

Introduction

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The central premise underpinning our volume is simple: the final two decades of the twentieth century no longer constitute an integral part of what we call the contemporary. We now view the late twentieth century through a complex historicising lens darkened by the events of 9/11, the ensuing ‘clash of civilisations’ and ‘war on terror’, the Global Financial Crisis of 2008, ongoing austerity and – most recently – the rise of populist politics. An additional impediment to immediate access and perfect recall is the impact effected by technological advances on everyday life in the twenty-first century: how reliably can we ‘supermoderns’ (to adopt Marc Augé’s term¹) be expected to recollect and relate to a now bygone world that did not have the internet, email, social networking, wifi or the mobile phone? Even those of us who lived through the 1980s and 1990s will be finding this increasingly difficult. Superseded and defamiliarised by previously unimaginable technologically modified ways of everyday living, the late twentieth century is beginning to look more and more like history. One prominent theme informing the tone of this introduction is how the final two decades of the twentieth century were marked by the speed of accelerated change in society’s attitudes to class, subnational devolution, religion, sexuality and the Black and Asian Minority Ethnic experience, as well as how these complex and mutually imbricated discourses helped produce a notable sense of motion sickness in the literature of the period.

Literature not only records but also anticipates and projects change, and more often than not it appears more intimately attuned than contemporary historiography or critical theory to the zeitgeist (of any given period). Like the other volumes in the Transitions series, *Accelerated Times* is testament to the belief that a more in-depth engagement with the visionary, world-making and (dare we say it) prophetic capabilities of late twentieth-century

¹ Marc Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, trans. by John Howe (London: Verso, 1995 [originally published 1992]).

literature promises to pave the way to a new critical reappraisal of the period. The essays presented here seek to read and understand the competing discourses of politics, culture, technology and nation, positioning literature as both *within* and *of* them rather than as a mere repertoire of cultural objects produced by them. The volume falls into four overlapping parts: ‘Transitions’, ‘Nation’, ‘Society’ and ‘Acceleration’. If in the first part ‘transition’ is largely coterminous with efforts at critiquing, refashioning and extricating oneself from what came before, the final part, concerned with the emergence of new contexts for literary production in the 1980–2000 period and beyond, addresses the beginning of literary culture’s not always entirely volitional immersion in yet another new set of contexts. We have given the final part the title ‘acceleration’ because what is genuinely new at the end of the twentieth century is not so much the technological and scientific progress that occurs *per se* as the unprecedented totality and speed with which it penetrates and revolutionises the culture. The digital revolution – enabled by the introduction of the word processor as standard office equipment in the late 1980s and subsequently propelled by the rise of the World Wide Web in the mid-1990s – took society by storm. In launching social media, which inaugurated a very real encroachment of virtual exchange and experience upon everyday life while generating a new sense of global connectivity (as well as an expectation of instant availability and access), the computer revolution would transform private, public and political life beyond what could previously have been imagined. These developments also impacted upon people’s increasing exposure and acclimatisation to images of human commodification and degradation in the century’s final approach to the millennium, including live transmissions of the atrocities of war and ethnic cleansing around the world, not to mention the entirely mundane and quotidian cruelties of life under global capitalism that clogged the media and in particular the television screens in people’s living-rooms.²

The extent of the mass hysteria prompted by the so-called ‘Millennium Bug’ – which threatened cataclysmically to incapacitate the machines we had come to rely on, but in the end turned out to be little more than

² If there is one particular literary genre that could be said to have taken the new communication technologies fully in its stride, it must be crime fiction. As Martin Priestman explains, ‘the eruption of mobile phones, emails and the internet into virtually everyone’s everyday lives has been one of the phenomena most eagerly traced in post-1990 crime fiction’ (Martin Priestman, ‘Detectives, Spies and Heroes: From the Cold War to the War on Terror’, in *The Oxford History of the Novel in English, Volume VII: British and Irish Fiction since 1940*, ed. by Peter Boxall and Bryan Cheyette (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 298).

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a worst-case scenario hyped out of all proportion by the media – brought home how completely, by the year 2000, society had already become reliant on the computer. The final year of the twentieth century witnessed a frenzied information campaign advising the public that all electronic machines had to be ‘year 2000 compliant’.³ As Nick Bentley explains, the end of the Cold War had deprived the public of a collective vehicle for their apocalyptic fantasies, causing millennial anxieties to be ‘channelled into a proliferation of alternative forms: from global warming to wayward asteroids to millennium bugs’.⁴ Such anxieties were also expressed through the image of the Millennium Dome (‘the doomed dome’), a major exhibition centre in London built to celebrate the year 2000 and now a landmark of Greenwich’s ‘entertainment’ district. Nominated the nation’s ‘Dome Laureate’, Simon Armitage produced a 1,000-line poem for the occasion, *Killing Time*, which aptly combined millennial anxieties with public fears about being ‘left behind’ by the ever-increasing novelty, speed and youth-orientedness of advancing technology:

This is the Computer World Software Helpline, please
 make sure you can see your screen.
 Your call is being charged at two pounds fifty-five per minute,
 my name is Gary, I’m thirteen.⁵

As explored in *Postwar*, Gill Plain’s volume in this series, despite all the manifold other problems encroaching upon society in the aftermath of the Second World War, perhaps the most prevalent fear in the 1940–1960 period concerned the end of security heralded by rapid technological change. Seen from our own vantage point of living in a world society dominated by technological surveillance and *insecurity*, it looks like such mid-twentieth-century trepidation was actually much more poignant and prescient than Armitage’s somewhat flippant invocation of technology-induced millennial angst.

As indicated by the headings chosen for its two central parts, *Accelerated Times* seeks to make a distinction between ‘nation’ and ‘society’. ‘Nation’ is understood as the superimposed collective imaginary that subsumes the broad kaleidoscopic spectrum of differences among individuals, groups and communities under one all-encompassing matrix, while ‘society’ is seen as an open and ever-changing configuration of neighbouring communities, each with its

³ Luke Jones, ‘How the UK Coped with the Millennium Bug 15 Years Ago’, *BBC News* (31 December 2015), at www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-30576670, last accessed 19 June 2017.

⁴ Nick Bentley (ed.), *British Fiction of the 1990s* (London: Routledge, 2005), p. 6.

⁵ Simon Armitage, *Killing Time* (London: Faber & Faber, 1999), p. 42.

own identity, traditions and interests. In other words, whereas ‘nation’ stands for a given collective identity that often seems largely impervious to historical change, ‘society’ is energised by the ongoing transformations and diversifications of actual lived experience in the present. Notably, it was ‘society’ that Margaret Thatcher showed herself keen to phase out as an alleged anachronism. Thatcher needed to quell society’s capacity to transcend the nation by proliferating into manifold cross-communal allegiances that would inevitably undermine any totalised notion of all-encompassing state authority. This distinction between ‘nation’ and ‘society’ is not to suggest that the chapters populating the central part of our volume are not closely interrelated; indeed, they clearly share a concern with post-industrial Britain’s growing diversification and the evolution of a socio-cultural plurality of not always entirely complementary variants, or iterations, of late-twentieth-century Britishness. No longer pure or immobile (if ever they were), traditional group identities rooted in gender, sexuality, race and ethnicity found themselves not only complicated by increasing intersectionality but moreover undermined by an all-pervasive neoliberal individualism. This was the era when already specialised literary canons split and multiplied, as in the branching out of Anglophone literatures from the former colonies of the British Empire. Whereas postcolonial writing continued to be preoccupied with the struggle to define and establish newly emergent national identities, home-grown Black and Asian Minority Ethnic writing sought primarily to assert post-imperial Britain as a society embarked upon multicultural hybridisation.

A particularly interesting, if perhaps slightly unexpected case in point here is the crime fiction of Guyana-born Mike Phillips.⁶ Between 1989 and 1997, Phillips published a tetralogy of novels,⁷ casting in the central role black freelance journalist Sam Dean, clearly an alter ego of Phillips himself at the time of writing. Phillips shrewdly deploys Dean’s off-centre position as an inquisitive outsider, naturally sensitised to instances of discrimination by race or class, to investigate mainstream (that is, middle-class and predominantly white) society’s urban underbelly. The novels, which never quite relinquish their explicitly journalistic drive to inform and enlighten, appear primarily interested in exposing contemporary Britain’s intrinsic diversity and multifacetedness in order to emphasise the profoundly convivial interrelatedness of different demographics over their assumed categorical segregation. In this respect, one might almost be

⁶ Together with his brother Trevor, Phillips is also the author of *Windrush: The Irresistible Rise of Multi-Racial Britain* (London: Harper Collins, 1998).

⁷ Phillips’s tetralogy comprises *Blood Rights* (1989), *The Late Candidate* (1990), *Point of Darkness* (1994) and *An Image to Die For* (1997).

tempted to celebrate crime fiction as a natural antidote to the perceived waning of ‘society’ in the 1980–2000 period. In crime fiction, society invariably prevails. Characterised by what Martin Priestman has called the genre’s ‘comparatively high social conscience [...] the majority of recent crime texts revolve around “issues” [...] ranging from gender or racial prejudice to enslavement of illegal immigrants or the pernicious effects of such media crazes as reality TV shows’.⁸ Accordingly, Phillips’s choice of a journalist as principal investigator is no coincidence and is in fact mirrored by the preferred *modus operandi* of other crime writers as well. Thus, the work of Gillian Slovo – starting with her tellingly entitled debut *Morbid Symptoms* (1984) – has, throughout her career, remained concerned with the pursuit of social justice, dependably embodied by her Portuguese-born protagonist, freelance journalist and private detective Kate Baeier. While British crime novels continue to be centred around the heroic exploits of individuals, detectives now appear first and foremost as instruments in the service of larger societal concerns. Correspondingly, villains are shown to act in the employ of organisations, be they representative of corporate power or entrepreneurial crime syndicates, echoing Gill Plain’s observation on the late twentieth-century evolution of the genre into ‘a means of exploring systemic rather than individual criminality’.⁹ Of course, in the era of globalisation, it becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish meaningfully between the two. If readers of crime fiction used to find themselves in a position of comfortable detachment, free to marvel from a distance at the heinous escapades of a choice selection of wicked individuals, by the late twentieth century the pervasive omnipresence of capitalist consumerism had allowed the world’s corruption to seep unstoppably into everybody’s everyday lives, tainting society as a whole with complicity and guilt.

Fits and False Starts: British Literature in Transition

Despite asserting itself as a period of rupture and revolution, the 1980–2000 period failed to liberate us from the ghosts of the twentieth century. Instead, British society continued to find itself caught up in a clash of often violently incompatible sets of ideologies, beliefs and imaginaries, some of which (marked by the prefix ‘post-’) were anachronistically

⁸ Priestman, ‘Detectives, Spies and Heroes’, p. 298.

⁹ Gill Plain, ‘Concepts of Corruption: Crime Fiction and the Scottish “State”’, in *The Edinburgh Companion to Contemporary Scottish Literature*, ed. by Berthold Schoene (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), p. 132.

inclined towards the past, while others (marked by the prefix ‘neo-’) encapsulated a more resolutely future-oriented disposition. In her chapter on women’s writing, Diana Wallace seeks to cut a path through this ideological commotion by utilising the considerably less divisive prefix ‘inter-’ as an index of transitional continuity with regard to both inter-generational and intersectional connectivity and exchange. Wallace’s thinking chimes with that of global sociologist Manfred Steger, who, similarly engaged in an attempt to capture the intrinsic transitionality of the contemporary, sees the proliferation of prefixes in both historical and theoretical discourse as ‘cast[ing] a long shadow on the contemporary relevance of traditional political ideologies’. ‘Is there, indeed, something genuinely “neo” about today’s issues’, Steger asks. ‘Have we really moved “post” our familiar political ideologies and social imaginaries?’¹⁰ Interestingly, Steger’s early-twenty-first-century diagnosis of the world as besieged by a triad of clashing ideologies (‘market globalism’, ‘justice globalism’ and ‘religious globalism’¹¹) had already been foreshadowed by the central character constellation informing Hanif Kureishi’s *The Black Album* (1995). As Andrew Tate explains in his chapter on Britain’s post-secular faiths, Shahid, Kureishi’s protagonist, ends up torn between the irreconcilable worldviews epitomised by his university tutor Deede’s left-wing politics, his friend Riaz’s fundamentalist religious orthodoxy and his brother Chilli’s get-up-and-go Thatcherite entrepreneurialism.

As demonstrated in Philip Leonard’s chapter in the final part of this volume, the category of ‘British writing’ itself was increasingly called into question. Leonard discovers a new global literature intent upon transcending nationalist frameworks of canonical demarcation in order to resume literature’s original ‘world-making’ brief. Always more than a mere reflector and recorder of change, literature responds to globalisation by reimagining and indeed recasting society and the world and thus allowing potential alternatives to unfold. As cosmopolite and world literature scholar Pheng Cheah encapsulates it in his reflections on literature as a ‘world-making’ activity, literature ‘tells us that we can belong in many ways, and that quivering beneath the surface of the existing world are other worlds to come’.¹² Accordingly, the final two decades of the twentieth century could

¹⁰ Manfred Steger, ‘Globalisation and Social Imaginaries: The Changing Ideological Landscape of the Twenty-First Century’, *Journal of Critical Globalisation Studies* 1 (2009), 9.

¹¹ See also Manfred Steger, *Globalisms: The Great Ideological Struggle of the Twenty-First Century*, third edition (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009).

¹² Pheng Cheah, ‘What Is a World? On World Literature as World-Making Activity’, *Daedalus* 137 (2008), 38.

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be said to have witnessed a rehabilitation of the literary imagination. Instead of finding itself relegated to the margins of cultural production, literature regained a centre-stage position by demonstrating that especially in periods of accelerated change it had a significant role to play. Cheah's portrayal of literature as a compass for future orientation chimes in intriguing ways with Steger's observations on the far from straightforward and smooth, and indeed frequently erratic, movement of transition from one historical paradigm to another. Commenting on the ideological repercussions of the reconfiguration of the global order in the aftermath of 9/11, Steger writes that 'the national is slowly losing its grip on people's minds, but the global has not yet ascended to the commanding heights once occupied by its predecessor.' Interestingly, Steger expects the transition to proceed 'in fits and false starts, offering observers confusing spectacles of social fragmentation and integration that cut across old geographical hierarchies of scale in unpredictable patterns'.¹³ Steger's depiction also makes an excellent synopsis of literature's indefatigable trial-and-error capacity to search in uncharted territory for the first tentative crystallisations of new social imaginaries and structures of feeling.

As already noted, Cheah has characterised literature as a world-making activity, by which he means that literature represents 'not merely a product of the human imagination or something that is derived from, represents, or duplicates material reality [but also] the force of a passage, an experience, through which we are given and receive any determinable reality'.¹⁴ This understanding of literature as a vehicle for experiencing, processing and shaping the contemporary, which invariably, by its very nature, constitutes a period of transition, also informs Peter Boxall's opening chapter on 'the ends of postmodernism', which examines the final two decades of the twentieth century as witnessing both the apotheosis and eventual dissolution of the concept. Boxall also picks up on the difficult business of periodisation in the postmodern era, which in *The Illusions of Postmodernism* (1996) Terry Eagleton invokes as a curiously anachronistic conundrum of two steps forward and (at least) one step back. Eagleton reflects that

Just as 'postmodernist' itself means not just that you have left modernism definitely behind, but that you have worked your way through it to a position still deeply marked by it, so there may be a kind of pre-postmodernism which has worked its way through postmodernism and

¹³ Steger, 'Globalisation and Social Imaginaries', p. 25. ¹⁴ Cheah, 'What Is a World?', p. 35.

come out roughly on the side where it started, which is by no means the same as not having shifted at all.¹⁵

Figured in this way as simultaneously a period of formative edification and an erroneous, possibly even entirely pointless detour, postmodernism exemplifies the conundrum that shifting epochal structures of feeling are extremely difficult to grasp and ultimately remain unaffected by our attempts to master history and control it by means of clever prefixation.

In one of the earliest attempts at categorising the phenomenon, Linda Hutcheon in *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (1988) memorably likens the relationship of modernism and postmodernism to a fraught and turbulently ambivalent parent–child relationship. Hutcheon describes postmodernism as ‘both oedipally oppositional and filially faithful to modernism’,¹⁶ thus – in anticipation of Wallace’s preference for ‘inter’ over ‘post-’ and ‘neo-’ – putting the emphasis clearly on transition rather than abrupt demarcation. By contrast, in *Modernist Futures* (2012), David James downplays any enduring influence of postmodernism on the literary record by arguing that contemporary novelists look for inspiration primarily to the modernist generation of writers, who are perhaps most fittingly described as their literary grandparents. Thus marginalised as a barren, childless and queer aberration, postmodernism is in effect denied its transitional impact. As James sees it, postmodernism’s ‘self-reflexive dismemberment of subject matter and style’¹⁷ renders it an irritatingly self-indulgent dead-end diversion of western culture in terms of aesthetics as well as ethics and politics. Many of the readings assembled here choose to rehabilitate postmodernism as a serious and perfectly valid literary response to human experience. Despite its playful and experimental inclination to blur the distinction between art and artifice, verisimilitude and mere contrivance, postmodernism constitutes a mode of representation that must in the end be seen as complementary rather than diametrically opposed or downright inimical to either realism or modernism.

James takes the view that within postmodernist writing anything goes: play, experimentation and ambivalence exuberate as traditional sets of values collapse into deconstructive relativity. The crisis of ideological free-fall and disorientation that inevitably ensues is poignantly summarised by Jeremy, the protagonist of Ian McEwan’s novel *Black Dogs* (1992): ‘I had no

¹⁵ Terry Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), pp. xviii–xix.

¹⁶ Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 1988), p. 88.

¹⁷ David James, *Modernist Futures: Innovation and Inheritance in the Contemporary Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 12.

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attachments, I believed in nothing’, Jeremy explains, ‘There was simply no good cause, no enduring principle, no fundamental idea with which I could identify, no transcendent entity whose existence I could truthfully, passionately or quietly assert.’¹⁸ Yet as McEwan’s novel unfolds, it quickly transpires that, by virtue of being a writer, Jeremy simply cannot help querying, questing and probing further. McEwan’s narrative is evidently driven by a passionate pursuit of truth, which leads his hero into various proto-epiphanic near-miss encounters with the metaphysical. At the same time, in the absence of any fixed, ideologically sanctioned guiding principles Jeremy’s apparent lack of conviction is compensated for by the love he feels for his wife and family. This is a love that assumes the significance of a moral absolute and grand spiritual reference point, sustaining Jeremy and saving him from lapsing into despair and insanity. Despite its self-professed directionlessness, then, at its best the postmodern novel does not abandon literature’s tradition of intellectual enquiry, spiritual probing and myth-disruptive world capture. Consequently, it is not the case that, as Marc Delrez has suggested, McEwan needs ‘to turn his back on postmodernism [. . .] to concentrate on the more unpalatable business of looking the beast of history straight in the eye’.¹⁹ Rather, even under postmodernism the challenge of confronting the real continues to be part and parcel of being a novelist. As Tim Gauthier writes, ‘incredulity towards the grand narratives does not eliminate our desire to construct patterns and systems of signification.’ As the grand structures of meaning cave in on themselves, late twentieth-century novelists resort to ‘the creation of the “little narratives”²⁰ to arrive at an approximate fathoming of the truth, and this applies even to an allegedly faithless text like Rushdie’s fourth novel *The Satanic Verses* (1988). The novel’s multiplicity of tales, at a closer look, all appear set on scrutinising the mystery of faith, the pure, yet intangible simplicity of which at once repels and intrigues the postmodern imagination.

Rushdie’s novel is of course most famous not for its delicate exploration of postmodern quandaries and contradictions, but for the violent outrage its publication instigated among a range of communities of Muslim believers around the world. What its fiercely agitated reception revealed was the hitherto often conveniently overlooked rift between secular

¹⁸ Ian McEwan, *Black Dogs* (London: Picador, 1992), p. 18.

¹⁹ Marc Delrez, ‘Escape into Innocence: Ian McEwan and the Nightmare of History’, *Ariel* 26 (1995), 7.

²⁰ Tim Gauthier, *Narrative Desire and Historical Reparations: A. S. Byatt, Ian McEwan, Salman Rushdie* (New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 5.

western politics and aesthetics rooted in a resolute celebration of emancipatory individualism, on the one hand, and devout, self-effacing Islamic orthodoxy and strict religious-cultural normativity, on the other. The publication of Rushdie's novel reintroduced faith and religion as phenomena of individual and public life in urgent need of critical, creative and political attention, and it did so with a bang. The novel was condemned as blasphemous by the then spiritual leader of Iran, the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, and a *fatwa* was issued calling for Rushdie's execution as well as all those involved in the publication of the book. (Hitoshi Igashi, the novel's Japanese translator, was stabbed to death, and Ettore Capriolo, its Italian translator, seriously wounded in 1991.) In many ways, what then followed – Rushdie's many years in police-protected hiding, the ritualised public burnings of his novel (including an incident in Bradford in early 1989), the obligatory western defence of freedom of expression as a human right and inalienable democratic value pitted against the allegedly 'medieval' totalitarianism of fundamentalist Islam – must now be regarded as the starting gun that would eventually explode into the full-blown post-9/11 'clash of civilisations'²¹ that continues to challenge the global order in the twenty-first century.

1980–2000: A Crash Course in Transitional History

Twentieth-century Britain's final twenty years present us with a crash course in transitional history. In the aftermath of the 1970s, described by the historian Tony Judt as 'the most dispiriting decade of the twentieth century',²² hopes and aspirations for the nation to become more efficient, disciplined and productive were running high. Politically, the period finds its origin in a reaction to the Winter of Discontent, which facilitated Margaret Thatcher's rise to power. Exacerbated by extremely cold weather, the winter of 1978/79 saw the country paralysed by public-sector strikes (including gravediggers, refuse collectors and hospital support staff) caused by mounting friction between the trade unions and the Labour government. Thatcher's no-nonsense approach to politics was widely hailed as a return to business after years of irresponsible domestic self-indulgence that had led the country into an unsustainable impasse of economic and moral torpor. Welfarist visions of a society anchored in consensual

²¹ The expression was coined by the American political scientist Samuel Huntington in his essay 'The Clash of Civilizations', *Foreign Affairs*, 72.3 (1993), 22–49.

²² Tony Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe since 1945* (London: Vintage, 2010 [originally published 2005]), p. 477.