

Chapter 2

THE SITUATION OF THE NOVEL IN POSTWAR BRITAIN¹

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1. INTRODUCTION

Mainstream literary criticism in Britain had developed a strict convention in which it categorised British postwar fiction as belonging to one of two precisely juxtaposed categories, the traditionalists and the experimentalists, and it observed no minor movement in between. What is more significant is that there was, in critical practice, until the final decades of the twentieth century, an unconcealed tendency to privilege the former over the latter. Accordingly, the established works of literary criticism of the period mostly concentrate on and document the turning of certain British postwar novelists, such as Charles Percy Snow (1905-1980), Angus Wilson (1913-1991) and Kingsley Amis (1922-1995), back to the norms of Victorian and Edwardian fiction as their source of formal inspiration. For example, in one of the most influential and latest of these works, *The Novelist at the Crossroads*, the British author and critic David Lodge states that “the English literary mind is peculiarly committed to realism, and resistant to non-realist literary modes to an extent that might be described as prejudice” (1971, p. 7). It was so much so that

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both more innovative than traditionalist and more traditionalist than innovative literary works. In other words, these critics have pointed to the emergence of a new kind of fiction that is neither traditionalist nor experimentalist, nor anti-experimentalist in the postwar period in Britain.

This study has revealed that the canonical interpretations of the novelists who were publishing in postwar Britain had to be formed according to a classification between the traditionalist and the experimentalist works. Let alone modernist experiment, the term realist tradition, however, has always been debatable in literary criticism. Even the work of one of the most celebrated “realist” novelists in English literature, George Eliot, recent studies have demonstrated, includes the writer’s references to the problem of representation in traditional realist literature in a self-reflexive fashion. Therefore, the future studies in terms of either postwar British fiction or, more generally, realist tradition in literature might be in one way or other related to how the writer himself or herself individually interprets traditionalism in his or her own terms since realism has always been a multi-faceted phrase in literature. Related to this, the concept of innovation in writing, future studies might demonstrate, is to be related to how the idea of experimentalism operates for the writer.

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