The world appears
as a very dull novel in which the characters –
Edwin, Wanda, Septimus and Moira,
are constantly looking out of the windows to observe,
bleakly or with sighs, that it is raining again.

John Ash, ‘Some Boys
(or The English Poem circa 1978)’ (1981)¹

John Ash’s description of the English poem circa 1978 as ‘a very dull novel’ is a damning but self-aware indictment of the literary climate. His mocking verse suggests a form so moribund, housebound, and tedious that the only point of comparison is to a novel, that form which promised innovation two hundred years ago, but now seemed destined only to repeat itself, a temporary panacea for a literature doomed to perpetual decline. The reading of the postwar period as a time of diminishing literary returns is not limited to John Ash’s poem. The elderly sisters in Barbara Pym’s novel *Less than Angels* (1955) take comfort from a radio play about people like themselves that they have already heard before ‘but neither could remember exactly how it ended … so life seemed to go round in a circle’.² The playwright Braham in Christopher Hampton’s *The Philanthropist* (1970) is happy to pen works that pass the time rather than aspire to art, boasting of his God-given ability to ‘create essentially
frivolous entertainments’ enjoyed by enough frivolous people for him ‘to amble comfortably through life’. Postwar literature is so self-effacing it often convinces critics of the qualified nature of its success.

Studies of twentieth-century British literature have tended to privilege the modernist experiments of the 1920s or the ‘revival’ of the British novel in the 1980s and 1990s over the amorphous and messy years in between. For some commentators, the British novel seems to go missing in action between Virginia Woolf’s *Between the Acts* (1941) and Angela Carter’s *Nights at the Circus* (1984). For these literary historians, although the 1950s give us the poems of Philip Larkin and the plays of John Osborne, subsequent decades are mostly a waiting game until postmodernism reinvigorates the stale world of British literature. The Romantic lyric or the industrial novel of the Victorian period present us with discrete literary forms and genres, whereas the postwar period, they might argue, offers only anomalies and long novels by Iris Murdoch.

This study of British literature from 1950 to 1990 works against that assumption, finding in the fiction, poetry, and drama of the period an unparalleled richness of voice, method, and matter.

While the first three decades of the twentieth century argued for the novel as an art form through writers such as Joyce and Conrad, it was the postwar period that had to arbitrate between the formal and moral expectations of the genre. If the final decades of the century saw a cautious embrace of postmodern play and experimentation, it was the immediate postwar period which gave us a novel entirely imagined by a protagonist who is in fact dead (William Golding, *Pincher Martin*, 1956), a novel published with separate bound chapters to be read in any order (B. S. Johnson, *The Unfortunates*, 1969), or a poetic drama written in an invented language (Ted Hughes, *Orghast*, 1971). These examples should serve as a corrective; two of them are explored in detail in Part Three (Hughes and Golding). Although this was a period often defined, politically, by consensus, its literature is marked by a new diversity. The diversity of the postwar period comes, in part, through state intervention, something that would have been unthinkable by the modernists with their emphasis on creative autonomy. The expansion of secondary education after the war and the creation of the Welfare
State didn’t just create more readers and writers, as we explore in the ‘Class and Education’ chapter in Part Four, but different kinds of reading and writing. The literature of the period is at once emboldened by the new cross-currents and social transformations and anxiously shackled by them. If modernism is often associated with elitism, this was a literature stimulated by a new audience, but also mindful of its responsibilities towards that same audience. The apparently conservative rejection of modernist experiment in the postwar period can also be read as a liberal gesture, widening the net of literary debate and participation.

Critical approaches to literature itself were similarly varied. The immediate postwar period found New Criticism taking centre stage, an approach which classified texts by genre or type, and subjected them to empirical scrutiny. In part, this is the method used in Part Three of this study, which considers the generic categories that defined the literature of the period – from the lyric to the postmodern novel – but combines this with a focus on individual texts, offering an extended commentary on six indicative plays, poems, and novels. Yet the 1970s and 1980s also saw the rise of theoretical approaches to literature in English Studies. It is with a particular historical pertinence, then, that Part Four of this study combines contextual and historical readings of texts with the insights offered by Marxism, feminism, or postcolonial theory.

It was not only in education that literature responded directly to the changed Britain of the postwar era. The period begins with Indian Independence in 1947 and ends with the destruction of the Berlin Wall in 1989; between those two events we find Britain losing its Empire and attempting to reconfigure its sense of national identity. At the same time, the world at large attempts to move towards concord and collaboration. For this very reason, Britishness itself becomes a contested category. The collapse of the Empire and the increasingly international world of literature means that British is often a nominal, unhelpful, and sometimes hostile term for the writers included in this volume. Although Sylvia Plath was American, her influence on British poetry begs her inclusion; her poetics are explored in depth in Part Three alongside the work of Stevie Smith and Philip Larkin. While John Osborne’s *Look Back in Anger* (1956) is often seen as rejuvenating the British stage, the
most influential play of the postwar period was Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* (1955), originally written in French, premiered in Paris, and penned by an Irishman. Beckett, too, provides a key context for postwar drama – his work is explored alongside Harold Pinter and Tom Stoppard in ‘New Stages’ in Part Three. For Irish poet Seamus Heaney, who wrote a poem in protest when included in a 1980s British poetry anthology, the term ‘British’ is politically insensitive as well as inaccurate. The novelist Salman Rushdie, author of *The Satanic Verses* (1988), fiercely rejected the term British or Commonwealth arguing that during the late 1980s Britain was harbour but not home. Many writers look to the United States, either for a home, as with Thom Gunn or Christopher Isherwood, or a literary starting point, as in the modernist poetry of Basil Bunting. The inclusion of all these writers in the present volume says as much about the contested term of Britishness and nationality in the postwar period as it does about the pragmatics of compiling a useful survey of that period.

For this reason, nationality and nationhood are recurring themes in this study, particularly in the chapters ‘Immigrants and Exiles’ and ‘Nostalgia and National Identity’ in Part Four. Postwar immigration from the Caribbean to Britain saw a new awareness of race and cosmopolitanism in British culture, and also provided an invigorating alternative to the apparent consensus of the 1950s. Samuel Selvon’s *The Lonely Londoners* (1956), which traces the fortunes of Moses Aloetta and a group of West Indian and African immigrants in London, is clear-eyed if comic about the hardships and prejudices they encounter. There is an argument that this period is defined, for all its variety, by the concerns of the outsider, to borrow the title of Colin Wilson’s 1956 philosophical work, rather than the comforts of consensus. Many of Iris Murdoch’s characters sit smugly in middle-class contentment at the outset of her novels, but few remain there for long; we frequently see the university campus in the postwar period, but usually through the eyes of the bewildered scholarship boy, as in Kingsley Amis’s *Lucky Jim* (1954); even the apparently permissive liberation of the 1960s is often depicted by the sceptical observer or the onlookers. The invention of sex famously comes too late for Philip Larkin’s disgruntled speaker in ‘Annus Mirabilis’ (1973).
Sex, while not, as Larkin’s poem suggests, invented in the postwar period, was marked by a sea change in attitudes during the 1950s and 1960s. One way of reading the period might track the change from the buttoned-up conservatism of the immediate postwar period, with its austerity and baby boom, to the promise of legal abortion, free birth control, and the decriminalising of homosexuality in the 1960s. Yet the literature does not always correspond to the history, as the chapters in Part Four suggest; while the Lady Chatterley trial of 1960* and the overhaul of theatre censorship laws in 1968 both point to increasingly liberal attitudes to what is read and by whom, writers as diverse as Joe Orton, Margaret Drabble, and David Edgar remain ambivalent about the new world of permissiveness. We might also note that while the postwar period gave birth to the ‘teenager’, and was the first to recognise the adolescent as someone with economic and cultural significance, it also brought the retirement home.

In the same way that the nationality of writers included in the book is worthy of investigation, the dividing lines between pre- and post-1990 might, too, seem arbitrary. The timeline in Part Five presents a neat journey from the Coronation to the end of the Cold War, yet history, as so many writers from the period show, is contingent, relative, and more often dictated by what is convenient. For many, the rise of Thatcherism in the 1980s, the break-up of the Trade Unions, and the abandoning of the principles of the Welfare State for a free market economy might seem to make the world after 1979 seem much closer to our own than to that of the Suez Crisis or the Coronation. The rise of novelists such as Martin Amis, Angela Carter, and Julian Barnes has prompted many commentators to curtain off the final two decades of the twentieth century as ‘contemporary’. Yet, throughout this volume, readers will hopefully come to realise how much the literary and cultural debates of the postwar period continue to define our lives. Terms such as meritocracy, ecology, immigration, assimilation, and social mobility were not just part of the cultural debate, as now, but were, in some cases, being used for the very first time.

* In 1960, Penguin were taken to court for publishing D. H. Lawrence’s novel *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, and successfully defended the work from charges of obscenity. For a fuller discussion of the trial and its implications, see the section on ‘Permissiveness and Censorship’ in Part Four: ‘Sex and Identity’.
Throughout this volume and the *York Notes Companions* series, there has been a deliberate attempt to focus debate on new voices or neglected works from each period alongside the more obvious choices. As Part Two: ‘A Cultural Overview’ notes, literary critics of the 1950s and 1960s were quick to offer terms such as ‘Angry Young Man’ and ‘The Movement’ to define current trends, but contemporary readers might do well to question the efficacy of these labels and their implicit policy of exclusion. While no postwar study can ignore Kingsley Amis or Philip Larkin, it would do just as well to consider Penelope Fitzgerald or Michael Hofmann. If Angela Carter seems ubiquitous in the postwar literary landscape, Christine Brooke-Rose can tell us just as much about experimental feminist fiction. The changing fashions of critics over the last thirty years has offered a number of competing ‘postwars’; if anything this volume should provoke further debate in its inclusions as well as its inevitable omissions. It is expansive and suggestive rather than exhaustive, as the further reading sections in Part Five suggest. If the postwar period is a time of consensus, there is a healthy absence of consensus about what authors the term postwar may in fact denote.

*William May*

**Notes**