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THEATRE AND THE NOVEL

OF ALL THE changes that the British novel has undergone in the past ten years, the most marked is in the social origins of its leading representatives. The great majority of English writers over 45 who have contributed in a real sense to the national literature followed the typical trajectory of the English professional: birth into a bourgeois family, boarding-school education, then either Oxford or Cambridge. In the first half of the twentieth century, this was more than ever the conventional path for the English novelist. But for writers under 45, things are very different. A proportionally larger number hail from shopkeeping families, from white-collar or working-class backgrounds; many have been educated in local-authority schools; and if they too have gone to Oxford or Cambridge, the fact is that since 1945 those universities have become more accessible.

If this type of analysis needs to be treated with caution, we can nevertheless trace some features of the English novel in recent years to the emergence of two social groups: on the one hand, young people from working-class and petty-bourgeois families who have been admitted to the elite universities on scholarships; on the other, young men and women who have received only a summary education and acquire their formation, literary and ideological, elsewhere. Both sets are quite distinct from their predecessors and share some positive characteristics. They are alert to past writers from similar backgrounds—D.H. Lawrence in particular—with whom they have some affinity. But they also differ from one another in important ways. The first group, many with a degree in English literature, come into contact early on with traditional culture and ideas, which they later modify or abandon. The second group, if

they have encountered that culture, will have done so altogether differently, and with divergent results.

At the same time, there has been a steady increase in the number of readers. In 1950, for the first time in English history, a majority of adults read books with some regularity, a trend encouraged by the growing number of libraries and paperback imprints. But this does not necessarily mean that authors from the new social strata are read by those from their own background. The fact that regular readers in England make up only a bare majority illustrates the limits of this expansion. And most of the writers in the second group are in fact playwrights, and therefore write for a public whose social composition has changed far less. Television drama has diminished this somewhat, but the paradox stands. There remains a disequilibrium in the relationship between writers and their public in England today, with repercussions for the field of literature. There is a notable difference between narrating particular experiences for a public that has shared them, and narrating them for a readership fascinated by novelty but with no comparable grounding in experience. Commercial promotion has added further complications: 'personality' may be more important in the relationship between writer and reader than the quality of the work.

At the intersection of these diverse factors is the figure of the 'angry young man', a deceptive formula and the coinage of a theatrical publicist, not a writer or a critic. It would be absurd, for example, to put both John Osborne and Kingsley Amis in this category: if the definition fits one, it cannot fit the other; their writings from every point of view are radically different. In its simplistic reduction, fashioned for the consumption of foreign audiences as well as the national market, a definition of this sort simply adds confusion to a situation that is already complicated enough.

A conservative reaction

Writers like Amis and John Wain began to publish after 1945, and it is common to point to this as the source for their rejection of certain forms of English bourgeois culture, exposed as irrelevant and ridiculous in the post-war world. But this sort of rejection was already typical in the thirties among leftwing poets, novelists and playwrights, when it was accompanied by a form of protest that combined political and social aspirations. In the English novel of the late 1940s, it was precisely

this type of protest and consequent challenge to the social order that was missing. Amis and Wain did not continue the principal strand of the thirties but reconnected with its dissidents, above all Evelyn Waugh, William Empson and George Orwell; each different enough from the others but sharing certain preoccupations.

Another important influence in the early fifties was a type of American novel, sceptical and disengaged, known in England mainly through the writings of J. D. Salinger. Amis's *Lucky Jim* and Wain's *Hurry on Down* are far from alike: there is a hysteria and a want of seriousness in Wain that is absent from Amis, who, in a narrower field, is more measured and precise. But the novels have important elements in common, in particular the figure of the isolated, uprooted young man, for whom the place he comes from, where he is now and where he will go to, has little or no significance. Not only the past, but also his present reflections on the past, crumble before this demystifying investigation, as does the future, any future. The type of protest in vogue in the thirties, the oft proclaimed if not always intimately felt demand for a better, more just and happier future, had become fundamentally suspect. The reason, of course, lay partly in the bitter difficulties of left politics and in the split between social democrats and communists in the harsh post-war years. But it seems also that the strange marriage of Freudian and Marxist doctrines in the thirties led to social protest as such being viewed with marked scepticism. An early example of this reaction was Nigel Dennis's novel *Boys and Girls Come Out to Play*. Amis has recently written, in a pamphlet on *Socialism and the Intellectuals*, that the only honest political interest is a strictly personal one. All the rest is psychologically dubious, 'and behind that again lies perhaps your relations with your parents'.¹ The irony was that the left-wing writers of the thirties themselves now landed on the same shores. We can see this in Auden's development and the changes he made to some of his early political poems. This was not simply a matter of differing sensibilities, but of historical pressures.

The scepticism of Amis and Wain was, therefore, conservative at bottom. This does not mean it could not be lively and sometimes acute, in response to the uncertain social and cultural climate of the post-war years. Without a doubt, this scepticism was itself an integral part of the culture of the time—that of first-generation university students who saw in aspects of the new social order mere hypocrisy, irrelevance

¹ Kingsley Amis, *Socialism and the Intellectuals*, Fabian Tract, no. 304, 1957, p. 4.

and sometimes absurdity. The figure of Professor Welch in *Lucky Jim* unites many of the traits of this falseness, in a society that complacently defines itself as 'superior'. Amis's parody successfully gives form to the response. It is unimportant, then, that Welch is a professor at a provincial university, and that this prose, midway between parody and satire, does not tackle more fundamental problems in English life, or take aim at more commanding targets. Amis instead focuses on isolated aspects of the culture that invite ridicule, all the more so in a provincial context. Wain, in *Hurry on Down*, widens his sphere of interest with the same underlying convictions of the shrewd youth, that nothing has value—or rather, that the only value is honesty towards oneself, recognizing the disillusion and the complex motives behind choices, whatever they may be. There is no doubt that this tone and moral temperament are typical of the time. Any curiosity about the past serves only to expose the errors committed in the name of social investigation and interpretation, of the most obvious kind. The elements of protest and rejection are strong, but the structure, the combination of parody and farce, seems to be a convenient means of avoiding the conflicts that such positions involve. Describing these feelings in a convincing way in the contemporary world—as opposed to the world of vivid details, sparkling with satire—would have led these writers to an extremely difficult question: the nature of reality today. Instead, their novels offer a phantasmagorical flight: profanities on the telephone, caricatured speech, marginal social types in whom aggression can be exaggerated. This is indicative of the social context of these works, which itself could be dated to the 1930s.

The disillusion of the years immediately before and after 1950 also manifested itself in works of a very different kind, of which George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is the most influential instance. Disgusted by the lies and cruelty of what would later be called Stalinism and by the seeming perdurance of a war economy, in which such lies and cruelty were institutionalized, Orwell projected a future where corruption is inevitable; except, perhaps among the disregarded 'proles', who are, for their part, outside politics, satisfied with their beer and their songs. This vision derived partly from an acute preoccupation with actually existing dangers and should be seen as an expression of its time, in which every attempt at political and social change had proved to be a cruel illusion. Orwell had been a socialist, and tried to remain one, but he did not believe that intellectuals and political leaders could remain loyal to humane aspirations, while the proles, for whom he had a deep, if generic

and abstract, sympathy, were seen as too apathetic and ignorant, at least in the short term, to be capable of resolute political action.

These opinions were widely held; other works, in less explicit ways, also rejected humanism and expressed a conviction that the worst human instincts, initially stifled, would return with all the impetus of the repressed. Of these, the most interesting is William Golding's first novel, *Lord of the Flies*. This is a contemporary version of the famous children's adventure story, *Coral Island* by R. M. Ballantyne, the tale of how a group of shipwrecked schoolchildren manage to survive and create a community. Golding's novel, a carefully constructed fable, comes to the opposite conclusion: the boys who attempt to uphold civility and rationality are easily isolated by the others, who spend their time hunting and soon degenerate into a wild state. A boy of delicate feelings is killed like Christ, and what was at first a human society becomes a human jungle, all the more arresting as the boys are always seen as 'only' schoolchildren. This is a strong and unusual novel, which has left a deep impression on the imagination of many readers. Golding's later novels—*The Inheritors*, *Pincher Martin* and *Free Fall*—have also met with high praise, although in my view the elements of psychological invention that were subordinate in *Lord of the Flies* take up so much space in the later works as to cast doubt on their literary coherence.

In England and in similar societies, strong forces plainly favour this vision, rooted in the ineluctability of evil. The career of Angus Wilson is suggestive in this respect. In his early works there is a good deal of acute observation of psychological and social incongruities; for a time, with the publication of *Anglo-Saxon Attitudes*, he seemed to be on the verge of a sophisticated, critical realism. Reacting to the pressure of the time, he was evidently keen to broaden the social horizon of his work. This was part of his humanist intent, in the spirit of E. M. Forster's novels and the motto 'Only connect'. The search for personal integrity within society proved difficult, prone to many forms of guilt and confusion, but Wilson did not abandon it. In his latest novel, *The Old Men at the Zoo*, it is as if the tendencies to cruelty and violence, which in earlier works come into conflict with the characters' sense of humanity and responsibility, have finally prevailed. *The Old Man at the Zoo* stages the phantasmagorical collapse of liberal values and English civilization, in a context of war between England and Europe. Wilson remains, for all that, a more interesting and serious writer than Iris Murdoch, who

started out, in *Under the Net*, with a sort of sophisticated intellectual comedy, and in *The Bell* has attempted to uncover the ultimate matrices of love and human relations—personal and social—in an experimental community. Her other novels, however, display a decadent tendency to reduce human relations to fodder for a literary mode which, as in Virginia Woolf's later works, consists in a dense and baroque game, ending in self-exhaustion. These novels, it must be added, were greatly admired in England. In this regard, the relationship between the type of writer and type of reader is clear. Much of the oddly stagnant atmosphere of England around 1955 evidenced in such works, which are not lacking in talent, is due to writers like Wilson and Murdoch, who, in other periods and other moments in their development, wrote with quite different intentions and convictions. A detached, often grotesque style coexists with a loss of vitality and authenticity: a collapse masked by extravagant, almost pseudo-gothic, intellectual contrivance. Lawrence Durrell's work had already shown the way.

Theatre of alienation

It is indicative of the complexity of English society in the past few years that the development of this grotesque narrative style has coincided with the advent of what is widely called critical realism. The start of this movement can be dated to John Osborne's 1956 play, *Look Back in Anger*. The Royal Court, a theatre whose fame dates from the period of George Bernard Shaw and Granville-Barker in the early 1900s, is considered by many to be the centre of a new phenomenon, beginning with Osborne and continuing with Arnold Wesker and others.

To understand the situation of English theatre, it is necessary to return once again to the thirties. At the time, disillusion with naturalism had led to new experiments with drama in verse, the first and most famous being T. S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*, followed by W. H. Auden and Christopher Isherwood's *The Dog beneath the Skin* and *The Ascent of F6*. By the early fifties, Eliot's recent plays in verse and the less important productions of Christopher Fry were the only new work of any interest. West End theatre, meanwhile, remained fundamentally unchanged. Apart from sparkling comedies and some whodunnits, this was home to drawing-room theatre that represented bourgeois life idealized in substance and attitude, still anchored in a pre-war mentality. Eliot's important experiments would be absorbed but also diluted by this

soporific theatrical environment: his last works, *The Confidential Clerk* and *The Elder Statesman*, were still in verse and dealt obliquely with religious themes, but the tone now called the drawing room to mind. Even allowing that the London theatre was connected only indirectly to national life as a whole, the gulf between the drama and everyday experience remained vast.

What was called the realist movement, beginning with Osborne, filled the void. All the same, it is difficult, looking back, to decide whether the new theatrical direction was the result of his striking talents or rather took shape for the larger reason that the situation was ripe; indeed, over-ripe. It is worth remembering that only a few years earlier, an interesting opera by John Whiting was swept from the stage by the critics; and important, too, that one factor in the success of Osborne's play, which got off to a rather slow start, was a persuasive intervention by the first of a new generation of critics, Kenneth Tynan. However, if it was the right moment for this kind of rupture, Osborne's rhetoric was the instrument best adapted to it. An exasperated protest accompanied by contemptuous, barely articulate rage: in the view of many, it was the voice of a new generation, a new class.

In light of Osborne's later work, it is difficult to say how much truth there was in that affirmation. The character of his proclaimed rebellion undoubtedly calls for careful analysis. What is striking, however, is that the double political crisis of 1956—the Hungarian revolution and the English attack on Suez—which seemed to many in the intermediate generations both culmination and outcome of the widespread disillusionment of the period, led in practice to a countrywide renaissance in political militancy on the left, for the first time since the war. The Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament proved to be a radical movement of a new type, important for its methods of organization and activity as well as for its politics, and the intellectual movement known as the New Left had its beginnings in that critical moment. It was natural, and in many respects accurate, to associate this renaissance with the new movements in fiction and theatre: the Royal Court and Theatre Workshop, the Free Cinema and social-realist novels in provincial settings. Certainly one could not live through those years without welcoming the sudden and widespread renewal of energies, and the intensity of the establishment attacks on these movements announced a new form of confrontation, social as well as cultural.

What cannot easily be said, however, is that this new writing, particularly in the theatre, gave expression to experiences and problematics proper to the working class. Nor is it clear, looking at the theatrical movement as a whole, that realism was the most important element. The common denominators in works such as *Look Back in Anger*, Wesker's *Roots* and Shelagh Delaney's *A Taste of Honey*, as in many others, are youth and isolation: society's absence rather than its presence. Much is made of the hero of *Look Back in Anger*, a university graduate who runs a sweet stall in the market, but this is only a theatrical device for giving voice to the lack of meaning in society, not in any way an initiative in social inquiry. The East End Jewish family in Wesker's *Chicken Soup with Barley* seems accurately done, in the realist manner, but the peasant families in *Roots*, whatever the intention, are simply the backdrop for a soliloquy of loneliness and frustration. Delaney's *A Taste of Honey* refers to a society—or rather, a social fringe—with uncertain borders, but once again the thrust of the work is to exalt the loneliness of the heroine.

Readers in other countries may have accepted these works as naturalist in the traditional sense, as representative images of contemporary life in England, but nothing could be more misleading. My experience of discussing them with students who work has often been the opposite: they are indignant at the thought that this could be the life they lead. Middle-class audiences, and the critics who interpret such works for them, may have thought they were seeing a kind of documentary, and this has led to misguided discussions. Drama is certainly related to social reality, but not in this sense. What is in question is not social realism but, in the most successful cases, lyrical flashes in the dark. In each case, the young protagonist is alone; contact with the organized adult world results in intense disillusion. A profound alienation sets in, and the fact of being young and living in a society of disintegrating values explodes in an inarticulate cry of protest, a generic expression of love of life.

Inarticulacy is one of the most important elements of this theatrical movement. It is always there, even when it conceals itself in apparently logical speech. Emotion, strangely, is proportional to the inability to express oneself clearly and communicate with others. It is this experience, not a careful analysis of society, that, perhaps unconsciously, has attracted the public and seduced its younger members, for whom these works are full of meaning. I think this is their defining quality: to have brought into particular focus something that was perhaps obvious but

has now become central, which justifies and at the same time encourages one to overlook the manifest shortcomings of these dramas. On careful examination, their shortcomings in many cases convey the central experience, which for a playwright is paradoxical.

Conditions of incommunicability

What the theatre, at least, is saying is also what, broadly speaking, is being said in England today: that it is impossible to communicate with others, and that pain and aspiration alike remain existential cries. In order to clarify this point it is useful to consider the work of Harold Pinter, which is—at least in appearance—quite different. In contrast to Osborne, Wesker and Delaney, Pinter is not politically engaged outside his own work, and he has sometimes been attacked by the others as a writer with intentions and experiences radically different from theirs. It is easy to infer a filiation between Pinter's writing and that important line of European theatre running from Chekhov to Pirandello to Ionesco and others. The central theme of this tradition is again the impossibility of communication, which is not only an accident or a disease but a fact common to all, part of the human condition itself. Pinter's works are correctly placed in relation to this 'drama of incommunicability', but it is curious how closely his characters and their settings resemble those of the realists, Osborne, Wesker and Delaney. There is the same uncertainty, the same indecision, the same awareness of complexity, which each character works out with difficulty, only by chance breaking through to the consciousness of others. Conversations are characterized by participants' mutual inability to understand one another. It is important to acknowledge the differences, in intention at least, between Pinter and the others, but more important in the last instance is the affinity that binds them: the uncertainty that is proper to their generation.

In plays like *The Birthday Party* and *The Dumb Waiter*, Pinter seems to conceive a world in which the human condition forever contains, if only latently, the roots of evil and violence. In this sense he is close to writers like Wilson and Golding. And it is here—in the causes of incommunicability—that the differences between the young playwrights begin to emerge. Wesker, sometimes at risk of oversimplification, refers us directly to politics and class society. He is a socialist and sees revolution above all as the recovery of human relationships that have been lost. He is still young, and the greater part of his work is still to be written.

No one can reasonably say which of the conflicts that animate it will turn out to be the most important. Sometimes there is an expectation that the people will manage to recover their voice on their own. At other times—as in parts of *Roots* and in his latest play, *Chips with Everything*—the atmosphere is in many respects similar to Orwell, giving the impression that the people are mute, that their voices cannot come from within but must be restored by others—themselves otherwise engaged. The future of Centre 42, the movement founded by Wesker, which aims to bring the working class to the world of art with popular spectacles of various kinds, depends on which of these different attitudes proves more strongly held.

Notwithstanding her active political involvement, Shelagh Delaney's poetics is so personal that the world of ideas impinges on it only indirectly. In a context of defeat and frustration, this may be an advantage: *A Taste of Honey*, taken on its own, is artistically stronger than anything by Wesker or Osborne. By contrast, Osborne is so thoroughly engaged in the battle of ideas that it is difficult to identify the relation between this content and his works. To be sure, his anger at some of the traditional hypocrisies of English life, especially those concerning class, is strong and unrelenting. But his work is often so deeply negative as to make it hard to discern his true interests and beliefs. A certain spirit of negation characterizes the whole movement, but in scenes like those of Wesker's *I'm Talking about Jerusalem* and in the prose of the last part of *A Taste of Honey* there is affirmation, limited and uncertain yet moving, that is absent in Osborne's work.

The explosive interest aroused by *Look Back in Anger* was due to a specific combination of sex and politics: in the best of cases, one was shown to be an aspect of the other, in the worst, both were schematic. In his latest work, Osborne is chiefly interested in certain types of erotic situation, or rather, in the psychic distortions to which sexual behaviour gives rise. *The World of Paul Slickey* and *Luther* should surprise anyone who ever thought that Osborne's main interest lay in ideas and action: Luther's revolt is visceral rather than principled. We can begin to see similarities between Osborne's imaginative vein and that of Strindberg or Tennessee Williams—far from the tradition of social realism or, at a more elementary level, social interest and commitment. Anger and frustration deriving from early emotional conflict may coincide with militancy, but it is difficult here to separate one factor from the other.

Another playwright of the same generation is, I think, more important than those so far discussed: John Arden, the author of *Serjeant Musgrave's Dance*. This, a fable about forms of violence, has more dramatic force than any of the works of Osborne, Wesker or Delaney, and seems destined to endure beyond the present context. Arden, while sharing in the experience of incommunicability, has not made this the fulcrum of his work, exploring its limits in poetry and songs composed in a rich, imaginative language. The same tendency appears in other young writers—influenced in part by Brecht and to a lesser extent by Ionesco and Beckett—who are coming up against problems already faced by the writers of the thirties in their experimental verse dramas. These underground currents will probably prove the more fertile in years to come, but in any case, there will be no return to the earlier state of things after the great flowering of English theatre in 1955, and the balance-sheet is clearly positive.

Realist futures

In the field of narrative, meanwhile, there has been an analogous development, though by different means. The realist tradition has long been much stronger in prose fiction than in the theatre, with important exponents from Dickens to Eliot and Hardy to Lawrence. The fifties saw a reaction against the experimental psychological novel, which in England reached its apogee with Woolf. The most notable representative of this reaction is C. P. Snow, and his unfinished novel sequence *Strangers and Brothers*. In a certain sense, these are realist works, attempting to describe typical aspects of English society: problems of work and politics, in particular, are more than mere backdrop. But the values and criteria of judgement in Snow's novels have been roundly criticized, especially for their keen interest in the leader—their apparent approval of this figure who makes choices, takes decisions—as if the justness of a society or of an individual life should depend solely on the prudent, sometimes paternalistic monitoring that precedes decisive action. The England described by Snow, the level of its managers, may truly be like that, but the heart of the problem lies elsewhere. Looking at his characters, it would appear that Snow always moves in the same moral world. Their experience inevitably falls short of a full, vital characterization.

The matter is theoretical. There is a kind of novel with notable precedents in the English tradition that creates and assesses a whole way

of life on the basis of the quality of individuals and their relationships. Society is not a backdrop against which human relations stand out for description, nor do individuals simply illustrate the system of life. A correct balance between those two elements is perhaps the hardest thing to achieve, and it is this balance that, in my opinion, is properly called realism. In English fiction (and not only there) this has been achieved piecemeal: we have been faced with novels that were either social or personal, and rarely both. There is so much new to say about English society that even partial descriptions, in terms of the social or the personal, are welcome. But it is important not to mistake the kind of novel written by Snow as a real alternative to the kind of novel written by Woolf. In this theoretical perspective, each is the shadow cast by the other. The argument becomes clearer if we separate Snow's method from the content of his work, which many reject, judging it contrived, inhuman, divorced from reality.

Margot Heinemann's novel *The Adventurers* has been held in high regard on the left for its intelligent description of the life and fortunes of the working class in the post-war period. There is intelligence, as there is in Snow, but not the kind of intelligence you would expect in a novelist. It is a kind of schematism (often hasty) that proceeds by social stereotyping, which chills enthusiasm. But, and this is crucial, the imagined world turns out to be impoverished—the 'way of life' that counterposes itself to the belief and hopes the characters share—and this is reflected in the avoidance, where the plot itself would require otherwise, of fundamental themes of personal experience. The subject is broached, as with Snow, but soon abandoned to make way for a series of 'theses'.

Novels treating working-class life in contemporary England run up against still greater difficulty. The most immediate challenge is that many of the more influential critics do not see the smallest need for them. But attempts continue to be made, not for abstract reasons—nor yet for political ones—but because for the new generation of writers, whose social origins differ from those of their predecessors, this field of experience is the most congenial and emotionally stimulating. At the same time, given the current state of English society, writers from that background tend, as they progress, to leave it behind them. Engagement with the life of the contemporary working class is thus a genuinely difficult task, as I have had to discover for myself with my first novel, *Border Country*. It is about a man born into a working-class family who grows

away from it as an adult and is barely able to recognize his past experience, which in certain respects is still his, when he returns to his old home for his father's last illness. Walter Allen's *All in a Lifetime* tells of a similar experience, albeit in a different manner: inter-generational dialogue in a time of limited social mobility. In writing my new novel, *Second Generation*, an attempt to narrate the contemporary experience of this mobility, I had to take into account unsuspected layers of reality that complicate the analysis of multiple generations. Still, it seemed to me that the attempt was necessary, because since Lawrence's final works many novels have confined themselves to a single generation, thereby evading what experience shows is the basic problem: the continuity of the individual through the vicissitudes of social change.

Two novelists who have written on this theme, in different ways, are John Braine and Alan Sillitoe. Braine's *Room at the Top* poses perhaps the most important question confronting post-war English society: the complex interrelation between general progress and individual careerism. Two different conceptions are in conflict: one liberal, wedded to the idea of individual development, the other socialist, laying the emphasis on the collective advance of a whole group. It is not only a matter of the difference between responsible social change and careerism, because the two can be so closely intertwined as to look like a single thing: a group can become egoistic and narrow-minded, a whole class of adventurers; an individual cannot simply embrace his own particular, unrepeatable laws of development if new horizons are to open up for his group. Braine's novel is a ruthless analysis of careerism in its purest state, in which every individual value is shattered in the struggle to get to the top. Written in the first person, the novel portrays the psychology of the protagonist to good effect, but has great difficulty in representing the moral sphere within which his psychology takes shape. At times, it slips into a kind of self-satisfaction and the moral ambiguity of drama for its own sake, a pitfall of even the best first-person novels. Still, its force is real and reasserts itself, in a less developed and articulate way, in *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*. Sillitoe's novel is the story of an amoral personal revolt against a society that cripples individuals: a reaction characteristic of recent years. As a story of personal revolt, it has much in common with the 'fiction of special pleading' represented, in my view, by Amis and Wain. The final difference is that Sillitoe tries to take this revolt as evidence for a more general rebellion. And this turns out to be extremely difficult in practice: the goal is not achieved in *Saturday*

Night and Sunday Morning, any more than in the provincial novels that have accompanied it, such as *Room at the Top*.

Sillitoe's most ambitious attempt to universalize this experience, *The Key to the Door*, a longer novel set between England and Malta, endeavours to concretize the development of a general revolt into a more organized opposition. It is an interesting book, but clearly for this entire generation of writers the attempt to cross over from the personal to the interpersonal is extremely difficult. We have seen how in drama, too, the voice of the generation is that of the alienated individual, held in the vice of solitude. The mood is fresh and lively in style, but its difficulties have not yet been overcome. These difficulties are probably peculiar to this critical stage in the development of contemporary thinking. What is certain, at least, is that there are writers ready to try to surmount them. One interesting example is Doris Lessing, whose novels treating her most personal experience, her childhood in Africa, are rightly held in high esteem. Her latest book, *The Golden Notebook*, pursues a variety of themes that open new perspectives on the sphere of subjective experience. It is technically interesting, but my impression is that Lessing has only extended the range of subjective points of view without fully integrating them, which is the intention of the work. Paradoxically, *The Golden Notebook* is more strongly idiosyncratic—personal in a sense that limits, rather than expands—than any of her previous works, of which the collection *Five* seems to me the best.

I have discussed the difficulties and achievements of the present generation of English writers because it seems clear, to anyone familiar with their work, that what may be called a movement bears within itself elements of confusion and formal difficulty. Overcoming such limitations is not easy, but the vitality of this generation leaves hope for further important development. My analysis resembles a diagram: I have tried to see the problems as common to the movement, while individual writers will naturally see their difficulties from a different angle. I believe that critics and readers in other countries are entitled to consider a good part of recent work in the English novel as a movement, even if any consideration of this type involves some schematization. My viewpoint is personal, but one of the most disconcerting features in the Britain of recent years has been the evolution of personal points of view, expressed solely as such, into real currents in which many, struggling with the same complicated process of growth, have come to participate.

That this generation, which includes all the writers I have discussed and sometimes criticized, represents an important movement for the whole body of society seems clear. Many traditional critics have objected that these works are transitory and bear little relation to wider social life. The connections are complex, naturally, but there is mounting evidence that the issues raised by these writers in the fifties are emerging in the sixties as ever more active currents of opinion, expanding throughout society. No one living in the here and now can be insensible to the complexities involved or to the length of road that remains to be travelled. However, it certainly appears that this kind of search for an identity, the refusal of criteria of judgement and modes of life that once seemed self-evident and secure, the attempt to find common values in a period of great mobility and rapid change—these writers' dominant themes—will also be the themes of Britain's immediate future.

First published in Italian as 'Il romanzo e il teatro: si prepara il futuro' in *Il Contemporaneo*, no. 63–64, August–September 1963. Retranslated from the Italian by NLR, since the original English manuscript has been lost.