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One of the most problematic critical myths in accounts of twentieth-century British fiction is that 1979 represents a watershed in the fortunes of the novel, with a subsequent renaissance that coincides with the so-called 'Thatcher revolution'. Like all problematic critical myths, this one is partially true, hence the difficulty of revealing the distortions it can produce. The case for a sea-change is put persuasively by James F. English when he explains how British fiction came to be read, within universities, in the context of the multifarious global consequences of postmodernity: neoliberal, relativistic, post-colonial, with the consequence that 'contemporary British fiction could be embraced as the scene of something radically new and decisively more important and vigorous than what had come before'. The causal relationship, here, depends upon the degree to which one accepts that the embrace of free-market global economics, under the sign of Thatcherism, brought with it 'a massive rearrangement of the cultural sector'. English believes in this seismic shift, though he does caution us against 'exaggerating the extent and uniformity of the transformations' in British fiction 'since the late 1970s' given that 'literary fields are always subject to inertia'.[1]

I would want to give greater inflexion to this cautionary note than is customary, though without fully endorsing that pejorative sense of 'inertia'. For example, the key instance cited to illustrate how a new mood of globalization is reflected in the British novel is the

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new prominence of migrant writers from Commonwealth countries. While the internationalization of the novel in Britain gathered pace through the 1980s and beyond, it was an inevitable consequence of the end of Empire, and a trend that slowly developed from the 1950s onwards. We should also remember the reactionary policies of the Thatcher government – particularly the British Nationality Act of 1981 – that were, in their effects, divisive, and quite opposed to that elusive goal of a vibrant, multicultural society. This is one of the central contradictions of Thatcherism, of course: its opposition, at a human level, to the forces of globalization that drove its economic reforms. Rather than an unfettered explosion of new multicultural energies, there was also the clear sense that those energies were being suppressed and/or channelled into the route of indignant anger (most notably in the work of Salman Rushdie).

Academic critics need to be wary not just of the apparent connection between analyses of postmodernity and globalization, and (supposedly) new, and possibly liberatory, energies in the novel. There is also the risk of overemphasizing the new, and obscuring the link with tradition that continues to anchor literary fiction. If Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2000) seemed to march forward under Salman Rushdie's carnivalesque banner, then *On Beauty* (2005), her homage to Forster, and a rewriting of *Howards End*, announced the liberal sentiments that, in some shape or form, continue to govern the possibilities of the novel.

We should also remember that the global recession of the 1970s created the circumstances in which the appearance of a renaissance in the British novel, from the 1980s onwards, could be discerned. This puts a different complexion on the assumption that the post-consensus politics associated with Thatcherism produced angry and inventive fictional interventions on a scale that obliges us to see a new era of literary history. It is certainly possible to find examples to support such a view; but pursuing that line of argument, we should reckon with the paradox that new economic circumstances – the effects of Thatcherite policies, if only locally – created the conditions of possibility in which the *idea* of a literary resurgence took hold. There was an economic boom that lifted the book trade; but there was also a new entrepreneurial spirit that corresponded with the idea

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that a resurgence of the novel was one way of focusing new social energies. The appeal of new literary identities is always (at least partly) conditioned, in advance, by social and economic circumstances, of course. This does not preclude the possibility of an autonomous voice for the novelist; but it should make us wary of where we look for it, and aware of how far that autonomy is compromised.

If the entrepreneurialism of the Thatcherite age produces an imprisoning effect for the novel writer to negotiate, in which apparent strategies of effective critique may be appropriated, a similar constraint was imposed on academia, where literary theory appeared to foment concepts of dissent – under the signs of carnival, transgression, decolonization and so on – but was rapidly transformed into an instrument of the status quo, the benchmark of a new professionalism, with no vital connection to the realm of praxis. In the introduction, I considered the great potential unleashed by the theoretical revolution in English studies, and the ways in which these intellectual developments chimed with the direction being taken by contemporary literature. Within the academy, however, there was an element of self-delusion about this. From this perspective, the appeal of theory in the 1980s and 1990s has a narrower, professional explanation. In an era when the left-liberal intellectual in Britain was embarrassed by the self-destructive antics of the Labour Party, the embattled position of the Humanities created a climate where that which seemed dissident was welcomed with open arms. In the seminar room, at least, tutors could resist the dominant ideology of individualism, and empower their students with the reading tools to help them root out sexism, classism and racism.

Literary theory, usually taking contextualization as its guiding principle, has been curiously deficient in contextualizing itself. The problem is a lack of self-consciousness, since reading politically under the sign of theory, in the seminar room and in academic publications, failed to address the fact that globalization was rapidly diminishing the opportunities for praxis. Academic critiques of the political inadequacies of individual novelists then become doubly ironic. It is not simply that unreasonable expectations have been made of the novel. More worrying is the self-congratulation that accompanies the

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process of separating the sheep from the goats, the Carters from the Drabbles: the process becomes an end in itself, a form of quietism dressed up as radicalism.

This was the context in which 'post-consensus' fiction could be invented. The early enthusiasm for theory generated a taste for those writers who seemed to be in concert with it – the Wintersons, Carters and Rushdies – in a clear exaggeration of the relative merits of those writers who could reinforce a critical position that perceived itself as 'political'. A new phase of literary history was rapidly pieced together in such a way as to reflect the interests of those responsible for its articulation. If the account of a literary renaissance thus constructed did identify some important voices, it was also selective, discriminatory, its judgements often out of kilter with the interests and enthusiasms of the reading public. This new phase of professionalization in English studies, in short, had the effect of de-politicizing academic work by driving a wedge between the interests of the professional critic and the notional general reader. A question we need urgently to ask ourselves is whether or not there are certain tramlines of critical thinking that have become habitual, turning the gulf between academic criticism and the broader literary culture into a chasm.

It is that distorted view of literary history that is the most serious consequence of this divergence. The idea of a new renaissance in the novel since the late 1970s/early 1980s draws a false dividing line that consigns the novel between 1950 and 1980 to a marginal status. The fact that the prominent novelists in that earlier period – Wilson, Murdoch, Bradbury, Drabble – are associated with a long liberal tradition in the English novel has tended to reinforce the academic enthusiasm for a notionally more radical political alliance between text and critic in the late twentieth century. Yet the persistence of that liberal tradition, with prominent writers like McEwan and Ishiguro coming out of the Bradbury 'stable', underscores the vulnerability of recent accounts of contemporary fiction.[2] This is an idea that many academics working in the field react to with hostility: it is not an account that tallies with the orthodox view of the post-consensus novel.

The critical problems I am highlighting have all to do with the unavailability of hindsight, but also with the difficulty of casting off

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the straitjacket of academic professionalism. Wrestling with that garment, my stated aim is to try and establish the current state of the novel as a cultural form, with a particular emphasis on the novel in Britain, but also incorporating some pointed comparisons, especially with fiction in the US. There are, of course, a number of snags with this daunting objective. The first pause for thought follows from the anxiety about the lack of historical distance, the difficult task of striving for currency. Most of the novels I discuss were published in the 1990s or the 'noughties', yet I do also mention earlier novels where it seems necessary to establish the literary context in which particular novels are written, and that attempt to establish historical markers, to the purist, might undermine the notion of critical contemporaneity. Indeed, it is clear that criticism of the contemporary is a logical impossibility in the strictest sense: as soon as a critic begins to write about the 'now' it has eluded his or her grasp and become the 'then' of history. Of course, one can only understand the cultural present through the lens of history, so no study of contemporary literature can afford to jettison the impulse to look back and compare; which means that criticism of the contemporary can sometimes look like literary history, too.

The problem of the time-lag is not so easily answered. By the time this book has gone through the production process (typically, about a year for an academic book) we will be heading towards the end of another decade, and the critical urge to periodize the noughties will already be abroad. Indeed, this kind of process is now happening very rapidly in criticism of contemporary literature: witness the historicizing effort of the essay collection *British Fiction of the 1990s*, edited by Nick Bentley.[3] From our current perspective, that volume identifies themes and preoccupations that seem to be very much 'of' the 1990s – Patricia Waugh's essay on the influence of science is a good example – and it establishes convincing parameters for the study of 'the long nineties', beginning with the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe in 1989, and ending with the attack on America on 11 September 2001.

The idea of 9/11 as a historical marker, an idea that has preoccupied novelists every bit as much as cultural commentators, must be

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taken seriously. Indeed, chapter four below examines the idea of a post-9/11 literature in detail, and that haunting historical moment is implicitly present in the understanding of the contemporary that this book works with. Moreover, if Ian McEwan is right (following Fred Halliday, and speaking through the thoughts of his character Henry Perowne), that the attack on America in 2001 had 'precipitated a global crisis that would, if we were lucky, take a hundred years to resolve' (pp. 32–3), then the response to 9/11, and its consequences, will surely endure through contemporary writing for some time to come.[4] Even so, 2001 may turn out to be just as misleading a marker as 1979, accurately identifying a shift of cultural mood, but tending to overlook those continuities that may eventually obscure the line in the sand.

The elusive sense of the contemporary invariably outflanks the efforts of the literary historian. That which is 'contemporary' may endure beyond a generation in particular circumstances, though the impression of contemporaneity often depends on hindsight for ratification. The idea of contemporary literary concerns having a longer duration than is sometimes assumed is supported by the simple fact of creative gestation: good novels, like casseroles, can take a long time to cook. I think, here, of Raymond Williams's first novel, *Border Country*, which he began in 1947, but which was not published until 1960, having gone through seven drafts.[5] Its longer historical aspirations are reflected in its structure, which juxtaposes scenes from the narrative present in the 1950s, with episodes from the past, centred on the impact of the General Strike of 1926. Its social drama, however, rooted in the issue of education and class loyalty/betrayal, chimed exactly with a major social (and literary) preoccupation of the 1960s. The example is an extreme one, but it demonstrates how 'contemporary' concerns can be surprisingly long-lived. Indeed, it suggests that novels that are deemed to resonate with a broader mood do so because they have achieved a longer view on a topical theme. It is the newspaper, not the novel, that responds to this year's current affairs.

Probably the biggest snag in any presumption to pronounce, with authority, on the state of the novel, is the selectivity that governs any

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critical activity that is manageable in practical terms. The sheer volume of material makes an engagement with contemporary writing daunting. Indeed, the novel in English expands exponentially, making it impossible for a single critic to achieve an authoritative overview.

Concerning the novel in Britain, the problem of volume is illustrated by the high number of novels published each year. In his recent survey, Peter Childs puts the figure at '100 new British novels . . . each week'.[6] This tallies roughly with Richard Todd's estimate of '4,500 and 7,000 new Booker-eligible fiction titles' appearing 'annually in Britain during the 1980s'.[7] Whatever the precise number, it is far too many for any one critic to process and assimilate. Indeed, if a critic were to spend a lifetime devoted to reading contemporary novels, he or she might hope to become an authority on the output of a single year, but then, when ready to pronounce judgement, our time-frozen critic may no longer be reading works with a contemporary resonance. In the absence of the processes of selection that make life manageable for academics working in earlier periods – who has remained prominent? who is most written about? whose name recurs on the fringes of literary life, and is a likely candidate for resuscitation? – the critic of the contemporary has to use other methods to be able to see the wood for the trees. This is where the discipline looks to be most shaky, since critics must rely on second-hand guidance: novelists' previous form; the selections of broadsheet literary editors and reviewers; and the judgements of literary prize panels. Moreover, we are all reliant on that which precedes these judgements: the inscrutable processes of selection that obtain in the world of publishing and literary agencies.

The fact – and extent – of this mediation needs to be fully acknowledged by critics of contemporary writing, since it makes this branch of criticism truly and indisputably secondary. While it may once have been possible to claim a certain primary status for key and innovative examples of literary theory, theorizing about the contemporary novel can never be said to achieve such a status. This is one reason why complex theoretical accounts of very recent novels are both unusual and unconvincing. The initial reaction they provoke – that a sledgehammer is being taken to a nut (in the absence

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of ongoing critical debate with which to engage) – yields to this understanding about contemporary criticism: its pretensions to primacy are undermined by its evidently responsive position in relation to a pre-existing literary culture that cannot (yet) be authoritatively challenged or rearticulated. The inevitable complicity between the critic, whether journalist or academic, and the book trade's construction of the literary, conditions all of our judgements.

Consequently, the desire to 'periodize' and categorize in any consideration of contemporary literary history is compromised: we are driven to try and make sense of the literary culture in which we find ourselves, even if our judgements are not just vulnerable to hindsight, but never fully independent. One response to the dilemma is to acknowledge critical partiality, as John Brannigan does when he argues against the periodicity implied in his title, *Orwell to the Present: Literature in England, 1945–2000*: he considers the period since 1945 to be 'too recent to see anything but its diversity and complexity' and 'too diverse and complex to enable us to construct one coherent, meaningful narrative of its literary, cultural or historical events.'[8] Yet the contradictory desire to construct just such a teleological narrative, driven by cause and effect, action and reaction, persists. Neither is it the sole province of the professional critic: the critical reflections of novelists are equally prone to this kind of narrative account, which is the impetus behind the artistic manifesto, driven by a reaction to what has gone before, or the desire to advance the claims of a 'movement'.

A dominant periodizing view, and one that lies behind recent cause-and-effect accounts of contemporary literary history, is summarized in Rubin Rabinovitz's survey of the English novel of the 1950s. Rabinovitz reveals how the dominant mood of reaction against the experiments of the modernists, and the novelists of the 1930s, as well as the reverence for older models of fiction, were advanced in the criticism written by the prominent novelists of the age, including Kingsley Amis, C. P. Snow, Angus Wilson, William Cooper, Pamela Hansford Johnson and John Wain. The traditionalism that Rabinovitz identified as the keynote of the English novel at this time is blamed for a moribund tradition, characterized by

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a stifling critical mood, and mediocre achievement: 'the novelists of the 1950s have not produced fiction which approaches the quality of the novels of the writers whom they have imitated', he wrote. Moreover, a new kind of professionalism, in which self-interest was enshrined, was adduced as a contributory problem: 'the successful novelist in England becomes, too quickly, part of the literary establishment. Between novels, he supports himself by reviewing for the weeklies and quarterlies and by giving broadcasts over the BBC. All too often, he uses his position as a critic to endorse the type of fiction he himself is writing and to attack those whose approach is different.'[9]

These charges – of the self-interested nature of insider literary culture, as well as the sense of a tradition that pales into insignificance when compared with the achievements of the Victorians, or the modernists – have remained more or less constant in criticism of the British novel since the 1960s. For the novelists of the 1950s, as Rabinovitz points out, nineteenth-century models suited 'their realistic style and their concern with social and moral themes';[10] and this perceived privileging of content over form (to put it crudely), while contributing to a dichotomy that is not necessary, does nevertheless place emphasis on the straightforwardly social role of the novel. Of course, there is a contradiction, here, in that this apparent public interest is compromised by the self-interest of those powerful writers promoting the norm. Yet there is an ideological emphasis, in the reaction against experiment, that puts the interests of the ordinary reader above the technical virtuosity of the writer, and this has had a definitive bearing on one important construction of the novel in Britain since the Second World War.

The realism versus experimentalism debate that has dominated discussion of British fiction, really since the modernist period, shows no signs of abating. For appreciative readers of Andrzej Gasiorek's persuasive demolition of the realism/experimentalism dichotomy, this may seem surprising: has not Gasiorek demonstrated, definitively, that experimental works of fiction invariably depend on realist codes, and that realist novels are very often self-reflexive in the manner of more overtly 'experimental' works?[11] In all but the most

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iconoclastic and avant-garde fiction, readers can depend on an element of narrative suspense (however scrambled the chronology may be) and be able to invest their empathic engagement in the plight of the characters depicted; and even those writers most enamoured of 'tradition' are drawn to postmodern tricksiness. Margaret Drabble's version of realism, for example, can embrace and survive her highly self-conscious use of an intrusive narrator;[12] and even, in the case of *The Gates of Ivory* (1991), the deliberate deployment of a two-dimensional creation.[13]

It may be, however, that we cannot do without a scale of experimentalism which helps us see which pole, realism or experimentalism, a given writer inclines most towards, or to determine the ways in which different impulses are combined. However, the more drastic notion of a dichotomy persists in critical accounts. Brian Shaffer, for example, begins his survey of the British novel 1950–2000 by identifying 'two divergent paths' or 'two conflicting novelistic "models"'' in the response to modernism: 'antimodernist realism' on the one hand and 'postmodernist experimentation' on the other. Shaffer acknowledges that his list of British postmodernists – Martin Amis, Julian Barnes, A. S. Byatt, Angela Carter, John Fowles, Ian McEwan, Salman Rushdie and Graham Swift – must be characterized as 'divergent', given the range of 'formal, linguistic, and thematic' elements in the novels of these writers. Yet he sees these writers as united in their development of the modernist project, and their rejection of the 'antimodernist backlash'.

The problem with enlisting these writers – perhaps any writer – in the name of a postmodernism with a beneficent political underpinning is that to do so implies a uniform ideological conviction about the novel that is unconvincing. Shaffer summarizes the orthodoxy, which many will find highly appealing, very skilfully. In this view, postmodernist writers, faced with a crisis of representation, in which the text becomes more important than the reality to which it alludes, find ways to make this productive. A key element in this new emphasis on textuality is the impulse to blur the distinction between 'high' and 'low' art through the process of quoting from, or alluding to, popular cultural forms. It is 'the postmodernist novel's abundant use of popular cultural discourse' that produces its 'demotic orientation'.

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Of course, the anti-modernist backlash, associated most clearly, perhaps, with the Movement of the 1950s, was predicated on a demotic impulse – to make literature intelligible to the ordinary intelligent reader, baffled by the obfuscations of modernist expression. *Midnight's Children*, one of Shaffer's exemplary postmodernist novels, may well have 'stretched the English-language novel, linguistically and structurally' by virtue of its 'myriad interweaving narratives and voices'; but the demotic impulse in this is not immediately discernible.[14] If there is one, it is the (laudable) impulse that presumes the intelligent ordinary reader can cope with complexity and with difficulty; but this is a very different form of populism from Kingsley Amis's blunt attack on Joyce and Woolf, and his championing of a direct, transparent style. The 'populism' of postmodernism, with its expectation that we have all raised our game, hinges on extraneous factors, including the health of the publishing industry, and the growth of an increasingly sophisticated, and increasingly cosmopolitan, readership, produced largely by the expansion of Higher Education in the second half of the twentieth century.

John Fowles is an interesting example of the problems inherent in defining literary postmodernism as having a politically progressive character. *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) is usually hailed as one of the first British postmodernist novels; yet Fowles is not taught as much as he was, a fall from grace now compounded, I suspect, because of the illiberal attitudes expressed in his journals.[15] There is a paradox in the fact of Fowles's unfashionableness, since his work is curiously contemporary in its emphasis on the self. If Hal Jensen is right that 'the type of novel that Fowles kept attempting' is best described as 'a capacious literary-philosophical-autobiographical holdall', then we might see his work as the grandest expression of a current norm, the first-person narrative with a strongly 'confessional' air.[16] It may be the grandness of the design, however, that makes Fowles unwieldy for current tastes.

With respect to the novel, it is obvious enough that the typical manifestation of the twentieth century is both shorter and less socially encompassing than its triple-decker nineteenth-century antecedents. This may indeed signal that the novel is in decline, in a purely

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aesthetic and qualitative sense, and that it has enjoyed its heyday. This is very much beside the point, however: through the twentieth century, the novel became the principal literary form, emphatically eclipsing poetry and live drama, and it is now the form that is widely held to have the capacity to illuminate our lives by inspiring personal reflection. It is clear that the formal changes to the novel are market-driven, having to do with the mechanics of production and distribution, and with consumer lifestyle. The interesting questions are then: what kind of consumer finds contemporary fiction illuminating, especially where the emphasis is on the confessional individual voice? What kind of consumer, in a fast-paced world, finds the solitary business of novel reading a rewarding experience?

The obvious and simplistic answers to these questions might reveal the novel to be a form of self-therapy for readers, an intellectual escape from the hurly-burly; and, where that commonplace formal emphasis on individual experience is apparent, the contemporary novel might be said to offer a crumb of comfort to the solitary reader: in your isolation, you are not a freak, but joined to the generality.

If, as Ian Watt authoritatively argued fifty years ago, the rise of the English novel coincided with the development of capitalist trade in the seventeenth century, and the ideology of individualism that accompanied a new era of economics, then we should be accustomed to seeing the relationship between ideology, economics and the form of the novel. It is this kind of political embedding that generates the periodizing break commonly identified in the late twentieth-century British novel: if Thatcherism unleashed a new ideology of individualism, in tune with the post-consensus, free-market philosophy of the political scene since 1979, it must have had an impact on the novel. Certainly, there are novels that responded to this new individualism with élan, and satirical anger, like *Money* (1984) by Martin Amis, a comic *tour de force* that ridicules the new social greed and consumerism, most obviously through the egregious narrating persona, John Self. This was Amis's first really substantial novel: it is as if a new form of anti-social individualism (dressed up as entrepreneurialism) gave him the necessary inspiration to forge a new and vital form of satire. Of course, the novel is also deeply (and knowingly) implicated in the

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effects of the ideology that it would repudiate, but which infiltrates its narrative voice. Indeed, it may be Amis's acknowledgement – and embrace – of this complicity, signalled as an inevitability throughout his work, that gives his novels their particular authority.

Yet such examples, as I have indicated, can be seized upon in such a way as to exaggerate or overstate the 'break', here: Amis's previous novels betray a similar emphasis on individual self-regard, on a smaller scale, much as the disappearance of communal values in British society was well underway before 1979. As with any 'break', *Money*, written in 1981–2, when the impulses of the so-called Thatcher revolution were apparent, arises out of a set of circumstances in which longer-term trends and cross-currents are made manifest. Even so, it is credible to see the emphasis on individual experience, which gathered pace in the twentieth-century novel, put into a more urgent context by the new ideology of individualism. The real value of the phase of British magic realism, in the best work of Carter, Rushdie and then Winterson, may be the gesture to resist this ideology through carnivalesque, and anti-realist, mythic perception. The predominant form taken by serious fiction since the late 1970s, however, betrays the imprint of the new individualism. The series of deluded (and even solipsistic) narrators created by Ian McEwan and Kazuo Ishiguro, for example, must be seen in the context of a society in which communal possibilities are perceived to be fast evaporating: as with Amis, the strategy is to resist that which has also been internalized – for the reader, as for the writer.

This observation reinforces the truism that the literary novel has always been in a paradoxical relationship with the political culture that creates its conditions of possibility. Indeed, one way of defining the literary novel, against more popular forms of fiction, is the greater degree of resistance to the ideological and political status quo: through its structural ambivalences and complicities, the literary novel is the enemy within. What might take us beyond the truism is the extent to which the emphasis on solitary experience in the novel has become pervasive. The cultural niche established by the poetic short novel hinges, perhaps, on its cultivation of that form of isolation that chimes with the post-consensus world, but which also pre-dates that era.

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In this view, the literary novel has been forced slowly into a cul–de–sac in which its relevance is dependent upon its complicity. Yet the nature of that complicity may be inevitable; and not, ultimately, disabling.

One reason why this notable strand of novel writing has been pushed into such a cul–de–sac is that novelists can no longer appeal to shared conceptions of typicality in the way that they once did. A consequence of social experience through the twentieth century and beyond is that there is no agreed moral stance, and this makes it difficult to deploy the old–style omniscient narrator, or to embed the experiences of a character in the landscape of shared values. Yet this is also an inevitable consequence of an increasingly pluralistic society, in which previously unheard or silenced voices are expressed. From another perspective, then, the loss of agreed values opens up the possibility of fresh social and cultural exploration.

At the same time, the internalization of the new individualism produces a great many novels in which issues of cultural pluralism and diversity are not the headline issues. Beneath the tip of the iceberg of the novel since 1979, there is a vast body of material that has been largely invisible in the seminar room, and under–represented in the prize culture. The distortion of literary history that has resulted needs to be clearly exposed.

In the rest of this chapter I want to concentrate on a mode of fiction that represents an oblique and resigned response to the society that developed in Britain in the later twentieth century, a mode that is more a form of reaction than reinvention. I am thinking of provincial realism, but more particularly, a sub–genre that borrows from it, the 'seaside novel'. The construction of the post–consensus novel finds no space for the enduring tradition of provincial realism. Yet provincial realism continues to cast a long shadow over British literary culture, however infrequently it may figure on university reading lists. It also has the capacity to illuminate post–consensus society, despite lacking the ostensibly radical formal credentials that are ascribed to postcolonial and postmodern novels. The contempo-rary manifestation of the seaside novel concentrates the key features of provincial realism, and is implicitly revealing about its social context, in ways that are not immediately apparent.

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The seaside, or at least the coastal town, has been a significant presence in the English novel, providing not just a backdrop, but a means of focusing key social relations, as in *Mansfield Park* or *David Copperfield*. For the modernists, the seaside assumed symbolic status, whether linked to the artistic sensibility (Joyce, Proust, Woolf), or in Eliot, portentously, to the anatomy of Western civilization ('On Margate Sands / I can connect / Nothing with nothing'). However, for the British novelist in the later twentieth century and beyond, the seaside became a setting that combined the emblematic aspect of modernist treatments with the capacity of realism to produce a con-vincing social microcosm. I am especially interested in the develop-ment of this genre in the 1990s, which resulted in a form suggesting social representativeness, but without compromising the lonely voice that predominates in late twentieth-century and contemporary fiction: this is a curiously intense form of interiorized social fiction, its effectiveness dependent on what the seaside has come to connote in the collective unconscious.

A key novel in the development of this genre – possibly its ur-text – is Graham Greene's *Brighton Rock* (1938). Greene's despairing exami-nation of the usefulness of faith to counter evil raises a vital question for Western civilization in the light of the rise of Nazism;[17] it also creates an archetypal depiction of the seaside, seedy and rotten, in which the channels of brute power and exploitation are made manifest. It is this established aspect of the seaside setting – as, in effect, intimately connected with other social sites – that gives it its enduring power and utility for the novelist.

Before considering the kind of seaside novel that emerges after Thatcher, I want to examine some earlier examples in this developing tradition. Important, here, is Stanley Middleton's *Holiday* (1974), a novel that exhibits several key features of the genre. Edwin Fisher's 'holiday', returning to the Lincolnshire seaside resort of his childhood summers, is also an escape from his failing marriage, but an escape that is impossible. Indeed, the novel concerns the process of con-fronting the past as a means to marital reconciliation, a process that is typical of the seaside novel. The seaside is a place associated with reflection, recreation and childhood, and so it assumes the status, not

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just of an ideal backdrop, but of a seemingly *necessary* location for the first-person confessional exploration that has become so dominant in contemporary writing. Although there are clear religious and mythic resonances in the seaside location, by virtue of water's elemental connection to rituals of birth and death, the seaside novel has assumed its own modern mythic status. It is that modern inflexion of the elegiac novel, in which – in the pervasive context of cultural pluralism – the uncertain quest for identity is all, that gives the seaside novel part of its curious and unsettling contemporary relevance. I say curious and unsettling because the evocative power I am trying to identify in the seaside novel is predicated on the forced juxtaposition of the conundrum of identity in the narrative present with nostalgia, where nostalgia invokes the personal memories of the traditional British holiday location: an enshrined national myth is exposed to (and by) a context of uncertainty.

If we are right to see the novel's treatment of time as one of its key defining features, then the particular juxtaposition of past and present in the seaside novel becomes still more significant, from a technical point of view. The novel, in predominantly secular societies, makes sense of experience in time. It is a medium designed to imagine, and follow, the notional present in the lives of one or more characters, and to make connections with the 'past' and 'future' experiences in these imagined lives. The special claim that we can make for the novel is that it can produce the effect of time being 'horizontal' – as it is in the way our important memories determine our sense of who we are – rather than simply chronological. Moreover, if contemporary life seems increasingly to be governed by linear 'clock time' – career goals, culture driven by rapid technological advance – then to enter 'the world of the novel' is not simply to escape from the culture of ephemera, but to engage with a form that emulates the 'mythic' mode of thinking that makes us fully human. The novel, in other words, enacts a form of interconnected temporal consciousness that is necessary to our existence, but which is largely uncultivated in the routine experience of a secular society.

Thinking about this capacity in relation to the seaside novel suggests a paradox. Here is a type of novel that might, like all novels,

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provide a way of pondering the psychic basis of social being, even though its setting appears to embody a form of withdrawal from diurnal reality. Before considering some more recent (and obviously 'contemporary') examples, another earlier, and less 'provincial', illustration may help to underscore this surface paradox. I am thinking of Iris Murdoch's *The Sea, The Sea* (1978), a novel that typifies her preoccupation with personal responsibility in a contingent world.

Following the conventions of the seaside genre, *The Sea, The Sea* is a first-person narrative in which the protagonist's predicament, rooted in a recognizable form of identity crisis, is explored after a removal to the coast. Charles Arrowby, a famous man of the theatre (actor, playwright and director), buys a house at the sea's edge, in a gesture of social withdrawal, to write a memoir. Predictably, all the key figures from his past follow him there, and the egotistical Arrowby begins to learn the lesson that withdrawal is impossible, that he has responsibility for his involvement in others' lives.

The benign influence of Arrowby's cousin James, with his Buddhist philosophy, has a direct bearing on the state of grace with which the novel proper ends, Arrowby's personal muddle having been untangled; yet Murdoch, committed as a novelist to the contingent wheel of life, ends the book with a postscript that has Arrowby back in London, about to resume his monstrous, egotistical existence. John Banville's *The Sea*, discussed in the introduction, makes up a triumvirate of Booker winners (alongside Murdoch's novel, and Middleton's *Holiday*) that display some of the essential characteristics of the seaside genre.

Here, however, I am especially concerned with that branch of the contemporary seaside novel, represented more by Middleton than by Murdoch or Banville, in which a prosaic brand of realism evokes a particular place. In the seaside novel, the provincial realism that we more readily associate with the Midlands in postwar fiction – the Leicester of William Cooper, the Nottingham of Middleton – is superimposed on a more elegiac or poetic depiction of coastal experience.

It is intriguing to speculate on the precise context for the development of this school of writing. Given that the novel in Britain is widely assumed to have enjoyed a renaissance in the 1980s, sometimes

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characterized by the emergence of a British school of magic realism, we might now be able to discern something of a reaction against this phase, or the *construction* of this phase, through the 1990s and beyond. This reaction is characterized by a revitalized form of provincial realism, written by under-recognized novelists including Stephen Blanchard, Andrew Cowan and Chris Paling, all three of whom have found the seaside novel amenable to their purposes.

Blanchard is one of the key exponents of the new provincial realism, his deceptively laconic style representative in its ability to extract great poignancy from (apparently) simple, prosaic description. His second novel, *Wilson's Island* (1997), centres on the return of Ralph, an aimless thirty-something, to his hometown after a period away 'along the coast'. The setting is vague, and Ralph's motivation is unclear: a mood of aimlessness and decrepitude hangs over the book, together with the impression of seediness and small-time gangsterism with which the seaside has become associated in both the popular and the literary imagination: in such instances, there are clear echoes of *Brighton Rock*.

Like many seaside novels, this one uses its setting to concentrate the theme of familial dysfunction, which is exposed more clearly in the absence of humdrum suburban activities and lifestyles. This is a book of makeshift lives, on the social periphery. Ralph's brooding resentment against his father, a dealer in second-hand domestic appliances, dominates the narrative. The father persuades Ralph to lend a hand in the business, and also to apply his talent at playing darts for cash. He has called his father 'Cliff' ever since he abandoned his family for a time when Ralph was little. Another key figure in the book is the grandmother, Ma, or Marion, a fading matriarch who now spends most of her time in bed.

The most powerful element is the recurring motif of Wilson's Island, and the local mythology of something witnessed there long ago. In one version of the story, a naked man was seen on a shed roof; yet there is also a folk memory that something more mystical may have been witnessed, perhaps something with a religious significance. For some characters, the island is imbued with a distant spiritual potential, though this has been submerged in the popular imagination

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and reduced to something smutty. This is a baldly drawn metaphor for the vacuous lives of the novel's characters; but it works well, because it conveys a form of spiritual bankruptcy, or simply imaginative failure, that chimes with contemporaneous assessments of the seaside town.

In *The Paraffin Child* (1999), we are in familiar Blanchard territory: a seedy seaside town in the north of England with its snooker halls and caravan parks. Protagonist John Drean is a pill-popping taxi driver, struggling to rebuild his life after the disappearance of his four-year-old daughter, Pearl, who went missing in the woods, in the manner of a doomed Little Red Riding Hood. This is a novel of lives arrested by trauma. In the opening scene of this novel dominated by the motif of fire, Drean douses with paraffin and burns all his photographs of his daughter. His self-destructiveness is epitomized in his relationship with Enid, a pyromaniac: in a telling moment, she stubs a cigarette out on Drean's flesh, in the attempt to share with him the language of fire. Fire – and, specifically, paraffin flame – is the book's symbolic motif. Paraffin burns rapidly and nearly invisibly in daylight, evoking, in the manner of Blanchard's understated style, that which is not fully registered at first, but which is still painful and destructive. The run-down seaside is the external correlative of this process of concealed destruction.

The facility with which seaside provincial realism embraces this kind of overarching symbolism is an arresting feature, suggestive of a hybrid mode. Andrew Cowan's *Crustaceans* (2000) is another good example. The crustaceans in this novel are modern men, hidden in their shells and unable to make emotional contact with others. This is as bleak a novel of its type as one could imagine, a raw demonstration of futile love by a father – the novel's narrator, Paul – addressed to his dead son, Euan. The action of the novel's present occurs on a single day, which would have been Euan's sixth birthday, had he not died on the beach in a tragic accident the previous summer.

The inversion of the seaside stereotype – the scene now of familial tragedy, not the setting of a childhood idyll – involves also the disruption of routine patterns of thought. At one telling moment, Paul recalls his thoughts just after Euan was born (in his imagined

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address to the boy at the age of six): 'my thoughts ran to the seashore in summer, absurdly, too hastily, for I knew the names of nothing we might find there, but already we were gathering shells, casting stones at the waves, raiding rockpools for crabs. Crustaceans. I knew that word at least, and I helped you pronounce it' (pp. 17–18). The true sense of imprisonment, here, is conveyed by the instantaneousness of the association, the desire to introduce the boy to the seaside, linked here, and throughout the novel, with emotional dysfunction. Paul's own boyhood memories of seaside holidays with his aunt are characterized by the absence of his father, aloof and distanced following the death of Paul's mother (p. 43). The seaside becomes an emblem of the source of paternal pain, usually perpetuated by rote, but which is here a burden located with Paul's generation: it is Paul, bereft of both father and son, who is the symbolic final repository of this burden, and the routine that produced it.

Perhaps the best of the seaside novels from this period is Chris Paling's *Deserters* (1996), another novel that trades on seaside stereotypes gone stale. Set mostly in Brighton, and with obvious echoes of Greene, Paling's novel anatomizes lives without pattern or structure, and is underpinned by an investigation of personal responsibility. It is centred on the career of Cliffie, the novel's bisexual, and unstable narrator, who enjoys his first settled domestic relationship with a backstreet café manager, Barry. An army deserter, Cliffie had originally planned to rob Barry, but is pulled up short, in his alcoholic haze, by a powerful moment of self-awareness: 'I caught a glimpse of myself leaning towards him in the bar mirror. It was so ludicrous and disconnected an image I almost shouted to him to watch his pockets because someone was trying to pick them. When I saw it was me I stopped and stared at myself; . . . I saw . . . someone who had good enough looks once but had all but destroyed them with booze and the needle. I saw a black leather jacket hanging on a wasted frame' (p. 8). This is a disturbing novel of lives destroyed by desertion, in the sense of the denial of responsibility to others. Cliffie's psyche is fractured by a buried memory from childhood, and the sexual violence he associates with a 'brown room'. For the character May, later redeemed by motherhood and life in a commune, her

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earlier insanity stems from a miscarriage, real or imagined. At one point, her madness infects Cliffie, when, responding to her insistence that a child is crying, he hears 'the plaintive cry of a child screaming against the wind' (p. 38). Like the promiscuous barroom scene in which Cliffie picks up Barry, the echo of May's sorrow in the sea air is an instance of inverted seaside experience – a child's scream, not the sound of beach games – to crystallize the essence of lives that have gone awry.

Paling takes the capacity of the seaside novel to distil the elements of social anomie to an extreme in *A Town by the Sea* (2005). This highly self-reflexive book is a parable, comprised of mini-parables, written in the form of an existentialist nightmare. The book's narrator, nameless for much of the book, is treated with brutality and incomprehension by the townsfolk when he appears on the beach and enters their town. The eventual discovery of his name – Marcelino Merida – and that he was a volunteer for the nationalist force in the Spanish Civil War before absconding, does not lend any sustained contextual meaning to the novel. Rather, it reveals continuity with the 'type' of narrator established in Cliffie in *Deserters*, who deserts rather than fight in the Falklands campaign, and whose life is crossed by the absence of a mother. Marcelino's discovery that his mother had died while he was fighting the war is what finally disconnects him from his social fabric, and which turns him, like Cliffie, into a drifter who is both target, and sometime perpetrator, of random acts of violence. In its brutal simplicity, *A Town by the Sea* exposes the skeleton of the seaside novel more usually fleshed out in the mode of realism: it is, in effect, a deconstruction of the genre.

A more central example is Graham Swift's *Last Orders* (1996), with its obvious echo of those lines from *The Waste Land*: 'On Margate Sands / I can connect / Nothing with nothing.' The allusion to Eliot's poem, that great literary statement mourning Western society's loss of faith in institutionalized belief, signals that Swift's novel makes the process of mourning revelatory of a broader spiritual crisis. It is the idea of the shabby seaside that punctures the solemnity of the symbolic journey of the mourners to Margate, to scatter the ashes of Jack Dodd in the sea.[18]

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Swift's novel exemplifies the crisis of identity that dominates many varieties of the contemporary novel, where the available institutions highlight rather then ameliorate the sense of human fragility. In the British tradition, the seaside novel distils exactly this angst; but, paradoxically, its elegiac form, generated through the exposure of insubstantial social structures, has produced a new form of aesthetic consolation. At the end of *Last Orders*, the valedictory ritual marks not just the end of Jack Dodds, but also the symbolic termination of the friends who honour him, and who are of his generation. Yet Swift conjures a form of secular redemption through the communal operation of collective memory, and in this connection the seaside, as a focus for the characters' pilgrimage, is more than background: it is the social embodiment of this communal collective memory. This goes beyond the Jungian association of the sea with the collective unconscious. It identifies, rather, a particular phase of social history.

Understanding the place of the seaside in British cultural life depends upon a recognition of the 'deep cultural roots which the seaside had struck in popular consciousness, especially and tellingly in relation to children, by the early twentieth century'; by the late twentieth century, the British seaside 'maintained its power as a cultural referent', and did so partly by 'beginning to market itself in post-modern, ironic ways, inviting visitors to make jokes about seaside kitsch'. This ironic dimension has been an integral part of seaside experience for many generations, even if latterly it contributes to 'a distinctive experience which is also sold as part of the heritage tourist boom'.[19]

The prominence of the idea of the seaside holiday in children's literature is both a reflection of and possibly an explanation for the enduring power of the seaside in adult consciousness. Yet this 'innocent and timeless vision of the seaside' was partly 'embroidered' by 'the postwar generation . . . from its own memories of childhood holidays'. Part of the progression to adulthood in British society is then explained by the recognition of how sanitized an idea this is, how seaside life in reality is characterized by such things as the economic hardship of seasonal work; sexual predation (and freedom);

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the tawdry underbelly of variety entertainment; and the criminality that thrives where employment is unregulated.[20]

This recognition is more complex than it appears, more than the scales of childhood innocence falling from our eyes: after all, parents continue to take their children to the seaside in full consciousness of the seediness beneath the veneer. This is not simply because early child literacy and socialization in Britain is dominated by the association of 'seaside' and 'holiday' – that is true, but what makes the seaside especially compelling is its adult appeal. Partly this has to do with the elemental qualities of the sea and the coast, which make the location an accessible dramatic contrast with most working lives; yet the more interesting aspect of the appeal comes from its unique status as a space of extremes. In an extraordinarily simple psychological equation, a space literally 'on the edge', and away from the authoritarian strictures of routine, gives license to 'the spirit of carnival': here, 'where land and sea meet, the pleasure principle is given freer rein, the certainties of authority are diluted, and the usual constraints on behaviour are suspended.'[21]

This is not simply to dignify the presiding spirit of the seaside holiday camp, where childhood and adult pleasures can coexist, where parents can enjoy evening entertainment when their happy and exhausted offspring have fallen asleep. The appeal of the seaside as a liminal space has a more significant social aspect to it. The carnival spirit is one that admits social contradiction – the possibility of being ripped off at the funfair – as the necessary condition of a space of extremes. The seaside, that is to say, reveals manifestations of societal conflict and inequality that are either absent from middlebrow experience, or parcelled up in safe packages held at one remove.

Traditionally, the British seaside holiday was a great social leveller, bringing working- and middle-class families together, or at least in some kind of uncustomary proximity. As that old class divide has dissolved, however, seaside experience has acquired a different significance. The disappearance of the old working class, the expansion of the middle class, and the emergence of an amorphous underclass, have changed that dynamic. The centrality of the seaside holiday in British culture has also been shaken by the popularity of overseas holidays.

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Yet the mythology of the seaside remains pervasive, as a presumed key experience of childhood; and the seaside stages a new social interaction – between that expanding middle class, and that wing of the underclass engaged in migrant and seasonal work. For the middlebrow family, seaside experience brings them closer to social paradox and contradiction than they usually get, and at a time when they are attuned to the idea of enjoyment. The seaside holiday, then, produces the flicker of a utopian effect; and the seaside novel reproduces something of this effect, vicariously, for its readers.

The novelists I have been discussing are attuned to ways in which seaside experience reveals key instances of social connection and social paradox; and it is clear that there has been an intensification of this propensity to be observed from the last quarter of the twentieth century. The British seaside resort appeared 'to pass into a time-warp' as a consequence of social and economic changes in the 1970s and 1980s, not least of which was the increasing availability and affordability of package holidays abroad.[22]

The economic decline of the British seaside since the 1980s is irrefutable, if sometimes overstated; it is, moreover, an important barometer of social change. John K. Walton links 'the problems of the more down-market resorts at the century's end' with 'the widening gulf in living standards between the better-off and the poor which had marked the social polarization of the Thatcher years and continued through the 1990s.'[23] Seaside decrepitude in the 1990s then takes on the hue of the new social divisions that obtain in 'post-class' Britain.

My broad argument is that the seaside novel of the 1990s distils the essence of social relations post-Thatcher, and does so by revitalizing the prosaic descriptiveness of provincial realism with the reflective tones of confessional narrative; and another novel that illustrates this combination clearly is *Trespass* (1998), by D. J. Taylor. Taylor uses a run-down hotel on the Suffolk coast as the setting that encapsulates his concerns. Holed up in this 'seaside hotel out of season', the kind of place where 'all the jetsam of English society comes to rest' (p. 19), narrator George Chell lives 'a vagrant existence' in the mid–1990s, living off investments (pp. 17–18). He has been aimless since the

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collapse of his uncle's business empire, Chell Holdings, six years previously. After an undistinguished start in life, he had become his uncle Ted's right-hand man, with him at his death, a broken man, disgraced by fraudulent trading, and making the revelation that we have been expecting all along: that he is really George's father (p. 306). Taylor's debt to Victorian and Edwardian fiction is clear, and quite self-conscious: this is social realism addressed to the condition of England, and in particular to the Thatcherite City of insider dealing and the fraudulent misuse of funds.

A publisher puts George in touch with a freelance writer, the dour Frances, who might ghost the (ill-fated) book he is planning to write about his uncle's life, and she comes to stay at his hotel, The Caradon, to conduct some interviews. An essential point of the book, and the basis for its credentials as a seaside novel, is that this Suffolk outpost, from where the revelations of the City of the 1980s are made – both through the interview transcripts, and George's retrospective narra-tive – is intimately connected with both the corruption and the confusion of that world. This is made clear when George discovers that the hotel's owner, the decidedly odd Mr Archer, was one of those investors who lost money at the collapse of Chell Holdings, and is probably the author of the hate mail George has been receiving at the hotel. At the end of her stay, Frances rails at George apropos of his habit of speculating about Mr Archer: 'Why don't you leave Archer alone? I mean, interfering in his life, cooking up all those little fantasies about him. It's just a kind of trespassing, when you think about it. Feeding off someone else's world' (p. 288). This simultaneously explains, and fudges, Taylor's choice of title: the defrauding of the small investor like Archer is paralleled by this new kind of trespassing on his life; yet speculation about the personal life is plainly the business of the novelist, an impulse that might well seem anathema to the brittle and unimaginative Frances. Archer is revealed as a lonely – and unexpectedly complicated – man, with a hopeless passion for one of his employees, and an altruistic and socially responsible impulse towards another, prone to petty theft. He is, that is to say, embroiled in his own messy microcosm of social contingency.

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The same indeterminacy governs the novel's depiction of the era of 'conspicuous consumption' (p. 199). George has one telling memory of his uncle, distributing money from a wad of notes, in a vulgar charitable gesture that evokes a stereotype of the 1980s (made popular by the comedian Harry Enfield's creation, 'loadsamoney') (p. 314); but equally resonant is the sense that he was unaware of his misdeeds, that he acted in the spirit of an entrepreneurial age, insufficiently regulated (p. 311). Finally, this is not just a satirical novel about the City in the Thatcher era, but also a novel driven by the introspective impulses that reflect this era. George, the drifter in a seaside town, is simultaneously a rootless object of pity and a parasite: the novel ends with his vague sexual speculation about Brenda, the object of the late Archer's passion (p. 336). Again, the seaside is that place in which underlying social relations (and contradictions) are revealed.

The way in which the novel's realism is overlaid by introspection distinguishes it as a recognizable seaside novel. Paul Binding accounts for this blend with reference to 'the famous quarrel between Henry James and H. G. Wells', assuming, in this reworking of *Tono-Bungay*, that Taylor would 'take Wells's part'. Yet Taylor, 'at his own showing, would be mistaken', concludes Binding, since the strongest elements of *Trespass* come 'from the Jamesian within ... not the Wellsian without'.[24] It may be the peculiar blend of these elements, however, that gives this, and the other seaside novels considered here, their power.

1996 seems to have been a particularly rich year for this type of seaside novel, seeing publication of Peter Benson's *The Shape of Clouds* and Paul Sayer's *The God Child*, as well as the key novels by Graham Swift and Chris Paling discussed above. Blanchard's *Wilson's Island* (1997) and Taylor's *Trespass* (1998) follow close behind. There can be little doubt that the end of the prolonged period of Conservative rule, the Thatcher-Major era, which saw many dramatic changes in British social relations – which were, in many cases, the manifestation of longer-term changes – provoked or inspired this kind of treatment. In the hands of these novelists, the seaside novel supplied a shorthand way of evoking those social relations that seemed to have been overlaid or by-passed in the age of the entrepreneur, and the advent of the so-called 'classless' society. It is

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also worth remarking that, although these novels seem to have internalized a form of social breakdown, they also comment upon it by concentrating, and so resuscitating, the essential ingredients of provincial realism. This under-recognized response to Thatcherism is also a vital (and underrated) bridge with tradition in the development of the English novel.

It is important to recognize that there is a longer tradition here, being honed for a specific context. Norman Levine's *From a Seaside Town* (1970), a novel with something of a cult following, demonstrates the broader connotations of rootlessness that are associated with the seaside novel. Levine's is a strange, plotless novel, narrated from the perspective of Joseph Grand, a Jewish Canadian whose identity bespeaks the uncertain quest for authentic artistic expression, under the sign of postwar migrancy. The elements of Grand's rootlessness seem to be aptly concentrated in a 'decaying seaside town in the south of England' (p. 30), revealing the longer-term economic and cultural collapse that suggested itself to novelists of the twentieth century.

In a still longer literary-historical perspective, the seaside novel is a genre one might point to to illustrate the shift from the confident novelistic portrayal of society, epitomized in the modes of omniscient narrative associated with nineteenth-century fiction, to a new convention of insularity and social breakdown, captured in the narrative forms of a hybridized provincial realism, and epitomized in the seaside novel of the 1990s. My insistence on the presence of this kind of convention should not detract from the variety and invention of the novel in Britain into the twenty-first century; but it does highlight the inadequacy of our critical models when a convention that looms so large should be absent from our critical surveys. This is a vital form of post-consensus fiction in itself, bearing few of the radical formal elements commonly associated with the most praised novels of the period. The question that must be asked is whether or not the neglect of such novels is, as I tend to think, a sign of critical prejudice. Here is a genre that exposes the simplicity of some post-consensus constructions in two ways: by demonstrating that telling responses to Thatcher were not always formally radical; and by

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revealing the longer historical undertow of those responses, with regard to formal expression as well as political change.

While I was writing this chapter, two novels by prominent British novelists were published, in which the seaside figures prominently: Ian McEwan's *On Chesil Beach* and Graham Swift's *Tomorrow* (both 2007). This suggests two things: first, that the preoccupations of contemporary provincial realism may well infiltrate mainstream literary culture in demonstrable ways; and second, that a new focus on the domestic may be a consequence of the increasing prominence given to portrayals of insularity and anomie in British fiction.

McEwan's novella, *On Chesil Beach* (2007), uses the idea of the seaside as a liminal space to embed, symbolically, its central premise: that one failed wedding night in 1962 can be taken as emblematic of the dividing line between the sexual liberation of the 1960s and the repression that preceded it. More particularly, Chesil Beach, that long stretch of pebbles that separates the English Channel from the Fleet Lagoon, is made to symbolize this epochal change. As the scene of confrontation on the wedding night, after the disastrous sexual encounter of newlyweds Edward and Florence, the beach – immensely difficult to walk on, like all pebble beaches – embodies their separation and failure to communicate. Despite the novella's historical ambition, to portray in miniature a generational shift in social mores, it is that focus on failed domestic experience that makes it so much of its time.

In Swift's *Tomorrow*, seaside experience frames the existence of the nuclear family unit that is Swift's focus: a romantic interlude on Brighton beach inaugurates that relationship of Paula and Mike; while a family memory of the near-drowning of their children, the twins Nick and Kate, while on holiday in Cornwall, underscores the fragility of this domesticity. Saved by their father on that occasion, the twins, now sixteen, are to hear a revelation on the 'tomorrow' the novel anticipates: they will discover that they were conceived through IVF, with sperm from an anonymous donor. This will deprive them of the biological father they thought they had, and so demolish the basis of the family unit that has sustained them.

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Partly, this is a novel about the social impact of technology, in the spirit of Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* (2005); yet its focus is narrowly domestic. Both McEwan's novella, and Swift's novel, in their different ways, contribute to a new domestic fiction. The new emphasis on domesticity – prefigured, notably, in McEwan's *Saturday* (2005) – implies either a distinct shrinking of possibilities for the novel, or a specific form of response to the new processes of globalization. The tradition of the seaside novel must be seen as an important progenitor of this intriguing new phase of creativity.