochial torpidity. While London society stands at the vanguard of a dramatic political transition, the citizens of Northam appear imprisoned by the entropic decline of their former culture; living in houses that 'belonged to another age' and enacting customs that offer only 'a faint, feeble echo of some once meaningful ritual.'³⁸ Conversations are punctuated by 'second-hand opinions' drawn from 'advertisements and tabloid newspapers' and traditional entertainments give way to the passive absorption of televised festivities, a medium 'they had taken to ... like aborigines to the bottle.'³⁹ Although Shirley takes some reassurance from the familiarity of these familial rites within a society that retained 'warmth and communion of a sort',⁴⁰ Drabble's depiction of Northam refrains from any alleviating affirmation of working-class solidarity or communal pride. Indeed, the unifying issue for two generations of Shirley's family is their entrapment within a culture of oppressive insularity: Steve dreams of opportunities in Australia; Cliff nostalgically craves employment outside the uncertainties of the modern market-place; and Celia imprecisely plots a future beyond the inscribed gender roles that inspire her mother's 'despairing plea' for 'metamorphosis'.⁴¹ The section concludes with an image of the family's historical vulnerability, 'a small tribe, frail, ageing' in a 'house perched precariously on the raw earth, amongst other isolated, precarious, detached houses'.⁴² As the first dwellers upon the hillside since the 'faithless queen Cartimandua ... sold her people to the Romans',⁴³ this image functions as a veiled forewarning of Thatcher's betrayal of 'The Other Nation'. Although remaining veiled in *The Radiant Way*, this parallel becomes explicit in *A*

³⁸ Drabble, *The Radiant Way*, pp. 47, 63.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 57, 55.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 64.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

Natural Curiosity: ‘a hint in the portrayal of Cartimandua of the Prime Minister, duplicitous Britannia, striking deals with a powerful America, abandoning the ancient culture of her own folk?’⁴⁴

While providing a means of introducing both the zeitgeist and the vast array of characters and relationships, the novel does not maintain this ‘two-nations’ framework as a structural and thematic axis. The narrative diffusions that follow appear to acknowledge that such a simplistic demarcation would be an inadequate template for the cultural diversity and relative social mobility of late twentieth-century Britain. However, *The Radiant Way* does retain a broader generic connection by loosely configuring its episodic fragments around traditional liberal concerns. The novel revolves around patterns of unity and division that emphasise the perils of social discordance through its effect upon the characters of individuals and the welfare of communities. These pivotal concerns are introduced through the past histories of the central characters and the establishment of their friendship as a symbolic embodiment of the egalitarian and progressive ideals of the post-war settlement. Beginning with their meeting as scholarship students at Cambridge, Liz, Alix and Esther represent a generation that emerged from ‘the margins of English life’⁴⁵ through the expansion of educational opportunity. In spite of the patriarchal inequalities and personal difficulties that hinder their early development, all three achieve relative success by the 1980s within careers that fulfil their respective ambitions to ‘to make sense of things’, ‘change things’ and ‘acquire interesting information.’⁴⁶ While these histories offer an initial vindication of ‘the great social dream’, the harmonious images of their friendship appear increasingly isolated as

⁴⁴ Margaret Drabble, *A Natural Curiosity* (London: Penguin, 1990), p. 3.

⁴⁵ Drabble, *The Radiant Way*, p. 90.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

they, and the characters around them, experience the repercussions of society's departure from the ideals of the 'radiant way'. Although the novel's title functions as the cultural metaphor suggested by this reading, it should be noted that the 'radiant way', like the 'middle ground', does not acquire a single definitive connotation. In addition to denoting the ambitions of a former period, it also operates as an ironic comment upon the cultural project of the 1980s and provides a focus for the tangential linking of character sub-plots and narrative themes. It is through the accumulated variations and resonance of this fluid metaphor that Drabble holds together the disparate *Bildungsroman*, political and symbolic dimensions of the novel.

The least political of these variations is provided by the *Bildungsroman* trajectory of Liz Headleand following the dissolution of her marriage to Charles. Although ultimately illustrating Drabble's repudiation of nineteenth century narrative conventions, Liz's academic and social ascent is initially associated with Pip's 'great expectations' through her dissociation from her sister, mother and the 'Other Nation' of her past. This ascent is abruptly curtailed during the party that was designed to confirm her class elevation; Liz's glamorous self-image is shattered by the humiliation of being abandoned for 'a more ancient lineage' and the threatened loss of a house that 'confirmed her'.⁴⁷ Like Pip, Liz is forced to recognise her material progression and social identity as illusory, an insubstantial attempt to veil the impress of her past: 'She had never deserved it. She had reached too high, travelled too far, from Abercorn Avenue'.⁴⁸ While her subsequent quest for self-realisation offers the potential for a romantic rebirth and a moral education beyond class vanity, in practice it eschews any resolution premised upon 'full

⁴⁷ Ibid., pp. 184, 121.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 121.

disclosure, demystification and patterned revelation.⁴⁹ In addition to the unreconciled relationships with her family and an unremarkable adjustment to independent life, this refusal to adhere to the conventions of the *Bildungsroman* is exemplified by Liz's psychological quest to heal the undiagnosed 'spiritual body odour'⁵⁰ engendered by her father's mysterious disappearance. Freed from the displacement figure of Charles, Liz adopts the mythology of Theseus and the Minotaur as a metaphor for the excavation of her repressed past and a return to 'those dark labyrinthine strong-smelling chambers and passages.'⁵¹ Acquiring additional significance from her position as an expert on the psychiatric problems of the adopted and orphaned, Liz's quest becomes a defining test of the rationale of her profession; the belief that 'contemplation of the unpleasant will generate enlightenment, information, knowledge: and knowledge will restore health and life.'⁵² However, in spite of the eventual revelations of her father's suicide, his paedophile tendencies and her own infantile sexual experiences, Liz finds the knowledge 'anti-climatic' and 'unsatisfactory', quickly 'losing interest in the riddle that had teased her for decades.'⁵³ While ostensibly marking a personal and professional defeat for Liz, the equivocal nature of her enlightenment also tangentially reinforces the narrative irresolution through which Drabble registers her scepticism towards the potential for a national recovery. Uncovering the 'serpent' in her own garden, Liz rejects the idyllic images of childhood and family life contained in *The Radiant Way* primer and the optimism towards educational advancement represented by a boy and girl 'running gaily down (not up) a hill,

⁴⁹ Bromberg, 'Margaret Drabble's *The Radiant Way*: Feminist Metafiction', p. 13.

⁵⁰ Drabble, *The Radiant Way*, p. 138.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 145. A more detailed analysis of these classical myths and their psychoanalytic significance is provided by Roberta Rubenstein, 'Sexuality and Intertextuality: Margaret Drabble's *The Radiant Way*', *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 30, no. 1 (Spring 1989).

⁵² Drabble, *The Radiant Way*, p. 145.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 388.

against a background of radiant thirties sunburst.⁵⁴ Fulfilling the negation of the generic conventions of her mythic *Bildungsroman*, Liz's confrontation with the Minotaur does not lead to an epic regeneration and the assurance of prospective health. Instead, the primer's vision is translated into an unconsoling recognition of mortality that marks the demise of the progressive ideals that informed her educational and professional achievements: 'On she would go, relentlessly, into the dark-red sun, down the radiant way, towards the only possible ending.'⁵⁵

A more transparently political rendering of the 'radiant way' is provided by the parallel figures of Charles and Brian and their symbolic shifts away from the social fellowship of National Service, and towards the ideological and class hostility of 'two nations' Britain. Exemplifying Drabble's commitment to the egalitarian ideals of the post-war settlement, National Service is described as an 'enforced opportunity' to surmount 'the arrogant assumptions of privilege, ... the aggressive envy of want, the constant maintenance of distinctions.'⁵⁶ Although initially inspired by this military experience to speak 'to the whole undivided nation',⁵⁷ Charles's transformation into a Thatcherite media mogul illustrates the detrimental consequences the novel associates with the dissolution of this ambition. In both its critique of a divisive educational system and the manner of its production, Charles's seminal documentary 'The Radiant Way' encapsulates the progressive idealism of the 1960s: '[it] was a microcosm of what would come about: a forward-looking, forward-moving, dynamic society, full of opportunity, co-operative, classless.'⁵⁸ As this unity of purpose becomes diluted by the increasing professionalism of union

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 385.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 389.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 168.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 176.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 176.

action, Charles's frustration leads to an unprovoked attack upon his colleague Dirk Davis. This act marks both the death of his socialist idealism and emergence of his subsequent incarnation as 'a man of power' that 'thrived on combat, confrontation, unpleasantness, on chopping the dead wood of poor old Britain.'⁵⁹ Charles's emergence as a representative Thatcherite is confirmed by his ruthless dismissal of Liz; the class vanity that motivates his marriage to Lady Latchett; his belief that 'the Falklands was Britain's finest hour';⁶⁰ and his move to New York and the corporate world of new media technology. It is indicative of Drabble's alienation from the values of Thatcherism that the relative sympathy accorded to Anthony Keating's entrepreneurial spirit in *The Ice Age* is not extended to her characterisation of Charles. Not only is he plagued by nostalgia for his former (better) self, but he also returns from New York with an impending divorce and the personal and professional disgrace of having backed the wrong technology through 'insufficient patriotism.'⁶¹ As a final bitter reminder of his distance from the positive values of 'The Radiant Way', Charles ends the novel haunted by the media revolution he championed, endlessly replaying the death of his own idealism through the terrorist video of Dirk Davis's murder: 'The car park in Acton, the brick wall in Baldai. Again, and again, and again.'⁶²

In contrast, Brian's sustained friendship with Stephen and his subsequent development as a novelist and lecturer provides a fulfilment of the egalitarian and educational possibilities of National Service. At the beginning of the 1980s Brian appears to be an ideal figure through his combination of innate goodness and

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 116.

⁶⁰ Throughout the novel support for the Falklands War appears synonymous with the jingoism of the Conservative Party, separating those on the left (Alix, Brian and Otto) from Charles and the comic figure of Lord Filey of Foley. The latter returns an Honorary Degree to an Argentinean University but complains about the Post Office's refusal to 'guarantee prompt delivery'. Ibid., pp. 247, 262.

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 302.

⁶² Ibid., p. 387.

protective gentleness with a physical grace and tactile warmth that derives from a Lawrentian quality of being ‘alive in his body.’⁶³ Contrary to a society of ‘fear’ and ‘clumsiness’, his working-class familiarity with people and objects leads Alix to the conclusion ‘that it was not so much a question of what was remarkable about Brian: it was more a question what had gone wrong with everybody else’.⁶⁴ However, just as Charles’s brutality becomes associated with Thatcherism, Brian’s embodiment of his Northam roots becomes intrinsic to his political radicalisation as a member of the ‘New-Old Left’.⁶⁵ Developing alongside the diachronic summaries of public sector cuts and industrial disputes which culminate in the miner’s strike, Brian’s militancy acts as a pivot around which Drabble depicts the dissolution of the Labour movement and the divisive effects of left-wing extremism. This is initially explored through the personal and political distance between Brian and the SDP convert Otto Werner, a distance symbolically encapsulated by the opposition between a ‘hammering’ manual typewriter and the ‘south-of-Watford’⁶⁶ hum of a word processor. As his sentimentality towards the childhood relics at Mrs Orme’s reveals, Brian remains trapped by the ‘imagery’ of his industrial background and unable to detach himself from a culture in irreversible decline. The futility of Brian’s cause is made transparent by the economic degeneration of Northam, ‘an ominous slowing of the pulse’⁶⁷ which afflicts the entire community regardless of political allegiance or business practice.⁶⁸ Reflecting Drabble’s experience of Sheffield in 1985,⁶⁹ Northam is pervaded by the fatalism of a downward spiral

⁶³ Ibid., p. 169.

⁶⁴ Ibid., pp. 170, 169.

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 229.

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 235.

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 150.

⁶⁸ In addition to the closure of the factory at which both Brian and his father worked, this decline also affects Jim and Cliff Harper and indirectly leads to the suicide of Eddie Duckworth’s wife.

⁶⁹ Margaret Drabble, ‘The acid test of Sheffield’s steel’, *The Times*, (8 Oct. 1985).

caused by manufacturing contraction and high employment. Within the five years of the novel, it experiences an accelerated descent that reduces an entire industrial culture into the nostalgic pastiche of the 'Open Hearth Hotel'. In contrast, the modernity of Otto's faith in new technology and political reform (along with Drabble's surprising recognition that much of her readership may be SDP supporters) appears to constitute a more progressive approach to the problems of the nation. However, the novel's endorsement of the SDP is qualified by Otto's academic impersonality, the abstraction of his political theory, and his eventual escape from the 'unmitigated, irreversible disaster'⁷⁰ of Britain to a lucrative post in Washington. As this suggests, the novel retains a humanistic scepticism towards all political ideologies, an approach that becomes transparent as Brian's militancy, like Charles's Thatcherite conversion increasingly separates him from his former, better self. Contrary to his instinctive gentleness, Brian becomes 'violently, irrationally anti-government'⁷¹ and adopts a class politics that increasingly alienates him Alix, Otto and Stephen. This process of self-negation culminates in his work for a Northam worker co-operative teaching politically motivated minority courses and dismissing as elitist, the 'great literature' he once espoused. Although never recovering his former self, it is important to recognise that Brian is presented as a tragic rather than a reprehensible figure. He is condemned by honourable principles to resist an unjust economic system through a political project that is unrealistic, regressive and ultimately self-destructive. As a humanistic warning about the perils of radicalism, the tragic pattern of Brian's narrative indicts both Thatcherism and the militant Left for instigating a culture of hostility and encouraging the sectarianism of class conflict. Behind Stephen's assessment that 'these times are

⁷⁰ Drabble, *The Radiant Way*, p. 391.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 246.

not good for men like Brian, who mean well',⁷² there exists a clear division between the 'common sense' of individuals and the deleterious effects of ideological dogmatism. As one section of Alix's internal interview makes transparent, Brian's isolation and self-deception is intended to illuminate the damaging consequences of the nation's movement from consensus to 'conviction' politics.

Do you think it possible that Brian's groups and other such groups, that Arthur Scargill and the Liverpool Council and the left-wing polytechnic trained intellectuals of Northam are ensuring the continuance of right-wing rule, indeed the increasing popularity of right-wing rule, and are positively encouraging the growing inequality of the society they claim to wish to redeem.⁷³

While Charles, Otto and Brian reflect the dissolution of the 'radiant way' at a party-political level,⁷⁴ it is indicative of Drabble's aversion to ideological systems that the benchmark for criticism is provided by the instinctive social values of Alix. In contrast to those isolated by the divisions and self-deceptions of the decade's 'new current', Alix continues to aspire to a 'more comprehensive vision', which like the epiphany in *The Middle Ground*, illuminates the nation and its people as a profoundly connected community:

[the] ... pattern that linked these semi-detached houses of Wanley with those in Leeds and Northam ... seeing people perhaps more as flickering impermanent points of light irradiating stretches, threads, a vast web, a vast network, which was humanity itself ... [w]e are all but a part of a whole which has its own, its distinct, its other meaning: we are not ourselves, we are meeting places, points on a curve.⁷⁵

Yet unlike in the 'ariel view of human love'⁷⁶ experienced by Kate, Alix's vision appears less assured with its Woolfian insistence upon the impossibility of any single consciousness realising the totality of human connections. For many critics, this lack of assurance relates to a development in Drabble's fiction from the

⁷² Ibid., p. 265.

⁷³ Ibid., p. 284.

⁷⁴ Additional perspectives are also provided by Alan Headleand's 'Old-Left' academic arguments with Otto Werner and Stephen's radical socialism. Ibid., p. 264.

⁷⁵ Ibid., pp. 72-3.

⁷⁶ Margaret Drabble, *The Middle Ground* (London: Weidenfield and Nicolson, 1980), p. 218.

individualised consciousness, linearity and teleology of the nineteenth century novel to the spatial patterns of 'the communal protagonist' and a 'plot of connections'.⁷⁷ While this correctly recognises Alix's vision as a self-referential acknowledgement of the problems of locating an encompassing perspective for the nation, it also operates as an embattled endorsement of the social ideals implied by such a viewpoint. Replicating the aesthetic and political tensions of the novel as a whole, Drabble questions the utopianism of Alix's quest for connections while simultaneously asserting the social and moral importance of its ambition. It is through this uneasy sense of affirmation that Alix's vision is maintained as a paradigmatic example of the political values of the 'radiant way'. Throughout the novel she functions as an idealistic centre through which Drabble's profound disillusionment with 1980s Britain is expressed. Although implied through the fragmentation of narrative and social disunity documented by the authorial interjections, the diminishing relevance of Alix's humanistic values is explicitly revealed by her comprehensive loss of political optimism. Epitomising the values associated with her social vision, Alix begins the 1980s dedicated to educating 'the poor, the dull and the subnormal' and in a marriage that constitutes a 'process of healing the wounds in [her] own body and in the body politic.'⁷⁸ Following the non-conformist traditions of her family, Alix's exemplary values are inculcated through experience rather than political allegiance. Escaping the middle-class prejudices of her schooling through her 'semi-chosen' exposure to poverty, Alix acquires an empathetic reach that allows her to transcend 'the fear and mutual suspicion'⁷⁹ that Drabble discerns as the source of social and class distinction. The significance of

⁷⁷ Bromberg, 'Margaret Drabble's *The Radiant Way*: Feminist Metafiction', p. 12.

⁷⁸ Drabble, *The Radiant Way*, pp. 128, 168.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 102, 168.

this empirical development is that it elevates Alix's faith in social justice, tolerance and inclusiveness beyond the self-destructive inflexibility of political dogmatism. Reinforced by her mediating role between the representatives of a fragmenting political left, Alix becomes an embodiment of the 'common sense' liberal-humanism that Drabble associates with the moral imperatives of the individual and the practical establishment of an egalitarian and humane society.

On one level, the erosion of Alix's optimism towards the nation occurs through her failing marriage, which like the symbolic break-up of Charles and Liz, provides a correlation with the escalating class divisions and conflicts of the 1980s. While remaining sympathetic towards Brian's socialist principles, Alix's 'common sense, her rational being, her education'⁸⁰ preclude her from accepting either the futility or hostility of his militant cause. Encapsulating the dilemmas of a moderate liberal voice amidst a period of ideological polarisation, Alix becomes personally and politically suspended in a 'representative position of representative confusion';⁸¹ caught between her emotional loyalty to Brian's working-class solidarity and her flirtation with the progressive beliefs of Otto Werner. While Kate's similar confusion in *The Middle Ground* was circumvented by an epiphany of social inclusiveness, it is indicative of *The Radiant Way's* bleak analysis Alex continues an unmitigated course towards disaffection. Culminating in relation to the political climate of the miner's strike, Alix resigns herself to a position of exclusion and despondency through a recognition that the unifying ambitions of her vision have been invalidated by the animosity of entrenched national divisions:

... she watched the grim images that filled her little screen, and heard the righteous voices of unreason in the terminal struggle of warring factions in her own land. Where was a voice to speak to her, for her, for England? Where was Cromwell,

⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 342.

⁸¹ Ibid., p. 285.

where Winstanley? Was the country done for, finished off, struggling and twitching in the last artificially prolonged struggles of old age.⁸²

Furthermore, Alix's faith in connection is also challenged by the diminishing status of her vocational career and her failure to save Jilly Fox. Continuing the pattern of decline established by Evelyn in *The Middle Ground*, the institutions through which Alix seeks to assist women offenders are steadily undermined by economic retraction and political marginalisation. Initially a liberal model within the prison service, the Garfield institute is influenced by hardening attitudes towards 'law-and-order' and the 'backlash of anti-feminism'.⁸³ In adopting a more 'punitive regime' the atmosphere of the institute becomes 'more and more sour, less and less therapeutic.'⁸⁴ With the curtailment of the 'civilising' influences of the Glovers, Alix's literature classes and the 'socially useful' programs of her Home Office think-tank, the novel portrays a cultural process in which '[l]ong-cherished notions of progress are inspected, exposed, left out to die in the cold.'⁸⁵ Interestingly, Alix's role as a teacher is implicitly associated with her studies at Cambridge and the influence of F.R. Leavis. In spite of her early experiences involving a shift away from the concept of 'the individual self',⁸⁶ she remains representative of a generation of educators that were inspired by Leavis's meritocratic spirit, moral seriousness and belief in the social effectiveness of literature.⁸⁷ Evident in both her frequent recourse to literary quotations and her professional attempts to exorcise the emotional anger of inmates through poetry, Alix displays a Leavisite emphasis upon literary criticism as the locus for a wider moral and humane education: a 'test for

⁸² Ibid., p. 343.

⁸³ Ibid., p. 185.

⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 272.

⁸⁵ Ibid., pp. 185, 172.

⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 72. Bromberg has interpreted this as part of a metafictional challenge to 'the most basic tenets of Leavis's tradition and its underlying assumptions about reality.' Bromberg, 'Margaret Drabble's *The Radiant Way*: Feminist Metafiction', p. 18.

⁸⁷ Francis Mulhern, *The Moment of 'Scrutiny'*, NLB, (1979), p. 313.

life and concreteness.’⁸⁸ Although Leavisite principles never acquire a definitive status within the novel, Alix’s adherence to practical criticism as both a therapeutic method and a state of ‘sensitive, mature intelligence’⁸⁹ significantly informs her failed mentorship of Jilly Fox. Preceding their final meeting, Alix unsuccessfully attempts to comprehend her ‘representative confusion’ through a passage in Dante’s *Inferno* and subsequently blames the ‘restless ecstasy and puzzled disquiet of her present state’ upon the ‘English Tripos’⁹⁰ at Cambridge. With her descent into the underclass world of the Kilburn estate, Alix’s attempt to rescue Jilly from the inadequacies of welfare provision offers a combined test of her empathetic reach, educational principles, and inclusive humanism. As a parallel with Brian’s militancy, the psychotic imagery of Jilly’s macabre mural and biblical fatalism confronts Alix with an irrationality that is incomprehensible to a mind trained to ‘think clearly ... at all times’.⁹¹ Having failed to reason with Jilly’s assured prophecies of a journey into ‘the eternal night’, Alix ineffectively resorts to an analysis of her mixed metaphors and accuses her student of failing to learn from ‘the study of English language and literature and the techniques of practical criticism.’⁹² Although forced to confront her failure to connect through the discovery of Jilly’s decapitated head in her car, Alix’s attempt to rationally comprehend the death remains as elusive as a suitable epigraph. Ultimately, this inability to aid or comprehend Jilly acquires the status of a personal and social defeat for Alix, prompting an awareness that the inter-city ghetto was an

⁸⁸ F.R. Leavis, quoted in R.P. Bilan, *The Literary Criticism of F.R. Leavis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), p. 82.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

⁹⁰ Drabble, *The Radiant Way*, p. 323.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 333.

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 327.

unimaginable realm inimical to her optimistic vision of commonality and human decency:

Once, thought Alix, I had a sense of such lives, of such peaceable, ordinary, daily lives ... Now I see them no more. I see horrors. I imagine horrors. I have courted horrors, and they come to greet me. Whereas I had wished not to court them, but to exorcise them. To gaze into their eyes and destroy them by my gazing. They have won, they have destroyed me. There is no hope of a peaceable life, of a life for the people, of a society without fear.⁹³

The significance of Jilly's death acquires an alternative context through Esther's relationships with the parallel figures of Claudio Volpe⁹⁴ and the Harrow Road Murderer. Relatively immune to political and cultural change through her aesthetic detachment, Esther is characterised by a talent for making 'startling, brilliant connections' premised upon her claim that 'all knowledge must be omnipresent in all things.'⁹⁵ In contrast to Alix's 'building block' configurations of contemporary society, Esther appears attuned to a more esoteric realm of irrational forces and freakish coincidence. As indicated by associations with Freud and the unconscious, Esther's narrative underscores the realist surface of the novel with classical parallels, mystical interpretations and improbable connections. Operating in conjunction with the numerous images of decapitation provided by her artistic studies, Esther's relationship with the werewolf monomaniac Claudio mirrors Alix's destructive confrontation with irrational self-martyrdom of Jilly. While Esther initially interprets Claudio's delusions as 'an elegant affectation' and justifies her collusion as a source of equilibrium, her failure to respond to the appeals of John the Baptist in a dream exposes Claudio's Satanism as a 'true sickness, a disease of the spirit.'⁹⁶ In contrast with Alix's incomprehension, Esther recognises that she 'had

⁹³ Ibid., p. 337.

⁹⁴ Volpe is the Italian word for fox, a connection noted by Rubenstein, 'Sexuality and Intertextuality: Margaret Drabble's *The Radiant Way*', p. 102.

⁹⁵ Drabble, *The Radiant Way*, pp. 106, 83.

⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 206.

strayed too far into darkness with Claudio. She longed for the voice of daylight, of reason, of the fresh air.⁹⁷ Yet in spite of gaining a rational distance and symbolically prefiguring Claudio's death, his view of the Harrow Road Murders as a 'mass hallucination, unleashed from the fear of people'⁹⁸ returns to haunt Esther when Whitmore is apprehended within her building. In effect, the dark connections that surround Esther involve a reconceptualisation of Alix's vision of 'horrors' as a collective spiritual malaise, a 'rot within ... all of us.'⁹⁹

The combined defeat of Alix and Esther provide the focus for the novel's 'extended nadir',¹⁰⁰ a section pervaded by winter darkness, Rita Ablewhite's stroke and the deaths of Deborah Manning, Jilly, Claudio and Brian's father. This is reinforced by the images of threat and social decay that accompany Alix's exposure to a Learesque storm and the catastrophic pollution of a canal by a local hospital. Within this section, London becomes an apocalyptic 'landscape of nightmare, an extreme, end-of-the-world, dream-like parody of urban nemesis.'¹⁰¹ Marking an intensification of the novel's pessimism, Drabble replaces the sporadic use of an impinging socio-political backdrop with a metaphoric darkness that intimates a pervasive national affliction. Indicative of the perceived hegemonic influence of Thatcherism and the antagonistic culture it engendered, the novel shifts from a micro/macro (us and them) delineation towards an emphasis upon 'the rot ... within all of us'.¹⁰² The encompassing nature of this malaise is evinced by the symbolic connections between the Harrow Road Murderer, the degradation of the Mozart estate and the violent peak of the miner's strike in 1983. In effect, the series of

⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 206.

⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 347.

⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 371.

¹⁰⁰ Bromberg, 'Margaret Drabble's *The Radiant Way*: Feminist Metafiction', p. 20.

¹⁰¹ Drabble, *The Radiant Way*, p. 244.

¹⁰² Ibid., p. 347.

motiveless decapitations becomes symptomatic of an irrational hostility that has divided the nation's body politic and infected its social fabric. While declining throughout the novel, the unifying darkness of this section signals the final demise of the 'rational, radiant light'¹⁰³ for both the central characters and the 'great social dream' they collectively represent.

While the intensity of this metaphoric darkness is not sustained, the recognition that 'our society is mad'¹⁰⁴ continues to overshadow the remainder of the novel. Imbued with an irresolution that stems from the irreparable state of the nation, the closing sections focus upon the ambivalent progress of the central characters as they adjust to, rather than recover from, the circumstances of their respective defeats. While Liz achieves a contentment beyond her relationship with Charles and unveils her past, she remains unable to envision a defined future; the academic and personal alterations offered to Esther by Robert Oxenholme and Elena are eclipsed by her enforced exile; and Alix's move to Northam and retreat into the 'ivory attic' of her privileged education impels her into an unsatisfactory paradox. Resonating with the sense of anti-climax offered by Liz's *Bildungsroman*, the dissipation and indeterminacy of these denouements appear concordant with the novel's concluding despondency towards the nation. As suggested by the continuing dislocation of their narrative sections, the ambiguous prospects of these characters reflect Drabble's uncertainty towards the future of a nation that has lost the progressive and collective purpose of the 'radiant way.' The unimaginable nature of Britain beyond this loss is reinforced by the peripheral significance accorded to the representatives of a younger generation left affected by the dissolution of consensus idealism. While *The Middle Ground* harnessed the

¹⁰³ Ibid., p. 331.

¹⁰⁴ Kenyon, *Women Writers Talk*, p. 35.

multicultural tolerance of teenage characters as a justification for its social optimism, *The Radiant Way* establishes no countervailing momentum through Celia's academic potential, Polly Piper's dynamic feminism or the bohemian lives of Nicholas and Ilse. Without a basis for regeneration or the continuation of caustic attacks upon social policy, the main body of the novel completes its thematic progression towards disunity with an attitude of beleaguered impotence towards the cultural decline it portrays. It is highly significant that the last section is given over to Alix's defeated withdrawal from a 'socially useful' role within the community and insistence that there 'is no hope, in the present social system, of putting anything right. The only hope is in revolution, and Alix does not think revolution likely.'¹⁰⁵

Although unable to envision a basis for cultural recovery, *The Radiant Way* concludes with a pastoral coda that reunites the three women, affirms the solidarity of their friendship and offers the 'possibility of momentary redemption.'¹⁰⁶ Occurring on the 'only sunny day of a dismal damp year'¹⁰⁷ and including a chance encounter with a fox, this excursion tentatively suggests a potential regeneration through an engagement with the natural world. Perhaps informed by the beneficial effects that Drabble herself attributes to country walks,¹⁰⁸ the characters are temporarily released from the metaphoric darkness of social decline by their immersion in the transcendence of an 'extraordinary primal timeless brightness'.¹⁰⁹ Furthermore, these Wordsworthian echoes contain a veiled political significance for, as Drabble has made clear elsewhere, her admiration for the poet extends to his

¹⁰⁵ Drabble, *The Radiant Way*, p. 392.

¹⁰⁶ Bromberg, 'Margaret Drabble's *The Radiant Way*: Feminist Metafiction', p. 23.

¹⁰⁷ Drabble, *The Radiant Way*, p. 394.

¹⁰⁸ 'If I'm feeling really depressed I go for a walk in the country, my heart lifts up and I feel restored, a better person; it's a simple revelation, but Wordsworth seems to be the first to have had it.'

Margaret Drabble, quoted in Kenyon, *Women Writers Talk*, pp. 39-40.

¹⁰⁹ Drabble, *The Radiant Way*, p. 395.

endorsement of the egalitarian aspirations of the French Revolution and his recognition that 'a little is enough, if we all lived in a community, and shared more.'¹¹⁰ However, in spite of the fleeting realisation of these ideals through a communal picnic, the descending sun abruptly curtails the harmonious possibilities of this moment.

The spirit passes. The sun is dull with a red radiance. It sinks. Esther, Liz and Alix are silent with attention. The sun hangs in the sky, burning. The earth deepens to a more profound red. The sun bleeds, the earth bleeds. The sun stands still.¹¹¹

In contrast to the retraction that accompanied the seasonal change at the end of *The Ice Age*, *The Radiant Way's* coda confronts the implications of its national diagnosis with a conclusion that suspends, but cannot resist, the inevitable onset of darkness. It is indicative of Drabble's bleak evaluation of the early 1980s that the novel is unable to provide anything akin to the religious consolation or limited social optimism offered by its predecessors. While the novel indicts Thatcherism for its attack upon the principles of the institutions of welfare-liberalism, its dismay towards political radicalism, social disconnection and the 'rot within all of us' implies a more fundamental loss of consensus ideals. As Updike has noted, what we witness in *The Radiant Way* is 'not so much the triumph of Thatcherism as ... the ebb and fall of an idealistic socialism that for generations of British intellectuals and workers served as a quasi-religious faith.'¹¹² While it is important to recognise that the passage of time has partially revived Drabble's optimism towards a progressive society,¹¹³ the final image of *The Radiant Way* exemplifies the pessimism and disbelief of liberal dissent in the mid-to late 1980s. Replete with the

¹¹⁰ Kenyon, *Women Writers Talk*, p. 39.

¹¹¹ Drabble, *The Radiant Way*, p. 396.

¹¹² Updike, 'Seeking Connections in an Insecure Country', p. 153.

¹¹³ 'We really did believe when we were young that things were going to go on getting better ... I think that has taken a knock or two but I think we still have that optimism that society can work and that human beings can be part of society and that they don't have to survive at the expense of one another.' 'My Generation: Blinded by Light', BBC 2 (18 June 2000).

accumulated connotations of social and rational progress, the fading light of Britain's post-war 'radiant way' acquires an apocalyptic hue as the landscape of the nation begins to haemorrhage.

Tearing Down the Walls: Campus Fiction and ‘the State of the University’

Considering their disparate generic histories and modes of address it appears implausible to relate the revival of ‘state of the nation’ fiction in the 1980s with a sub-genre traditionally reliant upon the social isolation of an enclosed university environment. As Lodge has noted, university fiction can be classified as a ‘literature of escape ... a modern, displaced form of pastoral’ whose appeal lies in the fact that ‘academic conflicts are relatively harmless, safely insulated from the real world and its sombre concerns’.¹ However, the ‘ivory tower’ setting of the university has undoubtedly proved fertile territory for diverse narrative treatments, inspiring comedies of unworldly eccentricity and ethical dissolution; nostalgic *Bildungsromans* of place and belonging; intrigues of academic or sexual power; detective fictions and spy thrillers. As this list suggests, the reliance of university fiction upon location and profession as a criterion for inclusion makes it a problematic sub-genre, a conglomeration of texts that belong to ‘the social rather than aesthetic history of fiction.’² As I shall attempt to outline, it is the genre’s responsiveness to the social status of the university that produces the more expansive ambitions of ‘campus fiction’ and ultimately, the resonance of a ‘state of the nation’ perspective.

Although the roots of the sub-genre extend back to the comic defamation of the learned in the fifteenth century, university fiction is more commonly perceived as emerging in relation to the secular research institutes established after 1850.³ As

¹ David Lodge, ‘Robertson Davies and the Campus Novel’, *Write On: Occasional Essays, 1965-1985* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1986), p. 171.

² Malcolm Bradbury, ‘Campus Fiction’, *No, Not Bloomsbury* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1987), p. 330.

³ For fuller discussion of the origins of university fiction, see Richard Sheppard, ‘From Narragonia to Elysium: Some Preliminary Reflections on the Fictional Image of the Academic’, in David Bevan (ed.), *University Fiction* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1990)

Sheppard's sweeping outline of the changing attitudes towards academia reveals, the accumulated examples of the sub-genre provide 'a more or less consciously encoded way of debating ... the place, nature and value of higher education.'⁴ While eighteenth-century novels had depicted the university as 'a dissolute playground populated by fools, knaves, rakes and rogues',⁵ those written between 1850 and 1954 reveal a steady improvement in the fictional status of academics and university education. Epitomising the benefits of the liberal education espoused by Arnold and Newman, the fiction of this period is characterised by sentimental *Bildungsromans* and idealised visions of university life in which the institution, and in particular Oxford, functions as a repository for the cultural values of a civilised, and civilising, Englishness. Although partly a response to the liberalisation of degree courses and the increased access offered to the middle-classes, these positive depictions are also indicative of a much broader process of social integration through which the university came to be perceived 'at one with, even central to British public life'.⁶ As many commentators have noted, this enhanced status arose from a concordance between universities and the wider commercial and imperial ambitions of the period. In addition to fulfilling the valuable function of producing technological, political and administrative elites, Arnoldian conceptions of cultural and moral perfection implicitly provided 'a moral justification for imperialist expansion.'⁷

⁴ Ibid., p. 29.

⁵ Ibid., p. 33.

⁶ Ibid., p. 35.

⁷ Ibid., p. 37.

Although images of the university as a privileged enclave of high cultural refinement retained a powerful nostalgic presence into the 1980s,⁸ the characterisation of academics after 1954 displayed a return to the negative stereotypes that preceded 1850. Curtailing the ‘premise of somnolent esteem’⁹ previously accorded to university life; many novels followed the seminal example of *Lucky Jim* in displaying ‘fundamental doubts about the social usefulness of universities in general and the value of the liberal humanities in particular.’¹⁰ This can be broadly attributed to higher education’s loss of institutional authority as the nation entered a period of post-imperial retraction, economic decline and international relegation. Although motivated by divergent political and educational convictions, the university system was criticised for having ‘lost much of its former systematic function’ and for failing ‘to produce the material answers to Britain’s economic problems’.¹¹ Furthermore, the scepticism of academic fiction towards its subject became more pronounced as a period of optimistic expansion gave way to the widespread student unrest of the late 1960s and the enforced financial contractions of the 1970s. From the ‘largely tolerant irony’¹² of Amis, Snow and McCarthy in the 1950s, representations of academic life became increasingly disillusioned, if not directly hostile, with the scathing comedies of Bradbury, Lodge, Sharpe, Raven and Jacobson. As Bevan has noted, the figure of the university lecturer became synonymous with ‘a world of trivia and perversion, of vanity and deceit, of plagiarism and gratuitousness, of patronage and pretentiousness, of

⁸ This is evident in Antonia Fraser’s *Oxford Blood* (1985), Anthony Lejeune’s *Professor in Peril* (1987) and the visual symbolism of Oxford in both Granada’s *Brideshead Revisited* and Central Television’s *Inspector Morse*.

⁹ David Bevan, ‘Introduction’, in Bevan (ed.), *University Fiction*, p. 3.

¹⁰ Sheppard, ‘From Narragonia to Elysium’, p. 17.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

¹² Bevan, ‘Introduction’, p. 3.

personal advantage rather than the pursuit of learning.’¹³ While some critics have interpreted this negative tendency as a response to the moral seriousness of Leavis or a product of the political radicalism of the late 1960s,¹⁴ their comedy is primarily drawn from the fragmentation of an academic culture that had seen the ‘displacement of humanism by academicism’.¹⁵ As expansion strained Newman’s ideal community of scholars, these novels satirised the increasing professionalism of academic research and career advancement, the discordance of proliferating subject disciplines and the increasingly bureaucratic governance of institutions. However, this new wave of academic novels also carry the traces of a broader comic defensiveness linked to the pessimistic zeitgeist of the 1970s, a self-deprecating acknowledgement of the popular accusations of worthlessness levelled against higher education as Britain entered a period of economic recession.

In contrast to the fictional decline of academics and institutions, the literary status of the sub-genre significantly improved during the post-war period, becoming ‘the nearest thing English fiction has had to a new subject since 1945’.¹⁶ For Eagleton, this success rests upon the academic novel’s ability to satirise middle-class life whilst remaining fundamentally committed to its values. In essence, it offers a ‘characteristically English’ compromise in response to the creative problem of there being ‘something peculiarly unpropitious about the typical social experience of an industrially declining, culturally parochial, post-imperial nation.’¹⁷ While this correctly notes the continuing predominance of the middle-classes in

¹³ Ibid., pp. 3–4.

¹⁴ For example, see John Schellenberger, ‘University fiction and the university crisis’, *Critical Quarterly*, vol. 24, no.3 (1982) and George Watson, ‘Fictions of Academe’, *Encounter*, vol. 51, no. 5 (1978).

¹⁵ Peter Scott, *The Crisis of the University* (London: Croom Helm, 1984), p. 61.

¹⁶ Watson, ‘Fictions of Academe’, p. 42. It is significant that this statement was made in 1978, prior to the emergence of the bi-cultural, regional and post-colonial voices of the 1980s.

¹⁷ Terry Eagleton, ‘The Silences of David Lodge’, *New Left Review*, 172 (1988), p. 94.

higher education and its literary representations, the enhanced status of sub-genre can also be attributed to the fact that the 'typical social experience' presented by academic fiction was significantly enlarged by the post-war development of a mass education system. In addition to influencing the thematic concerns of more traditional *Bildungsroman* narratives and comic intrigues, this expansion also produced a new generic variation that has subsequently become known as 'campus fiction'. Although commonly employed as an all-embracing category, campus fiction can be distinguished by its concern with 'intellectual and social change' rather than 'nostalgia or social recollection', construing the university 'not as an innocent pastoral space' but as a metaphoric locus, 'a battleground of major ideas and ideologies'.¹⁸ Beginning in British literature with the class and generational frustrations of Kingsley Amis's *Lucky Jim*, the post-war period has produced a strain of academic fiction that has persistently questioned the 'ivory tower' isolation of institutions by treating them as exemplary rather than idiosyncratic, as microcosms of society rather than enclosed settings for narrative development. This is not to imply that campus fiction dispenses with images of the university as 'an asocial enclave, protected from the uncertainties and excesses of the social',¹⁹ rather that it presents this world as increasingly threatened and transformed by the external forces of social change and political design. It is this concern with the broader cultural and political contexts of academic life that separates campus fiction from the numerous examples of the sub-genre that respond to these incursions with a defensive insularity. As Carter's expansive study reveals, post-war academic fiction is pervaded by depictions of individual institutions as Arnoldian bastions of culture imperilled by the invading forces of 'proletarians, scientists, women, and

¹⁸ Bradbury, 'Campus Fiction', pp. 331, 333.

¹⁹ Steven Connor, *The English Novel in History, 1950-1995* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 70.

foreigners.’²⁰ While campus fiction displays similar prejudices at the level of individual characterisation, it is distinguished by an acknowledgement of, and often an engagement with, the wider frameworks of social and cultural transition that effect institutional change.

The emergence and development of this ‘aspiration towards exemplarity’²¹ can be linked to the post-war shift from the liberal to the modern university, a transition that steadily eroded the institution’s ‘semi-spiritual quality ... of standing slightly apart from society.’²² Ascribed a more instrumental role in the ‘acceleration of economic growth or the promotion of social justice’, institutional autonomy diminished as higher education became ‘more intensely influenced by the interests of the state, of the economy and of civil society.’²³ Most notably, the widening access offered by the Butler Education Act (1944) and the expansions that resulted from the Robbins Report (1963) allied higher education with the egalitarian ambitions of the post-war settlement and progressive demands of ‘left-culturalism’.²⁴ For many, universities became ‘the very sign and symbol’²⁵ of a wider attempt to make education and ‘good’ culture available to all, a meritocratic pathway to ‘a better job; a higher income; more leisure; and an opportunity for individual expression.’²⁶ Harnessed to this political idealism, higher education became the focus for an elongated debate between the polarised perspectives of ‘a socio-cultural conservatism which censures universities for not being selective

²⁰ Ian Carter, *Ancient Cultures of Conceit: British University Fiction in the Post-War Years* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 99.

²¹ Bevan, ‘Introduction’, p. 6.

²² Scott, *The Crisis of the University*, p. 54.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ For a fuller discussion of this term, see Alan Sinfield, *Literature, Politics and Culture in Postwar Britain* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), p. 232.

²⁵ Connor, *The English Novel in History*, p. 70.

²⁶ Maurice Kogan and David Kogan, *The Attack on Higher Education* (London: Kogan Page, 1983), p. 15.

enough ... and a socio-cultural populism which censures universities precisely for their alleged elitism.’²⁷ Reinforced by their connection with the progressive and counter-cultural politics of the late 1960s and early 1970s, universities and polytechnics became symbolically resonant for those on both the left and right of the political spectrum. Whether criticised for debasing traditional practices and standards or maligned for their faltering progress towards social inclusivity, higher education became exemplary within debates about nationhood, cultural politics, economic failure and the ideological validity and efficiency of the welfare state. In terms of fiction, the enlargement of thematic scope that marks the development of campus fiction involves an acknowledgement of this diminishing gap between higher education and the interests of the state and society at large. However, while many novels produced before 1980 examine facets of this altered relationship, it is only with the interventionist approach of Thatcherism that the campus novel became commensurate with the diagnostic aims of ‘state of the nation’ fiction.

The underlying impetus for this generic combination was provided by the uncompromising rhetoric of Thatcher’s ‘conviction’ politics and the culture of political antagonism it engendered. With frequent recourse to a mythic historical past, the early years of Thatcherism established a vision of the nation against which cultural commentators and artists sought to define themselves. Reinforced by the social effects of a strict monetarist policy and attacks upon trade union power and the permissive 1960s, discourses upon Britain became preoccupied with frameworks of ideological confrontation and economic division. While providing apt circumstances for a resurgence of the ‘state of the nation’ question across the media and the arts, this confrontational zeitgeist became particularly evident in the

²⁷ Sheppard, ‘From Narragonia to Elysium’, p. 19.

relationship between the state and higher education. Through its politically symbolic position within debates concerning the welfare state, higher education became a representative model for governmental attempts to impose a greater economic accountability and efficiency upon what they perceived as a financially flabby and unproductive public sector. Significantly aided by the loss of quinquennial funding in the mid-1970s, institutions became 'subject to both immediate political pressures and to the vagaries of the public-expenditure system.'²⁸ The importance of this additional erosion of institutional autonomy became apparent as higher education was thrown into a state of crisis by the 15% cut in funding announced in 1981. Asked to implement this reduction within two years, the continuing existence of individual institutions came to depend upon the administration of staff redundancies, early retirements and selective departmental closures. The sense of crisis this inculcated continued with a further 2% cut that broke an election pledge made in 1983, and significantly deepened as the government sought progressively to introduce commercial practices into higher education, a process that culminated in the radical designs of the 1988 Educational Reform Act. While student numbers increased and polytechnics prospered across the decade, the administration and internal organisation of institutions was transformed by the loss of academic tenure and the introduction of short-term contracts; the student grant system; the replacement of the Universities Grants Committee with the Universities Funding Council; the promotion of profitable areas of research (mainly in science and the new technologies) and the degradation of those less profitable (mainly in the humanities). However, the dismay and disorder brought about by the rapidity of these reforms was also linked to a deeper

²⁸ Scott, *The Crisis of the University*, p. 90.

ideological antagonism between a public service ethos and the commercial priorities of the private sector. As David Lodge remarked at the close of the decade, 'Mrs Thatcher's government has sought to transform what it perceived as a kind of ivory tower extension of the welfare state into something like a privatised service industry.'²⁹ In contrast to government claims concerning the necessity of curbing public expenditure during a recession and the failure of universities to reform themselves during the 1970s, many saw these policies as 'a politically motivated assault on the intellectual, financial and institutional integrity of higher education.'³⁰ Not only were academic departments perceived to be dominated by the political left and funded through the establishment networks of UGC, but adherence to the liberal agenda of the Robbins Report made them primary purveyors of what Mrs Thatcher described as the 'anti-industrial spirit'.³¹ As with other institutions allied to the ambitions of the post-war consensus, higher education became an ideological battleground upon which the government sought to impose the commercial practices and values of an 'enterprise culture'. Although it has been argued that the extent of this ideological onslaught was exaggerated by academia's sense of its own persecution,³² financial cuts and the application of (non-academic) business practices undoubtedly generated hostility within a system that remained wedded to the liberal ideals of academic self-determination and non-vocational education. For many academics, the direction of government policy was seen as running 'counter

²⁹ David Lodge, 'Pay as You Learn', *The Listener* (5 Oct. 1989), p. 4.

³⁰ Sinfield, *Literature, Politics and Culture in Postwar Britain*, p. 250.

³¹ 'Nowhere is this attitude more marked than in the cloister and the common room'. Margaret Thatcher, quoted in Ian Gilmour, *Dancing with Dogma: Britain under Thatcherism* (London: Simon & Schuster, 1992), p. 162.

³² 'The mass of the population does not appear to reject and disapprove of higher education to anything like the degree to which higher education itself feels rejection and disapproval.' Scott, *The Crisis of the University*, p. 95.

to the true purpose and spirit of higher education',³³ an attitude symbolically encapsulated by Oxford University's refusal to grant the Prime Minister an honorary degree in 1985.

It is this sense of heightened ideological confrontation and institutional crisis that dominates both the formal structures and dark satiric registers of campus fiction in the 1980s. In contrast to the predominantly internal mockery through which novelists responded to a loss of idealism and economic stagnation in the 1970s, the binary structures employed by 1980s campus fiction reveal an intensified concern with the effects of a more radical and systematic process of state intervention. Expanding the scope of academic fiction's traditional patterns of incursion and disruption into a 'two-nations' or 'two cultures' structure, these novels seek to address the representative significance of higher education within Thatcherism's attempt to effect a cultural revolution across the public life of the nation. Undoubtedly influenced by their authors' close associations with humanities departments,³⁴ these novels all contain dire warnings about the imminent destruction of institutions and the liberal values that they embody. In essence, they all contain the dismay expressed by Bradbury in relation to the introduction of monetarist policies into the university system:

All the laws of practicality and the laws of a declining economy and recession have attacked things that I actually regard as profoundly valuable, and to this extent of course one of the reasons I write so much about universities is that I do see them as a bastion of liberalism in a society which on the whole is far less liberal than they are.³⁵

While underpinning the cultural and ideological confrontations through which they generate their political satire, it is a measure of the perceived threat that these texts

³³ Lodge, 'Pay as You Learn', p. 5.

³⁴ The disillusionment of these novels may be connected to the fact that all four novelists had left their academic posts by 1988. Carter, *Ancient Cultures of Conceit*, p. 254.

³⁵ Heide Ziegler and Christopher Bigsby (eds.), *The Radical Imagination and the Liberal Tradition: Interviews with English and American Novelists* (London: Junction Books, 1982), p. 66.

present this new economic realism as an irresistible force against which the insulating walls of academia no longer offer protection. Whether enforced by shadowy committees, ambitious departmental heads or demonically entrepreneurial vice-chancellors, the ethos of Thatcherism acquires the status of a brutal crusade against the foundations of a liberal academic culture. Although often exaggerated to serve satiric and prophetic ends, academia's subjection to the 'enterprise culture' is depicted as the eradication of any 'ivory tower' separation between the realms of intellectual inquiry and the commercial demands of the external world. In this regard it is significant that Parkin, Bradbury and Lodge all diverge from the conventions of the sub-genre by propelling their central characters beyond the academic sphere into locations dominated by the economic logic of free-market capitalism. Whether sited inside or outside institutions, these encounters assert a fundamental incompatibility between the managerial methods and financial aims of business and the humanistic pedagogy and intellectual freedoms of academia. Furthermore, these cultural contrasts provide the framework for wider 'state of the nation' critiques of Thatcherism as an anti-intellectual and ideologically intolerant political creed. However, in spite of their assurance concerning the politics and practices they oppose, 1980s' campus fiction appears less certain in relation to the institutions and values they implicitly seek to defend. The representatives of liberal academia may acquire the status of victims against the enemies of the new culture but they remain personally and politically ineffectual, traditional comic figures mocked for their social ineptitude, esoteric preoccupations and intellectual pretentiousness. Exhibiting the problems of generic combination, these texts often appear caught between the caricatures and farcical comedy of academic fiction and the serious social concerns of a 'state of the nation' diagnosis. On one level, this

reveals a continuation of the scepticism towards higher education for failing to fulfil the ideals of its post-war inception, the difficulty of mounting a concerted defence of institutions that remain only a symbolic, rather than a functioning, embodiment of liberal and egalitarian principles. In broader terms, this can also be related to the problems faced by many 1980s' novelists who sought to affirm the moderate and primarily apolitical values of liberal-humanism. By appealing to 'those intuitive decencies beyond the long arm of politics'³⁶ in response to the ideology of Thatcherism, these novels lie open to Widdowson's accusation that they actually disable the 'forms of consciousness and action which might oppose and depose that ideology.'³⁷ While this may underestimate the emotive force of their social dismay, 1980s' campus fiction remains characterised by expressions of 'baffled rage' and 'doomed passivity'.³⁸ Regardless of their divergent narrative approaches, these fictions offer only subtle variations on the despairing cultural evaluation of Malcolm Bradbury: 'I would like the world of liberalism, a world dominated by liberal values, to prevail, but I don't see the historical conditions that can make it prevail.'³⁹

The most graphic illustration of these binary patterns and the problems of satiric register are provided by the extreme reversals of Frank Parkin's *The Mind and Body Shop*. Although once a 'comfortable backwater of quiet learning and modest scholarship',⁴⁰ Parkin's fictional university is effectively decimated by its conversion to the practices of corporate privatisation. Shrouded in acid rain, the remnants of its Victorian campus stand on the brink of architectural collapse, the ivory towers of its liberal tradition soon to be dwarfed by the minaret of the

³⁶ Eagleton, 'The Silences of David Lodge', p. 95.

³⁷ Peter Widdowson, 'The anti-history men: Malcolm Bradbury and David Lodge', *Critical Quarterly*, vol. 26, no. 4 (1984), p. 6.

³⁸ Carter, *Ancient Cultures of Conceit*, p. 254.

³⁹ Bradbury, quoted in Ziegler and Bigsby (eds.), *The Radical Imagination and the Liberal Tradition*, p. 64.

⁴⁰ Frank Parkin, *The Mind and Body Shop* (London: Fontana, 1987 [1986]), p. 13.

Khomeini Centre for the Propagation of Islam. Whether living in tented accommodation or the Hayek hall of residence, undergraduate life is dominated by the financial necessities of sperm donation, paper rounds, prostitution and the legitimised practices of examination bribery. The majority of the academic community exists in a permanent state of violent inebriation, delivering commercially sponsored lectures and acquiring the titles such as ‘Regius Professor of Cosmetic Surgery’ or ‘Fellow in Hotel and Casino Management’. Furthermore, these comic inversions are extended to a national level through tangential references to an abdication crisis over the enrolment of the Prince of Wales at Gatwick Polytechnic; a House of Lords populated by scrap-metal merchants and furniture salesmen; Liverpool Football Club’s relegation to the 4th division; and mobile vasectomy vans that cruise The New Palm Beach, a housing estate aptly positioned in a ‘hollow of poisoned ground between the nuclear-waste disposal plant and the army firing range’.⁴¹ As this brief summary suggests, Parkin’s dystopian vision primarily functions through a plethora of satiric distortions, presenting Thatcherism as not merely indifferent to the merits of the mind and intellect but totally devoid of any social or moral concern.

The figurehead of this ideology is the unnamed vice-chancellor, a composite stereotype of the values and characteristics commonly attributed to Thatcher’s ‘enterprise culture’. Dispensing authoritarian memos from an office replete with wall bars and exercise machines rather than bookshelves, the vice-chancellor uncompromisingly institutes the bourgeois principles he gleaned as the ‘East Midlands sales rep for Consolidated Tractor Fuels.’⁴² While academic subjects become commodities measured in relation to ‘consumer satisfaction’, the vice-

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 42.

⁴² Ibid., p. 12.

chancellor also pursues profitability through corporate sponsorship, endowments and the wholesale disposal of library resources and literary manuscripts. In addition to being a self-made, middle-management philistine who pronounces the ‘p in psychology’⁴³ and mistakes George Orwell for the Huddersfield goalkeeper, Parkin also vilifies the vice-chancellor as an industrial spy, a racist, and the despotic head of a campus police state. This exaggerated mode of satirical critique is also applied to the loss of academic integrity represented by the vice-chancellor’s protégé Dr Hagstrom, an experimental psychologist who willingly manipulates data according to the requirements of her research sponsors. Defined by her Gucci boots and minimalist waterfront apartment, the upwardly mobile Hagstrom pursues her erotic obsession with international acclaim by providing spurious justifications for groups committed to social engineering, political indoctrination and religious intolerance. While Hagstrom may be understood as part of academic fiction’s traditional scepticism towards the morality of ambitious scientists,⁴⁴ Parkin’s stereotype is more specifically (and simplistically) drawn from the selfishness and egotism commonly identified with the zeitgeist of the 1980s. Ultimately, the dominance achieved by Hagstrom and the vice-chancellor comically mirrors the practices and results of Thatcherite reforms, their ethically disinterested pursuit of profit and self-advancement exposing the university, and by extension the nation, to the illiberal influences of political dictatorship, religious fundamentalism and totalitarian scientific dogma.

The primary contrast to this entrepreneurial culture is provided by the attempts of Douglas Hambro, Professor of Metaphysical Philosophy, to stave off the

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

⁴⁴ For a fuller discussion see Carter’s chapter on ‘Barbarous Scientists’. *Ancient Cultures of Conceit*, pp. 130-158

abolition of his department. Having already dispensed with Classics, Maths and English, the fate of philosophy and Hambro represent the last vestiges of the university's liberal past. Ironically developed alongside the traditional demarcations of Michaelmas, Lent and Trinity, Hambro struggles to market the subject through door-to-door sales, sandwich boards and the establishment of 'The Mind Shop'. In addition to providing numerous comic assaults upon the commodification of academic knowledge, Parkin reasserts the amorality of free-market practices as Hambro's criminal father-in-law achieves profitability by merging the shop with a brothel and protection racket. As the unsavoury figure of Shanker rises to become the new Chair of Metaphysics, Hambro progressively retreats into his obsession with the artefacts and life of Orwell. As Hawes has noted, in a novel in which satirical sharpness is blunted by flippant wit, the introduction of Orwell 'causes disappointment by raising the hope of deliverance.'⁴⁵ Rather than providing a politically substantial alternative, Hambro's veneration is limited to superficial pilgrimages and his failure to 'transcend the class barrier' by marrying a cleaning woman who turned out to be 'lumpenproletariat instead of working class proper'.⁴⁶ While this irreverence is not significant in itself, it is symptomatic of the novel's unwillingness to establish any meaningful counteraction to the academic and social degradation that it sets out to condemn. From his introduction as a flatulent buffoon to his final glee in rejecting university and bourgeois life, Hambro's ridiculous ineptitude precludes any sympathy for his victimisation by the vice-chancellor or dismay towards the disappearing values that he embodies. Indeed, the only potential source of resistance is provided by the more marginal figure of Baxi, a student who disrupts an Islamic celebration by

⁴⁵ Elizabeth Hawes, 'Free Will Is Our Only Choice' *New York Times* (16 Aug. 1987), p. 9.

⁴⁶ Parkin, *The Mind and Body Shop*, pp. 51, 52.

introducing Jewish artefacts and reverses a Hagstrom experiment by teaching chimpanzees to approach monopoly with an egalitarian ethos. Yet as with the novel as a whole, these remain isolated comic incidents that deride rather than indict a culture of economic exploitation, despotic militarism and ideological intolerance. While there is a critical danger of taking a light comic novel too seriously, *The Mind and Body Shop* does reveal the problematic dynamic between the generic claims of university fiction and national diagnosis. By retaining the comic register of an entertaining campus romp, Parkin negates the novel's criticism of Thatcherism and removes any gravitas from Hambro's final academic contemplation: 'Wasn't it Merleau-Ponty who said that whatever happened to philosophy today would happen to the world tomorrow?'⁴⁷

A similar picture of structural decline and disastrous external intervention afflicts the Lowlands University campus in Andrew Davies's *A Very Peculiar Practice* and *A Very Peculiar Practice: The New Frontier*. However, unlike the dystopian projection offered by Parkin, the decline of Lowlands is progressively established across the two novels and satirically measured through symbolic incidents of ideological and ethical confrontation. Furthermore, Davies's fictional world may be populated with similar caricatures and driven by absurdly contrived plots but it retains the serious undertones of a black comedy, a palpable sense of disillusionment and despair that is notably absent from *The Mind and Body Shop*. This can be partially attributed to a displacement of narrative authority to the intrusive figure of Ron Rust, the resident Arts Council Fellow in Creative Writing and professional scriptwriter. Simultaneously existing as television screenplays for

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 220.

the BBC,⁴⁸ the plot lines of both novels unfold in response to sub-sections dedicated to Rust's creative altercations with producers and commissioning editors. While concordant with the episodic structures, settings and predominance of dialogue in the novels, much of Davies's self-reflexive humour concerning the BBC and Rust's authorial intrusions appears rather superficial in comparison with the dark satirical edge of his central narrative. A more important contribution is made by Rust's unrelenting attitude of cynicism and failure, a voice perfectly suited to the dismal prospects of the institution he depicts. Infused with resentment towards 'the arrogant, overpaid, incompetent bastards',⁴⁹ Rust's malevolent treatment of his characters resonates with the besieged position of academia and perception of itself as 'victimised, vilified and undervalued'.⁵⁰ While Rust's motives may be personal rather than political, the dark narrative register he provides corresponds to a heightened sense of crisis in higher education, a point reinforced by his self-conscious repudiation of previous examples of campus fiction.

Nobody's done this one right before. Amis, Lodge, Bradbury, Sharpe ... that other sod ... what are they, frightened of telling the truth or something? This place is a madhouse, and Rust is going to do justice to it.⁵¹

The significance of this remark is further expanded with the exposure of Rust's narratorial limitations, his awareness that '[e]very time I think up something really outrageous, sodding reality comes up and tops it.'⁵² Underlining the satirical message of the novel, Davies reveals that even the absurd comic reversals and arbitrariness of Rust's screenplay are an inadequate match for the chaotic pace and 'unreality' of the contemporary university.

⁴⁸ It should be noted that *A Very Peculiar Practice* is 'a kind of novelisation' of the BBC series. Andrew Davies, quoted in Nic Ransom 'A Very Polished Practice: An Interview with Andrew Davies', *The European English Messenger*, vol. X, no. 1 (Spring 2001), p. 34.

⁴⁹ Andrew Davies, *A Very Peculiar Practice* (Sevenoaks: Coronet, 1988 [1986]), p. 23.

⁵⁰ Lodge, 'Pay as You Learn', p. 5.

⁵¹ Davies, *A Very Peculiar Practice*, p. 43.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 236.

This black comic mode is also reinforced by Lowlands' specific designation as a 'new' university, a crumbling and still unfinished testament to the expansionist ideals of the Robbins era. Represented by the Olympic ambitions of its swimming pool and 'labyrinth of multi-level interfacing' between 'refectory and boiler room, Arts and Cybernetics',⁵³ the decline of Lowlands implicitly marks the demise of the progressive liberal ambitions of the early 1960s. While Stephen Dakkar arrives with dreams of '[t]reating the patient as a whole person ... the campus as village ... the concept of the therapeutic community',⁵⁴ he is greeted by Jock McCannon's disillusioned assessment of the zeitgeist:

"All over now," he said grimly. "This is the Eighties ... This University is a swamp of fear and loathing. It's the cuts. The UGC has both its hands on the University's throat. Early retirements. Involuntary redundancies. Savage competition between colleagues."⁵⁵

It is this conception of Lowlands as a representation of the 'altered priorities'⁵⁶ of the decade that provides the satirical edge to the narrative excesses of Davies's novels. Although retaining the external appearance of 'a modern version of a medieval fortified town',⁵⁷ it exists as community dominated by the 'ulterior' values of the commercial market and pervaded by ideological and academic divisions. As in *The Mind and Body Shop, A Very Peculiar Practice* represents Thatcherite values through the entrepreneurial jargon and financial schemes of a zealous and similarly track suited vice-chancellor. Having only survived the initial cuts through a 'Machiavellian restructuring plan and some highly creative accounting',⁵⁸ Hemmingway's new economic realism focuses upon the exploitation of fee-paying foreign students, the establishment of the 'Sakamoto Corporation Science Park', and

⁵³ Ibid., pp. 4-5.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 12.

⁵⁵ Ibid., pp. 12-13.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 8.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 5.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 148.

an interdisciplinary initiative designed to yield ‘hard-nosed research-based packageable product.’⁵⁹ Yet in contrast to the dictatorial control envisioned by Parkin, Davies’s vice-chancellor is an ineffectual enforcer of funding demands, consistently thwarted by rebellious academics and farcical coincidences (his appointed reader in interdisciplinary studies becomes the asymptomatic source of a STD epidemic). His weakness is ultimately exposed during a symbolic confrontation with the eccentric historian Dr Hubbard over Fairlie Hall, a battle that not only marks a victory for the liberal arts against his corporate plans but also involves his own sexual and intellectual humiliation. However, in spite of Hemmingway’s eventual removal, the novel’s celebration of the academic values embodied by Hubbard is rapidly overshadowed by the arrival of a government audit team to administer an institutional merger with Hendon Police College. Whilst this denouement asserts the university’s vulnerability to imposed external reform, it is also important that the nature of this threat remains economic rather than ideological, that the axe is wielded by an innocuous accountant (Prettiman) rather than the entrepreneurial Hemmingway.

The significance of the ending of *A Very Peculiar Practice* is highlighted by the appearance of a more sinister and ideological assault upon Lowlands in *A Very Peculiar Practice: The New Frontier*. The difference between the novels reflects the increasing confidence and radicalism of the government educational strategies following the 1987 General Election. Following the failure of the merger, the managerial ineptitude of Hemmingway is replaced by the psychotic idealism of Jack Daniels, a vice-chancellor whose vision of the university as a centre for excellence is couched in allusions to Camelot and Plato’s *The Republic*. Satirically combining

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 153.

the government's emphasis upon science and new technologies with Reaganite new cold war paranoia, the narrative follows the covert transformation of Lowlands into a high security military-industrial complex. Surpassing the fiscal crises of *A Very Peculiar Practice*, the state of the university becomes metaphorically allied with an electroacoustic experiment into critical resonance that produces a 'discordant, spine-jarring vibration, as if some vast organism was out of harmony with itself.'⁶⁰ As in Parkin's dystopian critique, this discordance rests upon the unethical research projects of applied scientists succeeding at the expense of the liberal humanities. As the threatened Professor of English remarks: 'is the pursuit of knowledge only worthwhile when it attracts the filthy lucre of ignorant and destructive men.'⁶¹ Furthermore, this academic disparity also informs the representation of the university as a national 'two-nations' microcosm, the conspicuous wealth of the managers and scientists dividing them from the dispossessed arts faculty and a student population reduced to the status of an economic underclass. Following the pattern of his first novel, the closing confrontations of Professor Bunn's tribunal and Sammy Limb's student revolution provide victories for the moral opposition that ultimately banish Daniels to an underground existence with his robot Ronnie. Yet behind the transparent dispensations of comic justice, Davies remains unable to construct a fictional scenario that would prevent Lowlands from becoming 'the first of the brave new sixties campus universities to be closed down for ever.'⁶²

In addition to the political symbolism that surrounds the fate of the vice-chancellors, Davies reiterates his despairing defence of the liberal ideals of the university through the composition and power struggles of the medical centre.

⁶⁰ Andrew Davies, *A Very Peculiar Practice: The New Frontier* (London: Methuen, 1988), p. 128.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 166.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 4.

Offering a crude microcosm of the decade's ideologically divided culture, the four caricatures offer shorthand representations of Thatcherism, radical feminism, counter-culture idealism and pragmatic liberalism. The most blatant of these is the aptly named Bob Buzzard, a champion of rationalisation and private sector involvement who equates the university with a 'very, very inefficient sector of British industry'.⁶³ While the vice-chancellors act as ciphers for national policy, Bob represents 'true voice of eighties'⁶⁴ through his exaggerated consumer snobbery, disregard for professional ethics, and his obsession with personal competition. An equally disparaging tone is adopted towards the lesbian-feminism of Rose-Marie, her crusade against the 'phallogentric community' of the university undermined by her manipulative sexual politics and self-interest. As accomplices to the university's destruction through their machiavellian designs, both figures become subject to suitable contrived fates: Bob's sought-after promotion buries him in Daniels' underground asylum whilst Rose-Marie's scheming sexuality is curtailed by her departure with the enigmatic nuns. The function of these ideological stereotypes is not to offer a serious critique but to negatively reinforce the benign liberal inclusivity of Jock McCannon and Stephen Dakkar. While the former is a medically dangerously adherent to the theories of Laing, he is fictionally redeemed by his association with the ideals that informed the university's inception. Accorded the role of disillusioned prophet, Jock's treatise upon the 'the sick university' and biblical visions of apocalypse constitute an eccentrically spiritual elucidation of the demise of the academic community. In contrast to the eventual fates of Bob and Rose-Marie, Jock's incarnation as a Learesque figure of lost unity is assured by his martyrdom during the students' final act of collective resistance.

⁶³ Davies, *A Very Peculiar Practice*, p. 17.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 193.

Ultimately, any potential affirmation of liberal values rests with the figure of Stephen; a classic academic anti-hero blessed with political indecision, physical insecurity and inept social skills. Against the insane machinations of the university as a whole, the naïve and compassionate Stephen offers an idealistic defence of Lowlands as a community dedicated to the fulfilment of individual potential.

A university isn't just a degree factory, even in the Nineteen-eighties! I'll tell you what it's all about! Intelligent, lonely, nervous, cheerful, talented, vulnerable, nice'n'nasty ... infinitely varied 'n'uniquely valuable people!⁶⁵

However, as his personal frailty and the intoxicated nature of this speech suggests, Stephen's virtuous principles can never be translated into a viable programme of action against the determining forces of Thatcherite ideology and monetarist policy. Although accidentally victorious over both his competitive colleagues and the authorial manipulations of Rust, the individual endorsement of Stephen through the contrived denouements of both novels appears incongruous alongside the imagined fate of the university. In spite of retaining a darker recognition of lost alternatives beneath the frivolous comedy of their narratives, Davies's novels, like Parkin's dystopian projection, reveal a similar impotence in face of the educational and cultural changes they oppose. Prior to his final departure to Poland, this inability to envision either progress or reversal is encapsulated by Stephen's plaintive eulogy for the defunct university: '[i]t could have been such a good place, you know? It could have been really OK.'⁶⁶

Before addressing the fiction of Bradbury and Lodge, it is important to recognise a significant variation of generic emphasis that separates their campus novels from those of Parkin and Davies. In terms of their underlying structures, all four are premised upon the academic metaphor of the wall, an image that, as

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 57.

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 263.

Connery has recognised in relation to Evelyn Waugh, functions as a symbolic barrier between the realms of civilisation and barbarity:

In academic satire, such a wall, real or metaphorical separates the academy from the rest of the world and satire results from the invasion of the academy by the world or of the world by the academy.⁶⁷

With narrative centrality accorded to bounded campus locations and the reforming interventions of vice-chancellors, the fiction of Parkin and Davies illustrates this metaphoric pattern of invasion with their national diagnoses implied through the university existing as a social paradigm. The difference with Bradbury and Lodge is that while asserting similar interventions into university life, the prominence of other cultural spheres in their novels denies their institutions such paradigmatic status. Not merely an issue of stylistic choice, the internal/external binaries of Bradbury and Lodge indicate an alternative vision of the position of higher education within the 1980s. The rationale behind this perspective is implied by Bradbury's awareness of the limitations of his satirical attack upon post-humanist radicalism in *The History Man*:

What it didn't tell was another story: the way that humanism was also being threatened from without, by something we are all now very familiar with, the new sado-monetarism. Economic functionalism has proved in the event to be a threat far greater to the universities than was the radical utopianism of the affluent early 1970s.⁶⁸

Although similarly premised upon the threat of an external ideology, Bradbury's emphasis upon 'economic functionalism' marks a significantly divergence from Parkin and Davies's depiction of Thatcherism as a totalitarian project. Whilst the latter invokes the premeditated transformation of higher education in accordance with a particular socio-cultural blueprint, Bradbury's 'economic functionalism'

⁶⁷ Brian A. Connery, 'Inside Jokes: Familiarity and Contempt in Academic Satire', in Bevan (ed.), *University Fiction*, p. 128.

⁶⁸ Malcolm Bradbury, 'Introduction', *The After Dinner Game* (London: Arrow Books, 1982), p. 14.

infers a more disinterested process of intervention based upon the fiscal priorities of monetarism and productivity. Rather than assuming their centrality in relation to ideological and cultural change, the fictional institutions of Bradbury and Lodge exist on the margins of such developments, their internal degeneration merely the by-product of a broader economic strategy. Concentrating upon beleaguered staff instead of innovative vice-chancellors, financial contraction rather than ideological transformation, the campus worlds of Lodge and Bradbury continue to be sites of academic eccentricity and social isolation. Yet it is precisely this isolation that informs Bradbury's 'greater threat', the danger that the exclusion of higher education from the prevailing ideological zeitgeist will ultimately result in their relegation and neglect as outmoded relics of a prior cultural formation. Whether depicted through the architectural metaphors of *Cuts* or the parallels with the manufacturing industry in *Nice Work*, the ominous prospect of academic ghettoization overshadows their 'two nations' structures. Through the distance they establish between nation and campus, both texts contain an uneasy recognition that academia may no longer function as a social microcosm. In the context of the 1980s, Bradbury and Lodge recognise that the university's representative status was challenged by the fact that the significant cultural and ideological directions of the nation were being shaped elsewhere.

Cuts opens with a sweeping state of the nation summary during the summer of 1986, exemplifying the values of 'economic functionalism' through spiralling variations of the novella's title metaphor.

It was a time for getting rid of the old soft illusions, and replacing them with new hard illusions ... [a]nd everyone was growing leaner and cleaner, keener and meaner, for after all in a time of cuts it is better to tough than tender, much more hardware than software. The people who used to talk art now talked only money, and they

murmured of the texture of Telecom, the lure of Britoil, the glamour of gas ... [i]n money, only in money, were there fantasies and dreams.⁶⁹

Applied to everything from social divisions to fashion styles, 'cuts' operates as the central leitmotif that connects the state of the nation with the realms of higher education and television production. Although not achieving the global status of Amis's 'money', Bradbury's initial outline of the decade's economic priorities suggests a similarly impersonal and encompassing system that exists beyond human agency or political will. While it can be inferred that the anonymous 'they' that facilitate the cutting process are the government, Bradbury follows the pattern of his later novel *Rates of Exchange* by primarily indicting the illusory confidence of economic theory: 'it seemed to be becoming a supposed total explanation rather than an academic subject.'⁷⁰ This specific emphasis upon monetarism rather than Thatcherism reveals Bradbury's fundamental concern with the liberal opposition between 'human selves and systems'⁷¹ rather than the complexities of socio-political analysis.

The central emblem of this culture and its values is provided by the Eldorado tower, 'the moneyed modern world of glass and concrete' that dominates the industrial dereliction of a 'great sad northern city'⁷² and its once prominent university. Replete with nouvelle cuisine cafeterias and grandiose interior features, the epicentre of Lord Mellow's⁷³ media empire encapsulates the ambition and excess of the communication industries of the 1980s. While a statue of the university's founding Victorian philanthropist rises 'like a ghost', the commercial

⁶⁹ Malcolm Bradbury, *Cuts* (London: Arrow Books, Arena ed. 1988 [1987]), pp. 6-7.

⁷⁰ John Haffenden, *Novelists in Interview* (London: Methuen, 1985), p. 46.

⁷¹ Bradbury, quoted in Zielger and Bigsby (eds.), *The Radical Imagination and the Liberal Tradition*, p. 74.

⁷² Bradbury, *Cuts*, pp. 70, 10.

⁷³ According to Bradbury this character is an amalgamation of Robert Maxwell, Rupert Murdoch and Lew Grade. Lorrie Moore, 'Give Me Epic, Give Me Tragic, Give Me Cheap', *New York Times* (18 Oct. 1987), p. 9.

egotism of Eldorado tower eclipses the decaying campus and provides a constant reminder to the anti-intellectual Mellow that he has ‘a hell of a lot more money’.⁷⁴

He pointed to some small and decaying Victorian premises with pinnacles and domes that stood dully in the great shadow cast by the high glass tower. Guano caked the lead roofs, grass grows lushly in the gutterings, broken roof-lights stared up at them.⁷⁵

As this architectural symbolism suggests, the university remains attached to the cultural values of its inception and not, as Parkin and Davies implied, at the vanguard of reform and ideological transition. However, this recognition of the diminished cultural status of higher education is not accompanied by a nostalgic vision of its fading values. As the entrenched factions of Babbacombe’s provincial university illustrate, Bradbury’s dismay towards the new economic realism is matched by a satirical condemnation of those who perpetuate attitudes of elitist isolation. Although threatened by UGC cuts, university ratings (the ‘Michelin Guide to thought’⁷⁶), and the familiar entrepreneurial schemes of a Thatcherite vice-chancellor, Babbacombe’s English department continues to adhere to the *belles-lettrist* superiority and detachment of Professor Finniston.

... we have never deigned to *boast* of our reputation, like the vulgar new universities. And you know many of my colleagues have always refused to publish books, naturally preferring to transfer their thoughts by word of mouth to the two or three people who are fit to understand them.⁷⁷

The comic mode may be farcical but Bradbury’s mockery of vested interests contains a serious point concerning the response of the university sector to government policy. Due to the rapidity with which subsidy cuts were imposed,

⁷⁴ Bradbury, *Cuts*, p. 46.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

departments were unable to contemplate positive reform and ‘curled up defensively like hedgehogs’⁷⁸ in an attempt to preserve existing structures and staff.

This reluctance to explicitly endorse the values of higher education against the forces of economic determinism also informs Bradbury’s characterisation of Babbacombe and his picaresque transition from rural and sexual innocence to the frenetic dissolution of Eldorado television. While Babbacombe views the university as ‘representing the best of all human life’, this affirmation is premised upon its sedentary pace and social isolation: the ‘quietude, mannered eccentricity, and indifference to sad and foolish reality.’⁷⁹ Indeed, his academic position in Extra-Mural Studies is used to reinforce his esoteric pretentiousness as a minor novelist with his fiction falling somewhere between the influences of ‘Eco and Endo’.⁸⁰ Offering a parody of his scholarly isolation, Babbacombe produces intertextual and self-referential novels of colour (yellow, puce, and maroon) and eschews social responsibility by denying the existence of an external reality. Condensing the earlier cultural divisions into modes of literary production, the novella becomes preoccupied with Babbacombe’s radical digression into the commercial and communal practice of television scriptwriting. Drawn from his own experiences of the medium,⁸¹ Bradbury employs the naïve academic to ridicule a process in which artistic integrity is sacrificed to accommodate the global interests of financiers, the vanity of bankable celebrities and the populist demands of the market place. Satirising the 1980s trend towards ‘heritage’ drama, Babbacombe’s original script becomes mangled by Mellow’s impossible demands of ‘I want it epic, I want it

⁷⁸ Lodge, ‘Pay As You Learn’, p. 5.

⁷⁹ Bradbury, *Cuts*, p. 70.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

⁸¹ *Cuts* was written in the free time that followed the BBC’s late cancellation of a dramatisation of *Rates of Exchange*. Bradbury has also reflected upon the writing conditions and demands of television production in ‘Adapting and being Adaptable: The novel and television’, *No, Not Bloomsbury*, pp. 297-308.

tragic. I want it cheap'.⁸² With the entire project endangered by embezzlement and a hostile 'macro-economic climate',⁸³ Babbacombe nostalgically revisits the solitude and artistic integrity of his former existence: 'above were the high peaks of the Alps, pure and white, calm and indifferent, just like a world famous writer.'⁸⁴

However, the vagueness of this conclusion and Babbacombe's failure to represent a definitive ideology or set of values is indicative of an ambiguity that Widdowson has discerned across Bradbury's fiction: '[w]e are never quite sure where he stands in his satiric judgements – except that all the other characters are worse.'⁸⁵ The central problem, as Bigsby neatly clarified during an interview, is that any satirical condemnation of Lord Mellow's empire and the cultural forces it represents relies upon 'the survival of the values outside the book which inside the book you suggest to have disappeared.'⁸⁶ For Widdowson, the weakness of characters like Babbacombe are part of Bradbury's tendency towards a fiction that self-consciously admits the inadequacy of his liberal and humane values 'in the face of a political and technological History'.⁸⁷ However, in spite of Bradbury's awareness of the fragility of liberalism and acknowledgement that his characters stem from a thinness of 'social and historical purpose',⁸⁸ the critical import of *Cuts* can be upheld in relation to his use of 'satiric aversion'.⁸⁹ Attempting to emulate the satiric mode of Evelyn Waugh's shorter fictions,⁹⁰ the narrative flatness of *Cuts* is

⁸² Bradbury, *Cuts*, p. 103.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 127.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 124.

⁸⁵ Widdowson, 'The anti-history men: Malcolm Bradbury and David Lodge', p. 18.

⁸⁶ Christopher Bigsby, quoted in Ziegler and Bigsby (eds.), *The Radical Imagination and the Liberal Tradition*, p. 68.

⁸⁷ Widdowson, 'The anti-history men: Malcolm Bradbury and David Lodge', p. 18.

⁸⁸ Haffenden, *Novelists in Interview*, p. 38.

⁸⁹ Bradbury, quoted in Ziegler and Bigsby (eds.), *The Radical Imagination and the Liberal Tradition*, p. 74.

⁹⁰ 'Waugh is the great ghost in the cupboard'. Bradbury, quoted in Moore, 'Give Me Epic, Give Me Tragic, Give Me Cheap', p. 6.

designed to produce a sense of estrangement and moral distance thereby forcing the reader to 'seek the cause of the dehumanization I'm representing, and therefore the elements of humanism – which are very much in the books as presences but not as solutions.'⁹¹ Furthermore, a connection between the contrived plot of the novella and Babbacombe's formulaic screenplay additionally diminishes moral and causal reference through a present tense narration and the 'dominance of action ... over interpretation of action.'⁹² As a result, the passivity and exploitation of Babbacombe becomes conjoined with the architectural, literary and cultural environments he inhabits. In one sense, this can be viewed as reinforcing Bradbury's satirical quarrel with Thatcherism's tendency towards totalitarian expression, de-personalisation and reification.⁹³ According to Hulbert, the 'cuts' of narrative and screenplay create a sense of 'dazed disorientation' in keeping with the 'heartless, straitened times' of 'Lady Rigour's revolution' and offering a perfect antidote to *The Radiant Way's* 'spacious, grandly ironic' perspective.⁹⁴

On the television screens that flickered and flared ... another endless, abrasive, banal serial showed daily, the seamless, ever-unrolling tale of misery, violence, despair, obscenity, greed and conflict that is called the news ... It was a serial that Henry watched intermittently, glancing at its banal horrors, its bland tragedies, its half-apocalyptic messages, its unstructured and chaotic plots. It made him glad to be writing a serial of his own, shapely, ordered and elegant.⁹⁵

However, the final sections of the novella reveal problems with both Hulbert's interpretation and Bradbury's 'satiric aversion'. Significantly, this quotation remains an isolated satiric correlation amidst a narrative preoccupation with ridiculing the capricious demands of television production. Marking a retreat from the initial 'state of the nation' diagnosis, the unifying 'cuts' metaphor becomes

⁹¹ Haffenden, *Novelists in Interview*, p. 43.

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 46.

⁹³ Nigel Gray, *Writers Talking* (London: Caliban Books, 1989), p. 91.

⁹⁴ Anne Hulbert, 'Maggiemarch', *New Republic*, vol. 197 (14 Dec. 1987), p. 38.

⁹⁵ Bradbury, *Cuts*, pp. 89-90.

reduced to the script adaptations enforced by the loss of both leading actors through madness and death. The narrative shift to Switzerland also renders the architectural symbolism of Eldorado redundant, Lord Mellow and his staff becoming a singular company rather than a culturally representative institution. Furthermore, Babbacombe is detached from the social context that his blankness was designed to illuminate, thereby negating his role as the foregrounded victim for the reader's 'satiric aversion'. Re-positioned against the backdrop of a farcical disaster, the uncertain fate of Babbacombe and the failure of the project carry neither political significance nor satiric despair. *Cuts* may have begun as a satire upon economic determinism and its effect upon the university, but it concludes as a campus comedy in which the utter ineptitude of its protagonist precludes any concern for the 'state of the nation' or its 'castles of liberalism'.⁹⁶

So powerful is the stereotype of the clownish academic that by the end of *Cuts*, its socio-political force has been dissipated in the farcical events which accompany the filming ... the academic victim has become a futile buffoon whose peremptory expulsion from Academe seems, in retrospect, to have been entirely justified.⁹⁷

While the satires of Parkin, Davies and Bradbury are weakened by imbalances between the conventions of academic fiction and the 'state of the nation' novel, a more sophisticated attempt at generic combination is provided by *Nice Work*. Lodge's novel self-consciously announces and comments upon its 'state of the nation' ambitions through intertextual parallels with the 'industrial novels' of the mid-nineteenth century. Harnessing the characteristic divisions of this sub-genre to the cultural contrasts of academic satire, the comic collisions between industry and university are structured through ironic adaptations of Disraeli's 'two nations' delineation and Margaret Hale's educational journey in *North and South*.

⁹⁶ Bradbury, quoted in Ziegler and Bigsby (eds.), *The Radical Imagination and the Liberal Tradition*, p. 68.

⁹⁷ Sheppard, 'From Narragonia to Elysium', p. 29.

Supplemented by the framing quotations from Eliot, Disraeli, Gaskell and Dickens and the lecture of the central academic character, Lodge's 'state of the nation' novel maintains a playful dialogue with the formal conventions it employs. As Connor has convincingly argued, this structure of allusions seeks to circumvent the difficulties (particularly evident in Drabble) of locating an encompassing perspective for a diverse modern nation, allowing Lodge's depiction of the condition of England to borrow 'something of the integrating reach and perspectival authority it ascribes to its predecessors' whilst defending itself against the 'charge of having compressed and simplified that condition to one of fable or fantasy.'⁹⁸ This double-edged narrative also permits a compromise between the conflicting demands of the generic combination, avoiding rather than resolving the tonal imbalances and oscillations evident in the other novels. By displacing the farcical and parodic elements of campus fiction into the self-referential and intertextual dialogue of the novel, Lodge is able to comically undercut the realistic foundations of his 'state of the nation' diagnosis without negating its social authenticity. As a novel that self-consciously adopts a literary tradition concerned with the effects of industrialisation, this combination of appropriation and ironic distance is also used to navigate the implied historical associations between nineteenth century laissez-faire capitalism and Thatcherism's free-market revolution. On one level, the novel infers equivalence in relation to labour relations, factory conditions and the shared disenfranchisement of Chartists and the inner-city unemployed. However, Lodge also acknowledges important differences by exposing the naivety of Robyn's historical parallels with modern industrial practices. While this may not appear problematic, the reliance upon nineteenth-century narrative structures and

⁹⁸ Connor, *The English Novel in History*, pp. 75, 79.

comparative social oppositions actually masks 'a much more various and multiaccentual political and economic situation.'⁹⁹ As I shall exemplify in more detail, *Nice Work's* concentration upon industrial manufacturing involves a significant marginalisation of Britain's post-industrial condition. Ultimately, the limitations of Lodge's diagnostic framework illuminate the weakness of his liberal opposition to Thatcherism.

Complying with Disraeli's portrait of 'dwellers in different zones', the initial chapters of *Nice Work* alternate between the contrasting personalities and social environments of Vic Wilcox and Robyn Penrose. Although premised upon differences of class established by their respective homes, cultural preferences and culinary tastes, Lodge's central antithesis is between the 'real world' of industry and the 'privileged detachment'¹⁰⁰ of academic life. The 'reality' of the blunt, sexist and uncompromising Vic revolves around both the physical conditions of material production and the 'economic realism' of his managerial principles. From his daily rotation of suits to his plans to rationalise factory production, Vic's existence mirrors the mechanical engineering he so admires, governed by the requirements of practicality, efficiency and financial profitability. Waking to concerns about 'the price of pig-iron, the value of the pound ... the quarterly forecast, the annual review';¹⁰¹ Vic's obsession with the 'hard facts' of his business is self-referentially linked to Dickens's critique of utilitarianism in *Hard Times*. Following the example of Gradgrind, his 'protestant ethic'¹⁰² is associated with a lack of imagination or play that reinforces his emotional detachment from his wife and children. In contrast, the university's distance from the 'vulgar, bustling industrial city' is represented by the

⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 75.

¹⁰⁰ David Lodge, *Nice Work* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1989 [1988]), p. 14.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., p. 3.

¹⁰² Ibid., p. 152.

anti-humanism of Robyn's literary theory, the 'unreal' abstractions of post-structuralist theory and 'semiotic materialism.'¹⁰³ Balancing the dogmatism of Vic's utilitarianism, Robyn's semiotic politics are ridiculed as isolating and reductive, an intellectual game through which the complexities of real social and economic conditions can be displaced into abstract theoretical frameworks. Later extended to her feminism, anti-capitalism and anti-racism, Lodge's presentation of Robyn's esoteric detachment reiterates the premise of his early reminder that prison 'is just a word to Robyn, a word in a book or a newspaper, a symbol of something – the law, hegemony, repression'.¹⁰⁴ In addition to her rather supercilious distance from '*the grey, gritty hopelessness*'¹⁰⁵ of the industrial city, Robyn's intellectual engagement with the semiotic problems of attire and ideologically defensible modes of non-penetrative sex also exemplify a more Bakhtinian form of ridicule. In effect, they mirror Lodge's comic admonition to academic institutions that their 'interests are not all-absorbing and all-important ... and that those interests to some extent depend on the suppression of certain facts about life of a low, physical, earthly kind.'¹⁰⁶

Although achieved more by digression than representative characterisation, the backgrounds of Vic and Robyn also provide the foundation for the novel's broader depiction of the social effects of Thatcherism. In contrast with the critical stance adopted towards their antithetical perspectives, the positive social functions of industry and higher education are implicitly upheld through their beleaguered position under Thatcherism. Unlike the vitriolic censure that dominates many novels of the 1980s, Lodge seeks a critical balance by establishing the failings that

¹⁰³ Ibid., pp. 14, 23.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 64.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., p. 65. This quotation from Lawrence is indicative of Robyn's reliance upon literary allusions to structure her comprehension of the industrial world. Connor, *The English Novel in History*, p. 78.

¹⁰⁶ Haffenden, *Novelists in Interview*, p. 167.

necessitated reform whilst decrying the radical methods and social effects of government policy. This is particularly evident in Vic's qualified respect for Thatcher's offensive against inefficiency and restrictive labour practices, his recognition that the current decline of industry is a consequence of historic underinvestment and increased global competition: 'She overdid it, but it had to be done.'¹⁰⁷ However, Vic's acceptance of the economic conditions is accompanied by his dismay towards the unemployment and urban dereliction caused by the collapse of manufacturing industry and the communities it supported. Rather than associating his utilitarianism with the social Darwinism of New Right economic theory, Vic becomes a surviving representative of a disappearing culture, an embattled defender of British engineering, civic responsibility and working class decency. In spite of his stoic rationalisations and the brutal physical conditions of the factory, Lodge distances his practical, industrial capitalism from the economic ideologies of Thatcherism. Instead, his work ethic is reclaimed as socially beneficial in comparison with the greater evils of further unemployment and social alienation. In many ways this forms an ironical reversal of the liberal concerns of the industrial novel with Vic's modernisation plans appearing in the service of social cohesion rather than economic exploitation, the preservation of a functioning community as opposed to the mere pursuit of profit.

The decimation of the university system provides a more direct critique of Thatcherism's educational reforms by reiterating the incongruity between academic and business practices that dominates campus fiction of the 1980s. Assessing the effects of 'swingeing cuts',¹⁰⁸ the novel displays familiar concerns about the potential closure of institutions, students working as strippers, staff reductions and

¹⁰⁷ Lodge, *Nice Work*, p. 171.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

the entrepreneurial initiatives of an acronym obsessed vice-chancellor. As in *A Very Peculiar Practice*, the imposition of these financial cuts marks a final act of retraction from the expansionist ideals of the early sixties: ‘The Robbins Report was our Big Bang. Now we’ve gone into reverse.’¹⁰⁹ Exemplified by the disillusionment of Philip Swallow and Robyn’s father, the novel registers the loss of an era which promised ‘higher education for everyone who could benefit’ and criticises Thatcherism for introducing a commercial ethos in universities that will ‘destroy everything that makes them valuable.’¹¹⁰ More specifically, Lodge indicts government policies and the UGC for their myopic presumption that business strategies premised upon a pyramidal management structure could be successfully applied to collegiate institutions. Yet in a similar manner to Bradbury, he also implicates the academic community in the counter-productive failure of these policies. Departments are depicted as exacerbating the disarray caused by funding cuts through their reliance upon early retirements and unwillingness to admit that ‘there was any aspect of our existing arrangements that was dispensable.’¹¹¹ Indeed, rather than demonising Thatcherite policies as totally incommensurate with educational institutions, *Nice Work* exemplifies Lodge’s contention that ‘industrial wisdom’ can be effective if applied ‘at the level of systems rather than of accountancy.’¹¹² Thus while dismissing the vice-chancellor’s ‘Enterprise Ventures’ as ‘playing at capitalism’,¹¹³ the novel appears to uphold Fordian principles in

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., p. 40.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 220, 248.

¹¹¹ Ibid., p. 248.

¹¹² Lodge, ‘Pay as You Learn’, p. 6.

¹¹³ Lodge, *Nice Work*, p. 254.

relation to the department's unwieldy syllabus.¹¹⁴ Reinforcing the novel's attack upon intellectual abstraction, Robyn is ridiculed for the impracticality of her post-structural outrage that 'repetition is death!'¹¹⁵ What lies behind these implicit calls for internal reform is a broader frustration with academic traditionalism. In essence, *Nice Work* displays an awareness of the fact that higher education's resistance to Thatcherite policy was significantly hampered by the perception that they were 'defending a system of privilege'.¹¹⁶ Rather than the nostalgic lament offered by Davies, *Nice Work* is openly critical of the failure of institutions to either embody or pursue the egalitarian ideals of their post-war expansion. Justifying Vic's initial description of an 'academic Vatican',¹¹⁷ the narrative persistently underlines the social and geographical detachment of the university from the surrounding community. This is indicative of Lodge's accusation that academic culture perpetuates an 'Oxbridge idea of higher education as a version of a pastoral, a privileged idyll cut off from ordinary living.'¹¹⁸ Within this context, higher education is essentially presented as undergoing a misdirected process of reform, suffering under Thatcherism's crude and narrow economic criteria instead of being forced into greater social relevance and inclusivity.

Having established the necessity of reconciliation between town and gown, the potential for integration offered by Vic and Robyn's relationship becomes the symbolic focus for both the redemption of the university and a unification of the nation's divided state. These utopian hopes are foreshadowed by the intertextual

¹¹⁴ 'Most of our universities have superimposed an optional course system on a traditional core curriculum, assessed by autonomous departments of 'schools', whose notions of what constitutes a course vary wildly. The resulting incompatibilities, inequalities and organisational confusion ... are enough to make the angels weep.' Lodge, 'Pay As You Learn', p. 6.

¹¹⁵ Lodge, *Nice Work*, p. 253.

¹¹⁶ Lodge, 'Pay as You Learn', p. 5.

¹¹⁷ Lodge, *Nice Work*, p. 14.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 220.

parallels between the shadow scheme and structure of *North and South*. As Eagleton has argued, in spite of *Nice Work's* rejection of 'the content of Gaskell's ideology ... its 'spirit' is nostalgically preserved.'¹¹⁹ Although not resulting in marriage, the initially antagonistic exchanges between Vic and Robyn are replaced by a process of mutual understanding and education that tempers their respective dogmatic convictions. Moving beyond the narrow confines of his utilitarianism, Vic acquires a 'metaphoric vision'¹²⁰ that awakens him to the benefits of literary study and revives a romantic fervour previously displaced into the sentimental ballads of female vocalists. Although less significant, Robyn's influence also effects the management and the conditions of the factory through Vic's responsiveness to her comments on sexism, worker alienation and the pettiness of commercial competition. The parallel education of Robyn involves an awareness of academia's reliance upon an external world of capitalist competition and material manufacture. During her flight to Germany, Robyn experiences an ariel vision of 'all the myriad people and agencies concerned [with] production and circulation'.¹²¹ Questioning the privileged isolation of the university through Vic's maxim that '[t]here's no such thing as a free lunch',¹²² Robyn envisages an idealistic union between the antithetical cultures that embody the divisions of the nation.

... a hundred small seminar groups formed on the grass, composed half of students and lecturers and half of workers and managers, to exchange ideas on how the values of the university and the imperatives of commerce might be reconciled and more equitably managed to the benefit of the whole of society.¹²³

However, Robyn's progression towards this liberal idealism relies upon a reassessment of her theoretical principles, a resolution of the conflicts between

¹¹⁹ Eagleton, 'The Silences of David Lodge', p. 99.

¹²⁰ Lodge, *Nice Work*, p. 123.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 193.

¹²² *Ibid.*, p. 77.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, p. 250.

theory and practice that overlay the novel's 'two-nations' structure. Interestingly, Lodge's treatment of Robyn's theoretical education illuminates his aversion towards the abtruseness of post-structuralist theory and his accusation that it has created a 'very unhealthy gap ... between educated discourse inside and outside the university.'¹²⁴ From the outset Robyn's theoretical discourse is comically undermined, presented as insulating her from the complexities of social reality and precluding her from accepting her 'true' self as a well-intentioned member of a wider liberal humanity.

[Semiotic materialism] might seem a bit bleak, a bit inhuman ... but in practice this doesn't seem to affect her behaviour very noticeably – she seems to have ordinary human feelings, ambitions, desires, to suffer anxieties, frustrations, fears, like anybody else in this imperfect world, and to have a natural inclination to try and make it a better place.¹²⁵

While Robyn merely questions the detachment of theoretical beliefs, the narrative reveals a more critical perspective upon the discordance between academic abstraction and 'real life'. In addition to the denigration of Robyn's radical feminism through her instinctive jealousy towards Charles's affair, her Marxist terminology is portrayed as merely reductive jargon through her backfiring interventions at the factory. As Eagleton has noted, this comic displacement of Robyn's political radicalism preserves the potential for a 'Forsterian act of connection'¹²⁶ by circumventing the potentially irreconcilable contradictions between her theories and Vic's capitalist doctrines. Reinforcing this significant marginalisation, Lodge's defence of theory is limited to Robyn's development as a teacher and her engagement with the pedagogic difficulties of disseminating the principles of post-structuralism and deconstructive criticism. Shifting from the impenetrable quotations and intellectual snobbery that characterised her discussions

¹²⁴ David Lodge, 'Structural Defects', in *Write On: Occasional Essays*, p. 113.

¹²⁵ Lodge, *Nice Work*, p. 22.

¹²⁶ Eagleton, 'The Silences of David Lodge', p. 100.

with Charles, she develops a more lucid and illustrative style through her impromptu sessions with Vic. Replacing her earlier insights into Lacan, Derrida and Foucault, Robyn's role as a theorist is primarily validated through her application of Jakobson's principle of metaphor and metonymy. Epitomised by her semiotic analysis of a Silk Cut billboard, Robyn undergoes a selective transition that precisely mirrors Lodge's own critical inclinations:

When the ideological heat generated by "deconstruction" has died down, we may well decide that its most valuable contribution was in stretching and enhancing our understanding of how this fundamental principle, the $E=mc^2$ of modern poetics, actually operates in literary texts.¹²⁷

In effect, Robyn is redeemed by becoming, like Lodge, a 'domesticator of more extreme types of continental criticism'¹²⁸ and adopting a pedagogic approach that implicitly accepts that simplification is infinitely preferable to non-communication.¹²⁹ As Widdowson has argued, such 'common-sense' reconciliations form the basis of both Lodge's criticism and fiction and are underpinned by 'a late twentieth-century Arnoldian project which is ... *against* politics and *for* a notion of an ideologically-innocent, 'disinterested' liberal humanist culture.'¹³⁰ Robyn's theoretical education is a validation of such cultural ideals, her withdrawal from radical theory a necessary stage in her movement towards the communication and pluralism of her utopian vision. In addition, this epitomises Lodge's proposed solution to the range of inimical oppositions in *Nice Work*, a solution premised upon a liberal-humanist faith that social divisions based

¹²⁷ David Lodge, 'Bourgeois Triangles', in *Write On: Occasional Essays*, p. 124.

¹²⁸ Haffenden, *Novelists in Interview*, p. 157.

¹²⁹ 'The intellectual and artistic life of a society requires a constant refreshment by new ideas, which are formulated by the intellectual avant-garde, and then permeate down through educated society by means of the media. In this process they are inevitably simplified, and perhaps vulgarized, but this is better than no ideas getting through at all, which is what seems to be happening now in this country.'

Lodge, 'Structural defects', in *Write On: Occasional Essays*, p. 115.

¹³⁰ Widdowson, 'The anti-history men: Malcolm Bradbury and David Lodge', p. 6-7.

upon differences of class, race and culture can be transcended and resolved at the level of the individual.

However, the limitations of this position are revealed by the structural marginalisation of an emerging post-industrial cultural, the world of financial futures inhabited by Basil, Debbie and Charles. Although Lodge ironically employs the novel's title to contrast Vic's material production with the 'nice work' of Robyn's literary production of meaning, they are both affirmed against the short-term profit motives of 'a glorified form of gambling'.¹³¹ Indeed, Lodge uses Charles's transfer to the city to reinforce his critique of deconstruction as 'an unreal, privileged, self-indulgent pursuit'.¹³²

I regard myself as simply exchanging one semiotic system for another, the literary for the numerical, a game with high philosophical stakes for a game with high monetary stakes – but a game in each case, in which satisfaction comes ultimately from playing rather than winning, since there are no absolute winners, for the game never ends.¹³³

In spite of its marginal position within the narrative, the acknowledgement of this alternative culture poses significant questions concerning the symbolic centrality of *Nice Work's* 'state of the nation' antithesis.¹³⁴ Rather than industry and higher education operating as core elements beleaguered by a specific political regime, they are conceptualised as 'two sides of a modern political economy which is itself now paradigmatically under threat'.¹³⁵ As Charles's letter suggests, the post-war ideals of higher education are being 'left behind by the tide of history'¹³⁶ as the progressive energies of the nation are displaced into a meritocratic world of

¹³¹ Lodge, *Nice Work*, p. 128.

¹³² Eagleton, 'The Silences of David Lodge', p. 100.

¹³³ Lodge, *Nice Work*, p. 225.

¹³⁴ As Connor has stated, the novel 'makes intermittently visible a new set of conditions of England which would seem to require more inclusive, more explanatory forms of the social imaginary than are provided by the sharp, yet soothingly distinct binarism of the two nations in *Nice Work*.' *The English Novel in History*, p. 82.

¹³⁵ Patricia Waugh, *The Harvest of the Sixties: English Literature and its Background, 1960-1990* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 35.

¹³⁶ Lodge, *Nice Work*, p. 223.

money. More precisely, Robyn's intellectual knowledge and Vic's manufacturing tradition are both threatened by redundancy in a culture that values Debbie's 'barrow-boy mentality'¹³⁷ and an economy shifting towards high technology and the service industries. Although not ascribing to this emerging culture the hegemonic influence envisioned by Martin Amis in *Money*, Lodge implies its inexorable advance through Charles's contention that '[i]t's no use blaming Thatcher, as if she was some kind of witch who has enchanted the nation. She is riding the *Zeitgeist*.'¹³⁸ What is so problematic about the depiction of this third cultural sphere is that in addition to threatening Vic and Robyn's respective cultures with obsolescence, it also challenges the liberal premise of the novel's binary structure. As the association with deconstruction suggests, the numerical abstraction and autonomy of financial speculation, coupled with the naked avarice that drives its participants, precludes the kind of liberal-humanist connection associated with the central characters. Thus while the promise of reconciliation remains in relation to the central antithesis, Lodge's acknowledgement of the inimical detachment of the city weakens its representative significance as a symbolic solution for the nation's divided condition.

Yet even the prospect of an individual reconciliation appears unlikely following Vic and Robyn's brief sexual encounter in Germany, their contrary responses rejecting a Forsterian vision of sexual love as offering 'that transcendence of social barriers that politics cannot provide.'¹³⁹ In spite of representing the positive values of their respective cultures through Robyn's more utilitarian apprehension of the university and Vic's engagement with Tennyson, the novel

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 223.

¹³⁹ Eagleton, 'The Silences of David Lodge', p. 98.

ultimately retreats from the possibility of a comprehensive symbiosis. In effect, their continuing detachment involves a fictional recognition that a symbolic resolution at the level of character would be incommensurate with the national diagnosis. Momentarily displaying the same pessimism and despair as other 1980s' campus fictions, the plot of *Nice Work* is overtaken by a fidelity to unrelenting degradation of their professional realms; Robyn's slender career prospects are finally curtailed by another round of UGC cuts and Vic's honourable quest for profitability is rejected in favour of the interests of corporate shareholders. However, rather than confront the seemingly implacable progress of these socio-economic forces, Lodge contrives a happy ending by self-consciously replicating the dénouements offered by Victorian novelists: 'a legacy, a marriage, emigration or death.'¹⁴⁰ In one sense this can be interpreted as an intertextual admission of defeat, an authorial concession that, like the industrial novelists, Lodge is also unable to 'contemplate a political solution to the social problems'¹⁴¹ described in his fiction. Yet rather than inform any meaningful self-criticism, the playfulness of these narrative resolutions actually operates as a means of recuperating the novel's liberal-humanism by exchanging the conventions of realism with those of romance and melodrama. Manipulating the prospective futures of his central characters through Robyn's chance inheritance, Lodge seeks to preserve both their respective individual qualities and the novel's underlying liberal optimism. As Eagleton has argued, *Nice Work* dissociates itself from its own seriousness and thereby 'seeks to have its ideology and transcend it at the same time.'¹⁴² Reinforcing the miraculous rejuvenation of his wife and transformation of his family, Vic's work ethic is

¹⁴⁰ Lodge, *Nice Work*, p. 52.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

¹⁴² Eagleton, 'The Silences of David Lodge', p. 101.

ascribed a more noble and creative context through his return to the relative autonomy of a small-scale business enterprise. Similarly, Robyn's virtues as an educator are protected from the 'tooth and claw'¹⁴³ competition of an American university whilst her potential return to intellectual arrogance is denied through a rejection of Charles. Symbolically prefaced by a student wearing a tee shirt inscribed with the words 'ONLY CONNECT',¹⁴⁴ Robyn decides to remain at Rumbridge and pursue her utopian vision of the university. The 'instinctive avoidance of contact' she witnesses between a gardener and students providing a final reminder that '[t]here is a long way to go.'¹⁴⁵

While this imbues the novel's ending with an optimistic tone, the revival of Vic and Robyn's fortunes is predicated upon a disconnection from the social spheres they represent. Offering a further example of the humanistic retractions of 1980s' 'state of the nation' fiction, the promise of their futures remains detached from the negative repercussions of further unemployment, social alienation and institutional degradation. Ultimately, the preservation of *Nice Work's* social idealism comes at the expense of the sombre state of the nation diagnosis, sustained only through a rejection of its fictional realism through an aesthetic displacement from actuality to fantasy. Although masked by a sophisticated narrative diversion, the positive prospects accorded to the characters supports 'no macro-structural equivalent: Britain remains not only divided but fragmenting.'¹⁴⁶ In addition to the realms of industry and education remaining segregated and beleaguered, their continuing existence is overshadowed by an emerging ideology inimical to the spirit of collective human endeavour and social values of their respective cultures. It is

¹⁴³ Lodge, *Nice Work*, p. 260.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 275.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 277.

¹⁴⁶ Waugh, *The Harvest of the Sixties*, p. 35.

somewhat ironic that in resisting the apocalyptic despair exhibited by Parkin and Davies, Lodge's produces a more profoundly bleak representation of the 1980s, his indomitable liberal-humanism merely elucidating with greater clarity the implacable disharmony and illiberalism it seeks to repudiate.

Prophets, Politicians and Social Climbers: The Rise and Rise of Thatcherite Man

... there is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women, and there are families and no Government can do anything except through people. And people must look to themselves first.¹

In many respects the appearance of numerous 'state of the nation' novels in the 1980s is informed by a desire to oppose the individualistic emphasis of this seminal quotation through inclusive examinations of Britain's social fabric. Through the delineation of a nation of political division, cultural antagonism and socio-economic inequality, they pessimistically document the consequences of Thatcherism's repudiation of consensus culture and welfare-capitalism. With the notable exception of Amis's *Money*, opposition to this retraction is represented through embattled individuals, relationships or groups that continue to uphold the liberal-humanist values of intrinsic connection and community against the fragmenting pressures of social intolerance, political dogma and economic self-interest. In effect, they adopt a fictional mode in which the disintegration of a lost or ideal social fabric is critically illuminated by counteracting images of unity and liberal wholeness. As has already been noted, the optimism generated by these images often appears incommensurate with the projected implications of their 'state of the nation' diagnoses. Forced to acknowledge the unabated advance of Thatcherism and the belatedness of consensus ideology, the validity of their opposition is sustainable only through acts of narrative detachment or social withdrawal. Significantly, positive resolutions are commonly measured against the decline of representative Thatcherite characters, figures who are either pushed to the margins of the narrative (*Nice Work*) or dismissed through eventual descents into insanity,

¹ Margaret Thatcher, *Woman's Own*, (31 October 1987).

regression or death (*The Radiant Way, A Very Peculiar Practice: The New Frontier, The Child in Time*). While similarly concerned with the loss of social cohesion, the decade also produced a number of novels that more directly indicted the emerging culture of Thatcherism through fictional embodiments of her new-right ideology and 'enterprise culture'. In contrast to the comprehensive tendencies of social-realism, these largely first-person narratives offer satirical caricatures of the cultural revolution Thatcher sought to inspire through free-market competition: 'Economics are the method. The object is to change the soul.'² Although not adhering to the traditional criteria of the genre, these novels acquire a 'state of the nation' resonance due to the archetypal importance of the individual within the zeitgeist they represent. By the late-1980s, Thatcherism's 'enterprise culture' had become significantly defined by the materialistic excesses of economic individualism, the abiding by images of the striped-shirted City 'yuppie' and Harry Enfield's 'Loadsamoney' denoting a nation that had become 'less tolerant, more greedy and far less humane.'³

However, the representative validity of these caricatures has been questioned by Taylor's accusation that they merely perpetuate media myths of meritocracy and individual freedom. In doing so, these novels fail to recognise the realities of Thatcher's political pragmatism, the centralisation of state power, and the substantial advances made by corporate industry and established financial institutions.⁴ The validity of this criticism is supported by the fact that the symbolic individual that resounded through speeches and policy statements did not

² Margaret Thatcher, quoted in Robert Hewison, *Culture and Consensus: England, Art and Politics since 1940* (London: Methuen, 1995), p. 212.

³ Eric J. Evans, *Thatcher and Thatcherism, The Making of the Contemporary World* (London, Routledge, 1997), p. 121.

⁴ D.J. Taylor, *After the War: The Novel and England since 1945* (London: Flamingo, 1994), pp. 279-280.

significantly materialise in society. In spite of prominent examples, Thatcherism effectively failed to transform social attitudes in line with its ideological ambitions.⁵ However, the ‘myth’ of the entrepreneurial individual remains highly significant as an expression of, and justification for, the political and moral principles that underpinned the economic theories of the New Right and Thatcher’s personal vision of the nation. As Letwin has argued, the political philosophy of Thatcherism was largely premised upon the assumed attributes of the individual, the ‘vigorous virtues’ of ‘uprightness, self-sufficiency, energy, independent mindedness, adventurousness, loyalty and robustness’.⁶ Deliberately chosen to resist any identification on the basis of profession, religion or class, these qualities reflect an aspiration to replace collective allegiances and inherited privilege with a social framework of meritocratic opportunity. They exist in contrast with the ‘softer’ virtues of ‘kindness, humility, gentleness, sympathy’,⁷ the overabundance of which had significantly contributed to the ‘dependency culture’ and moral atrophy of welfare state society. In addition to constituting a reaction against the values and politics of consensus, the Thatcherite individual also functions as an ideal figure for a culture founded upon the principles of free-market competition. Whether operating as consumer or private entrepreneur, the ‘vigorous virtues’ constitute a blueprint for the economic self-reliance and dynamism that Thatcherism sought to animate through a social formation that would act as ‘the cradle rather than the coffin of individuality’.⁸ Although accused of fostering selfish materialism, Thatcher remained committed to the laissez-faire principle that ‘economic choices

⁵ Ivor Crewe, ‘Values: The Crusade that Failed’, in Dennis Kavanagh and Anthony Seldon (eds.), *The Thatcher Effect* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 241.

⁶ Shirley Robin Letwin, *The Anatomy of Thatcherism*, (London: Fontana, 1992), p. 35.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 342.

have a moral dimension',⁹ arguing that a culture based upon individual self-interest would lead to greater personal responsibility,¹⁰ philanthropic generosity, and encourage 'the best in human nature.'¹¹

In addition to criticisms that focus upon the historical incongruities that arise from these Victorian allusions,¹² the appropriation of this period as a social model also reveals a contradiction within Thatcherite ideology between the impetus of economic individualism and the requirements of social cohesion.¹³ Having abandoned the frameworks of consensus that promised (if not delivered) social inclusiveness, Thatcherism employed the Victorian mythology of 'Englishness, respectability, family and nation'¹⁴ to assert images of national unity against the disruptive forces of its economic theory: 'the free market has a tendency to subvert traditions, having a turbulent effect upon culture and morality.'¹⁵ It is the failure to reconcile this contradiction that provides the basis for these novels, the untempered selfishness of their entrepreneurial figures exemplifying Sinfield's warning that Thatcherism may become unable 'to satisfy or control the emotions it arouses.'¹⁶ Of course, the acerbic nature of these satires ensures a one-sided presentation of this political dilemma, their portrayals of the government rarely, and often only implicitly, acknowledging any separation between official policy and the excessive

⁹ Margaret Thatcher, 'Iain Macleod Memorial Lecture' (4 July 1977), rpt. in Robin Harris (ed.), *The Collected Speeches of Margaret Thatcher* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997), p. 64.

¹⁰ 'Encourage the individual and the community benefits. A parent's success is shared by his family, a pupil's by his school, a soldier's by his regiment. A man may climb Everest for himself, but at the summit he plants his country's flag. We can only build a responsible, independent community with responsible, independent people.' Margaret Thatcher, 'Speech to the Conservative Party Conference' (14 Oct. 1988), rpt. in Harris, *The Collected Speeches of Margaret Thatcher*, p. 337.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 336.

¹² For example, see Evans, *Thatcher and Thatcherism*, p. 122.

¹³ 'Margaret Thatcher's calls for a return to 'Victorian' values are intended to deal with this difficulty by evoking a time when aggressive competition co-existed with tradition, family, religion, respectability and deference.' Alan Sinfield, *Literature, Politics and Culture in Postwar Britain* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), p. 296.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 297.

¹⁵ Irving Kristol, quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 296.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 307.

individualism it engendered. However, it is significant that while many of the characters rise to positions of financial and political prominence, they either remain on the margins of these spheres of power or are actively betrayed by those who control them. With the exception of Cauter's New Right politician, they exist as disciples of a 'true' and undiluted spirit of enterprise; embodiments of the anti-social attitudes encoded within the ideology of Thatcherism rather than the administration itself. In effect, they function as dystopian projections of an imagined social formation rather than representations of a political reality, their chronicles of immorality and callousness indicting the destructive implications of a philosophy that sanctions an imbalance between the claims of individualism and social responsibility.

The primary satiric mode of these novels is based upon appropriations of the image of the self-made man, repudiating conceptions of meritocracy and the moral benefits of economic liberalism through the disreputable ascents of their central characters. Reflecting elements of Thatcher's own ascent, these rise-to-power narratives chart the emergence of lower middle class figures from the suburban margins to the centres of economic and political power. In contrast to the honest endeavour of the 'vigorous values', they achieve success through an equally instinctive propensity for brazen self-interest, opportunism, unscrupulousness and ruthless ambition. Their single-mindedness and self-reliance becomes the source of social isolation and moral indifference, precluding them from considerations of family loyalty, civic responsibility and emotional guilt. Furthermore, these biographical narratives are used to provide tangential accounts of the emergence of Thatcherism, the entrepreneurial or New Right attitudes of their protagonists juxtaposed against the shifting cultural and class formations of post-war British

society. Although often marginal within the dominant social formations of past epochs, their narratives acquire a ‘glorious teleology’¹⁷ with the arrival of the 1980s, Thatcherism’s validation of their financial achievements and ideological convictions transforming maverick detachment into cultural apotheosis. The effect of this structure is to present Thatcherism as a liberating revolution, unleashing social attitudes that had remained latent in earlier periods. A significant exception to this pattern is provided by the 1960s, a decade denounced by Thatcher for its permissive values but cited in these novels as a precursory period of consumerism and entrepreneurial freedom. Of course, with the exception of *Nasty, Very*, these historical frameworks are retrospectively delivered by highly unreliable first-person narrators and constructed in line with the ulterior motives that surround their acts of confession or legal declaration. Although the manner and intentions of the literary duplicity varies, the dishonesty and bias acts to reinforce the self-serving arrogance of the protagonists as well as obliquely parodying the New Right accounts of post-war history against which Thatcherism celebrated its ‘new beginning’.

Whether formulated as biographical account, confession or affidavit, these rise-to-power narratives display a similar satiric structure in indicting the ethos of individualism through their invidious characters whilst foreshadowing dénouements of self-destruction and symbolic retribution. Although implicitly asserting the liberal-humanist values of tolerance, social interdependence and moral responsibility through these caricatures, they remain ambivalent about the possibilities of challenging the zeitgeist ascendancy of Thatcherism. In the first person narratives of *Fixx* and *Dirty Tricks*, there is a danger that the negative vitality of their protagonists and the absence or weakness of positive alternatives brings

¹⁷ D.J.Taylor, *After the War*, p. 275.

their narratives ‘uncomfortably close to glorification.’¹⁸ In a similar manner to Harry Enfield’s ‘Loadsamoney’, the indefatigable spirit and derisive wit of their narrators treads a fine line between satiric parody and comic celebration. In addition, the use of teleological structures to invoke the conditions that produced Thatcherism also involve a recognition of the economic and social failures of the post-war settlement and consensus politics. Unlike the unfulfilled ideals that inform the optimistic resolutions of *The Radiant Way* and *Nice Work*, the social ideologies of the past critically illuminate the ‘enterprise culture’ but are not symbolically recalled as the basis for a prospective future. This is not to suggest that these texts somehow invalidate the foundations of their satiric attacks, merely that their condemnation of Thatcherism relies upon humanistic principles of individual morality and social responsibility disconnected from any broader political or cultural formation. As in other contemporaneous ‘state of the nation’ novels, ineffectual political opposition and continuing electoral successes inform dénouements that pessimistically imply the unassailable position of Thatcherism. However, their focus upon single characters exacerbates the fictional difficulties of this recognition, precluding the retractions through which other novels provide mitigating images of exemplary relationships or social microcosms. In spite of their divergent modes, each of these novels rescinds the potential for satiric punishment implied by their narrative structures. The characters either escape retribution and continue to embody the ascent of their entrepreneurial values, suffer downfalls that are disconnected from their political ideals, or are destroyed by circumstances that confirm the tenets of their ideology. Although portraying an emerging zeitgeist that fundamentally threatens the moral health and cohesion of the nation, these fictions

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 281.

remain unable to envisage a cultural tendency that may lead to the establishment of an alternative set of social attitudes.

The most straightforward elucidations of this narrative pattern appear in Julian Rathbone's *Nasty, Very* and Terrence Blacker's *Fixx*, the similarities between the characteristics and social backgrounds of their Thatcherite figures a testament to the coherence of the entrepreneurial myth. In each case, self-reliance and business acumen are portrayed as innate attributes, exemplified by Bosham's deceitful approach to monopoly and Fixx's retrospective interpretation of his premature birth as stealing 'a march on the opposition'.¹⁹ Significantly, these attributes separate them from the cultural values of their upbringing: Bosham from the class deference and the mean-spirited morality of the 1950s, Fixx from family traditions of military loyalty and non-conformist radicalism. Recognising themselves as a breed apart, they become determined to escape the stifling mediocrity of their lower middle class backgrounds (the 'No Man's Land'²⁰ of the class war) and acquire social status through the trappings of individual wealth. Having rejected advancement through education, both achieve success through ventures that reflect Thatcherism's emphasis upon wealth creation rather than material production. From his early career as an estate agent, Bosham dismisses the traditional commodity exchange of his father's shop in favour of warehouse storage: the owning and selling of air being 'the divine reduction to its absolutely barest essentials of the process of wealth creation.'²¹ More schematically reflecting post-war economic shifts, Fixx's early conversion to service industries leads him into property speculation; the new consumerism and show business during the 1960s; corporate diversification across

¹⁹ Terrence Blacker, *Fixx* (London: Bloomsbury, 1996 [1989]), p. 25.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

²¹ Julian Rathbone, *Nasty, Very. A Mock Epic in Six Parts* (London: Grafton, 1986 [1984]), p. 137.

the global village of the 1970s; and 'new establishment' greed in the 1980s. Contrary to the principles of meritocracy both figures are lazy and opportunistic, their meteoric ascents only attained through acts of criminality and unscrupulous exploitation. Initiated by arranging an illegal abortion in exchange for information and the fortuitous death of his upper class wife, Bosham's prosperity is maintained through a network of corrupt local officials and police informants. In the case of Fixx, capital is acquired by stealing his father's war medal, augmented through his abusive marketing of an immigrant singer, and ruthlessly preserved by transferring criminal liability to his unwitting business partner. Furthermore, the selfishness and coercion that characterises their business practices extends to their private lives, the sexual act reduced to the attainment of self-satisfaction and more established relationships measured solely in terms of class conquest and economic gain. Taken in combination, the competitive and acquisitive values of the entrepreneur are depicted as sanctioning wanton avarice and social hostility, the individualistic ambitions of Bosham and Fixx intrinsically opposed to conceptions of communal responsibility, ethical behaviour and moral culpability. In effect, they constitute satiric exaggerations of Hewison's criticism of Thatcherite cultural philosophy, personifying the dangers of a society in which 'the market becomes the only sphere of social action ... the economic becomes the only motive of morality ... [and] economic activity becomes the principle form of human expression.'²²

However, while these novels present Thatcherite man as a familiar stereotype, their divergent narrative styles and thematic frameworks also reveal the developing significance of the entrepreneurial values through the 1980s. Written in the wake of the government's 1983 General Election victory, the protagonist of

²² Hewison, *Culture and Consensus*, p. 212.

Rathbone's novel exists at the vanguard of the 'enterprise culture', his rise indicative of the emergence of a new political breed rather than the cultural prevalence of his ethos. Reinforced by the sparse realism of the narrative mode, Bosham's apotheosis marks the arrival of a vulgar and grubby illiberalism motivated more by self-interest than ideological conviction. From the outset, his progression is measured against the inherited privilege of Terry Mead through a personal rivalry that develops from class hostility into party political division. Unlike the crusading arrogance of other Thatcherite figures Bosham retains a deep insecurity about his social status, his financial ruthlessness allowing him access only to the fringes of Woolingham's cultural establishment. Even his eventual possession of the town's oldest house cannot mask his social and intellectual inferiority; a deficiency illustrated by numerous misquotations and attempts to assume sophistication through antique interior décor and a fireside collection of Dickens. Similarly, ignorance and prejudice condition his political views, the working class reduced to 'oicks' and 'elves' and Thatcher's 1979 General Election chances dismissed on the basis that 'the great British public will not vote for a bint.'²³ However, as the novel's dénouement illustrates, Bosham's social status is transformed by Thatcher's determination to alter the composition and ideological direction of the Conservative Party.²⁴ Encapsulated by the contest for the local Conservative candidacy, Bosham's self-made credentials and network of Rotarian businessmen stand against Mead's compassionate 'one-nation' paternalism and the 'blue rinse brigade' of the local association. Replicating the methods that ensured his economic success, Bosham prevails by a smear campaign aided by his corrupt patronage of policemen, the local media and members of the British Movement.

²³ Rathbone, *Nasty, Very*, p. 244.

²⁴ For further discussion, see Evans, *Thatcher and Thatcherism*, pp. 48-49.

Transformed into ‘a man of real, permanent, traditional substance’²⁵ by a Central Office advertising guru, Bosham is eventually elected to parliament as one of Thatcher’s ‘princes of industry’. As a reflection of the particular temper of the 1983 General Election, his campaign is dominated by the rhetoric of conviction politics and a militaristic patriotism. However, while indicting the shallow populism of this victory through the slogan ‘Bosham’s gotta lotta bottle’,²⁶ the drunken behaviour of SDP punks and the Labour Party’s gerrymandering reveal the novel’s broader dismay towards the political process as a whole.

There is no possibility of a change in government this time, and the fact that the seat will change hands is source of shame rather than excitement. All have colluded, and as a result the social fabric may be destroyed – the whole kingdom may be reduced to an uninhabitable wasteland.²⁷

As a result, Rathbone’s mock epic satire concludes as an expression of liberal disbelief towards a zeitgeist of political cynicism and social disaffection in which Bosham’s intolerance, right-wing xenophobia and selfish individualism appear a credible alternative. Yet in the context of this chapter, it is significant that Bosham’s apotheosis is achieved without popular support, an opportunistic victory rather than the inception of a new cultural formation. Written prior to the concerted entrepreneurial discourse of late 1980s, he exists as an exploiter of political symbolism rather than an ideologue with his rise to power dependent upon a fragmented political opposition and the ‘Falklands effect’. Although the catastrophic consequences of Thatcher’s re-election are certainly implied, Bosham’s entrepreneurial values are permitted electoral success by a state of social disintegration rather than through their credence as a cultural philosophy. While indicting the Conservative party for cynically appropriating the myth of the ‘self-

²⁵ Rathbone, *Nasty, Very*, p. 299.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 300.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 279.

starter' for political advantage, *Nasty, Very* unwittingly captures the transition between the pragmatism of Thatcher's first term in office and the determined radicalism that came to define Thatcherism. Indeed, it is possible to argue that the morbid nature of Rathbone's disbelief implicitly presents the general election of 1983 as the nation's nadir, a moment of moral and social crisis that *cannot* continue unabated. Whilst this palpable sense of outrage may not have been shared by the public,²⁸ it denotes a confidence in the values of liberal-humanism as a potential stimulus for change; a confidence that becomes increasingly subdued and ironically expressed in novels that address the enterprise culture of the late 1980s.

The fictional effects of this separation are exemplified by Terence Blacker's *Fixx*, a novel that caricatures an economic elite more arrogant in its convictions and more assured about its historic inevitability. In contrast to the austere realism that accompanies Bosham's insinuation into political power, Fixx's confession takes the form of a personal manifesto: a celebration of entrepreneurial values and achievements dedicated to the next 'young eaglet poised to take wing into the bright blue sky of free enterprise.'²⁹ While sullen resentment and social uncertainty accompany Bosham's individualism, Fixx revels in his exceptional status as a 'philosopher of the market-place, risk-taker, Romeo, role model to a generation.'³⁰ From his early claim to have influenced the 'modest success'³¹ of Archer, Heseltine and Rice, Fixx defines himself as the original 1980s entrepreneur, unsurpassed in the dynamism and flamboyance of both his business methods and sexual conquests.

A similar confidence underpins his retrospective depiction of post-war cultural

²⁸ A survey of public opinion conducted for the Guardian in 1983 found that in general 'the state of the nation [was] accepted with resignation and seen as an inevitability about which little [should] or could have been done.' Alan Sked and Chris Cook (eds.), *Post-War Britain: A Political History*, 4th edn. (London: Penguin, 1993), p. 437.

²⁹ Blacker, *Fixx*, p. 9.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

history, the directions of his commercial ascent and personal relationships accorded paradigmatic significance: 'Something happens to me; I act; the world shifts ever so slightly on its axis.'³² Structured around a series of historically symbolic conflicts, Fixx's narrative is a celebration of his victorious crusade against individuals and social groups that oppose his free-market philosophy and patriarchal convictions. In addition to the conflicts with feminism and sexual equality that extend from his mother to his wife, there are more distinctly Thatcherite contests with the progressive elite of the 1960s, liberal-left journalism, and the patrician businessmen and politicians of the 1970s. In each case, the representatives of alternative cultural ideologies are vanquished by the deviousness of his economic, criminal and sexual machinations. Yet unlike Bosham's sly opportunism and struggle for social acceptance, Fixx embodies a zeitgeist of mercenary arrogance in which the philosophy of the market place completely subsumes traditional distinctions based upon politics, class or erudition. As this suggests, Fixx's revisionist chronicle is primarily concerned with the entrepreneur rather than political rise of Thatcherism, the '*annus mirabilis* of 1979' enshrining the virtues of 'robust self-interest' with 'the long awaited arrival of the businessmen's government'.³³ As in Rathbone's novel, Thatcher's cultural revolution is depicted as validating individual rapacity and unscrupulous advancement rather than inspiring party political allegiance. However, Blacker's novel remains distinguished by the assurance of Fixx's entrepreneurial identity, the comic cynicism with which he expresses his disdain towards 'the loser, the underachiever, the naysayer'.³⁴ Underscored by the capricious nature of Fixx's first person narration, Blacker provides a fictional

³² Ibid., p. 77.

³³ Ibid., p. 207.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 8.

caricature extrapolated from a cultural philosophy that legitimises consumer identities but is 'positively hostile to identity choices that threaten the authority of the entrepreneur and the supremacy of entrepreneurial values.'³⁵

While itself a parody of the excesses of economic individualism, the unreliability of Fixx's narrative also provides the material for Blacker's satiric opposition through the numerous omissions and thinly veiled contradictions intermittently exposed by a second voice. Eventually attributed to his daughter Catherine, these italicised sections progressively challenge the veracity of the Fixx's narrative, remind the reader of his fugitive status and foreshadow a finale of personal exposure and public retribution. Significantly, this opposition between Catherine's realism and Fixx's role as a self-aggrandising 'fantasist'³⁶ is informed by their differing perspectives upon the 1980s. In contrast with Fixx's domineering entrepreneurial optimism, Catherine's life as a squatter is characterised by communal tolerance, austerity and social concern.

I pointed to the thriving stock-market our wealth-creating government had encouraged, the lads scarcely out of their teens making six-figure salaries in futures and commodities; she pointed to the inner-city slums, the unemployment figures, the bolshy pinched faces of underpaid nurses and teachers. I expounded upon my philosophy of robust self-help and enterprise, enthused about the joys of good business, overnight money, healthy bottom lines; she saw money as a prison, ambition a treadmill.³⁷

A satiric punishment premised upon these contrasting values appears to be assured when Catherine acquires narrative authority and repudiates Fixx's claim '*to be the biggest fascist bastard that ever drew breath*'³⁸ by exposing his physical cowardice, lack of sexual charisma and paternal sentimentality. In effect, she depicts his entrepreneurial identity as a façade, a confident persona designed to

³⁵ David Marquand, quoted in Hewison, *Culture and Consensus*, p. 213.

³⁶ Blacker, *Fixx*, p. 146.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 228.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 246.

mask the fact that ‘*he was merely pitiful, just another mid-life crisis haunted by passing time and lost opportunity.*’³⁹ However, this indictment of narrative duplicity is subsequently questioned by a final section dedicated to Fixx’s apotheosis as an undercover entrepreneur within a government department committed to transforming the nation into ‘Great Britain Ltd – the sharpest, most aggressive outfit Europe has ever seen.’⁴⁰ Whether this is perceived as a continuation of a narrative fantasy hardly matters due to Fixx’s status as a cultural archetype, the fabrications of his narrative functioning as comic distortions of specific social circumstances and historical incidents.⁴¹ More importantly, Fixx’s seemingly inevitable course towards self-destruction is reversed, his pattern of ‘get involved, screw up, move on’⁴² now concordant with Thatcherite strategies for industrial rationalisation and public sector reform. In contrast with Rathbone’s disbelief and the strained optimism of other 1980s’ fiction, Blacker’s novel concludes by explicitly acknowledging Thatcherism’s cultural momentum through his protagonist’s apparent immunity to satiric punishment. Although unquestionably indicting Fixx’s monstrous entrepreneurial identity and the political ideology that sanctions it, Blacker’s satire ultimately recognises that his zeitgeist arrogance is not misplaced, that Fixx is truly a man ‘in tune with exciting times in which we live.’⁴³

A more politically sophisticated and ambivalent representation of Thatcherite man is provided by David Caute’s *Veronica or The Two Nations*, Disraeli’s classic division informing the autobiographical narratives of a Tory Home

³⁹ Ibid., p. 248.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 250.

⁴¹ ‘He may not personally, as he maintains, have sold leukaemia-inducing contraceptives in the Third World, rubber bullets in Belfast, riot control vehicles in Singapore and shackles in Central America, but someone did, and is still selling them.’ John Melmoth, ‘Up and on the make’, *Times Literary Supplement* (5 May 1989), p. 483.

⁴² Blacker, *Fixx*, p. 251.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 250.

Secretary and a Fleet Street journalist. On one level, the alternating sections of these characters combine as a political thriller drawn from the late 1980s media obsession with Conservative 'sleaze', Michael Parsons' confession of incest interspersed with Bert Frame's investigations and tabloid revelations. However, Cate expands the scope of the novel by making this incestuous relationship a seminal moment for both characters, their shared desire for Veronica at a boarding school during the war conditioning a future of personal and political antagonism. Significantly, both idealise her as a paragon of nationhood and the wartime spirit, a symbolism reinforced by the fact that her psychological destruction coincides with the bombing of Hiroshima. For Parsons she is 'V for victory' or 'the Crown Jewels',⁴⁴ his possessive fixation inspiring a quest for political power dedicated to enacting retribution upon those who impeded its fulfilment. Similarly, Frame's hatred towards the 'little Michaels' is also motivated by revenge, his childhood glimpse of the relationship underpinning a narrative of class alienation and political disillusionment.

We were all betrayed, we slum kids who'd surrendered our precious cynicism to adore and trust that one immaculate, beautiful paragon of English womanhood, English friendliness, and English decency.⁴⁵

Whilst it would be inaccurate to overstate Veronica's significance as a symbol of national potential, her interpretation of Sybil as affirming 'the One Nation of Crown and Cottage'⁴⁶ exists as a rare moment of uncomplicated idealism against the intolerance of Parsons' New Right ideology, Frame's unprincipled newspaper campaign, and the bitter social divisions tangentially revealed by his investigations. Circling around the story of Veronica's sordid destruction, Cate depicts the 1980s

⁴⁴ David Cate, *Veronica or The Two Nations* (London: Paladin Books, 1990 [1989]), pp. 9, 57.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 57, 176.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

as the nadir of a post-war history of unfulfilled ideals and waning traditions, a decade that significantly exacerbated a pre-existing decline in the ethics of public life and the social cohesion of the nation.

In terms of the emergence of Parsons as a New Right ideologue, Cauter connects his political ambition with the ruthlessness of his incestuous relationship with Veronica. Displaying an important characteristic of fictional Thatcherites, Parsons' political values are allied to an innate individualism that separates him from the conventional influences of family and institutional education. Never feeling "wholly part of 'we' or 'us'",⁴⁷ he rejects his father's patriotic conceptions of character and team spirit, his mother's social philanthropy, and the non-competitive principles of his liberal progressive school. In contrast, his rise from a lower middle class background is conditioned by instinctive right-wing convictions and a precocious sense of self-determination: 'I had schooled myself to be my own master, to fashion my own destiny'.⁴⁸ On a personal level, these attitudes are manifested through his selfish manipulation of Veronica and the solipsistic justifications he subsequently provides through his readings of literary accounts of incest. More significantly, Cauter uses Parsons' psychological obsession to indict a politics based upon exclusion and prejudice, his allegiance to New Right ideology conditioned by his resentment towards those that threatened or opposed his relationship with Veronica. His retrospective confession is punctuated by seminal incidents that reveal the displacement of romantic fanaticism into political conviction, the enemies of his early life prefiguring the social policies of his interspersed New Right speeches. Initially embodying the working-class ignorance and barbarism he perceives in Disraeli's novel, *Frame* becomes the source for later

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 9.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 282.

assertions of authoritarian government against majority rule, responsibility through private ownership and educational fees, and support for a class structure placed on the more rational footing of 'initiative, energy, enterprise'.⁴⁹ In addition, Nancy Lunt is associated with radical feminism and the cultural programs of the GLC, a psychiatrist with the 'morbid philanthropy'⁵⁰ of the welfare state, and Albert Harting with the evils of social democracy, collectivisation and cold war communism. In each case, interference with Parsons' incestuous desires induces ruthless acts of revenge that extend from personal hatred to political demonisation, a pattern graphically illustrated by Dr Rowley's refusal to return his confiscated books.

(That's state medicine for you – that vast Leviathan of paternalist do-gooders. No private practitioner would assume such arrogant prerogatives. He knows who pays his fees. Very well: one day they would be made to squeal.)⁵¹

Following the removal of Veronica, Parsons' political progression becomes increasingly archetypal, gleaning important lessons from the unpretentious 'sons of trade and toil'⁵² at grammar school before rising to parliamentary candidacy as a 'notable' within the Oxford Conservative Association. While his class background, solitary lifestyle and ideological fervour exclude him from the 'decent house party'⁵³ Conservatism of Charrington, Parsons' eventually emerges as a New Right disciple of Keith Joseph:

By 1970 it had become apparent to some of us that the solid 'Socialist nation' within the nation could be undermined only by a massive assault on the whole post-war 'settlement'. ... The great state monopolies had to be broken up, sold off; the welfare state had to be drastically slimmed down. Only then could we hand 'back' to the taxpayer his own money ...⁵⁴

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 54.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 147.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 162.

⁵² Ibid., p. 181.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 291.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 290.

However, in spite of a rise to cabinet prominence Parsons does not become a devotee of the Prime Minister, admiring ‘Her thirst for conflict, Her Iron Lady resolution’ but remaining averse to her Victorian mythology and the ‘daisy wheel and dot-matrix’⁵⁵ culture of her monetarist think tanks. In fact, with the reappearance of his private ‘urgencies’⁵⁶ through a bill to decriminalise incest, Cate effectively withdraws from the political significance of his central character. As the final revelation of his time with Veronica becomes imminent, Parsons’ political persona is revealed as a façade, a ‘parchment mask hiding its apartness of mind, its secret lair of being.’⁵⁷ In a shift indicative of novel’s moral ambiguity, the cultural refinement he disingenuously associates with his forbidden love becomes a means of illustrating the intolerance and philistine character of the Prime Minister. Complimenting Charrington’s acerbic comments about her autocratic style and xenophobic rhetoric,⁵⁸ Cate uses Parsons’ final interview to illuminate her social ineptitude, cultural ignorance and prejudicial hostility towards the Queen and the Clergy. There are two significant problems with this scene, firstly that the descriptions of ‘glacier eyes’ and ‘the jagged iron railings of Her mind’⁵⁹ become indicative of the problems of successfully transposing Thatcher into a fictional character.⁶⁰ Secondly, the criticisms are derived from Parsons’ position of immoral arrogance; the erudition through which he falsely justifies his abuse of Veronica

⁵⁵ Ibid., pp. 201, 203.

⁵⁶ As Charrington comments: ‘there are ... shall we say ... “urgencies” in Michael which demand a more direct kind of power. Difficult to describe. Almost as if he has scores to settle.’ Ibid., p. 198.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 304.

⁵⁸ As he remarks in relation to Thatcher’s rank-and-file appeal: ‘When she goes witch-hunting the wild ones pardon Her trespasses. If the Argies have learned their lesson and the Spaniards are too sensible to invade Gibraltar, She has to make do by bashing gays.’ Ibid., p. 204.

⁵⁹ Ibid., pp. 307, 308.

⁶⁰ As Taylor has noted, the demonic caricatures of Thatcher that populate 1980s fiction are partly due to the fact that ‘... the real Mrs Thatcher, brought to us by the televised walkabout and the photo-opportunity and groomed for us by the spin doctors of Central Office, was conspicuously in want of a third dimension.’, *After the War*, p. 269.

translated into a sneering contempt for Thatcher's social background and scientific training:

She sits there in a world all Her own believing that Ford was a man who made lots and lots and lots of cars. How could one explain to that corner shop mind that our mission should be to carve out a plot of earth called England where truth is not the enemy of honesty? Heavens, one can either cleave to Whitman or embrace Wilde, but this woman has never read either.⁶¹

While scandal and resignation lead to regression and suicide, Parsons' departing statement returns to the psychological roots of his incestuous obsession, the absence of parental affection revealed by his yearning for the familial harmony of *The Railway Children*. In effect, he is punished for the callous destruction of Veronica but not for the political ideology into which his passions are displaced. In spite of implying the underlying cynicism of the political culture through the clandestine motives of Parsons' rise-to-power, their exposure ironically augments the reputation of the Prime Minister because 'a woman so frequently betrayed by male fragility merely gains in stature at each resignation.'⁶² Whether or not this closing ambivalence can be ascribed to the difficulties of maintaining the allusive psychological framework that surrounds Veronica, the demise of Cate's protagonist carries little political significance beyond a concealed acknowledgement of the continuing political ascendancy of Thatcherism.

A similar ambivalence informs the narrative sections of Bert Frame, although its significance is more obviously related to the detrimental social effects of Thatcherism and difficulties of locating a position of effective opposition. Providing a parallel with the political ascent of Parsons, Frame's emergence from his Limehouse background informs a wider portrayal of the post-war decline of working-class culture and the subsequent fragmentation of the Labour movement

⁶¹ Cate, *Veronica or The Two Nations*, p. 306.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 307.

during the 1980s. Ironically, the loss of cultural identity that characterises Frame's journey begins as a WEA student, an education that reinforces his allegiance to the traditions of class solidarity whilst excluding him from the communal recreations enjoyed by his family. As this class separation is enhanced by his removal to suburbia and marriage to a middle-class woman, Frame's political disillusionment is measured by the *Daily Mirror's* abandonment of the slogan 'Forward With the People'⁶³ in 1959 and the unions' betrayal of his father's anti-fascism through their support for Enoch Powell in 1968. Conditioned by his family connections with the causes and commitment of a pre-war generation, Frame functions as a bitter spokesman for the embattled position of the Labour movement under Thatcherism: 'we're still the good people, but helpless somehow against the little Michaels with their wealth and stealth.'⁶⁴ Whilst 'keeping faith' through the picket lines at Wapping and support for the miners strike, he fatalistically recognises the demise of working class solidarity and the reduction of its political tradition to 'nice anorak people' at Levellers Day commemorations and the 'cultural hegemony' espoused by the 'tarts on *Marxism Today*.'⁶⁵ Furthermore, Frame's disenchantment with the left is reinforced by the success of Thatcherism's populist rhetoric and economic individualism. This is primarily represented through the 'survival-of-the-fittest social Darwinism'⁶⁶ that underpins the working class hooliganism of Bobby Dukes.

... Bobby hurls himself into a tunnel of noise at the small, sunny end of a tunnel of which are GTI sports cars, shares in British Telecom, a profit on the sale of his previous one-bedroom flat in Acton, and kicking the other fellow's fingers off the ladder. Bobby despises unions, hates blacks, and believes everything he reads about social security spongers.⁶⁷

⁶³ Ibid., p. 245.

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 139.

⁶⁵ Ibid., pp. 138, 139, 140.

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 112.

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 111.

Supplemented by the hostile comments of an NHS doctor and social worker, Frame's sections appear to construct a familiar 'state of the nation' perspective, criticising Thatcherism for dismantling the post-war settlement and encouraging a divisive culture in which '[p]rofit is the yardstick of every human transaction.'⁶⁸ In this context, Frame's vengeful pursuit may be construed as just act of retribution for Parsons', and by extension the government's, betrayal of Veronica's egalitarian spirit. However, as Bobby's adherence to the attitudes of the popular press implies, Frame's 'state of the nation' digressions are significantly undermined by his complicity with the cultural tendencies he deplors. Although expressing outrage at betrayals of class solidarity and the decline in political journalism, his hypocrisy is exposed by his financially motivated decision to join a tabloid newspaper that specialises in sex scandals and moral majority hysteria. Furthermore, with his children at public school and an acceptance that 'you can't afford a conscience and a mortgage',⁶⁹ Frame is revealed as merely an alternative version of the Thatcherite self-made man. This connection is made explicit by Charrington: 'Michael has made his own way in the world – as indeed have you yourself...'.⁷⁰ For all his nostalgia and virulent anti-Thatcherism, the political context he weaves into his investigations exists as a deceitful grasp for a position of moral authority. Indeed with the revelation that the entire narrative has been constructed by Frame around a confession that emerged during the inquest, the novel itself becomes an act of unscrupulous opportunism, Parsons' suicide reduced to a situation in which 'you earned a living or lost one.'⁷¹ Ultimately, Cauter reveals the duplicity that exists on both sides of his updated Disraelian division, the perspectives of the New Right and

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 112.

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 246.

⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 291.

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 316.

Old Left equally compromised by hypocrisy and self-interest. The ambiguity of the novel is therefore produced by the absence of any untainted moral or ideological benchmark, the dual narratives presenting a zeitgeist characterised by political cynicism, social fragmentation, and the ambitions of economic advancement. Whether this is intended to assert the hegemonic influence of Thatcherite values remains unclear, but they are undoubtedly central to the depiction a nation in which ‘traditional values and culture ... [have] been usurped, rewritten and confused.’⁷²

By far the most brutal and compelling personification of Thatcherite ideology is provided by the anonymous narrator of Michael Dibdin’s *Dirty Tricks*, a novel that expands from the generic conventions of the crime thriller to satirise entrepreneurial ambition and the hypocrisy of a class conscious British society. Like Cauter and Rathbone, Dibdin uses a confessional narrative to expose the callous and unrepentant self-interest of his central character whilst suspending the possibility of an individual, and politically symbolic, act of punishment. However, instead of the lower middle class backgrounds, business instincts and anti-intellectualism of Fixx and Bosham, the Oxford educated protagonist is depicted as a product of his parents’ belief that ‘[n]iceness was what counted in life, not money’⁷³ as well as the hedonistic and experimental spirit of the 1960s. Furthermore, rather than representing the post-war shift from consensus to Thatcherism through a biographical arc, Dibdin uses his narrator’s return from a global quest for ‘experience’ to illuminate the profoundly altered condition of the nation.

The attitudes and assumptions I’d grown up with had been razed to the ground, and a bold new society had risen in their place, a free-enterprise, demand driven, flaunt-it-and-fuck-you society, dedicated to excellence and achievement. ... Created by this

⁷² Mark Wormald, ‘Tunnel Vision’, *Times Literary Supplement* (25 Aug. 1989), p. 918.

⁷³ Michael Dibdin, *Dirty Tricks* (London: Faber and Faber, 1991), p. 20.

one woman! She had spurned the hypocritical cant beloved of politicians and addressed herself directly to the people, showing how well she knew them, telling them what they whispered in their hearts but dared not speak, calling their bluff! ‘You don’t want a caring society,’ she had told them in effect ... ‘No, it’s no use protesting! I *know* you. You’re selfish, greedy, ignorant and complacent. So vote for me.’⁷⁴

In contrast to the social cachet, leisured lifestyle and hospitality he enjoyed as an EFL teacher and ‘cultural ambassador’, he returns to a society in which he is ‘just damaged goods, another misfit, another over-educated, under-motivated loser’.⁷⁵ Exemplified by the stringent working conditions of Clive’s entrepreneurial language college and the privation that surrounds his East Oxford lodgings, the protagonist is forced to confront a new culture of economic exploitation, social division and ruthless ambition. Unlike the innate attributes of other Thatcherite figures, Dibdin’s character undergoes an ideological conversion motivated by an assumed right to equity, a determination to acquire the lifestyle he was unjustly denied through his exposure to ‘humanistic propaganda’.⁷⁶ However, the caricature that emerges from this conversion offers a similar satirical view of Thatcherite values, the tenets of self-help and social advancement again portrayed as validating unbridled avarice, devious opportunism and sexual manipulation. The protagonist effectively dispenses with the ‘decadent indulgences’ of moral decency and justifies his contemplation of murder as appropriate to a zeitgeist in which ‘every other human value has been called into question.’⁷⁷ While this reveals an underlying affinity with other personifications of Thatcherite values, *Dirty Tricks* is distinguished by the concentration of its crime novel structure, the minutia of design and execution limiting the narrator’s ascent to specific acts against individuals as opposed to expansive advances through the realms of finance and politics.

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 21.

⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 27.

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 135.

⁷⁷ Ibid., pp. 5, 77.

Exemplifying the tendency by modern crime writers to dissolve the barriers between genre fiction and mainstream literature,⁷⁸ the malicious schemes and individualistic ethos of Dibdin's narrator are used to illuminate the acute class distinctions of Oxford society. Elucidating his circumstances to a South American court, the narrator functions as both accused criminal and cultural guide, his dubious entreaty incorporating dissections of the social manners and class hierarchies that condition his ascent. Traversing the social geography of the city, he maps the gradations of status that lie between East and North Oxford, the subtle distinctions of class that surround the dinner party, buffet brunch and sherry evenings. Whilst implicitly establishing Oxford as a microcosm of the economic and cultural divisions of the nation, the protagonist's analytic descriptions of these social occasions is also significant in revealing the complex relationships between financial status and class identity. In contrast to the subsuming economic vision of Fixx, Dibdin's narrator remains acutely aware of the limitations of financial acquisition, his entrepreneurial methods merely the means of attaining a more permanent and exclusive social standing.

This upward mobility begins with his introduction to the 'lumpenbourgeoisie' and suburban culture of Dennis and Karen Parsons, their dinner party attended by a thriving Thatcherite class of accountants, solicitors, computer analysts and advertising consultants. Inspired by the contrast between the Volvos and Audis and his 'tenth-hand push-bike',⁷⁹ the narrator recognises the obsolescence and impotence of his counter-cultural values against the competitive materialism and new consumer identities of the 1980s.

⁷⁸ Peter Lewis, 'The Art of Interrogation', *Stand Magazine*, vol. 33, no. 1 (Winter 1991), p. 83.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

These people were armed and dangerous. They had houses, wives, cars, careers, pensions. They bought and sold, consumed and produced, hired and fired. They ski'd and sailed and rode and shot. Once I could have seen them off by asserting that I had no interest in such things ... [b]ut that wouldn't wash any more, not at my age.⁸⁰

In spite of the additional humiliation of being labelled an 'eternal student', the narrator maintains a sense of superiority over the Parsons by virtue of his cultural refinement; their wine snobbery, regional accents and superficial displays of artistic and literary discernment mockingly revealed as the product of class insecurity: 'They knew their own taste wouldn't do, poor dears, but they weren't sure what *would*.'⁸¹ Conveying his relationship with the couple through the logic of the market place, the narrator fulfils Karen's demand for sex whilst simultaneously acting as Dennis's 'court jester'⁸² by satisfying his cultural pretensions through displays of erudition. In spite of the 'compensation' he receives through the seduction of Karen, the continuing weakness of his social and financial position is exposed and exacerbated by an 'asset-stripping'⁸³ holiday and his subsequent return to unemployment. Whether boating accident or pre-meditated murder, his material prospects are transformed by the removal of Dennis, the cynical manipulation of Karen's maternal instincts ensuring a marital 'happy ending' of six figure investments and a BMW. Celebrating the maxim that only 'contrast can create value', the narrator flaunts the symbolism of his car amidst the poverty of East Oxford whilst claiming to provide a public service by introducing the local children to the truth that '[what] makes the world go round is not love or kindness ... but envy and greed.'⁸⁴ Forming the crux of the novel's satirical message, Dibdin uses his character's framework of economic and social comparisons, coupled with his

⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 10.

⁸¹ Ibid., p. 11.

⁸² Ibid., p. 50.

⁸³ Ibid., p. 58.

⁸⁴ Ibid., pp. 116, 117.

mercenary self-advancement, to indict both the subtle ruthlessness of the existing class structure and the arrogant brutality encouraged by the new philosophy of free-market individualism.

This conjunction is perfectly illustrated by the antithetical social groups that ostracise the couple at the Carters' nouveau-riche brunch. Through his naïve conception of Oxford as an expression of 'our whole Western civilization',⁸⁵ the American host remains blissfully unaware of the contemptuous superiority of the cultured class he so admires and the greedy indifference of his business counterparts. Although the narrator considers himself a natural inhabitant of the former group, the scandal of his marriage to Karen and her drunken flirtations induce similar attitudes of mockery and disdain: 'Gown despised me for selling my soul to a shrill shallow shrew, town for being an old fart who couldn't satisfy his frisky young mate.'⁸⁶ Initiating a more criminal stage of social advancement, the narrative increasingly focuses upon the details of an elaborate scheme to dispense with Karen and thereby enable entrance into the North Oxford society of Alison Krammer. Significantly, the former objective is also motivated by the desire to enact retribution upon Clive, Karen's new lover and epitome of an alternative progression from 1960s businessman to vindictive eighties entrepreneur. Like Bosham and Fixx, Clive's success begins with the exploitation of an earlier era of individualism, invoking a retrospective bitterness from the narrator towards those involved in 'packaging my dreams and hopes and selling them back to me at a profit.'⁸⁷ Following events in which accident and design coincide to ensure Karen's death and Clive's imprisonment, the narrator's exoneration and financial control of

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 140.

the language school confirm his entrepreneurial and intellectual ascendancy, the squandered advantages of his life redeemed by the destruction of his former peers and unpunished criminal deceptions.

Whilst assuming the continuation of this ascent through his attachment to Alison, the double dénouement of the novel affects a reversal of fortune that reveals the dominance and duplicity of her class at both a private and public level. Completing his function as an observer of social mores, the narrator outlines the necessary transitions from exhibition to understatement, property value to precise location, and brands of car to the kudos of preciously educated children. Yet while Alison may be the 'real thing' the narrator discovers he is not, his cultural pretension exposed by the musical *faux pas* induced by Alison's daughter and his inability to decipher the cryptic crossword clue posed by the parodic figure of Inspector Moss.⁸⁸ These incidents foreshadow Alison's outraged refusal to provide an alibi, an act perceived by the narrator as indicative of the clinical severity through which her class preserves a genteel respectability against the momentum of the zeitgeist.

[She] ... still thought right and wrong were as clear and unambiguous as right and left. Even a decade of radical and regenerative government hadn't taught her that her moral code ... was as irrelevant to the contemporary world as theories about the great chain of being or the music of the spheres.⁸⁹

Ultimately, his vindictive attempt to educate Alison exposes the hypocrisy of this moral code, her relationship with the narrator merely providing cover for an affair with Thomas Carter. Furthermore, the social naïveté displayed by Carter throughout the novel is revealed as an attempt to compensate for a faith in 'natural

⁸⁸ Dibdin's comic portrayal of the television character is made evident by references to Wagner and Moss's assertion that he has 'excellent taste in poetry, women, music, beer and crime.' *Ibid.*, p. 216.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 225.

decency'⁹⁰ lost during the Vietnam War. Effecting a transformation from Machiavellian villain to unwitting dupe, he is forced to flee the country by Thomas's concluding threat to falsely testify against him. While exposing the hubris of his invidious opportunism and free-enterprise ethos, this incident does not signify a restoration of moral or humanistic values as his downfall is ultimately ensured by the more subtle cynicism of Alison and Thomas. In effect, they complete a portrayal of the class structure as gradations of pretence and deceit, a hierarchical configuration of etiquette and ritual that both formalises economic competitiveness and discretely veils the selfishness of individuals. This is not to suggest that the Dibdin's novel implies the cultural hegemony of Thatcherism, merely that it remains ambivalent about the moral distance between criminal and victim, between the unfettered ruthlessness of the entrepreneur and the covert practices of exclusion and denigration that sustain the established social structure. Although undoubtedly exacerbated by his questionable motives, the narrator's passage through the strata of British society confirms rather than repudiates the philosophical wisdom of his Thatcherite creed: 'There is no such thing as society, only individuals engaged in a constant unremitting struggle for personal advantage. There is no such thing as justice, only winners and losers.'⁹¹

This pattern of confirming retribution is further exemplified by the political machinations that surround his extradition appeal, the framing correspondence between civil servants revealing an equal cynicism operating at the level of nation-states. Ironically, the protagonist acquires the status of betrayed disciple; used by the government he venerated to divert attention from clandestine dealings with a

⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 229.

⁹¹ Ibid., p. 237.

virulently anti-Communist dictatorship.⁹² Substantiating his accusation of ‘neo-colonialist arrogance’,⁹³ Dibdin uses these letters to parody the supercilious xenophobia and illiberalism emanating from Downing Street through the figure of Bernard (presumably Ingham). Like so many other representations of the government, *Dirty Tricks* concludes by inferring a totalitarian propensity, the death squads of the fictitious South American state satirically allied with the crusading zeal of Thatcher’s revolution:

I recall Bernard once remarking apropos of the Charter 88 people that you couldn’t make a revolution without smashing a few eggheads. If the Generalissimo and his colleagues have taken him at his word, who are we to criticize then for displaying a degree of realism about which we can only joke?⁹⁴

In spite of his successful appeal, Dibdin’s final plot twist ensures that the narrator becomes a victim of his own ideology in a double sense, his respect for the dictatorship’s artless fidelity to his social ideals ironically leading to his ruthless assassination for communist affiliations. In one sense this marks a suitable come-uppance, the co-conspirator in his past crimes becoming the source of his eventual punishment. However, the resolution of the novel’s broader political implication remains deeply ambiguous, the chastisement of the villain not allied with a symbolic purification of the corrupting values he embodied. The narrator may be ‘hoist with his own petar’⁹⁵ but the cultural ethos he adopted remains undiminished, the malevolence of his social manoeuvring merely an extreme expression of the cynicism that lies behind the protocols of class identity and the rhetoric of Thatcherism.

⁹² In the paraphrased words of the Generalissimo: ‘Downing Street is as anti-Communist as he is, so what’s the harm if it comes out that the SAS has been training his death squads, or that the PM’s personal economic adviser helped him manage an economy in which eight families own 94 per cent of the GNP?’ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 235.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 241.

⁹⁵ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Cyrus Hoy (ed.), Norton Critical Edition, 2nd ed. (London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1992), III.IV.211.

Dialogism and Satire: The ‘Disappointed Moralism’ of Martin Amis’s *Money*

In the context of fictional representations of Britain during the 1980s, Martin Amis’s *Money* is undoubtedly rendered exceptional by its apparent disregard towards the domestic impact of Thatcherism. This could be attributed to the novel’s concern with the early years of the decade, a period prior to the confirmation of Thatcherism’s political ascendancy. However, Amis’s perspective upon the transitional ‘state of the nation’ is conditioned by a framework of historical decline and global economic change that transcends conceptions of political efficacy. Rather than discerning national change in terms of a cultural retraction from the ideals of consensus, the despondent and disintegrating Britain that appears in *Money* stands at the end of a twentieth-century narrative of imperial abatement. Through Self’s transatlantic oscillation, the diminished ‘condition of England’ is measured against the dynamism of New York and its position at the centre of a new ‘money’ culture. As this suggests, Amis’s conception that the future of Britain will be determined by forces beyond the boundaries of the nation-state leads to an abandonment of the circumscription associated with the ‘state of the nation’ novel. In contrast to the fictional attempts to preserve the traditional conventions of the genre, *Money* asserts their obsolescence by revealing Britain’s cultural and political alteration as merely the by-product of a global movement in power.

Nineteenth century England is the time of our big novels, our centre-of-the-world novels. That imperial confidence has now shifted to America and you think quite cold-bloodedly, quite selfishly, I want some of that. I want that amplitude that is no longer appropriate to England.¹

Furthermore, the ‘amplitude’ of Amis’s novel involves not merely a transfer of cultural power between nations, but a dispersal of power through the ‘money

¹ Martin Amis, quoted in interview with Christopher Bigsby, in Malcolm Bradbury and Judy Cooke (eds.), *New Writing* (London: Minerva, 1992), p. 182.

conspiracy' of international financial capitalism and global consumerism. What lies behind the structure of *Money* is recognition of the disappearance of national self-determination within a world economy oblivious to the distinctions of territory, politics and cultural tradition.

However, while the global meta-narrative of 'money culture' results in a radical divergence from the 'state of the nation' form, the novel's personification of the zeitgeist through John Self remains within the dominant critique of the 1980s. Indeed, Amis's embodiment of an individualistic culture of greed and excess can be viewed as an influential precursor for later depictions of the Thatcherite entrepreneur. Although harnessed to a broader context, Self operates as an exemplary figure within a satire that indicts the ideology of economic individualism for exacerbating a dissolution of the social fabric and validating a process of intellectual and moral desensitisation. Yet as I have already discussed, this mode of zeitgeist critique is often accompanied by a satiric ambivalence concerning the affirmation of an alternative cultural framework. In common with 'state of the nation' fiction as a whole, they reveal the difficulty of locating a critical position from which the ideological values of the 1980s could be opposed and repudiated. What is interesting about *Money* is the extent to which it integrates, and elucidates, this satirical ambivalence through a complex metafictional structure. In contrast to the simple reversals and retractions that characterise other examples, Amis's use of a parallel author-figure exists at the centre of dialogic narrative which both refutes the validity of an assured satirical condemnation whilst ironically recuperating the possibility of moral judgement.

Before examining these narrative complexities, it is important to recognise that a large proportion of critical examinations of *Money* have paid little attention to

its socio-historical or ideological dimensions.² Academic interest has concentrated upon the fact that *Money* is not only a seminal novel in a zeitgeist frame of reference but also functions as an exemplary text for the complex interactions within British fiction between fictional realism and postmodern literary devices.³ This line of inquiry is undoubtedly justified, even prompted, by both the novel's self-referentiality and the tendency towards a 'postmodern trickiness'⁴ throughout Amis's fiction. Indeed, any critic needs to be sensitive to the peculiar 'crossover' qualities of a writer who self-consciously positions himself between the influences of Saul Bellow and Vladimir Nabokov. However, the analysis offered in this chapter seeks to circumvent the question of aesthetic dominance (the extent to which *Money* can be viewed as a postmodern novel) by recognising a polyphonic structure within *Money* that self-consciously utilises multiple levels of narrative discourse. The novel incorporates postmodern devices, contemporary reference, cultural critique and social satire whilst ultimately refusing to grant a monological priority to any discursive mode. As the terminology of this remark reveals, this reading is indebted to Bakhtin and the prior connections made by Lodge and Diedrick⁵ between *Money* and Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*. This connection is primarily based upon both novels being 'Ich-Erzählung' forms of the

² Notable exceptions include Malcolm Bradbury, *The Modern British Novel* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1993); James Diedrick, *Understanding Martin Amis* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1995); and Laura L. Doan, "'Sexy Greedy Is the Late Eighties': Power Systems in Amis's *Money* and Churchill's *Serious Money*.' *The Minnesota Review*, vol. 34-35 (Spring/Fall 1990)

³ For example, Amy J. Elias, 'Meta-Mimesis? The Problem of British Postmodern Realism' and Catherine Bernard 'Dismembering/Remembering Mimesis: Martin Amis, Graham Swift', both in *Restant*, no. XXI (1993).

⁴ Martin Amis, quoted in Bradbury, *The Modern British Novel*, p. 406.

⁵ David Lodge, *After Bakhtin: Essays on Fiction and Criticism* (London: Routledge, 1990) and James Diedrick, *Understanding Martin Amis*.

confessional type’;⁶ narratives dominated by voice and self-consciousness rather than visualisation and objectivity. As in Dostoevsky, what is important is ‘not how his hero appears in the world but first and foremost how the world appears to his hero, and how the hero appears to himself.’⁷ However, whilst *Notes from Underground* contains a single narrative voice, *Money* utilises multiple voices to create the dialogic interaction that characterises the polyphonic novel:

... the novel in which a variety of conflicting ideological positions are given a voice and set in play both between and within individual speaking subjects, without being placed and judged by an authoritative authorial voice.⁸

Whilst this can be adopted as a broad template, *Money* carries the additional complexity of three separate levels of dialogue which, although inter-related, remain distinctive in terms of their orientation and discursive function. The most obvious of these is the internal dialogue of Self, the novel’s fragmented and contradictory anti-hero who, as his name ironically implies, engages in a search for a stable identity. As Bakhtin noted in relation to the ‘Underground Man’, Dostoevsky ‘sought a hero who would be occupied primarily with the task of becoming conscious ... whose life would be concentrated on the pure function of gaining consciousness of himself and the world.’⁹ However, rather than offering a *Bildungsroman* development of a unique consciousness, Self functions as a caricature of a particular historical dynamic. As such, his internal dialogue acts as an exploration and critical exposure of the ideological contradictions of the emerging culture of the 1980s. This is reinforced by his relationships with other ‘speaking subjects’ although it should be noted that majority of these do not

⁶ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson, intro. Wayne C. Booth (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), p. 197.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

⁸ Lodge, *After Bakhtin*, p. 85.

⁹ Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, p. 50.

function as the ‘independent consciousness’ or ‘fully valid voices’¹⁰ of Bakhtin’s polyphonic novel. Instead, they operate as extensions of Self’s internal dialogue by personifying, affirming or challenging the voices of his decentred consciousness. The obvious exception to this, and focus for the second level of dialogue, is the character of Martin Amis. In addition to operating as a ‘fully valid voice’ through his discussions with Self, Amis also exists as an author-figure that introduces a discourse upon the cultural efficacy of art, authorial control and ethical responsibility. While this relationship will be discussed in greater depth later, it is important to recognise that Self is far from the ‘mute, voiceless object of the author’s words’, for as Lodge humorously notes, he ‘not only answers the author back, as Bakhtin said of Dostoevsky’s heroes, but actually throws a punch at him.’¹¹ The third level of dialogism involves the discourses of Self, the author-figure and the satirical mode of the novel. This interaction is premised upon the fact that the oral nature of Self’s *Ich-Erzählung* narrative leads to a particular type of double-edged discourse that Bakhtin describes as hidden dialogicity. This occurs when there is ‘a dialogue of two persons in which the statements of the second speaker are omitted’:

We sense that this is a conversation, although only one person is speaking, and it is a conversation of the most intense kind, for each present, uttered word responds and reacts with its every fibre to the invisible speaker, points to something outside itself, beyond its own limits, to the unspoken words of another person.¹²

As I shall exemplify later, the second speaker in *Money* can be viewed as the reader, or rather an implied reader, through which Amis opens up the possibility of satirical judgement and narrative closure.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 6.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 24.

¹² Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, p. 197.

The primary basis for the novel's critique of the 1980s is provided by the internal dialogue of Self's fractured consciousness. Reflecting the competing claims of economic individualism and an awareness of its destructive effects, the 'four distinct voices' of his consciousness encapsulate his struggle for an identity beyond the values of the zeitgeist:

First, of course, is the jabber of money, which might be represented as the blur on the top rung of a typewriter - £%(1/4)@=&\$! - sums, subtractions, compound terrors and greeds. Second is the voice of pornography. This often sounds like the rap of a demented DJ: *the way she moves has got to be good news, can't get loose till I feel the juice - suck and spread, bitch, yeah bounce for me baby ...* And so on ... Third is the voice of ageing and weather, of time travel through days and days, the ever-weakening voice of stung shame, sad boredom and futile protest ...

Number four is the real intruder ... It has to do with quitting work and needing to think about things I never used to think about. It has the unwelcome lilt of paranoia, of rage and weepiness made articulate in spasms of vividness: drunk talk played back sober.¹³

Although not functioning as explicit ideological options, these voices constitute alternative ethical frameworks that condition Self's perception, and apprehension, of himself and the culture in which he functions. Indeed, Self's internal dialogue can be viewed as an extension of the psychological divisions that afflict numerous fictional representatives of Thatcherism and the 'enterprise' culture of the 1980s. In spite of *Money's* anti-humanist mode, there remains an assertion that the identity offered by economic individualism requires the suppression of innate human virtues. From this perspective, it could be argued that Self's internal dialogue provides a limited example of the cultural patterns that Bakhtin perceives as a characteristic feature of Dostoevsky's fiction:

[his] extraordinary gift ... for hearing his epoch as a great dialogue, for detecting in it not only individual voices, but precisely and predominantly the *dialogic relationship* among voices, their dialogic *interaction*.¹⁴

¹³ Martin Amis, *Money* (London: Penguin, 1985 [1984]), p. 108.

¹⁴ Lodge, *After Bakhtin*, p. 92.

However, it is indicative of Amis's analysis of the early 1980s that the novel does not provide a 'great' and diverse cultural dialogue but asserts the dominance of the jabbering voice of money. Through the excesses of a character 'consumed by consumerism',¹⁵ the novel depicts a culture in which money is 'the only gauge of anything, the only measure'.¹⁶ Underpinning Self's comprehension of politics, social structures and sexual relations, it operates as the definitive reference point for a new cultural hierarchy and forms the boundaries of possibility: 'money is freedom ... [b]ut freedom is money.'¹⁷ The origins of this cultural shift are made explicit in the early sections through the figure of the 'big blond screamer' and his accusations of 'fraud and betrayal, redundancy, eviction':

I read in a magazine somewhere that they're chronics from the municipal madhouses. They got let out when money went wrong ten years ago ... Now there's a good joke, a global one, cracked by money. An Arab hikes his zipper in the sheep pen, gazes contentedly across the stall and says, 'Hey, Basim. Let's hike oil.' Ten years later a big whiteman windmills his arm on Broadway, for all to see.¹⁸

This transparent reference to the oil crisis of the 1970s illuminates the broad socio-economic thesis of the novel. As Hutton has argued, the crisis was pivotal to the creation of 'a whole new geography of haves and have-nots' that provided a 'dramatic opportunity for the international finance system'.¹⁹ The institutions of this system became increasingly powerful as national exchange controls proved ineffective against markets 'in which the currency could be bought and sold freely; and the floating-exchange-rate system simply allowed demand and supply to determine the price'.²⁰ As the 'blond screamer' exemplifies, Amis reflects this economic shift by personifying money as a global 'god' whose influence is

¹⁵ John Haffenden, *Novelists in Interview* (London: Methuen, 1985), p. 7.

¹⁶ Amis, *Money*, p. 124.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 270.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

¹⁹ Will Hutton, *The State We're In*, rev. edn. (London: Vintage, 1996), p. 59.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

inexplicable, inescapable and uncontrollable. Through Self's frequent digressions upon the character of the 'money conspiracy', Amis constructs a chaotic and arbitrary force spread across the global capital markets and capable of 'pussy-whipping' both individuals and nation-states. Indeed, it is significant that the novel contains only sporadic references to the political circumstances of Britain or America. Rather than viewing governments as pro-active elements, Amis infers political power as an insignificant by-product of global economic conditions. As Hutton has said of Thatcher's famous claim that she and her political project were not for turning: 'a statement she made, safe in the knowledge that the world economy was pushing all states in the direction she wanted to travel'.²¹ In this regard, Doan can be viewed as being overly specific in her criticism of the novel for failing 'to fulfil the grander aim of unmasking the ideological underpinnings of Thatcherism.'²² The politics and social policies of Thatcher and Reagan never directly appear in *Money*, an exclusion designed to reinforce the trans-atlantic and global hegemony of money. This is also illustrated by the novel's mode of direct connection, the persistent shifts from a macro-economic level to the urban landscapes, lifestyles and casualties of New York and London. Reflecting the fatalism of the novel's zeitgeist vision, the impenetrable nature of money is epitomised by the blond screamer's inability to recognise any individual, institution or system as culpable for his dispossession. Furthermore, Self's belief that '[m]oney is the only thing we have in common'²³ questions the potential for acts of collective resistance or communal refuge. Society has been atomised into individuals trapped within economic classifications and divided by their capacity to

²¹ Ibid., p. 62.

²² Doan, 'Sexy Greedy Is the Late Eighties', p. 79.

²³ Amis, *Money*, p. 116.

stimulate or suffer 'money-hate'. Similarly, the urban landscape of New York reflects a new money topography in which the wealth of Manhattan exists alongside the 'medium-poor' district of lower Eight Avenue and the 'no-money country' of the inner city.²⁴

Through the dominance of the voice of 'money' within his consciousness, Self functions as an exemplary product of this culture and a harbinger of its ideological values. For the majority of the novel, he embraces the individualism and commodification of consumer capitalism by seeking personal validation through the status and expense of his addictions, associations, possessions and sexual encounters. Fittingly, his financial ascent begins in the booming advertising industry of the 1980s producing sensationalist and semi-pornographic television commercials for 'smoking, drinking, junk food and nude magazines.'²⁵ However, he aspires to become one of the new heroes of the money hierarchy, to possess the 'clasp and nuzzle of real money' he hears in Fielding's voice or the economic purity of Ossie Twain:

His job has nothing to do with anything except money, the stuff itself. No fucking around with stocks, shares, commodities, futures. Just money ... he buys money with money, sells money for money. He works in the cracks and vents of currencies, buying and selling on the margin, riding the daily tides of exchange. For these services he is rewarded with money. Lots of it. It is beautiful, and so is he.²⁶

Self's hedonistic cycle of financial accumulation, consumption and personal gratification is a celebration of the possibilities of this culture. Throughout the novel he affirms the versatility and signifying power of money, 'semaphoring his credit card'²⁷ as an expression of status and identity. In effect, money has become a form of meta-language, which like Self and his transatlantic idiom, transgresses the

²⁴ Ibid., p. 117.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 78.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 120.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 130.

boundaries of nationality. It is important to recognise, however, that Self's idiom does not imply a total loss of national identity but represents a transatlantic movement of cultural power to a nation that has 'success in its ozone'.²⁸ While a 'watery and sparse' London is suffering from 'jet-lag', New York exists as a city of '[h]eat, money, sex and fever'.²⁹ Yet as Self gleefully observes, London is becoming more attuned to the values of his culture:

There used to be a bookshop here, with the merchandise ranked in alphabetical order and subject sections. No longer. The place didn't have what it took: market forces. It is now a striplite boutique, and three tough tanned chicks run it with their needy smiles. There used to be a music shop (flutes, guitars, scores). This has become a souvenir hypermarket. There used to be an auction room: now a video club. A kosher delicatessen - a massage parlour. You get the idea? My way is coming up in the world. I'm pleased ... the other stuff was never much use to me and I'm glad it's all gone.³⁰

As this summary reveals, Amis characterises the emerging culture of the 1980s through an opposition between 'high' culture (books, music, antiques, culinary appreciation) and the junk culture of physical gratification, kitsch, high fashion and the visual image. Indeed, the voice of money encourages an active hostility towards learning and the educated (Alec, Doris Arthur, Amis) by offering Self a criterion for social status that eschews academic achievement and cultural refinement. As Diedrick has noted, the source for Self's hostility appears in *The Moronic Inferno* and Amis's interest in the phrase '[i]f you're so smart, how come you ain't rich?': 'Such distortions which include an aggressive, even disgusted philistinism, provide the writer with a wonderfully graphic reversal of human values'.³¹ It is this 'reversal' that dominates the novel's depiction of Self's routine adherence to the shallow satisfactions of addiction, consumption and image:

²⁸ Ibid., p. 207.

²⁹ Ibid., pp. 118, 49.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 71.

³¹ Martin Amis, *The Moronic Inferno and Other Visits to America* (London: Penguin, 1987), p. 21.

Watching television is one of my main interests, one of my chief skills. Video films are another accomplishment of mine: diabolism, carnage, soft core. I realize, when I can bear to think about it, that all my hobbies are pornographic in tendency. The element of lone gratification is bluntly stressed. Fast food, sex shows, space games, slot machines, video nasties, nude mags, drink, pubs, fighting, television, handjobs.³²

Self exists as a consumer without 'resistance' who, in the absence of the 'sustenance' of high culture and education³³ is 'cretinized' by mass media entertainment. Whilst this may reveal a form of cultural conservatism, Amis's position is not one of intellectual elitism but the dystopian projection of a world in which the 'mind as the requirement of reasonable feeling becomes redundant'.³⁴ The ascendancy of Self's philistine culture is reinforced by the measurement of his progress against the public school and Cambridge educated Alec Llewellyn. While Alec has 'sinned against money' and entered Pentonville, Self escapes the Shakespeare pub and his working class background: '[m]e going up, him going down. Perhaps this was what I was paying for.'³⁵ Indifferent to the traditional demarcations of class and culture, Self celebrates money for being 'so democratic: you've got no favourites. You even things out for me and my kind.'³⁶

The democracy of consumerism and the diminishment of cultural 'resistance' reappear in Self's second voice of pornography. Indeed, a primary function of this voice is to reinforce the hegemony of the first by replicating the economic logic and global consumerism of the 'money conspiracy'. Although Self is unable to define pornography, he recognises that 'money is in the picture somewhere. There has to be money involved, at one end or the other.'³⁷ On one level, pornography is established in the novel as an exemplary 1980s' business, an

³² Amis, *Money*, p. 67.

³³ Martin Amis, quoted in Haffenden, *Novelists in Interview*, p. 22.

³⁴ Patricia Waugh, *The Harvest of the Sixties: English Literature and its Background, 1960-1990* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 32.

³⁵ Amis, *Money*, p. 56.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 238.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 315.

expanding and diversifying service industry that has become aggressively responsive to the demands of the global market place.

Fielding explained to me about the lucrative contingencies of pornography, the pandemonium of Forty-Second Street, the Boylesk dealerships on Seventh Avenue ... the soft proliferations of soft core in worldwide cable and network and its careful codes of airbrush and dick-wipe, the stupendous aberrations of Germany and Japan, the perversion-targeting in video mail-order, the mob snuff-movie operation conceived in Mexico City and dying in the Five Boroughs.³⁸

Although presented with his characteristic exaggeration, Amis's depiction of this industry reflects a genuine revolution in the availability of pornography in the late 1970s following the introduction of video technology. As Palac has stated from within the industry, 'the video revolution of the early 1980s turned video porn into a mainstream entertainment product'.³⁹ In accordance with Self's junk culture as a whole, Amis is less concerned with the mechanics of the industry's expansion than with its position within the shifting patterns of cultural value. Pornography follows an antithetical path to high culture, emerging from within an ethically disinterested consumerism with a new 'mainstream' respectability. Repeating the technique of 'graphic reversal', the novel satirically juxtaposes the material products of pornography with the industry's use of mainstream marketing strategies and ethos of customer satisfaction. While the 'Happy Isles' becomes a Hawaiian theme brothel, the retail 'emporiums' produce glossy brochures advertising '[g]rannies, kids, excreta, dungeons, pigs and dogs' to cater for the 'wants and likes' of the 'brisk lunchtime shoppers'.⁴⁰

Self's lack of cultural 'resistance' leads to an acceptance of pornography as both an art form and a framework of definitions concerning women, sexuality and gender relations. Providing an ideal blueprint through its nexus between sex and

³⁸ Ibid., p. 94.

³⁹ Lisa Palac, quoted in Diana E.H. Russell (ed.), *Making Violence Sexy: Feminist Views on Pornography* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1993), p. 15.

⁴⁰ Amis, *Money*, pp. 323, 324.

money, Self's pornographic voice is expressed through his reduction of women to the level of commodities to be onanistically evaluated and consumed: 'you can tell pretty well all you need to know about a woman by the amount of time, thought and money she puts into her pants.'⁴¹ Women are hierarchically categorised as products, interchangeable accessories defined by their 'aesthetic' qualities as sexual performers ('sack-artists') either by men, or in the cases of Vron and Butch, by themselves. The novel almost exclusively presents a world in which sexual desire and personal intimacy are wholly permeated by the pornography/money nexus. This is epitomised by the series of financial negotiations that constitute Self's relationship with Selina Street. She, like Fielding, is a 'ghostwriter'⁴² of Self's consciousness, validating his pornographic 'voice' as a performer and personification of male sexual fantasies. Trading upon her 'high street' eyes and 'brothel knowhow' to obtain a boutique, Selina and Self's grotesque distortions of romantic ritual reveal them to be equally versed in the values of the 'twentieth century' and equally corrupted by its 'necessary commerce'.⁴³

This positioning of Selina as Self's gender double is also significant in relation to Amis's broader, and more ambiguous, mapping of gender relations within the new culture. Whilst she recognises that financial power is used as a means of dominating women, Selina is unable to empower herself beyond patriarchal possession. In spite of her final success, Selina merely transfers ownership from Self to Ossie whilst retaining the belief that 'fucking and shopping' are the only things 'girls should be allowed to do much of'.⁴⁴ It is revealing that the 'democratic' opportunities of money available to Self are not available to Selina and

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 346.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 345.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 343.

that even financially powerful women like Martina remain passive players within the 'money conspiracy'. This has led Doan to criticise *Money*, in comparison with Caryl Churchill's *Serious Money*, for failing to 'examine the dynamics of the gender system' and electing to 'stay within the patriarchal gender boundaries by upholding the pattern of dominance and submission'.⁴⁵ From this perspective, Amis's representation of an entrepreneurial culture in which 'money is the only measure' fails, unlike Churchill's, to realise the implicit potential for the transgression of traditional gender roles. In fact, the novel does not merely 'stay within' patriarchal boundaries but grotesquely simplifies them into a gender/power binary premised upon naked aggression and physical violence. As his casual rationalisations of rape and physical assault imply, Self's gender-identity is not merely asserted through his financial power to consume pornography but involves a more fundamental physical domination: the exploitation of Selina's fearful realisation 'that half the members of the planet, one on one, can do what the hell they like with you.'⁴⁶ However, in terms of its cultural context, there is an ambiguity surrounding the source and significance of Self's violent masculinity. In one respect, his call for a return to the 'cave-man spirit' in response to gay culture and description of Doris Arthur as 'someone who's really worth raping'⁴⁷ reveals Self's misogyny as a desperate reaction to established cultural shifts. This potentially positions Self as an exponent of a residual sexism, an inheritor of the values of his father and The Shakespeare pub. However, there is also the possibility of retaining Self as the harbinger of a new culture with his misogyny an expression of the pornographic metaphors of power ('pussy-whipping' and 'gang-banging') that he attributes to money. From

⁴⁵ Doan, 'Sexy Greedy Is the Late Eighties', pp. 74, 79.

⁴⁶ Amis, *Money*, p. 14.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 202, 58.

this perspective, Self's masculinity stems from the 'violence' of a free-market culture in which human relationships are permeated by the ruthlessness and competition that exist on 'masculine Madison'.

In the cabled tunnels beneath the street and in the abstract airpaths of the sky, how much violence was crackling through New York? How would it level out? Poorly probably. Every line that linked two lovers would be flexed and snarled between a hundred more whose only terms were obscenity and threat ... I've hit women.⁴⁸

In conjunction, these two voices of Self's consciousness provide the basis for the narrative's carnivalesque quality. As Lodge has recognised, *Money* exists within the tradition of the 'demonic carnival, a suicide note from a character who indulges in every excess of the lower body, sexual and gastronomic, that the modern urban culture can provide.'⁴⁹ Yet as the use of 'demonic' suggests, *Money* cannot be simply absorbed into the Bakhtinian model of carnival as a modern exemplar. Indeed, it could be argued that the novel illustrates the historical diminishment of the 'positive pole' or 'regenerating ambivalence' in carnival forms that Bakhtin outlines in *Rabelais and his World*.⁵⁰ However, rather than adopting Bakhtin's seminal work as a rigid blueprint for the carnivalesque, *Money* can be valuably understood as a novel that simultaneously retains and refutes the 'spirit' of this tradition. Indeed, a critical awareness of both concurrence and divergence in relation to Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque provides a broader and potentially more comprehensive picture of the satirical objectives and moral concerns of the novel.

In his celebration of the 'democratic' opportunities of an emergent culture, Self experiences a freedom akin to the spirit of carnival; a 'liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order ... the suspension of all hierarchical

⁴⁸ Ibid., p 19.

⁴⁹ Lodge, *After Bakhtin*, p. 24.

⁵⁰ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Cambridge Mass. : M.I.T. Press, 1968), p. 21.

rank, privileges, norms and prohibitions.⁵¹ He is immersed in the carnival of money, the anarchic possibilities of a free-market capitalism that eschews notions of class, education, refinement and high culture. Self's arrogant vilification of these norms and institutions, through the vibrant language of a modern transatlantic Billingsgate, can be obliquely related to the carnivalistic 'lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract.'⁵² This degradation, an essential feature of grotesque realism, is reinforced by an emphasis upon the 'material bodily principle' through the predominance of 'images of the human body with its food, drink, defecation, and sexual life.'⁵³ As a carnival figure, Self is a character of physical exaggerations: growing fatter on the 'heavy fuel' of alcohol, drugs and fast food; obsessed with the 'lower stratum' pleasures of sex and masturbation; and troubled by 'compound hangovers' and a gastric condition through which he becomes a 'human hovercraft on the bowl'.⁵⁴ In addition to the related spheres of the body and Billingsgate language, Self also experiences a carnivalesque sense of time in which 'life is subject only to its laws ... the laws of its own freedom'.⁵⁵ Disconnected from the conventions of regulated time, Self's existence is conditioned by the blackouts and reversals of 'time lag, culture shock, [and] zone shift'.⁵⁶

All day I am my night self, spliced by night thoughts, night sweats. And all night, well, I am something else entirely, something else again, I am something overrevolved, a salty slipstream thinning out and trailing over the black Atlantic.⁵⁷

The sustaining location for Self's grotesque excesses and temporal inversion is the urban centre of New York, a city that replaces the market place or fairground as the carnival site of the late twentieth-century. A place of carnivalesque exuberance,

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 10.

⁵² Ibid., p. 19.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 18.

⁵⁴ Amis, *Money*, p. 36.

⁵⁵ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, p. 7.

⁵⁶ Amis, *Money*, p. 264.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 264.

diversity and hybridity, New York embodies Amis's view of modern America as 'racially mixed and mobile, twenty-four hour, endless, extreme, superabundantly various'.⁵⁸ For Self, it is a place beyond cultural prohibitions, a realm of 'contention' and 'democracy' in which he experiences a 'holiday from the nine-to-five of [his] social shame.'⁵⁹

Yet in spite of these comic reversals and challenges to official culture, Self's carnival remains 'demonic' in its negation of the universalism and utopianism of Bakhtinian theory. This disparity can be clearly illustrated through a comparison with Bakhtin's description of the bodily element within grotesque realism.

It is presented not in a private, egotistical form, severed from the other spheres of life, but as something universal, representing all people ... [it] is contained not in the biological individual, not in the bourgeois ego, but in the people, a people who are continually growing and renewed.⁶⁰

In contrast, the carnival of money is founded upon individualistic consumption, the isolated 'economic man' (Self) gratifying his physical addictions and egotistic desires without reference to a wider community. Indeed, this individualism is inimical to the 'free and familiar contact'⁶¹ of the carnival community, inducing social division, competition and personal aggression through its reliance upon financial power: 'Money. It's either that or fear or shame. It's all I've got to use against people who might hate me.'⁶² As this implies, Self's carnival does not involve a suspension or liberation from hierarchy, but a transition from the boundaries of class, education and high culture to the new financial hierarchies of entrepreneurial capitalism. As Self is only too aware, it is his continuing success in the latter culture that protect him from the shackles of the former. This is a carnival

⁵⁸ Amis, *The Moronic Inferno*, p. 13.

⁵⁹ Amis, *Money*, p. 31.

⁶⁰ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, p. 19.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Amis, *Money*, p. 335.

in which the festive spirit of 'becoming' and 'renewal' has become a desperate cycle of accumulation and gratification, an attempt to assuage the inherent anxieties over status created by modern consumer culture.

The market is seen to depend on the stimulation of feelings of personal inadequacy in consumers who then pursue its chimerical material satisfactions, believing that in the disease itself may be discovered its homeopathic cure.⁶³

This state of anxiety, and the physically destructive cycle it initiates, is exemplified by Self's third voice of 'ageing and weather'. In a further negation of carnival, the 'images of bodily life' in *Money* are predominately concerned with decay and disintegration rather than 'fertility, growth, and a brimming-over abundance.'⁶⁴ The leitmotifs of decaying teeth, receding hair and tinnitus join with a catalogue of physical sufferings that remind Self that 'being young is killing me.'⁶⁵ Yet as a metaphorical connection between his teeth and New York streets implies, the body itself has become an exchangeable consumer product and a site for gentrification. Informed by his admiration for the 'dazzlingly metallic'⁶⁶ television presenters, Self dreams of a whole body transplant and the possibilities of cosmetic surgery: 'If you lose your rug, you can get a false one. If you lose your laugh, you can get a false one. If you lose your mind, you can get a false one.'⁶⁷ Although more ambiguous, the weather is also connected to the anxieties of money and ageing as one of the 'things that move past us uncontrollably while we just stay the same.'⁶⁸ In contrast to the voices of money and pornography, Self's third voice is concerned with the inevitable consequences of Self's carnival. In essence, it is a voice of 'futile protest' against the physical and elemental forces that money can

⁶³ Waugh, *Harvest of the Sixties*, p. 31.

⁶⁴ Amis, *Money*, p. 50.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p.50.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 316.

mollify but not reverse: 'With money, double-dazzle New York is a crystal conservatory. Take money away, and you're naked and shielding your Johnson in a cataract of breaking glass.'⁶⁹

Self's carnival and the negativity of the third voice reveal the shallowness and destructiveness that forms the basis of Amis's critique of the emerging culture of the 1980s. However, it is important to recognise that *Money* is a novel of dark irony rather than didacticism, its mocking indictment of individualism functioning through black humour rather than offering an ideological or cultural alternative. As Amis has stated: '[m]y hatred for it [money] does look as though I'm underwriting a certain asceticism, but it isn't really that way: I don't offer alternatives to what I deplore.'⁷⁰ This is not to imply that the absence of alternatives is a weakness, rather that the novel eschews the possibility of simplistic solutions to an unregulated global system, rejecting the potential for either personal liberation or political change in the face of the cultural meta-narrative of money. Indeed, money remains impermeable to opposition precisely because of its decentred nature: existing as a self-perpetuating global conspiracy in which all participate but which requires no guiding human agency or institutional fulcrum.

However, the novel does offer a tangential moral structure through the Self's potential for an alternative mode of consciousness through his fourth voice. As with the political dimension, it is important to recognise that this moral satire is not overtly didactic, but as Bradbury has observed, the vision of a 'disappointed moralist'.⁷¹ The ambivalence of the novel's judgements is informed by Amis's

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 354.

⁷⁰ Haffenden, *Novelists in Interview*, p. 14.

⁷¹ Bradbury, *The Modern British Novel*, p. 402.

perception of the modern individual as possessing ‘moral unease without moral energy’:⁷²

She was like me, myself. She knew she shouldn’t do it ... [b]ut she went on doing it anyway. Me, I couldn’t even blame money. What is this state, seeing the difference between good and bad and choosing bad - or consenting to bad, okaying bad?⁷³

In terms of his dialogic consciousness, it is this awareness of a pattern of thought and behaviour beyond the voice of money that forms the basis of his fourth voice. While the voice of ageing and weather raises the spectre of consequence and decline, the fourth confronts Self with the possibility of alteration: of ‘needing to think about things I never used to think about.’⁷⁴ Threatening his adopted identity within the new culture, this voice appears through isolated moments of self-awareness that Self’s narrative seeks to rationalise, diminish or suppress. These range from his admiration for Prince Charles’s belief in self-discipline as a principle of civilisation; the guilt he feels towards his violent treatment of women and relationship with Selina; and his admission that in brothels he cannot help ‘getting engaged on the human scale’⁷⁵ (a point reinforced by an omitted lecture he gives to a pregnant prostitute). In addition, Self reveals a romantic sentimentality concerning ‘[l]ove and marriage’ during the Royal Wedding and a rare poignancy through his memory of his mother; ‘[o]nly her fingers and the difference in the house, the judgement, the shame, when she’d gone.’⁷⁶ Although Self attempts to play down its significance, the death of his mother and upheaval to America result in an abiding sense of exclusion:

I am a dog at the seaside tethered to a fence while my master and mistress romp on the sands. I am bouncing, twisting, weeping, consuming myself. ... imagine the grief,

⁷² Haffenden, *Novelists in Interview*, p. 14.

⁷³ Amis, *Money*, p. 26.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 102.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 263, 206.

tethered to a fence when there is activity - and play, and thought and fascination - just beyond the holding rope.⁷⁷

It is this desire to enter the world of 'thought and fascination' that defines Self's fourth voice and his relationship with Martina Twain. Significantly, Self is unable to find a 'voice to summon her with'; '[t]he voices of money, weather and pornography ... just aren't up to the job when it comes to Martina.'⁷⁸ During his relationship with Martina, Self experiences a period of reversal in which his addictions are replaced with the values that Frank the phone claims to be teaching him: 'Compassion, Self-control, Generosity of spirit, Respect for womankind.'⁷⁹ Self's 'new deal me'⁸⁰ is also marked by an effort to progress from junk culture to an appreciation of high art, twentieth century history and the classical foundations of the money conspiracy. However, the imminent failure of Self's transformation is implied by his symbolic associations with Martina's dog Shadow and their shared desire to return to the 'sin and death' of the 'world's end, where everything was unleashed, unmuzzled.'⁸¹ As his canine double rejoins his former life, Self returns to Selina Street and the voices and values of the money/pornography nexus. In terms of its broader significance, the entire episode with Martina may appear to provide a measure for satiric judgement by establishing an opposition between the health of Martina's cultured civilisation against the depravity of Self's barbaric animalism. However, this simplistic pattern is complicated by the fact that even with the animal symbolism, Self's metamorphosis remains unattainable because the qualities in Martina that he aspires to are themselves predicated upon money.

Her smile is knowing, roused and playful, but also innocent, because money makes you innocent when it's been there all along. How else can you hang out on this

⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 207.

⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 119.

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 191.

⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 293.

⁸¹ Ibid., p. 289.

planet for thirty years while still remaining free? Martina is not a woman of the world. She is a woman of somewhere else.⁸²

Ultimately, Self cannot achieve an independent, univocal redemption because his internal dialogue is the dialogue of a culture in which you 'cannot beat the money conspiracy. You can only join it.'⁸³

A second level of dialogism is evident in the complex and ambiguous relationship between Self and the author-figure of Martin Amis. This dialogue primarily operates as an extension of the elaborate confidence trick that superficially functions as the narrative plot. Self's 'lack of sustenance' leads to his exploitation by three artist-figures: Fielding the con-artist, Selina the sack-artist and Ossie the money-artist. However, as Self's ontological paranoia reveals, these figures are merely fictional surrogates for the manipulations of the author-artist:

I think I must have some new cow disease that makes you wonder whether you're real all the time, that makes your life feel like a trick, an act, a joke. I feel, I feel dead. There's a guy who lives round my way who really gives me the fucking creeps. He's a *writer*, too...⁸⁴

Beginning with an authorial preface which alerts the reader to be 'on the lookout for clues and give-aways',⁸⁵ the narrative foregrounds an authorial presence through a carefully constructed web of inter-textual reference, parodic nomenclature, involution and meta-fictional commentary. These elements have been dismissed by some critics as 'decorative rather than structural: lip-service gestures towards post-modernist orthodoxy',⁸⁶ and celebrated by others as central to the novel's diagnosis of the 'postmodern condition.'⁸⁷ Yet within the dialogic design of the novel, these devices can be viewed as both disrupting the conventions of realism and authorial

⁸² Ibid., p. 134.

⁸³ Ibid., p. 288.

⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 60.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ James Lasdun, 'Pre-modern, Post-modernist', *Encounter*, vol. LXIV, no. 2 (Feb. 1985), p. 47.

⁸⁷ Diedrick, *Understanding Martin Amis*, p. 99.

influence whilst reinforcing the ‘disappointed moralism’ of Amis’s socio-cultural satire.

The inter-textual structure of *Money* is dominated by Amis’s use of Shakespeare as a ‘sort of writer-god’⁸⁸ with numerous references and a sustained pattern of allusions derived from *Othello*.⁸⁹ Through the thematic parallels of deceit and sexual betrayal, the play operates as a master narrative for the exploitation of Self throughout the novel. Although ultimately reduced to a suicidal breakdown, Self’s true dramatic counterpart is Roderigo rather than Othello. He is the ignorant gull whose confidence blinds him to the manipulations, mockery and financial tricks perpetrated upon him by the artist-figure (Iago/Fielding/Martin Amis). Although he encounters the play in operatic form, Self’s lack of literary knowledge (he believes Desdemona has been unfaithful) leaves him incapable of apprehending the significance of either Fielding’s quotations or the artist-figure’s car. As this suggests, Shakespeare also functions as a symbol of literary culture and a benchmark against which Self’s ignorance can be comically exposed.⁹⁰ The juxtaposition of Self’s confident philistinism and the literary allusions of the artist-figure is repeated by a second pattern of allusions to Orwell. In addition to misreading *Animal Farm*, he remains oblivious to the significance of his hotel room number and considers Airstrip One to be his ‘kind of town.’⁹¹ Self’s inability to assimilate these references is made more significant by the fact that it is the artist-figure’s double or alter ego (Martina Twain) who directs him towards this potentially revelatory material. As Tennant has recognised, Martina operates as a

⁸⁸ Haffenden, *Novelists in Interview*, p. 23.

⁸⁹ Diedrick has also drawn attention to parallels between Hamlet and the Oedipal sub-text of Self’s screenplay. *Understanding Martin Amis*, p. 83.

⁹⁰ According to Amis, Shakespeare exists as a ‘taunting embodiment of what he’s excluded from’. Haffenden, *Novelists in Interview*, p. 23.

⁹¹ Amis, *Money*, p. 223.

'cultural advisor'⁹² who provides a 'how-to kit for the twentieth-century'⁹³ by introducing Self to Freud, Marx, Hitler and *Money*. In effect, Self's failure to decipher these inter-textual codes precludes him from an awareness of his own fictional existence and subordination to the machinations of the artist-figure.

She talked about the vulnerability of a figure unknowingly watched - the difference between a portrait and an unposed study. The analogous distinction in fiction would be that between the conscious and the reluctant narrator - the sad, the unwitting narrator.⁹⁴

A further metafictional pattern is provided by the parallels between Self's screenplay and both his financial decline and the dénouement of his familial plot. This doubling of screenplay/novel is made explicit with the artist-figure's involvement with the second draft. Significantly, this shifts the artist-figure from his marginal position as a shadowy neighbour with a 'smirk of collusion'⁹⁵ into the centre of his protagonist's narrative. The screenplay's hero problems, motivation problem, fight problem and realism problem also refer to the novel itself and require the author-figure to complete a double plot resolution. While in the redrafted screenplay he panders to the egotism of the performers, he ironically reworks the synopsis for Self by prefiguring his sordid sexual encounter with Vron. Self becomes entwined in a 'rockbottom realism'⁹⁶ fulfilment of his own script by motivating a punishment beating that parodies the screenplay's melodramatic conclusion.

Although significant, the intertextual allusions and screenplay parallels essentially revolve around the metafictional dialogue and culminating chess-game between the author-figure and his protagonist. On one level, these discussions

⁹² Emma Tennant, 'Seriously Rich', *The Literary Review* (Nov. 1984), p. 44.

⁹³ Amis, *Money*, p. 334.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 132.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 248.

continue to expose Self's lack of cultural resistance through the artist-figure's detailed explication of the plot and enigmatic puns concerning his own style. He taunts an inattentive Self with statements about the principle players being 'all actors', his car (a fiasco) being 'a bit of a joke', and reminds him that 'names are awfully important'.⁹⁷ There is also an oblique reference to Self's 'turnabout' and betrayal of Martina (Desdemona) through the author-figure's assurance that reading is as 'overrated as Shakespeare's women.'⁹⁸ Furthermore, these dialogues allow the artist-figure to muse directly upon his authorial position through discussions of the 'double innocence' of characters, the problems of endings and the accountability of the author within a 'moral philosophy of fiction'.⁹⁹

Yet in spite of a belated apology to his character, authorial guilt and accountability remain negligible facets of a relationship which, as critics have noted, highlights Amis's penchant for Nabakovian fictional games that are primarily aesthetic and comic in orientation.¹⁰⁰ The crucial similarity is that the artist-figure functions not as an author-god within a framework of morality and justice but as just 'some fucking joker.'¹⁰¹ According to both Amis and his fictional double, the 'sadistic impulses' of modern authors are a by-product of the decline of literary heroes from the status of 'gods' and 'demi-gods' to contemporary 'anti-heroes, non-heroes, sub-heroes';¹⁰² '[t]he further down the scale he is, the more liberties you can take with him. You can do what you like to him, really.'¹⁰³ The cynicism of this self-reflexivity becomes apparent during a chess game that concludes, and

⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 360, 261, 359.

⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 372.

⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 260.

¹⁰⁰ Victoria N. Alexander, 'Martin Amis: Between the Influences of Bellow and Nabokov', *The Antioch Review*, vol. 52, no. 4 (Fall 1994).

¹⁰¹ Amis, *Money*, p. 330.

¹⁰² Amis, *The Moronic Inferno*, p. 17.

¹⁰³ Amis, *Money*, p. 247.

encapsulates, the relationship between Self and the author-figure. While Self remains mystified by his opponent's strategy, the artist-figure contrives a zugzwang conclusion and thereby prefigures his character's suicide through its chess equivalent. Ultimately, the author-figure is unable to claim Self's destruction as retribution because, like Fielding/Iago, he remains a motiveless artist-figure 'too deep into his themes and forms, his own artwork.'¹⁰⁴

The increasing prominence of these metafictional devices towards the end of a predominantly satirical novel has prompted one critic to question 'why Amis, after offering Answers to big social problems, later rescinds them by stressing the fact of fiction.'¹⁰⁵ However, to view the novel as switching between two incompatible aesthetic modes ignores the significance of the dialogic relationship between the artist-figure and protagonist. The relationship may not provide an integration of narrative styles but it does allow a reaffirmation of the novel's cultural critique by undermining the status of the authorial presence, and by extension, the significance of his narrative games. In effect, the metafictionality of their relationship functions as an allegory of the social system that dominates both of them and about which neither finds any big 'Answers'.

As a product of dialogism, this process is founded upon the recognition that the artist-figure does not operate as a monological author-god in relation to Self. His metafictional control of the narrative functions externally, thereby allowing his character the 'relative autonomy'¹⁰⁶ of an independent voice and consciousness. Their discussions exist as dialogic interactions through which the artist-figure is answered, criticised and mocked by his protagonist. Amis's use of this dialogism

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 376.

¹⁰⁵ Alexander, 'Martin Amis: Between the Influences of Bellow and Nabokov', p. 581.

¹⁰⁶ Diedrick, *Understanding Martin Amis*, p. 97.

sometimes appears to be purely comic, employed to parody his own literary career with Self's references to his father, an accusation of plagiarism, poor sales and charges of obscenity. Yet, as Diedrick has noted, these biographical asides are implicated within a more important comic discourse concerning the author-figure's position as a 'serious writer in a commodity culture'.¹⁰⁷ In contrast to Self's 'private culture', the author-figure lives a seemingly monastic existence and seeks to avoid 'the whole money conspiracy'¹⁰⁸ by dedicating himself to thought and culture through a Franklinesque timetable of self-improvement.

I get up at seven and write straight through till twelve. Twelve to one I read Russian poetry - in translation, alas. A quick lunch, then art history until three. After that it's philosophy for an hour - nothing technical, nothing *hard*. Four to five: European history, 1848 and all that. Five to six: I improve my German. And from then until dinner, well, I just relax and read whatever the hell I like. Usually Shakespeare.¹⁰⁹

Although potentially establishing the author-figure as a positive antithesis to Self and the values of money, this passage actually typifies the critical capacity of their dialogic interactions. The fact that this statement is directed towards the uncultured Self imbues it with a tone of pompous superiority and undermines it as an exemplary alternative. This dialogic effect is repeated through Self's indifference towards the author-figure's aesthetic commentary and his mockery of Amis's student existence, book-habit and hand-rolled cigarettes. The debunking of the artist-figure's lifestyle and literary pretension exposes his claim to exist beyond money as an act of self-deception, implicating him within the same conspiracy that dominates his protagonist. By highlighting the limitations of the authorial presence in relation to the wider culture, this dialogic structure ultimately deflates the significance of the metafictional elements within the novel. The author-figure remains a joker, able to undermine the reality of his own character but unable to

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 98.

¹⁰⁸ Amis, *Money*, p. 262.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., p. 236.

disturb the realism, or perhaps hyperrealism, of the culture that frames him. The metafiction operates as an isolated narrative game that, due to the authenticity of Self's voice, never questions or challenges the mimetic assumptions behind the novel's social satire and cultural critique. In fact, the confidence trick that dominates the narrative plot actually reaffirms the central thesis of the mimetic perspective because, as Amis has stated in interview, it primarily functions as an analogy for the inexplicable, arbitrary and brutal nature of the money conspiracy.¹¹⁰

The issues of the authorial control are eventually resolved by Self becoming an escape-artist, freed from Martin Amis's 'artwork' through his acquisition of a new (italicised) voice and his failure to commit suicide. His final monologue constitutes an act of narrative closure beyond the allusions, doubles and prescribed dénouement of the artist-figure. Self's immunity and independence from these 'pentagrams of shape and purpose' is illustrated by the author-figure's astonishment that his character is not 'out of the picture'.¹¹¹ As many critics have observed, this monologue from 'outside' the novel points towards a potential regeneration for Self, a step towards the world of 'thought and fascination'. Through his belated grasp of the hidden machinations of the plot, Self begins to comprehend his 'age problem, paternity mix-up and 'psychopathic state' of money confidence. In addition, the removal of 'form' slows his life into a 'continuous present', forcing him to engage with the mundane patterns of urban existence: 'The people hurry from the underground, very mortal, the young half healthy, the old half shrewd - quarter beautiful, quarter wise. Humans, I honour you.'¹¹² Through his suicidal collapse, Self progresses from egocentric individualism towards an empathetic respect for

¹¹⁰ Haffenden, *Novelists in Interview*, p. 6.

¹¹¹ Amis, *Money*, pp. 384, 389.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, p. 394.

human vulnerability and resilience in the face of the weather, ageing and mortality. Furthermore, he attacks television as a powerful cultural religion and advertising as the exploitation of sensitive human areas, 'the mystical part of ordinary minds'.¹¹³ These personal reversals are reinforced by his admiration and gratitude towards Georgina, a woman Self attempts to appreciate beyond the objectivising and commodifying frameworks of money and pornography.

However, Self's liberation from the novel is not an escape from the money conspiracy, a fact that prevents the monologue from becoming a didactic reversal of character and basis for satiric judgement. The regeneration is limited because the vulnerability of 'continuous present' is imposed by the absence of money. His financial collapse leaves him nude, 'one day old and one inch tall'.¹¹⁴ Self may describe money as the great conspiracy, fiction and addiction of the twentieth century, but it remains the fundamental determinant and context of his monologue. With repeated complaints about the limitations of his destitution, Self reveals his desire to return to a more affluent state and replace Georgina with 'Selina or some other Tina or Lina or Nina'.¹¹⁵ This ambivalence denies Self any position of exclusion or meaningful rejection by reaffirming the implacable hegemony of money. Like the author-figure's chess game, Self's monologue fails to provide the novel with an act of monological closure, a finalising perspective through which the 'central deformity in life'¹¹⁶ could be neutralised, circumvented or satirically repudiated.

By reinforcing the ideological dominance of monetarism, the ambivalence of the monologue appears to endorse Amis's own appraisal of the comic novelist's

¹¹³ Ibid., p. 384.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., p. 383.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., p. 393.

¹¹⁶ Haffenden, *Novelists in Interview*, p. 13.

response to the evils of modern life: 'he doesn't reward and punish and convert; all he can do with these evils is laugh them off the stage.'¹¹⁷ Whilst this may be pertinent to Self's failure to enact his own come-uppance or convert meaningfully to an existence outside money, it fails to account for the satirical effectiveness of the novel as a whole. As I have discussed previously, Self functions as a representative site, a fulcrum around which the novel raises moral and ethical questions concerning the emergent ideology of the 1980s. However, as the final monologue demonstrates, Money remains a satire of implication rather than denunciation and resists closure through a third level of dialogism: the dialogue between Self and the (implied) reader. The significance of this relationship is outlined in the prologue when Amis asks '[t]o whom is the note addressed? ... It is meant for you out there, the dear, the gentle.'¹¹⁸ Exemplifying Bakhtin's internal polemic discourse, Self's confession is characterised by an acute awareness of the existence of an external audience:

... the word with a sideward glance at someone else's hostile word - ... all self-deprecating overblown speech that repudiates itself in advance, speech with a thousand reservations, concessions, loopholes and the like. Such speech literally cringes in the presence or the anticipation of someone else's word, reply, objection.¹¹⁹

As a character self-consciously introducing us to his 'private culture', Self's narrative is pervaded with such anticipations: externally directed asides, calculated manipulations of the *fabula*, and a question/answer method of justification which assumes the reader's consent regarding any given observation or moral dilemma. Although superficially designed to deflect the potential criticism of another's words, these devices also tend towards the 'vicious circle' that Bakhtin observes in relation to the 'Underground Man'. In seeking independence by retaining 'for oneself the

¹¹⁷ Amis, quoted in interview with Christopher Bigsby, in Bradbury and Cooke (eds.), *New Writing*, p. 172.

¹¹⁸ Amis, *Money*, 'Preface'.

¹¹⁹ Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, p. 196.

final word', Self actually 'demonstrates to the other (and to himself) his own dependence on this other.'¹²⁰ This reliance upon external validation acts as a narratological reinforcement of Self's unstable and fragmented consciousness, his 'inability to be at peace with own definition of self.'¹²¹ This connection becomes particularly evident when the essentially passive mode of the internal polemic gives way to a more active hidden dialogicity in which the 'traces' of words delivered by an invisible second speaker 'have a determining influence on all the present and visible words of the first speaker.'¹²² Significantly, these passages function in tandem with Self's fourth voice and dialogically ascribe the values excluded from his 'private culture' upon the absent audience.

Hey, if you were here now, sister mother daughter lover (niece, auntie, granny), maybe we could talk a bit and cuddle down together - nothing dirty. Only spoons. Maybe you'd let me rest my great face in the gentle bracket between the wings of your shoulderblades. That's all I have in mind, believe me. I know you for a pure creature. You don't drink or smoke or screw around that much, I'll bet. Am I wrong? That is what I love in you ...¹²³

This is representative of a series of passages that establish an implied reader who is antithetical to Self and the voices of money/pornography. Within such passages every phrase and question can be viewed as indirectly suggesting an 'alternative' system of values. Yet although Amis may coach the reader through implication, this value system remains incomplete and ensures that the ultimate responsibility for any finalising satirical or ethical judgement lies with the reader. This dialogic positioning of the reader completes a fundamental pattern of the novel; a structural progression in which the potential for monological resolution, the possession of the final word or judgement, is established then deferred. From Fielding to Martina to the author-figure there appears the possibility of resolving the contradictions of

¹²⁰ Ibid., p. 229.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Ibid., p. 197.

¹²³ Amis, *Money*, p. 111.

Self's consciousness by casting him as an exemplary figure of either satirical punishment or ethical redemption. Even in the final monologue, Self's independence of voice and consciousness paradoxically reinforces his reliance upon the consciousness of another. Through a combination of internal polemic and 'postmodern trickiness', Amis clearly implies that Self is only able to sustain his narrative beyond the control of the author-figure through the imaginative faith of the reader: 'readers are natural believers. They too have something of the authorial power to create life'.¹²⁴ It is perhaps indicative of Amis's 'disappointed moralism' and his bleak analysis of the hegemonic influence of money that he constructs a cultural satire that defers the final judgement to a realm beyond the boundaries of the novel.

¹²⁴ Ibid., p. 260.

Conclusion

This country needs someone like Margaret Thatcher. In years to come great novels and poems will be written about her.¹

Even as the government won its third general election there was evidence to suggest that Thatcherism's attempt to transform the 'soul' of Britain had not resulted in a new ideological consensus. Although the economic, political and social agendas of the post-war consensus were either jettisoned or radically reformed, the persistence of collective and welfare assumptions revealed that the 'Thatcher revolution' had been achieved without 'counter-revolution in the thinking of ordinary people.'² However, the fact that the ethos of Thatcherism was structurally imposed rather than publicly advocated offered little solace for opponents while its political ascendancy appeared ensured by a fragmented and ineffectual opposition, the malleability of the electoral system, and the corresponding economic conservatism and anti-statism of other industrialised nations. It is this sense of pessimistic but assured opposition that characterises the 'state of the nation' novels produced during the 1980s. They are reflective of both Thatcherism's failure to win the 'hearts and minds' of a significant section of the middle-class intelligentsia and the liberal despair inspired by the government's entrenched position of power. Within an era dominated by the antagonist climate of 'conviction politics' and the populist celebrations of the tabloid press, the vehement critiques of liberal dissent have been described as resembling 'voices crying in the wilderness.'³ Yet the mere assertion of the tolerant values of liberal culture amidst this climate can be upheld as an act of positive engagement when 'significant groups of intellectuals and artists ... seemed to move

¹ Brian Walden, quoted in Hugo Young, *One of Us* (London: Macmillan, 1989), p. 136.

² Ivor Crewe, 'Values: The Crusade that Failed', in Dennis Kavanagh and Anthony Seldon (eds.), *The Thatcher Effect* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 241.

³ Robert Barnard, *A Short History of English Literature*, 2nd edn. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), p. 220.

away from identification with their society'.⁴ As Waugh has noted in relation to the fictional shift away from 'traditional images of national identity': 'it does not seem to be entirely coincidental that the dissent of middle-class intellectuals should express itself through the language of abstruse theory or a literary preference for fantastic otherness or linguistic *jouissance*'.⁵ By continuing to speak as 'social counterforces' and 'moral consciences'⁶ in a period of disorientating transition, these novelists arguably fulfil the traditional role of the genre by examining the 'place of human values in a society given over to materialism'.⁷

Having said this, it is impossible to ignore the underlying sense of dismay and beleaguement that is generated by the absence of viable political and social alternatives to Thatcherism and the disunited condition of Britain. In common with their cinematic counterparts, this absence results in novels that 'remain locked within the very discourse they oppose, unable to give convincing voice to an alternative 'social imaginary'.⁸ In the first-person narratives this is signalled by the 'bitter post-liberal irony'⁹ and moral ambivalence that is evident in a stylistic preference for modes of caricature, black humour and satiric distance. This may, of course, be interpreted within the context of a general withdrawal from satiric assurance in twentieth-century fiction, the absence of demonstrative moral structures adhering to Amis's precept that 'I don't offer alternatives to what I

⁴ Kenneth O. Morgan, *The People's Peace: British History since 1945*, 2nd edn. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 439.

⁵ Patricia Waugh, *The Harvest of the Sixties: English Literature and its Background, 1960-1990* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 155.

⁶ Thomas Elsasser, 'Images for Sale: The "New" British Cinema', in Lester Friedman (ed.), *British Cinema and Thatcherism: Fires Were Started* (London: UCL Press, 1993), p. 54.

⁷ David Lodge, *Language of Fiction: Essays in Criticism and Verbal Analysis of the English Novel*, 2nd edn. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), p. 217.

⁸ John Hill, *British Cinema in the 1980s* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), p. 165.

⁹ Malcolm Bradbury, *The Modern British Novel* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1993), p. 403.

deplore.’¹⁰ However, the connections between these figures and an emerging zeitgeist imbues this approach with a specific cultural significance, the ambivalent resolutions of these novels indicative of the seemingly inexorable progression of the social and ideological frameworks embodied by their protagonists. In each instance the prospect of a satiric come-uppance is qualified or rescinded, the characters either elevated by final moments of judgement or suffering descents that merely confirm the legitimacy of their values and worldviews. Ultimately, the dark humour of these novelists projects upon the reader what it appears impossible to enact at the level of narrative: the imagination of a society in which the values of liberal-humanism hold sway over the ideologies of ‘economic realism’ and dehumanising effects of consumerism. A similar absence is apparent in those novels that combine an aversion to Thatcherism with affirmations of symbolic relationships and microcosmic communities. The limitations of these optimistic images are illustrated by their isolation from the narrative frameworks of diagnosis, an implied recognition that a positive future is only imaginable through dissociation from the prevailing state of the nation. In *The Middle Ground* and *Nice Work* this is signalled by perspectival shifts, Kate’s epiphany of human connections premised upon a rising above society and Lodge’s integration of class and culture displaced into Robyn’s fantasy of an ideal university. In contrast, the regenerative birth and communal picnic that conclude *The Child in Time* and *The Radiant Way* involve movements from the urban to the natural world that reinforce their faith in an alternative social ideology through intimations of a Romantic organicism and transcendence. Furthermore, these images are accompanied by a sense of impending closure, the bloody radiance of a setting sun and classical connotations

¹⁰ John Haffenden, *Novelists in Interview* (London: Methuen, 1985), p. 14.

of Mars highlighting the transient and precarious nature of these harmonious resolutions. Thus in spite of envisioning the potential for a social being beyond the ideology of Thatcherism, these frozen moments and utopian images contain no basis for a concerted challenge to its political and economic ascendancy.

From a Marxist perspective, these problematic dénouements can be attributed to the fact that the ‘radicalization’ of the liberal novel, like centre opinion generally, only occurred within ‘its traditional parameters’.¹¹ In spite of sophisticated adaptations of the genre’s conventions, the cultural perspectives and political solutions of these novels continue to reflect the liberal-humanist ideology of their nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century predecessors. The primacy of the individual and personal development reappears in the negative exemplars of Thatcherism, the mutual education of *Nice Work*, the elemental love of *The Child in Time* and Drabble’s fictional illustrations that ‘[i]t’s a question of what *you* are when things are against you that’s most important’.¹² This humanistic withdrawal from collective modes of opposition is epitomised by McEwan’s defence of the liberal novel’s ‘expressive freedom’, his evaluation that the most successful ‘political’ fiction has always been written against, rather than for, a politics.¹³ Of course, for Marxist critics such appeals involve a misapprehension of the real conditions of society and history, liberal-humanism’s resistance to politics masking a failure to recognise its complicity within the capitalist structures it seeks to oppose. As Widdowson has remarked in relation to the criticism and fiction of Malcolm Bradbury:

¹¹ Perry Anderson, ‘A Culture in Contraflow – I’, *New Left Review*, no. 180 (March/April 1989), p. 46.

¹² Olga Kenyon, *Women Writers Talk* (Oxford: Lennard, 1989), p. 35.

¹³ Ian McEwan, ‘Preface’, *A Move Abroad: or Shall We Die? and The Ploughman’s Lunch* (London: Picador, 1989), p. xi.

... what Bradbury fails to see ... is that his denial of politics *is* a politics; that his reaffirmation of the old elitist liberal culturalism is just as much a part of capitalism as Mrs Thatcher's monetarism; that individualism is the central tenet of both capitalist economics and liberal humanism; that bourgeois liberalism is the ideology of capitalism; that it is that ideology ... which obscures the real social relations of the notional 'free individual's' life; that late twentieth-capitalist society and culture is exposing its contradictions more and more sharply; and that even a liberalism of despair helps to disguise them.¹⁴

Within this context, the problems of 1980s' 'state of the nation' fiction stem from the ideological contradictions that are inherent within the structures of the genre, Lodge's self-referential shift from national diagnosis to the 'redemptive capacities' of the individual 'merely the latest, fashionable rehearsal of a familiar liberal gesture.'¹⁵ Indeed, it can be argued that the aesthetic and political hesitancy of these novels highlights the diminishing relevance of liberal-humanist imperatives that are derived from an earlier stage of capitalist development. As Eagleton has argued, while these residual values remain 'ideologically essential', they are rendered increasingly marginal and ineffective by late-capitalism and the 'requirements and life-styles' of an emergent post-industrial nation.¹⁶ Ultimately, these fictional attempts to bridge the widening gap between national problems and humanistic solutions are indicative of 'a Thatcherite Britain where liberalism is at once severely disillusioned and unable entirely to relinquish its fond idealist hopes.'¹⁷

The significance of this Marxist framework lies in the recognition that the inability of these novels to escape the discourse of Thatcherism is significantly conditioned by their position within the discourses of liberal-humanism and consensus culture. Unlike the 'unsettlement and opportunity'¹⁸ that Connor

¹⁴ Peter Widdowson, 'The anti-history men: Malcolm Bradbury and David Lodge', *Critical Quarterly*, vol. 26, no. 4. (1984), p. 12.

¹⁵ Terry Eagleton, 'The Silences of David Lodge', *New Left Review*, no. 172 (1988), p. 101.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 94.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

¹⁸ Steven Connor, *The English Novel in History, 1950-1995* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 89.

associates with the 'outside in' fiction of Mo, Ishiguro, Kureishi and Rushdie, these resolutely 'inside' fictions apprehend the transition of the nation in terms of loss rather than possibility. What prevents a more optimistic appreciation of multicultural plurality is an underlying belief in the social worth of a common national culture. While 'outside in' and regional novels affirm the potential freedom of cultural difference, the pessimism of 'state of the nation' fiction derives from a position of lost cultural centrality. In effect, they remain preoccupied with the disestablishment of a liberal value-system that had accorded them a central position within the nation imagined by the post-war consensus. As a result, these novels offer critical evaluations of Thatcherism that remain bound up with the ideals and assumptions of consensus culture through both the promise of national unity that underpins their aesthetic forms and the welfare-capitalist ethos that informs their critiques. However, the obvious problem with this approach is that Thatcherism was not the nemesis of consensus but a product of its elongated decline, the divisions of the 1980s marking an exacerbation of a cultural and political fragmentation that had been gathering impetus since the late 1960s. In this context the sense of beleaguement and despair that characterises many of these novels is essentially conditioned by their ideological belatedness. What prevents the possibility of discerning a progressive direction for the nation is an assumption that such a future should involve a return to a shared framework of values, a common culture that by the 1980s had become irrecoverable. Thus while retaining a belief in the potential coherence of the nation through their formal modes and thematic structures, these novels inadvertently reveal a Britain in which the basis for social unity had ceased to exist long before the arrival of Thatcherism.

Returning to the critical perspectives of Marxism, the aesthetic problems of this belatedness involve the post-industrial and global economics of the 1980s discrediting the narrative structures that emerged in response to the nation's industrial rise. Coupled with a society of increasing racial, ethnic and subcultural diversity, the traditional frameworks of the genre were exposed as an inadequate means of encompassing the internal complexity of nation or accounting for the impenetrable networks of international influence. Throughout these novels there is a tendency towards the construction rather than the reflection of the nation, hesitancy about the capacities of social-realism and the diagnostic authority it traditionally guaranteed. Whether evident through media recycling or self-referentially acknowledged, the attempt to imagine Britain as a totality inescapably reflects the impossibility of discerning representative structures and typical social alignments within a fragmented and heterogeneous nation. Similarly, the political pessimism of these novels implicitly illustrates the diminishing national influence of consensus ideology, their critiques of Thatcherism accompanied by an uneasy recognition of the marginality, if not the bankruptcy, of post-war liberal thinking. Although appalled by the radical social changes of the 1980s, an adherence to the principles of consensus leads to critical responses characterised more by disbelief than confident opposition. In this regard, the real significance of the narrative retractions within these novels lies not in the absence of political solutions but in the ambivalence of their liberal affirmations, the tacit recognition that even the popular foundations of consensus culture were diminishing. While primarily indicting Thatcherism as the central cause of this cultural decline, the absence of moral confidence (in the satires) and social resonance (in the symbolic communities) reflects a broader uncertainty about the credibility of a common value system and

the universal claims of liberal-humanism. Epitomised by *The Radiant Way's* closing image of the setting sun, the belatedness of these novels within a period of national transition produced dark prophecies of a future in which the aspirations of post-war society would be forever eclipsed by the forces of political dogma, economic individualism, and cultural fragmentation.

Whilst with hindsight the pessimism of these novels appears significantly conditioned by the climate of Thatcherism, they remain powerful illustrations of the disillusionment of liberal opinion following the collapse of the post-war narrative of the 'great society'. By upholding the principles and assumptions of this narrative, they were unable to discover an alternative voice or story to oppose the emergence a revolutionary politics that radically challenged both their conceptions of society and the rationale of their consensual discourse. Ultimately, the 'state of the nation' fiction produced during the 1980s provides an acute commentary upon the relegation of a cultural hegemony and a despairing portrait of the radical political ideology that emerged in its wake.

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