

Learning from a comparatist can make you a more capacious reader; living with one is quite a different matter, especially when volumes in multiple languages vie for shelf space in an apartment that could hardly be described as capacious. This book bears the stamp of some of that learning and living; but more indelibly still, it bears witness to the love of a comparatist who became my companion. For her critical wisdom, her infinite patience, her sixth sense for what makes an argument ring true, and for the humour with which she reminded me to keep in mind our immediate futures whenever I was too absorbed in modernist ones, my final thanks are reserved for María del Pilar Blanco to whom this book is dedicated.

Introduction: Contemporary fiction and the promise of modernism

Any artistic project can be made to seem incomplete. Unrealised aspirations and unresolved arguments could describe why movements are remembered just as well as the finished masterworks for which they're renowned. But if stories of incompleteness are there ready to be told, how do we go about telling them without ignoring anachronism and without relying on critical contrivance to prove claims for continuity? What does it really mean to consider that a given movement may also have a replenished moment, a phase of re-emergence – in another time, for another culture – through which its promise obtains renewed pertinence? Inevitably it's hard to view a period retrospectively and not review it at the same time, when enticed to see just how temporally elastic its parameters might be. Tempting as they are to fuel, though, debates about reperiodisation have a tendency to run their course through arguments of fleeting consequence; in modernism's case, that tale of continuance more compellingly unfolds when our work on revising paradigms is enriched by a closer look at creative practices. Providing such enrichment, Toni Morrison suggests that the 'ideal situation is to take from the past and apply it to the future'.¹ We would be hard pressed to think of a more audacious writer, one who, we might assume, has no truck with tradition. For surely Morrison's singularity sums up her freedom from inheritance, epitomising her irreverence toward any model that's not of her own making. Yet more than three decades later, Morrison's claim speaks to writers who variously partake in that 'ideal situation', and who find in it forms of imaginative praxis – forms that 'take from' modernism the potential for extending what fiction can do.

Precisely how and why modernist commitments, principles and aesthetics continue to inform the contemporary novel is the concern of this book. It brings together writers from a particular generation, whose careers have developed beyond the trends and traits of postmodernism, and who have drawn instead on modernism's legacy in the very process of fulfilling new formal, ethical and political objectives. Yet what does it mean to

speak of modernism's continuance in the first place? Is it not the case that to argue for the persistence of recognisably modernist goals is surely something of a contradiction in itself, because to associate modernism with this talk of recuperation sounds quite opposed to the language of rupture on which so many vanguards of the early twentieth century staked their reputations? Surely the basic premise of any *modernism* is, effectively, a demand: writers should forego all things vestigial or inherited in order to propel their methods forward and to produce art that reaches for alternative horizons. If this is the case, and if that demand is satisfied, how will we know what millennial modernisms look like when and if they arise? Will they be found in fiction that expresses 'a cultural shift' away from the high-modernist 'worship of form', as Urmila Seshagiri calls it, or instead in writers who make new interventions that at once extend aesthetic aims pioneered by early-twentieth-century fiction while challenging our critical expectations of what newness involves? Many of the answers to these questions will depend on whether we think the act of paying homage to modernism necessarily boils down to 'a literary moment as significant for what it departs from as for what it moves toward'.² Justified though these queries and caveats are, they forget modernism's own dialectical relation to tradition: fiction today partakes of an interaction between innovation and inheritance that is entirely consonant with what modernists themselves were doing more than a century ago, an interaction that enables writers to work *with* their lineage in the process of attempting new experiments with form.

So far, so convivial; at least that is how it seems in light of the more predictably antagonistic accounts of literary influence that have shaped our understanding of how writers pick up from and overtake their precursors. In this book, I draw attention to the way contemporary novelists forge less hostile or anxious lines of communication with the modernist tradition. The cultivation of this conviviality is something that Morrison herself encourages in the previously mentioned assertion, as she indicates the utility of the literary past for future ambitions. It is also a prospect that Raymond Williams entertained in *The Politics of Modernism*; although here, as we would expect from Williams, those interactions of past and present are couched in sociocultural rather than in stylistic or compositional terms:

If we are to break out of the non-historical fixity of *post-modernism*, then we must search out and counterpose an alternative tradition taken from the neglected works left in the wide margin of the century, a tradition which may address itself not to this by now exploitable because quite inhuman rewriting of the past but, for all our sakes, to a modern *future* in which community may be imagined again.³

In light of his argument that modernism has 'achieved comfortable integration into the new international capitalism', we could read Williams as confirming the idea that modernism has passed – what seemed so artistically radical is now culturally reified. Not only does he imply that it is a phase in literary history that can only be viewed in retrospect, its legacies addressed only via the prefix *post*; Williams is also keen to 'remind us that the innovations of what is called Modernism have become the new but fixed forms of our present moment'.⁴ What role, then, does modernism play in a 'modern *future*'? The answer is more implicit, or inadvertent, in Williams's perorating comments. It is here that we need to read against the grain of his reconstruction of the fate of modernism's revolutionary protocols, painting as he does a picture of the project's exhaustion and its subsequent absorption into a 'comfortable' order of consumption. In other words, Williams would undoubtedly be wary of recuperating modernism as a contemporary concept, for it represents – in its early-twentieth-century manifestation – such a 'highly selective field';⁵ his very terms, however, point beyond the rather fossilised version of institutional modernism that he frames. The implication is that we should 'counterpose' the assumptions that have 'fixed the moment of Modernism', because it is a fixity that is produced by the canonising 'machinery of selective tradition', whose categories may be inadequate for specifying how a new generation of writers are conversing with that tradition on more open-ended terms and, in so doing, exemplifying modernism's indispensability.⁶ What might remain most pertinent about Williams's argument, therefore, could be precisely what runs athwart the twinned impulses of his critique: firstly, to uncover modernism's complicity in emergent forms of capitalist production; and, secondly, to call for a scholarly reinvestment in the neglected work of (regional) writers who have hitherto been excluded by the (metropolitan) sensibilities of high modernism.⁷ Read counter-intuitively, Williams's intervention contains within itself an invitation, as it gestures to the viability of thinking about modernism's continued vitality, to the possibility of realising how it might be 'imagined again' after the vapidry of postmodernism.⁸ We can accept such an invitation, providing we make the very distinction that Williams himself elides, one that would allow us to distinguish modernism as a 'selective' institutional construction, from modernism as the scene of an unfinished argument about the novel's critical and formal potentiality. Why some of the most audacious novelists have stepped into that scene in recent years is one of the questions motivating this book, as I consider how the relation between craft and critique in late-twentieth-century fiction corresponds with how 'the *social form* of modernism' in its earlier twentieth-century contexts, as Mark McGurl

notes, was 'at once activated by and made manifest in the innovative *aesthetic forms* of the art-novel itself'.⁹ If I take seriously Williams's notion about the way 'tradition' can 'address itself' to 'a modern *future*', I also take it to the next analytical level – and into a new historical epoch – by turning to novelists who have furthered modernist resources in order to meet fresh expectations about the purposes of literary experiment.

This study thus pursues the consequences of modernism's regeneration in contemporary fiction along two interrelated trajectories: the compositional and the political. The former indicates an attention to technique that shares Liam McIlvanney and Ray Ryan's contention that 'we are emerging from a period of heavily theoretical criticism and that, as a result, what might be called the *novelness* of novels is coming back into focus'.¹⁰ This should not suggest that theoretical positions don't contribute to or facilitate the insights of this book. It implies instead that a closer scrutiny of the compositional elements of contemporary writing is required if we are to differentiate with any precision the strategies of writers whose affinities with modernism can be as complex and contradictory as they are explicit and self-conscious. Only then can we begin to explore at the levels of technique and context alike the reasons *why* modernist impulses remain so politically enabling for writers who have responded – as my six central writers do – to the material conditions that shape racial, sexual and social identification or injustice. This approach assumes that the particularities of form are therefore central, rather than incidental, to our estimation of contemporary fiction's involvement in ethical and political realms. In turn, that assumption helps us to counter the sense in which 'cultural critique', as Janice Radway has warned, 'typically attempts to make sense of the situation at the time of writing by relating it to past canons and rarely seeks to trace emergent, gradually building effects over time',¹¹ precisely because it also counters the idea that 'past canons' should remain our primary reference-point when we speak about artistic inheritance. As we shall see, a less programmatic account becomes available for the relation between literary innovation and cultural critique when we look more closely at contemporary writers' dynamic, if sometimes rebellious, conversations with the past in their process of developing 'emergent' narrative practices.

Any 'modernism after modernism', as Derek Attridge has put it, 'necessarily involves a reworking of modernism's methods, since nothing could be less modernist than a repetition of previous modes, however disruptive they were in their time'.¹² Running centrally throughout this book is my ambition to chart the creative motivations, thematic consequences and

formal possibilities yielded by that process of reworking, but also to show why each of the very different novelists I consider should want to rework modernism in the first place. To explore why it matters that writers today re-evaluate modernist impulses and deploy them as their own, we need to join critics who, as Amy Hungerford wittily puts it, 'are not confined to those hefty postmodern slabs that formerly sat on syllabi as proof of the difficulty, and thus the worth, of contemporary writing in the academy'.¹³ The goal of *Modernist Futures* is thus twofold: to propose alternative ways of thinking diachronically about the purpose of experimentation in contemporary fiction, and also, by doing so, to combine late-twentieth-century literary history with the commitments of close reading. Methodologically speaking, I try to be sensitive to the genealogical back-stories of the novel today – without recourse to that more familiar tale of postwar narrative as hedged in by 'hefty postmodern slabs' – even as I concentrate on the more local formal and affective properties that make particular novelists unique.

This is hardly an unprecedented move, nor is it the sole preserve of those who study the novel. Voices from art history, philosophy and aesthetics are joining the chorus that proclaims 'the premise that modernism is over is false'.¹⁴ To substantiate this assertion – or to point out the disciplinary and hermeneutical consequences of refuting that 'premise' – J. M. Bernstein makes two further claims on behalf of modernism's continuity, claims that complement the notion I will be working with in this book: the *promise* of modernism has yet to be fully realised. The first of Bernstein's claims takes the form of an instruction to criticism itself, as he insists that we need to find modes of identifying how artists and writers have perpetuated that 'restless insistence on the transgression of past judgments in the new'.¹⁵ His second and related claim is on behalf of modernism's currency, such that we need to find new ways of speaking about modernist practices *in* the present, rather than from the retrospective vantage point enabled *by* the present. Not simply an argument for extending modernism beyond its received period boundaries, it also addresses modernism as a set of persisting resources, rather than as a collection of historical artefacts. If the 'task of aesthetics', writes Bernstein, 'is to vindicate modernist art's *own* claim to mattering', then this is because modernism itself should be seen as a 'form of art that survives through a reiterated presentation of itself and that also becomes the very 'stakes' of artistic practice and 'aesthetics in general'.¹⁶ What Bernstein is implying, as I see it, is that we have been asking the wrong questions. The key issue is not whether modernist continuities exist, but how far, and at what price, modernism's extension into

the procedures of contemporary literary or visual art has been obscured by critics who take the bygone vivacity of modernism for granted.

Bernstein raises an important series of metacritical issues, some of which will be explored in this Introduction. If the following chapters linger to some extent on the particularities of how novelists transcribe modernist innovations, I will take the opportunity here to step back somewhat from the writers in question, in order to clarify strands that connect their work and to point out some of the ways we are invited to approach them. In so doing, I not only intend to highlight unexpected correspondences between their creative aims, but also to reflect on how the very subject of contemporary literature's modernist 'heritage' relates to the disciplinary aims of the New Modernist Studies. Such implications for craft and criticism alike are highlighted throughout this study, and they enable me to account for interrelations within and between chapters more substantively than national or stylistic distinctions might imply. In turn, although this book expends much of its energy on exploring *how* modernist aesthetics resurface in contemporary fiction, of no less importance is the issue of *why* writers today extend such approaches to form in the first place – and what that might entail for our evolving critical practices.

MODERNIST FORM NOW

However they evolve, though, such practices are often freighted with suppositions. One might be led to suppose, for example, that a consideration of modernism's salience for contemporary fiction inevitably reinstates critical formalism over ideologically driven interpretations, as though turning from social effects to stylistic expressions were the only means of getting back in touch with the 'novelness of novels' today. Granted, 'the conjuring of "form" and "aesthetics"', as Samuel Otter has remarked, 'discloses a variety of intellectual and emotional responses, spurred by a perceived indifference to verbal complexity, literary agency, textual explanation (rather than critique), artistic wholes (rather than symptomatic parts), and readerly pleasures'.¹⁷ The role of formally inspired readings in an approach to the political efficacy of the novel is only as vexed as the disciplinary tales we choose to retell about the pitfalls of close reading and its clashes with cultural analysis. Instead of re-inscribing such incompatibilities, one ought to be able to imagine 'less determined relationships between the formal and the historical and perspectives that might avoid the intoxicating cycle of antagonism or backlash', as Otter describes it, 'in which "form" and "history" are pitted against one another' – a story of

methodological conflict that 'may no longer be (and may never have been) tenable'.¹⁸ Sharing this scepticism about the perceived irreconcilability of craft and context in critical practice, throughout this book I adopt the premise that questions of form are indissolubly linked to questions concerning how fiction confronts the material world through its imaginative simulation of how that world is sensed and known. It is a premise that also concurs with Attridge's contention that '[w]hatever else the "modernist" text may be doing (and all literary texts function as a number of things besides literature), it is, through its form, which is to say through its staging of human meanings and intentions, a challenge that goes to the heart of the ethical and political'.¹⁹ As these two pathways – the compositional and the politico-ethical – intersect in *Modernist Futures*, they address the issue of how we negotiate alternative directions for approaching modernism's persistence and recrudescence in contemporary fiction. We should observe such continuities from a writerly standpoint (in terms of the way they affect and reform the creative agendas of late-twentieth- and twenty-first-century novelists); yet I also trace their repercussions from an interpretive and literary-historical standpoint, so as to show why modernist aesthetics are not only compatible with, but are also actively opening up, new avenues for the novel's cultural interventions. As Rebecca Walkowitz has acknowledged, 'modernist strategies can be adapted for various political enterprises, as can critical attitudes',²⁰ and the six novelists considered in this book give a flavour of just how variously those adaptations occur. Certain shared commitments, however, can be discerned in ways that justify my selection of these writers; but in order to discern them, we first need to bring together a sufficiently agile definition of what *modernism* actually means before we consider what it does for novelists today.

In her study of the relevance of modernist methods for contemporary cosmopolitan fiction, Walkowitz defines modernism as 'involv[ing] strategies that respond to and engage with the experience of modernity',²¹ drawing on Foucault's account of modernism as a 'consciousness' of modern life, 'a type of philosophical interrogation – one that simultaneously problematizes man's relation to the present, man's historical mode of being, and the constitution of the self as an autonomous subject'.²² While this kind of interrogation is certainly one that concerns the writers I consider in this book, it doesn't provide a full range of answers to the question of why writers today are recalibrating modernist strategies to deal with the lived experience of *post*modernism, compelling us as they do to explore whether it's more preferable to characterise modernism with the logic of continuity instead of rupture. To say that modernism should be seen, as

Susan Stanford Friedman does, primarily 'as the structural principle of radical rupture – wherever, whenever, and in whatever forms it might occur',²³ is to reinstate a conflation of innovation with dissent that would simply not be recognised by writers who build on modernism's formal and critical potential. Models of rupture are familiar enough in accounts of early-twentieth-century literary experimentalism; they are models I want to complicate, though, not least because the rupturing of generic or linguistic conventions has not always guaranteed or aspired to politically progressive ends.²⁴ Chapter 1 thus establishes the conceptual and historical parameters within which we can utilise a more dialectical sense of the connection in fiction between inventiveness and literary heritage, a dialectic that informs the readings I then go on to perform in subsequent chapters. By gauging the political valences of this interaction of inheritance and innovation, I question, as Timothy Brennan has done, 'the idea that *rupture* rather than continuity is the sign of historical change'. Brennan remarks that '[t]his radical incantation of rupture – borrowed from the literary avant-gardes and a particular kind of modernism (Pound and Woolf rather than Eliot and Yeats) – is, in fact, conservative. For, if nothing else, the apparent calm of insisting on the flow and repeatability of tradition, as opposed to the Copernican shifts of the supposed year zero of the new, provides a mental landscape in which social transformation can actually be imagined'.²⁵ While the novelists considered in this study are scarcely unquestioning in their approach to 'the flow and repeatability of tradition', neither do they see that departing from what Milan Kundera calls 'the inherited path' along which writers move inventively in conversation with artistic precedents is inherently radical; instead, such writers combine acts of homage *with* fresh 'developments in modernist literary style' that, as Walkowitz has eloquently shown, may 'coincide with new ways of thinking about political critique'.²⁶ Modernist methods thus enable contemporary novelists to remap that 'mental landscape' where transformative contexts of social interaction, political assessment and ethical accountability can be envisioned.

Exploring *how* writers perform that process of imaginative remapping may not yield a startlingly new account of fiction's well-documented capacity for empathic projection and involvement, a capacity aptly summarised by Jonathan Franzen. Though he is, broadly speaking, a realist writer who would probably be reticent about being aligned with the modernist inheritance, Franzen pinpoints, nonetheless, precisely what is significant about certain modes of narration in contemporary fiction that couldn't be identified as anything other than modernist. For he insists that 'the novel

is the greatest art form when it comes to forging a connection between the intensely interior and personal and the larger social reality'.²⁷ Pursuing this connection in fiction now prompts us to rethink the way we describe what is important (still) about some of the most familiar and exhaustively analysed innovations in twentieth-century writing. For example, if the novelists I examine in this book continue one of the hallmark aims of modernist fiction – to evoke interior subjectivity by simulating the effect of impressions, whether sustained or incoherent, to which subjects emotionally and intellectually respond – they also invite us to reconsider the supposedly inward orientation of that aim. In responding to modernism's experimental models of mentation, contemporary writers reveal the potential for modernist fiction to be more than simply a laboratory for examining consciousness as a hermetic domain. Instead, they incorporate techniques for showing how mental experiences are shaped by material circumstances, how protagonists' psychological states adapt to and are mutually pervaded by the social realms they navigate – revealing their working definition of the modernist novel as a medium for connecting interiority and accountability, braiding the description of characters' innermost reflections into the fabric of worldly situations.

This much may be familiar to readers of J. M. Coetzee, Milan Kundera, Ian McEwan, Toni Morrison, Michael Ondaatje and Philip Roth. Their fictions have often thematised whether in traumatic or enabling ways the relation between mind and world, perception and action, while testing the compatibility between the cultivation of personal agency and the demands of ethical responsibility. What remains to be answered, however, is the question of *why* these writers have chosen – creatively yet purposively – to extend modernist resources in representing their characters' phenomenal encounters with sociocultural environments and conflicts. This question matters to *Modernist Futures* not only because it lays the foundation for many of my interpretive aims and claims, but also because it justifies my corpus, a corpus drawn from a specific generation of novelists who began writing in the heyday of postmodernism and whose careers developed in its wake. After living through an age when self-referentiality as a creative compulsion reigned supreme, these figures are particularly concerned with exploring how the immediacy of inward experience relates to the interpersonal facets of social accountability. As they respond to an era typified by the fiction's parodic self-inspection, such writers reintegrate the novel's alternative capacities for interior and exterior forms of engagement – relating the potency of its simulation of emotive perceptions to the pertinence of its treatment of material realities.

It is thanks to the postmodern, then, that modernism has any future at all. Part of the purpose of this Introduction is to explain in literary-historical terms why that might be so, showing how those writers selected for the following five chapters reinvigorate modernist aesthetics in response to politically abortive metafiction. How we define that response, together with how we grasp what it is about modernist narrative that remains important for contemporary writers, will therefore depend on the kind of story we choose to tell about the development of postwar fiction – if indeed we choose to describe it in developmental terms in the first place. Some thirty years ago, Leslie Fiedler intimated the need for alternative accounts of modernism's reception at a time when fiction seemed more concerned with rescinding than with accepting whatever gifts were bestowed by earlier twentieth-century innovators. He noted, for instance, that '[t]hrough a novelist like John Barth is clearly indebted to the example of James Joyce, he uses Joycean techniques not developmentally but terminally'.²⁸ This dissolution of modernism also announced the dismemberment of postmodernism's very enterprise, as metafiction turned in ever-tighter circles of self-interrogation. 'In light of this', reflects Fiedler,

I was convinced for a long time that what was really dead in our culture was not the conventional novel at all, but *only* the kind of anticonventional long fiction which asked of the reader a constant awareness of its own artifice – and a concomitant admiration of the virtuosity of its artificer *as* artificer, as well as his ingenuity in making the death of the genre he purports to write its central subject. Clearly, it seems to me, such terminal fiction could not be written over and over without becoming an intolerable bore to its writers as well as its readers. But, alas, under the aegis of 'post-modernism', it has continued to be practiced to the very verge of the twenty-first century – and is still read by a tiny audience of a very special kind, whose nature can only be understood in terms of a radical change in the way long fictions have come to be consumed since the 1950s.²⁹

The problem with this rather gloomy picture of postmodernism's destruction of the novel, and its critical absorption by an academy home to its own receptive but 'tiny audience of a very special kind', is that it fore-stalls the prospect of ever getting modernism *back into* that picture on the 'verge of the twenty-first century'. One of my contentions in this book is that contemporary writers are not only challenging any neat progression from modernist writing to the 'terminal fiction' of recent decades; they are also compelling us to wonder whether our understandings of how novelists now regard the politics of modernist forms have been built upon literary-historical charts that no longer seem accurate. To put it another way, in order to explore what writers now expect to achieve by reincorporating modernist techniques, we need to ask whether our conception of

the novel's future – and modernism's role in it – has inherited, or at least been inflected by, a critical language centred on postmodernism's potential that is not entirely our own nor relevant to our present moment. The short answer would be: yes, inevitably it has. The long answer is played out across the pages of this book, as it shows why it is so important that we continue to develop critical vocabularies for recognising the import of modernism's reanimation in contemporary writing.

'The contemporary' itself, though, is no longer what it was. Likewise, the umbrella term 'postwar' now names a field for a discipline whose analytical priorities have at once proliferated and diverged. Fiction's journey from the postwar era into the contemporary scene has become too multifarious to be addressed as a single period, because of 'the simple fact', as Amy Hungerford rightly observes, 'that new forms of reading and writing are emerging on a vast scale'.³⁰ The risks of critical homogenisation, or at least inelegance, when thinking about what counts as contemporary become even more apparent once we bring that new generation of voices into the frame, including Monica Ali, Nicola Barker, Junot Díaz, Jonathan Safran Foer, Hari Kunzru, Andrea Levy, Tom McCarthy and David Mitchell, who only emerged through the 1990s, publishing their major works after the millennium. As already indicated, I will be concerned with a somewhat earlier group of innovators, in an effort to obtain a more historically nuanced sense of how modernism has operated in fiction written through and after the postmodern period, and to understand why that generation continues to play such a key role in reimagining what modernist conceptions of form might still become. One aspect of this analysis needs to account for the way writers have reassessed the idea of formal integrity after decades when postmodern fiction discredited such notions of cohesion. Pertinent here is the work of a British novelist who has shifted across generic boundaries, moving throughout her *oeuvre* from politically engaged fictions of socio-economic and racial inequality to dystopian visions of environmental peril.³¹ Aptly enough, for this reason Maggie Gee thinks of herself as 'evidently a bit of a hybrid'. Yet the hybridity of which she speaks is formal as well as thematic, as she combines tradition with present aims. Committed to this synthesis of heritage and invention, she sees herself as the kind of writer who refuses to work *in the wake of* modernism because she doesn't see that modernism is over:

I have also consciously, in my career as a writer, become more aware of, and suspicious of, 'difficulty': i.e. I began as an 'experimental' writer, aka 'difficult', but came to believe the highbrow-commercial divide was a tragic one for contemporary literature, and that if one could, with a great deal of work, conceal complexity under a surface ease, this was a better way forward.³²

Gee represents a refinement of high modernism's consciously pronounced sophistication, in terms of her awareness instead of what is the equally sophisticated task of articulating underlying 'complexity' with economy and control. Without resorting to so-called *lisible* transparency or comfortable traits of domestic realism, Gee suggests that creating an illusion of 'ease' in fact demands 'a great deal of work'. Aspiring to be no less experiential, even though her end result might appear more accessible, she goes on to assert that 'I still consider myself essentially a modernist, because I still believe in whole meanings for works of art: that the form of the whole should embody the meaning'.³³

It is this belief in formal integrity, and the accompanying reticence towards postmodernism's self-reflexive dismemberment of subject matter and style, that recurs for each of the novelists addressed in the ensuing chapters. As an object of critical attention, this dimension of form may strike some readers as a rather blunt refusal of the consensus view of modernism's privileging of fragmentation. In part, it is; because I set about tracing modernism's continuance along less predictable lines, without seeing its contemporary persistence simply as a reflection, in David Tracy's phrase, of the 'fragmented character of our times'.³⁴ In turn, I regard literary innovation less as the product of cultural instabilities than as the very medium that brings the reader, through their intimate engagement with form, into a more ethically involved relation with *how* specific contexts of social crisis, racial injustice or political destabilisation are represented by novelists today.

Far from reverent, the six writers discussed in this book have certainly responded combatively to those modernist notions of individual genius that pertain to the novel's supremacy, artistic dignity, or supposed detachment from the public sphere of commodification. However, neither do they perpetuate the received view of modernism's search for aesthetic unification and mastery, a view that has been thoroughly complicated by recent work in modernist studies which has shown, as Andrzej Gasiorek and Patrick Parrinder remark, that while we can make 'all due allowance for the technical innovations of the great modernist writers', there was in reality 'no shared view of the nature, purposes and responsibilities of novel-writing in the period', and '[n]or was there a uniform response to the challenge of modernity'.³⁵ To say that contemporary writers are paying homage to the early-twentieth-century art novel as a vessel for now-lost principles of integrity would be to forget that modernist writing itself compelled its own readers to reflect on the discordances between manner and matter, technique and social critique. We should remember in turn

that modernist novelists themselves 'engaged with contemporary life in a variety of fictional modes, reinventing the genre by means of radical experimentation with form' but also with 'less obvious transformations of established literary conventions'.³⁶ Nor are the six authors I centralise in this book remobilising that iconic effort of reparation in the face of modernity, an effort made most iconic by Eliot's *The Waste Land*, 'to create meaning from the flux and fragments of an atomized contemporary world', as Leonard Wilcox puts it, 'to pierce the veil, to reveal underlying truth'.³⁷ What sets my selected novelists apart from their contemporaries – and what motivates my engagement with *them* over other possible heirs to the modernist project – is their capacity to articulate modes of ethical and political commentary precisely through a sincere rather than self-parodic dedication to rendering perceptual experience. As Walkowitz points out, '[t]he analysis of perception and its provocations has been important to formal accounts of modernist experimentation as well as to cultural, political, and geographic accounts of urban experience and empire'.³⁸ The following chapters reveal that perception inspires 'a method' with a backstory, one that began with the early impressionism of Henry James and Ford Madox Ford, elaborated subsequently by the perspectival innovations of William Faulkner and Virginia Woolf, and is now extended today by such writers who appear in this book, who dramatise the 'provocations' of perception in narratives that embark upon different hemispheric and historical contexts.

It may seem unsurprising to regard the representation of perception as a lasting preoccupation. It provides a valuable point of focus, however, for considering how writers *are* dealing imaginatively with modernism's iconic concern with evoking the sensation of social worlds through the device of interior focalisation. This is most evident in contemporary novelists' concerns with dramatizing the relation of sensation to intellection, capturing in narrative form the flux of intimate thoughts. At first sight, such interactions point to a quintessentially impressionist set of goals, spurring Ford, Conrad and Woolf to undertake that task of correlating language and perspective, structure and sensory experience. Chapter 4 explores this lineage as it informs Ian McEwan's work, revealing impressionism's own extensive legacy beyond mid-century. Yet the attraction to the unity of perception and description that impressionism implies also continues in the work of novelists today who wouldn't associate their aims with the kind of free indirect discourse practiced perhaps most audaciously by James and Woolf. It is an attraction to the integration of form and content, structure and sensation, that marks Michael Ondaatje's affinity, as we

will see in Chapter 2, with the logic of synthetic Cubism, just as it characterises the correlation of linguistic minimalism with depictions of agrarian thrift in J. M. Coetzee's fictions of provincial life. In each case, modernist aesthetics reoccur not as the mark of the writer's retrogressive reach for a pre-postmodern era of wholeness, but as a solution to specific representational concerns, a way of doing justice to the subject in hand – in short, as the realisation of a certain promise that remains in modernist conceptions of form.

But what exactly *is* modernist form in this context, and what kind of politico-ethical work might we expect it now to carry out in contemporary writing? Such deceptively simple questions of definition are key to our understanding of the stakes and implications of writers today fulfilling modernism's unrealised promises. For Angela Leighton, form is precisely what escapes definition, eluding our stock assumptions and exceeding prosodic or narratological categorisations. 'Form', she writes, 'is what remains when all the various somethings – matter, content, message – have been got out of the way'.³⁹ Nothingness necessarily accompanies, as this argument goes, our phenomenological grasp of a work's form: however much we want to name and typologise the properties we apprehend, the work 'takes on a curious, transgressive momentum of its own, evading capture as that neutral "form" which changeably reappears in various human guises', such that the very label *form* denotes 'both the object and the outline, the thing and its formal impression in the mind'.⁴⁰ If form is ultimately a word (rather than a prescribed or analysable set of properties) that 'already toys with its own content, enjoying the hologram effect of being a thing and an absence, a sound and an emptiness, there and not there',⁴¹ then how might we approach a literary field, like modernism, across which the novel form became for writers the subject of conscious and careful reformulation? Dissolving the idea of form as technique may well liberate criticism from the tendency to draw on neologisms from narrative theory or to resort to the systematicity of descriptive stylistics. That belief in form's inangibility and indeterminacy, however, doesn't get us any closer to achieving a more precise account of how contemporary writers have acutely reflected on the genealogies of their methods. While this book by no means offers a methodical narratological investigation of modernist legacies, it poses the question as to whether matters of technique have often been neglected within contemporary fiction studies in favour of the allegorisation of plots or the recruitment of novelists' thematic concerns to serve timely theoretical ends. We should be in a position now to start combining the history of how postwar fiction has evolved with closer analyses of the modes that

this evolution has at once inherited and generated – a synthesis of historicism and formal analysis that can include both pragmatic *and* affective perspectives. Indeed, as Isobel Armstrong reminds us, '[t]he aspiration to form is a *sensuous* state'.⁴² Additionally, she points out that our attention to art as 'a shaping of the *process* of shaping' demands some combination of linguistic or structural categorisation and our more involved, aesthetic intuitions, if we are to make sense of why certain narrative strategies move us emotionally in the ways they do.

In the chapters to come, I follow Armstrong's cue that the 'aspiration to form is a struggle brought to consciousness', a drama of 'perpetual remarking' that's staged within the work itself, just as it prompts us to reflect on the difficulties of reading that work. As Armstrong notes, art 'does not consist in achieved form, which would become finite, but in the experience of making form, an experience distributed across makers and perceivers'.⁴³ To regard form not as a systematically produced artifice, but as an experience to which the writer contributes imaginatively and with which the reader interacts interpretively is to provide an alternative model for comprehending the continued validity of modernist aesthetics. The potential for thinking about modernist form in this way as a performative process rather than a means to an end is brought into sharp focus by the writers in this study. As we will see, their work evinces a common aim: to turn the innovative composition of fictional worlds into an emotionally and ethically implicative process, an aim that bespeaks their objective, in Toni Morrison's words, 'to have the reader work *with* the author in the construction of the book'.⁴⁴ Because they seek not merely to simulate the experience of the material world but also to stimulate new interpretations of it, their strategies for remaking form into a process of participatory engagement both defines what modernism means to contemporary novelists and underlines why it still matters.

LATE MODERNIST INSTITUTIONS AND POSTMODERN INTERRUPTIONS

Late-twentieth- and twenty-first-century writers have found it unsatisfactory, let alone desirable, to summon and redeploy modernist tactics for aesthetic ends alone. More than any simple act of artistic homage, their dialogues with modernism evidence instead politically urgent responses to the legacies of *post*modern metafiction, whose reigning paradigm of self-referential parody presented a futile loop from which all the novelists in this book have in their various ways wanted to escape. However successful

their escape has been, though, we cannot simply sidestep the reasons for them doing so. In other words, '[w]hat, after all, is the place of postmodernism in all this?' It is a question Andreas Huyssen posed towards the end of *After the Great Divide* (1986), trying to explain as he did the avant-garde's 'energetic come back' in the 1970s, without suggesting that this should 'point to the exhaustion of cultural resources and creativity in our own time', but rather present 'the promise of a revitalization in contemporary culture'.⁴⁵ In this section, I will offer my own response to that question, bearing in mind this book's motivations to reassess contemporary writers' relations both to their immediate and to their earlier twentieth-century pasts – whether artistic or institutional. I don't mean to suggest that my selected novelists collectively represent 'attempts to shift into reverse', as Huyssen puts it, 'in order to get out of a dead-end street where the vehicles of avant-gardism and postmodernism have come to a standstill'.⁴⁶ The picture I paint is rather more pragmatic. Despite the varying degrees to which they either draw or else depart from modernist predecessors, the writers considered in this book – as dissimilar as they might seem – are united by a practical attitude towards upholding an attention to craft in the face of fiction's dissolution into narrative self-reflection. We may classify them as 'late modernists', but the term is imperfect because it insinuates that they are sifting through the relics of high modernism and its residual goals. Late modernism does have a certain currency, if we use lateness to capture the arc of an account in which contemporary fiction takes forward the trailblazing practices of early-twentieth-century writers in a new yet belated manner – belated by virtue of the way it reveals how postmodernism marked for a certain generation of novelists merely an interruption, a temporary delay in all that modernist aesthetics had still to achieve.

Following my consideration of the participatory nature of form, my second, and perhaps most historically significant, strand for *Modernist Futures* takes up the issue of why writers should want to identify with modernist aspirations after postmodernism. Even John Barth, sometime proclaimer of the novel's exhaustion, would highlight at the dawn of the 1980s the vitality of aesthetic formations lampooned by metafictionists of the 1960s and 1970s. Addressing postmodernism as though it were already on the wane, Barth conceded that the 'term itself, like "postimpressionism" is awkward and faintly epigonic, suggestive less of a vigorous or even interesting new direction in the old art of storytelling than of something anticlimactic, feebly following a very hard act to follow'.⁴⁷ That 'act' was, of course, the example set by modernism. A compelling reason for me to

write this book has been to give recognition to the ways in which contemporary novelists have in fact dealt so effectively with postmodernism's 'anticlimactic' mood by reinventing the very methods it sought to parody, to exaggerate and, *ineffectively*, to replace. As I have implied, Coetzee, Kundera, Morrison, McEwan, Ondaatje and Roth have held little affinity with that compulsion to foreground the mechanics of writing for metafiction's sake.⁴⁸ Indeed, they may be taken as a representative of a considerably different concern with the responsibilities of the novel and the responsiveness of the reader who interacts with it, a concern made manifest as an abiding conviction that innovation should enable the critical work that fiction can direct at the world rather than at itself. In place of postmodernist fiction's self-referential deliberation upon the failures and fabrications of illusionism, the novelists in this book 'demonstrate alternative values', as Charles Altieri has called them, 'defined by exemplary adjustments in the sensibilities produced by attention to formal structures'.⁴⁹ Sometimes these authors highlight for the reader that formal 'attention' at work – as McEwan does with his ideal vision of paragraphs that comment on their own creation; or as Morrison does by encouraging her readers to participate in the affective world of her narratives, oblique and linguistically demanding though they can. Yet these writers do so rarely in a way that lauds self-consciousness as the motivating theme or as the sole reason for us to find their storytelling important.

In light of these novelists' various, perhaps conflicting, backgrounds, some readers may find their aligning with each other unusual or at best partial. By virtue of their contrasting idioms and ambitions, however, each writer can be understood in terms of a common endeavour to reconsolidate fiction's formal integrity and ethical accountability as it survives the vanities of postmodern self-reflexivity, an endeavour that tests the way we recognise the consequences of that survival. As such, these writers compel us to wonder what's politically left of the postmodern after the closing decades of the twentieth century, when the 'oppositional agendas' of post-colonial and feminist intellectuals, writers and activists became 'deeply suspicious', as Linda Hutcheon admits, 'of the postmodern's lack of a theory of political agency'.⁵⁰ The formal correlative of this suspicion can be witnessed in the way contemporary novelists have increasingly moved beyond metafiction – postmodernism's primary vehicle for defamiliarising, if not undermining, the aesthetic claims of modernist fiction as much as the ideological claims of collective oppositional discourses. One couldn't deny that Coetzee, Kundera, McEwan, Morrison, Ondaatje and Roth have each, at one or other point in their career, invoked strategies

of self-conscious narration. When we read them historically, however, their acquaintance with metafiction looks less like a lasting fidelity than a passing phase, whose temporariness suggested that such writers were well aware that postmodernism's interrogation of 'truth-claims and its denaturalizing and demystifying impulses had been compromised by its very institutionalization'.⁵¹

Modernist Futures contends that we can therefore take account of the cultural and historical reasons for modernism's continuation by focusing on novelists who intersected with this discrete phase of disillusionment with postmodernism, who refused its mandate that 'values are not permitted to be grounded' (in Hurcheon's phrase), and who departed from a terrain 'where no utopian possibility is left unironized'.⁵² Such an account needs to be attentive to the political ramifications of modernism's legacy as it enables these novelists to exercise certain forms of critique to which we may in turn provide ethical forms of response. In the following chapters, writers thus invite us to analyse correspondences between the politics of style and the ethics of reading, since these exchanges help us to explain why it is that modernist strategies remain so vital to the novel today. This is not to argue that such innovators simply disavow the impact of postmodernism in favour of some nostalgic recuperation of models of composition drawn from an age before writers become self-parodic. That would be to mistake the formal integrity of modernist fiction as the antithesis of self-reflexivity, when in fact the 'modernist novel', as Pericles Lewis reminds us, 'through the difficulty and self-consciousness of its literary style, characteristically calls attention to the problem of its own interpretation'.⁵³ Indeed, one of the motivations for my selections has been to pinpoint writers whose reinvestment in modernism has enabled them to rethink the very role that rhetorical reflexivity might play in narratives that provoke our ethical engagement, insofar as their fiction may produce moments of intense absorption in and indignation towards episodes of oppression, trauma or disempowerment, while also 'call[ing] attention', in the fashion Lewis notes, to the virtuosity by which the critical effects of such episodes are achieved. In sum, each of the writers I have brought together stages some degree of formal self-reflection but without undermining our affective involvement in the personal and collective experiences he or she plots. As we shall see, it is this double capacity for immersing the reader and at the same time reflecting on modes of address and perspective, which offers a supple medium for contemporary writers as they mobilise modernist narrative practices after the postmodern. The novelists who appear in this study do so, firstly, because they exemplify

the spectrum of formal and thematic concerns across which that medium can be employed; and secondly, because their work embodies a disposition towards valuing techniques tested throughout the modernist period, precisely for the reason that those techniques facilitate the kinds of cultural, philosophical and emotive work that they want their writing to perform.

When getting to grips with these larger scale transformations from modernism to postwar postmodernism, and onward again into the last decades of the twentieth century and the rise of what I am calling the novel's modernist future, we're led to interrogate ingrained habits of periodisation as well as the very terms of analysis – aesthetic, historical and socio-political – that accompany them. Our questioning of stock terminology should especially be directed to the way we frame writers who appear unequivocally postmodern, with reputations like those of Angela Carter, Peter Carey and Don DeLillo, who are famed for dramatising the contingency and relativity of historical knowledge. As Andrzej Gasiorek reminds us, even figures such as Julian Barnes and Salman Rushdie, 'far from acceding to postmodernist scepticism, contend not only that veridical accounts of the world are possible but also that they are *necessary* if various forms of oppression are to be opposed by rational critique and if the transformation of society is not to recede from view as a political desideratum'.⁵⁴ This gestures to the contention that while '[r]eality demands to be interpreted ... it does not license the free play of just any vocabulary', a contention that has not only revealed a 'serious purpose' underlying the linguistic brio of many supposedly postmodern novelists,⁵⁵ but has also redirected the instincts of thinkers who have built their reputations from endorsing postmodernism's relevance for understanding contemporary culture. Fredric Jameson is the most prominent case in point here. With a change of heart from his earlier portraits of postmodernism as fatally numb to modernism's legacy and complicit instead with the voracity and cynicism of corporate culture, in *A Singular Modernity* Jameson indicates the 'dependence of the postmodern on what remain essentially modernist categories of the new'. As he goes on to explain, this is not an 'insignificant contradiction for postmodernity, which is unable to divest itself of the supreme value of innovation (despite the end of style and the death of the subject)'.⁵⁶ In a similar vein, Caroline Levine has elucidated the contradictions underlying postmodernism's supposed rupture from early-twentieth-century literary culture, suggesting that controversies over postmodernism's 'impossible' 'attempts to escape institutionalization' in fact 'tend to extend the logic of the avant-garde, rather than to disrupt it'.⁵⁷ While articulating their own distinctive and often contrasting

allegiances to the artistic and political 'value of innovation', as Jameson calls it, the writers at the centre of this book speak directly to this notion of late modernism as an ongoing, uninterrupted phase, one from which 'postmodernism attempts radically to break, imagining that it is thereby breaking with classical modernism'.⁵⁸

'Late modernism', however, has itself faced definitional hurdles. If it's not used as an endlessly expansive and nimble category, applicable to any phase of post-high-modernist writing, it becomes, by contrast, too narrowly confined to the immediate aftermath of 1922, associated with writing leading up to the Second World War. This latter, contracted version of late modernism is the one that Tyrus Miller offers in his influential yet somewhat monochromatic account of the sardonism of interwar fiction:

In their struggle against what they perceive as the apotheosis of form in earlier modernism, late modernist writers conjured the disruptive, deforming spell of laughter. They developed a repertoire of means for unsettling the signs of formal craft that testified to the modernist writer's discursive mastery. Through a variety of satiric and parodic strategies, they weakened the formal cohesion of the modernist novel and sought to deflate its symbolic resources, reducing literary figures at points to a bald literalness or assimilating them to the degraded forms of extraliterary discourse. They represent a world in free fall, offering veriginously deranged commentary as word, body, and thing fly apart with a ridiculous lack of grace.⁵⁹

The scene of swirling satiric fervour that Miller frames is deceptive in its description, partly because of the enumerative manner of his critical style. It feels as though we are being offered a complex, multifaceted view of late-modernist writing, when in fact he is reducing it to monotony: the monotony of the retrogressive task of negating high-modernist artistry. In Miller's view, mid-century novelists could only reconcile themselves with the 'mastery' of their near predecessors by defaming it. Despite his effort to provide a more precise account of how diverse high modernism's influence was, Miller's picture of that struggle against form ends up condemning a whole generation of writers to a climate of anxiety – the scene of a contest that can be settled only when the resources inherited from high modernism are outdone.

We need a more multifaceted view of postwar literary history than this vision of the rivalry over 'degraded forms' can provide. To get a palpable sense of how late modernism evolved and survived alongside the very postmodern aesthetics that sought to displace it, we would do better to look to novelists rather than theorists. Pertinent here is an institutional

story about the relation of modernism and pedagogy. I am not so much concerned with rehearsing complaints against the New Critical cherishing and entrenchment of modernist poetics, as with the curricular expansion of writing programmes that many of the practitioners working under the banner of New Criticism provoked – even if, as Tim Meyers reminds us, the movement 'also effectively worked to disenfranchise many creative writers from the act of criticism'.⁶⁰ Whatever other constrictions novelists in higher education face in their attempt to write their own criticism, the success of creative writing itself, nowhere more so than in the North American academy, is indisputable. Documenting the reasons for that success is beyond the scope of my discussion here; nor do I want to spot causal links between creative writing pedagogy and the literary-critical categories by which we trace modernism's later twentieth-century influence. More useful for our purposes will be to survey the conditions under which modernist techniques have themselves been subject to institutional incorporation by being disseminated across what Mark McGurl has called the 'Program Era', and in a fashion that affects the way writers choose to reactivate modernist methods.

Despite those attempts, tacit and overt, by New Critical formalism to elevate modernist style, the heterodox impulses that drove modernism to cross new frontiers in the first place were hardly immune, as McGurl reminds us, from becoming 'wholly respectable' beyond the middle of the century, 'sitting there fat and happy on the college syllabus'.⁶¹ To this extent, the university would 'become the primary custodian' of a 'late modernist "literariness"' that embodied new tensions between personal inspiration and progressive education, craftsmanship and coursework.⁶² This seemingly contradictory intersection of creativity and the curriculum was a productive one for the scene of fiction-writing instruction; and the programme came to operate as the disciplinary site of that 'ongoing struggle' in postwar fiction 'between the compositional values of self-expression and self-discipline' – the latter being inherited, as McGurl notes, from none other than 'the Jamesian tradition of narrative decorum'.⁶³ Seductive though he is as a role model for conscious artistry, James was quickly joined in the classroom by other modernist figureheads. Divided criteria of a qualitative kind emerged: to follow the verbal restraint and condensation of Hemingway, or the baroque syntax showcased by Faulkner. This is where the pedagogical, not to say personal, implications of modernist style are most apparent, observes McGurl, adjudicating the alternative and equally attractive options that the tutee is compelled to negotiate. In precisely this regard, Faulkner 'came to symbolize the value not of *craft*

but of sublime *genius*, licensing the students of the Program Era to – linguistically speaking – *let it fly*.⁶⁴

But not all students are alike. What is interesting in the case of Faulkner's influence is that his 'maximalism', as McGurl labels it, can inspire its modal opposite. As we will see in Chapter 5, Toni Morrison's commitment to economy exemplifies this process of turning-the-tables on the 'sublime genius' of Faulkner's run-on sentences, as she makes spareness into something elegant by upholding her belief that 'you should never satiate'.⁶⁵ In fact, Morrison's example shows that we shouldn't take the institutional absorption of modernist imperatives at face value. While McGurl argues that 'the beauty of literary minimalism is in its artful unwillingness to conceal the concealment of its own dependency and weakness', having as it does 'the ironic advantage of revealing the systematicity of creativity in the Program Era in its starkest form',⁶⁶ I will be providing a rather different take in Chapter 3 where we turn to Coetzee, just as I give minimalism a reprieve when considering Morrison's use of concision. Coetzee's unadorned fiction requires us to read minimalism not as a symptom of 'retreat or self-concealment',⁶⁷ but as a method with a distinct – and not exclusively North American – lineage that reaches back to the impressionist principles of Ford, and forward again (when traced through Coetzee's later modernist influences) to Beckett's tense yet verbally shorn narration. Undoubtedly the U.S. model of the writing programme represents a remarkable social and intellectual shift in the application of the high-modernist ethos of individual virtuosity. Yet the institutional mediations of creative writing – like the maligned vocabulary of New Critical appreciation with which the programme's terminology of craft had intersected, before superseding it – cannot pretend to tell the whole story of how contemporary writers extend the procedures and aspirations of modernist fiction.

When prestigious novelists take up established positions within the academy, they add to the reputation of their host institutions, and they show that becoming a renowned literary innovator brings with it a degree of cultural capital. In this sense, reviving modernist aesthetics could uncharitably be deemed to be the first step on the road to fame (or at least respect) in the eyes of scholarly peers, regardless of how unpalatable experimental fiction might be to the book-buying public. Equally, though, the charisma acquired by writers employed in higher education is something they don't necessarily choose for themselves but rather assume in the eyes of their students. In short, how writers choose to identify their own style or voice may not automatically match up with the identity attributed to

them by those who respond to the way they write, or by those who learn from the traditions that writers endorse in the classroom. If this is so, we ought to ponder the proposition that a writer might see no complicity between what she does and how she teaches; or, likewise, between how she chooses to inherit devices from modernism and the exhaustive study of modernism's cultural heritage carried out by her neighbouring literary historians. Certainly, Hungerford makes a brilliant case for renaming the contemporary as 'long modernism', precisely because 'the second half of the twentieth century sees not a departure from modernism's aesthetic but its triumph in the institution of the university and in the literary culture more generally'.⁶⁸ At the same time, however, it is easy to overestimate the cross-contamination between this institution of teaching, reinterpretation and publication that now houses modernist literature in the academy and the experimental ambitions of contemporary writers who happen also to be employed there. With respect to this study's aims, I am mindful of such distinctions between the *disciplinary influences* of modernism's critical formation (as scholars from discrete fields, each with their own distinctive political and interpretive priorities, reassess twentieth-century fiction in ways that 'influence' the canonisation of contemporary writing) and those *artistic influences* that writers savour and incorporate for themselves. This is not simply to recognise the crude fact that many established writers have never taught consistently in higher education or else have shown reticence towards the disciplinary formation of the programme, a reticence expressed from time to time by McEwan, for instance, who admits that he had 'comparatively little contact' with Malcolm Bradbury or Angus Wilson,⁶⁹ his supervisors in the 1970s on the soon-to-be-famous fiction-writing programme at the University of East Anglia. It is also to acknowledge how those novelists from my corpus who *have* taught – Coetzee at Cape Town, Morrison at Princeton, and Ondaatje in Ontario at York University as well as Glendon College – regard their creative work as radically separate from their pedagogical objectives.

Morrison, for one, is resolute in this respect. Making a novel 'has to be very private and very unrelated', she confirms: 'When I write, I can't read other people I like', and 'I have to feel as if it's being done almost in a very separate womb of my own construction. Wholly free. And because it's the only activity at all that I engage in wholly for myself. It's the one place that I can't have any other interference of that sort'.⁷⁰ These preconditions have led her to 'suspect that full-time teaching would get in the way of writing', insofar as 'you have to think in a certain way about the literature you're teaching', where ultimately any 'critical stance' she adopts

in the seminar room makes her 'too self-conscious' back at the writing desk.⁷¹ Similarly, for Ondaatje, too, we need to take into account that he 'doesn't like talking about his work' at all. And oddly enough, his quibbling on the phone with Cary Fagan in the 1990s about the very idea of being interviewed occurred, in this instance, just after he finished teaching at Brown University – his wife, Lynda Spalding, had been Brown's writer-in-residence – where presumably he talked a good deal about what it means to carry out that 'work'.⁷² Like Morrison, though, Ondaatje feels that 'the best writing comes when you're not self-conscious, and to think that there's somebody out there listening for something becomes pretty ominous'.⁷³ We could hardly imagine Ondaatje and Morrison shying away from the seminar room; but they are scrupulous about dissociating their contribution to the discipline of creative composition from how their own novels 'grow organically', as Ondaatje describes it, without 'a scheme', however consciously crafted they might seem.⁷⁴

If Ondaatje and Morrison express some caution about being too self-aware, however, this shouldn't be confused with the way they have dealt with the legacies of postmodernism, as though postmodernism alone is the proper originator of artistic self-consciousness. Indeed, we need only look to a self-proclaimed postmodernist to tell us so. Speaking of that 'self-conscious exploration of composition', Clarence Major sees that it epitomises what modernism made possible. While taking lessons in perspective from that period of transition between impressionism and Cubism delineated by Cézanne's career, Major also 'drew a profoundly romantic response' from Gauguin and was spurred to find a contemporaneous equivalent in fiction. To do so, he reached for Lawrence, Mansfield and Joyce, attracted to the 'kind of self-apparent urgency' and 'reflexive brilliance' of their most 'expressionistic' work.⁷⁵ Inspiring him to become 'more fascinated in technique' than 'by subject matter',⁷⁶ Major's awareness of the way compositional reflexivity predates postmodernism establishes a frame, for our purposes, for approaching writers in succeeding chapters who take modernism up on its promises. This is not to claim that Major is in fact a 'late modernist' after all, despite what his critics have said. It is to highlight, instead, a key methodological point for this book concerning how we go about relating the compositional to the political, while remaining alert to the role that heritage plays for novelists who reflect on technique but who prevent self-consciousness from compromising the integrity of their fictional worlds.

In his later work, McEwan has embodied these protocols more explicitly than most. In the same year his most self-scrutinising novel,

Atonement (2001), appeared, McEwan asserted that he is 'drawn to some kind of balance between a fiction that is self-reflective on its own processes, and one that has a forward impetus too, that will completely accept the given terms of the illusion of fiction'.⁷⁷ That 'balance' is one that unites the very different novelists I address. Drawing attention to writerly 'processes', Coetzee likewise sustains the simultaneously arresting 'illusion' of his disturbing plots. He engages a modernist heritage of stylistic obliquity and economy precisely in order 'to engage the reader ethically', as Derek Attridge puts it, challenging our preconceptions especially when his fiction – 'as in the case of modernist writing' in its early-twentieth-century contexts – purposefully seeks to 'resist the immediacy and transparency of language'.⁷⁸ And to give a final flavour of those instances of 'balance' addressed in this book, we can think of how Toni Morrison has, across her career, tried 'to blend' the 'artificial with improvisation'.⁷⁹ In achieving that synthesis she has satisfied the compulsion, as she describes it, to involve the reader in the very 'construction of the book',⁸⁰ but without curtailing our deep emotional response to those arresting scenes of racial dispossession, communal violence and personal sacrifice that readers find so haunting throughout Morrison's work.

Such strategies for combining narrative self-reflection and readerly involvement, whether difficult or pleasurable, are more overtly deployed by some novelists than others and with contrasting degrees of polemical force. Given that range of deployment, I have opted for author-led discussions that, taken together, showcase richly contrasting thematic and stylistic commitments. An upshot of their mutual differences, however, is that they show the varied contours along which modernist continuities flow. As we shall see, this variety in purpose and technique suggests that it is not simply the case that 'the two ends of the twentieth century hail each other like long lost twins', apposite though Tom Gunning's simile is for the transhistorical conversation this book convenes between modernist and turn-of-the-millennium fiction.⁸¹ Those twins have been together all the time, as it turns out, even though postmodernism intervened for a considerable time in their kinship – a kinship that has often been mis-taken for more anxious versions of influence.

'GETTING BEYOND INFLUENCE': ON IMPIETY
AND ADAPTATION

'[S]omething had changed', recalled Peter Carey in 2006, reflecting on the moment he turned from short-fiction to the novel; but why did that

change come about? 'Age, experience, a simpler form, practice, reading, influence, getting beyond influence'.⁸² In Carey's account, influence is something that writers grow out of, a phase in the initiation process through which they find their own voice. The implication here is that 'experience' has shown how not to fall under the influence of figures like Jorge Luis Borges and García Márquez, whose allure Carey now sees, with 'age', as having been inescapable for his younger, short-story-writing self. We can only surmise that the *effects* of literary influences need to be felt before they can be relinquished. Milan Kundera also elaborates on this procedure of engagement and relinquishment, less in terms of succession – whereby a writer moves from identification with forebears to the recognition of her own individuality – but as an ongoing dialectic. In *The Curtain*, his stringent yet probing manifesto on technique from 2007, Kundera declares the 'novelist's ambition is not to do something better than his predecessors but to see what they did not see, say what they did not say'.⁸³ Some sixty pages later, Kundera expands this notion intriguingly. He points to the insights we gain when writers themselves speak about their own practice in conversation with their predecessors. Novelists reflect as assiduously on method as they do on thematic materials, a process in the early stages of composition that opens the seeming privacy or hermeticism of the creative act to an expansive heritage:

According to his criteria of values, he will again trace out for you the whole *past* of the novel's history, and in so doing will give you some sense of his own poetics of the novel, one that belongs to him alone and that is therefore, quite naturally, different from that of other writers. So you will feel you are moving in amazement down into History's hold where the novel's *future* is being decided, is coming into being, taking shape, amid quarrels and conflicts and confrontations.⁸⁴

Modernist Futures shares something of Kundera's desire to enter that 'hold', that laboratory of style, where new formal priorities are being 'decided'. I'm not implying that we try to understand contemporary writers simply by who, and what, they admire, as though we can only know style by its remains. I am suggesting, however, that we reflect on our own interpretive stance on affiliation and inheritance, with the view to asking why the recapitulation of modernist aesthetics might or might not be important to understanding a writer's own sense of where tradition and innovation coincide.

This question of how we decipher influence is often caught between binary alternatives: between, on the one hand, that melodramatic battle of artistic egos, where the inheriting writer is afflicted, in Harold Bloom's

famous diagnosis, with 'immense anxieties of belatedness',⁸⁵ and, on the other hand, the rule of critical common sense that holds that 'if one is attuned to the effect', as Henry Widdowson claims, 'all texts reverberate with the echoes of other texts. All uses of language have a history of previous uses'.⁸⁶ Both approaches generalise the formal *substance* of influence as writers negotiate it, in order to preserve the freedom with which readers can invoke vague terms like 'association' or 'echo' for pinpointing the nature of creative debt. Widdowson himself admits that readers are 'free to conjure up all manner of intertextual associations' and 'resonances' that 'come not only from the countless times ... words have been used in reference, but also from our experience of other literary texts'.⁸⁷ Again, the emphasis is on the reader to spot connections, rather than taking it from the compositional viewpoint of the writer who, in interview, may disavow our notions of where her allegiances lie. As Paul Fry has remarked in a recent reappraisal of the high-modernist lineage of *The Anxiety of Influence*, the 'Bloomian thief steals origins, Eliot's thief steals mannerisms, yet the question remains between them how, if not via words, the thief is to be detected'.⁸⁸ If Fry is right to point out 'that novelty does not just happen when it appears but is a phenomenon whose emergence as an influence is subject to delays, detours and bypaths of reception', how do we gauge the originality of writers so contemporary that their body of reception has only just accumulated, and whose influence upon a still younger generation of novelists has yet to be accounted for? Even if we follow Bloom's cue that 'criticism is the art of knowing the hidden road' leading from work to work,⁸⁹ then how do we approach the use of the past in *oeuvres* that are unfinished or that might be reaching that stage where, as Carey puts it, we find the writer 'getting beyond influence'?

An answer to this cluster of questions is offered by one of this book's key figures, a writer who in turn raises his own questions about influence and in the most unlikely of contexts – the acceptance speech for the world's most prestigious prize for literary distinction. As a one-time pragmatic literary-linguist, we would expect J. M. Coetzee to be an eloquent commentator on the very essence of originality. And so he is; except that he chose the occasion of his 2003 Nobel Prize speech to offer a most intimate yet characteristically oblique reflection on the very dialectic of inheritance and innovation that I will be tracing throughout this book. 'He and His Man' may be read as a deliberate, and doubly self-reflexive, attempt by Coetzee to hybridise Defoe's plots, as we see episodes from *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1722) reread by Crusoe. Coetzee adopts Robinson as his speech's focaliser, one who envisions from his writing desk the 'leaping

and prancing' of people agonised by disease as 'allegoric of his own leaping and prancing when, after the calamity of the shipwreck and after he had scoured the strand for sign of his shipboard companions and found none, save a pair of shoes that were not mates, he had understood he was cast up all alone on a savage island, likely to perish and with no hope of salvation'.⁹⁰ This affinity between the traumas of Defoe's chronicle and his own leads Crusoe to ponder the artistry of *Plague Year*, entering into dialogue with the very texture of the text in an effort to discover why it ignites his imagination as vividly as it does: 'How then has it come about that this man of his, who is a kind of parrot and not much loved, writes as well or better than his master? For he wields an able pen, this man of his, no doubt of that'.⁹¹ However allegorical Crusoe deems Defoe's fiction to be in relation to his castaway experiences, it is at this point that Crusoe's meditation on 'his man's rhetorical flair begins to allegorise Coetzee's own scrutiny of fidelity and singularity, piety and virtuosity – the interaction of engagement and self-differentiation that characterises Coetzee's negotiation of influences (those prominent yet contrastive personae of Ford and Beckett), the same sort of a negotiation that each writer in this study undertakes.

As his speech unfolds at this meta-compositional level, Coetzee reconstructs the idea of the precursor as a figure who expresses 'a touch of fellow feeling for his imitators', knowing that 'if the young are to be forbidden to prey upon the old then they must sit forever in silence'.⁹² In place of *he* and *his man*, then, we're invited to read *contemporary writer* and *modernist forebear*. If we do so, though, ultimately '[h]ow are they to be figured?', asks Coetzee: 'As master and slave', as Harold Bloom would have it, where the descendant captures and controls his powerful precursor, even though, as Roth's fiction will reveal in Chapter 1, to adopt Conrad's famous maxim to make the reader see need not presuppose an enslavement to imitation.⁹³ 'As comrades in arms',⁹⁴ just as Morrison's own admiration for Faulkner, Zora Neale Hurston and James Baldwin suggests, encouraging her as they do to write 'at the top of [her] form' when envisioning alternatives to scenes of discrimination, communal fortune and racial injustice.⁹⁵ 'Or as enemies' and 'foes', an antagonism that McEwan dramatises in *Atonement* where he indicts the indulgences of Briony Tallis's high-modernist embellishments, only subsequently to reassert his attraction to the urban novel-of-consciousness, as *Saturday* (2005) orbits Bloomsbury while making no attempt to conceal its allusions to the one-day narratives of Woolf and Joyce.⁹⁶

Coetzee invites us to hear the broader resonance of these questions, while at the same time acknowledging how those choices between kinships and contenders, 'comrades' and 'foes', imitation and individuality, represent extremes that have little bearing on the way formal inventiveness comes about – extreme alternatives that may, when recycled as critical terms, weaken our grasp of the specificity of a novel's ingenuity. As Coetzee implies, the binaries that separate forbear and inheritor perpetuate inelegant scenarios for making sense of the working relations that exist between modernism and contemporary writers. Instead, such relations are always in motion; and for the interactive way they operate for the writers in this book, Coetzee himself goes on to provide an especially appropriate maritime analogy:

If he must settle on a likeness for the pair of them, his man and he, he would write that they are like two ships sailing in contrary directions, one west, the other east. Or better, that they are deckhands toiling in the rigging, the one on a ship sailing west, the other on a ship sailing east. Their ships pass close, close enough to hail. But the seas are rough, the weather is stormy: their eyes lashed by the spray, their hands burned by the cordage, they pass each other by, too busy even to wave.⁹⁷

In a scene of work where skill and full attention are consciously put to the rest, Coetzee pictures the writer as consumed in the process, a process that overtakes any opportunity for explicit acknowledgement of artistic affinities. Precursor and heir are both immersed here in the urgency and necessity of the undertaking, pursuing themes and methods that may well move 'in contrary directions' but that nonetheless mark a comparable endeavour. In this manner, their techniques 'pass close' to each other: 'close enough' for us to hear resemblances between their styles, especially in the compositional stages of shaping and revising, even if, in their finished form, their fictions 'pass each other by'.

Encapsulated in this remarkable peroration to Coetzee's Nobel speech is a scenario that echoes throughout this study, as it brings together writers whose modes of working resonate with priorities that they don't passively inherit from modernism, like period-souvenirs, but that revitalise modernist aesthetics for tackling a new spectrum of artistic, cultural, ethical and political demands. Despite the commotion of the scene, Coetzee could be seen as dramatising a moment of piety, a condition that Michael Roth has defined as 'the turning of oneself so as to be in relation to the past, to experience oneself as coming after (perhaps emerging out of or against) the past'.⁹⁸ Granted, we can appreciate piety's relevance here, as each of

the novelists studied gestures to the vital presence of what has gone before, pointing in turn to modernism's presence within, and as a precondition of, new circumstances of creativity. Those same writers would surely agree that we ought to 'acknowledge the importance of something in the past', just as 'we acknowledge the claim that that thing has on us'. They might also agree that piety thereby facilitates a deeply ethical 'refusal simply to use the object or to forget it'.⁹⁹ Indeed, my contention will be that for those novelists who navigated the aftermath of postmodernism, the *prospect* of the unrealised potentialities of modernist fiction exists not simply to be used but to be continually tested, redesigned and remade. Piety, however, doesn't quite do justice to their dialogues with tradition. For I aim also to reveal how contemporary writers are responding *actively* to the past in a fashion that this notion of piety – with its connotations of devoted acknowledgement and reverential fidelity – cannot quite encompass. 'We moderns', exclaimed Gertrude Stein, 'must create a complete tradition and live into it, for we do not follow teaching'.¹⁰⁰ The writers I have addressed can be seen to be moving forward still with that task of completion, even if the irreverence that Stein cherished is now dialectically connected to a process in which artistic inheritance and infidelity coincide. Without denying the influence and magnitude of historical modernism, contemporary novelists are demonstrating more audacious means of negotiating its legacy, making us all the more 'aware', as Toni Morrison put it in *Playing in the Dark*, 'of the writer's notions of risk and safety, the serene achievement of, or sweaty fight for, meaning and responsibility'.¹⁰¹

To plot that audacity both inside and outside the fictional text requires an agile methodological framework that can draw, without preconceptions, on alternative kinds of evidence. In addition to essays, reviews or even speeches of the sort we have just analysed from Coetzee, another important extra-literary resource for *Modernist Futures* is the author-interview. 'The interview form is characteristic of the age', declared Joe David Bellamy, introducing his conversations more than three decades ago with such pyrotechnic experimenters as Barth and Barthelme. 'In the immediacy of its appeal', he reckoned, 'to our voracious appetite for personality and glamour, for human contact, for character revelation, for getting-it-from-the-horse's-mouth, it has become a mainstay of *Playboy* and *Rolling Stone*'.¹⁰² It has also become a mainstay for scholars of contemporary fiction who wish to reintroduce matters of motivation and inspiration back into their portfolio of terms, instead of leaving all artistic intentions in doubt or refuting them outright. As Bellamy observes, interviews 'may also provide insight into the nature of a particular writer's sensibility – that smoggy

area of aesthetic distinctions least apt to be revealed by traditional analytical methods'.¹⁰³ Shrewd and well-intentioned though Bellamy's defence of interviews may be, he tends to rehearse the polarisation between critical analysis and authorial sensibility, when what we need is a means of combining interpretive methods with that sensitivity to artistic motivations. Kundera seems to suggest so as well, offering his own impression of how we should treat the information that writers disclose:

A novelist talking about the art of the novel is not a professor giving a discourse from his podium. Imagine him rather as a painter welcoming you into his studio, where you are surrounded by his canvases staring at you from where they lean against the walls. He will talk about himself, but even more about other people, about novels of theirs that he loves and that have a secret presence in his own work.¹⁰⁴

In each of the following chapters, I have heeded Kundera's advice when engaging with novelists' interviews and essays. Something analogous to that intimate acquaintance with the writer 'in his studio' can be facilitated either by conversations with novelists or by the commentaries they provide on 'other people'. These materials, however, also help us to gauge how that 'secret presence' of past works in a novelist's own has got there, and why that act of appropriation occurred in the first place – if, indeed, appropriating modernism is what that writer has wanted to do.

We need to provide alternatives, then, to the oppressive jurisdiction of influence, as Stein mocked it in *Three Lives*, when it is viewed as 'a steady march' from past to present from which the contemporary writer can 'never break away'.¹⁰⁵ Here the term *appropriation* deserves some elucidation. Recently, the expanded field of adaptation studies has provided its own critique of the hegemony of source texts. Calling for fluid conceptions of influences and their effect on subsequent creations, these critics have replaced accounts of straightforward borrowing with more open-ended notions of appropriation. For instance, what Julie Sanders finds useful about appropriation as a critical category is the way it helps us think more flexibly about the compositional *cooperation* of allusion and re-creation, inheriting and renewing. In this framework, we are able to observe how artistic precedents are regenerated, their initiatives redeployed, and their styles not simply mimed but reanimated for the markedly different characterological, descriptive or political concerns of the appropriating artist. Sanders's recommendation for studying adaptation is equally applicable for our purposes of charting modernism's continuance in contemporary literature without recourse to 'a static or immobilizing discussion of source or influence'.¹⁰⁶ In place of causal diagnoses of artistic

affinities, we need a 'more active vocabulary' that works beyond pre-conceived ideas about the dominance of canonical originators.¹⁰⁷ Such a vocabulary for tracing how traditions are reformulated allows us to examine formal legacies without assuming that the inheritors in question are either fixated in their fidelity to past masterworks or anxiously trying to out-write them.

One has to tread carefully, of course, when using authors' interviews and essays to substantiate our understanding of how they might alternatively adapt, appropriate and transcribe modernist procedures, while also alluding or paying homage to identifiable modernist texts. There are two caveats, then: firstly, there is the risk that such interviews will simply assume the position of an authenticating 'source-text' that overly deterministic ideas of influence uphold and which the more supple notions of adaptation and appropriation seek to complicate; and secondly, we have to concede that writers' answers are guided by the questions asked, and even the most conversational (and confessional) novelist might not be able to sidestep the interviewer's insinuations. Peter Carey himself has drawn attention to these issues, remarking that interviews often compel writers to pin down definitive inspirations that in practice have a more diluted impact on their craft. When asked in 1986 whether he saw himself as a successor to Borges, Carey replied: 'Is what I am saying the truth? Was this really the attraction or am I simply trying to build an answer that will make us both happy?'¹⁰⁸ The question arises as to how we use such interviews to substantiate a commentary, like the one that unfolds in this book, whose concerns are more politico-aesthetic and literary-historical than they are biographical. Leaving aside the issue of whether or not we should treat writers' self-reflections as 'evidence' in the first place, the recent work of narratologists like Robert Walsh suggests that it is misguided to reject notions of authorial compulsion or esteem, even if many early plans never eventually make it into a novelist's published work. To any genetic critic, this would sound like an obvious point; but to accommodate an analysis of intentionality alongside that of influence is important when encountering writers who are still living, producing and commenting on their work, while also talking about the literary movements they inherit and whose impulses they extend. In these cases, Walsh proposes an 'idea of creativity as mediation, as expressed in the comments of novelists themselves upon their experience of the narrative imagination – bearing in mind that these comments also contribute in their own right to the communicative context of their fiction'.¹⁰⁹ In more insidious respects, that context may well give writers the chance to speak about their place in an ongoing

tradition, thereby acquiring some prestige by flagging-up the heritage with which they are aligning their work.¹¹⁰ This caution aside, however, I share Walsh's sentiment that artistic ambitions are not simply arbitrary or deceptive but provide another layer for critical evaluation, providing a form of contextualisation that is as legitimate as any cultural or historical one. In this sense, I concur with Michael Wood who, in an elegant discussion of Yeats and form, has warned that 'there is something wasteful and disagreeable about not wanting to know what writers think they are doing, and about the accompanying assumption that critics know better. It doesn't seem implausible that writers often achieve what they intend and that their intention has something to do with their achievement'.¹¹¹ Taken together, Walsh and Wood offer a useful reminder that the idea of being able to situate writers against their own essays and interviews is a genuinely worthwhile endeavour – even if what we discover is that contemporary novelists are often, if not especially, eager to ring-fence their style and define their impulses as unique.

'A BRIDGE WITH THE PAST': DIALOGUES AND DEPARTURES

Speaking before an undergraduate audience in 1987, William Faulkner was candid about working in conversation with what has gone before. Literary-historical landmarks need not be insurmountable, he implied; they are catalysts for each generation of emerging experimenters, spurring new writers to make their own advances in the afterglow of past achievements:

I think that the writer ... is completely amoral. He takes whatever he needs, wherever he needs, and he does that openly and honestly because he himself hopes that what he does will be good enough so that after him people will take from him, and they are welcome to take from him as he feels that he would be welcome by the best of his predecessors to take what they've done.¹¹²

Faulkner points here to a process of aesthetic inheritance in which the precursor is not so much abandoned or hidden, as 'openly and honestly' reprinted. Pre-existing traits are woven in the very fibre of what's new. Faulkner implies that, as a writer, what you inherit depends on the way you use it, since the most formidable influences need not compromise the individuality of your own experimental aims. Echoing Faulkner fifty years later, New York-based novelist Siri Hustvedt sees that the issue isn't one of straightforward influence, for 'every writer takes from the past. It is how it happens', such that '[my] love for Henry James doesn't make me want to fight it out and get *over* him'.¹¹³ In a deliberate refutation of the

Bloomian vision of conflict between virtuosic inheritors and their equally virtuosic forebears, Hustrvedt prefers to see heritage circulating within the here-and-now, inviting contemporary writers into a scene of 'literary mingling'.¹⁴ We are back to the prospect of conviviality with which this Introduction began, which allows us to see how contemporary writers work 'in dialogue', as Laura Marcus terms it, 'with the structures of modernist fiction'.¹⁵

To observe how novelists participate in these dialogues, even as they manoeuvre towards new departures, is a task I attempt in the following chapters by zeroing-in on key transitions across each writer's oeuvre. If certain modernist interlocutors stand prominently at the other end of those dialogues, I have nonetheless avoided the overly schematic pairing-off of precursors and legatees. The writers I consider are not simply 'pursu[ing] the narrow path of aesthetic duty' of the sort that James, in E. M. Forster's view, encouraged all heirs of the art-novel to do.¹⁶ As a result, this book makes no bid to offer a systematic survey of which novelists today have been influenced by which modernists. Indeed, there are many early-twentieth-century writers, artistic developments and period-specific phases (Surrealism and Vorticism being the most glaring absences) for which I have not included late-twentieth-century inheritors. Among those excluded is Forster himself, not because he is formally uninventive, and certainly not because '[t]here's something middling about' him, as Zadie Smith has argued.¹⁷ Curiously enough, in light of her own homage to *Howards End* in *On Beauty* (2005), Smith sounds as unflattering towards her own work here as she does about Forster's. More perceptive is her later remark that Forster 'didn't need anyone else to be like him. Which would appear to be the simplest, most obvious principle in the world – yet how few English novelists prove capable of holding it'.¹⁸ It would hardly be true to say that nobody wants to be 'like' Forster these days, not only after *On Beauty's* tale of prejudice and accountability, but also because Forster's ethics of connectedness, along with his own 'insider-outsider' status, as Paul Armstrong calls it,¹⁹ reverberate through such admired narratives of nationhood as Ishiguro's *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986) and *The Remains of the Day* (1989), as well as Timothy Mo's *Sour Sweet* (1982). Just as Joyce, therefore, will appear largely in the background when compared to my more explicit analyses of McEwan's and Coetzee's conversations with Woolf and Ford, respectively, so Forster's absence is a matter of selection rather than qualitative discrimination. What motivates my selections, as I indicated previously, is the extent to which each writer chosen enriches our understanding of that 'balance', as McEwan called it,

between narrative self-reflexivity and formal integrity, between pushing back the frontiers of artistry and ethically engaging the reader. The bolder argument underpinning this book is that only by scrutinising those contemporary novelists who have consciously negotiated that balance in the wake of postmodernism can we develop a more nuanced portrait of the future of novelistic innovation and the roles that modernism's reanimating plays in shaping that future.

Those earlier twentieth-century modernists who *do* appear in this study, then, are selected because they matter to the formal and political aims of some of the most singular writers of our age. Rather than being the object of mimicry or pastiche, these precursors have been re-engaged in the very warp and weft of contemporary narrative. From the more expected appearances of James and Conrad in discussions of impressionism's afterlife or the equally inevitable pairing of Faulkner with Morrison (whose interaction has now become for Faulknerians a significant sub-discipline in its own right), to the far more neglected legacy of Ford for such a seemingly contrasting prose-stylist like Coetzee – these figures make their appearance alongside essays and interviews in which contemporary writers testify to their impact. These dialogues are thus substantial rather than speculative. I have chosen contemporary fictions that tangibly register modernism's impact at a compositional level, even if (as is often the case) we see them 'getting beyond influence' altogether. My readings are based not in theoretical conjecture, but on the authority of writers who have reflected deeply upon the very historicity of their craft and its ethical implications. What Rob Nixon says of V. S. Naipaul's affinity with Conrad as a precursor applies to many of the anterior affiliations analysed in this book: when a modernist predecessor is seen by a contemporary novelist 'as neither an invented nor a chosen starting point but a natural one'.²⁰

Is there surely not a difference, though, between a writer whose dialogue with the past is strategic and one for whom it seems inevitable? Are there novelists who combine or negotiate between 'chosen' and 'natural' precedents? Pondering such questions in relation to the shifting attitudes towards experimentalism in postwar fiction, David Lodge saw that fiction had reached not a turning point after the social realist reaction against modernist subjectivism in the 1950s, so much as an intersection of diverging aims that spoke directly to the novel's undecided future. Hence Lodge's talismanic image: that of the 'novelist at the crossroads', a figure poised at the junction of personal priorities and lines of shared inheritance. As Lodge argued, 'the novelist is constantly divided between two imperatives – to create and invent freely, and to observe a degree of realistic

decorum'.¹²¹ What he implied was that the genuinely daring move for novelists approaching the 1980s would be to reconcile the perceived antagonisms between the social realism they inherit from Sillitoe's generation of the 1950s, and the rise of a new avant-garde heralded in the 1960s and 1970s by John Fowles, Christine Brooke-Rose and B. S. Johnson. Lodge concluded that his generation seemed to 'be living through a period of unprecedented cultural pluralism which allows, in all arts, an astonishing variety of styles to flourish simultaneously. Though they are in many cases radically opposed on aesthetic and epistemological grounds, no one style has managed to become dominant'.¹²²

Such proclamations about a cultural climate with no consensus on which direction the novel should go were, in significant respects, influenced by binary understandings of realist and experimentalist impulses. Lodge's work in stylistics did much to dispel that binary, arguing as he did for a more complex view of the polyphonic mix of mimetic and meta-fictional modes – anticipating by more than a decade his eventual allegiance to theories of heteroglossia, after Bakhtin became popular in the British academy through the 1980s. Even then, however, when novelists like Angela Carter, Graham Swift and Salman Rushdie were writing the fictions that would make them famous for blending historical, phantasmagorical, and metadiegetic registers, discussions about what novelistic innovation was actually *for* were still susceptible to the image of the writer at the crossroads, where socially responsible realist fiction clashes with the self-indulgence of neomodernist experiment. In the same year *Money* (1984) first appeared, though, we find Martin Amis acknowledging that novelists cannot stay standing those crossroads forever. Someone who would repeatedly uphold the modernist conviction that 'style is absolutely embedded in the way you perceive',¹²³ Amis adopted Lodge's plea to find a confluence between seemingly incompatible imperatives: 'realism and experimentation have come and gone without seeming to point a way ahead. The contemporary writer, therefore, must combine these veins, calling on the strengths of the Victorian novel together with the alienations of post-modernism'.¹²⁴ Ten years later and Jeanette Winterson, despondent being so formally and thematically different from Amis, repeats his call to 'combine' heritage with alternative conceptions of what is new by *not* 'refusing tradition its vital connection to what is happening now'.¹²⁵

How novelists might productively utilise, rather than dismiss, the modernist legacy 'for what is happening now' was one of the subjects addressed by a symposium on the 'state of fiction', hosted in the late 1970s by the short-lived journal *The New Review*. In the generational mix of

its contributors, this issue reflected a decade of mingling, often conflicting, compulsions. Writers were deliberately juxtaposed: John Braine sat alongside Christine Brooke-Rose, and Ian McEwan claimed that 'the artifice of fiction can be taken for granted' just lines before Olivia Manning condemned *Ulysses* as 'a monster' who, 'like all monsters', is 'without progeny'.¹²⁶ As D. J. Taylor recalls, those novelists contributing to *The New Review* issue were 'in no doubt that experimental fiction, whatever that was, had been tried and found wanting. But they were in no doubt either that the ordinary novel, the sort of book that gets discussed in newspapers, that people buy or borrow from the libraries, was somehow failing to do its job; that a gap existed between fiction and the environment it attempted to describe'.¹²⁷ It is precisely this gap that those novelists who established themselves in subsequent decades have sought to shrink, but not in a way that would make their work any more palatable for the kind of local-library member who Taylor quaintly imagines. This is why I have concentrated on that distinct generation of novelists who worked in the wake of 'high' postmodernism's fallow in the 1970s and 1980s: it is they who developed particular responses to the relevance of modernist experimentation and who have continued to reconsider what it takes to negotiate between the self-reflexivity that serious 'literary fiction' has inevitably acquired and the ability, as Winterson identifies it in Stein, 'to make a bridge with the past that is both conscious and liminal', something that 'only *new* work can do'.¹²⁸

Critically speaking, then, Lodge was ahead of his time: paving the way to a kind of commentary that could be sensitive to how aesthetic and ideological concerns associated with, and facilitated by, past methods can be revitalised *through* the contemporary novelist's own virtuosic self-advancement. With this fluid model of the mutual articulation of heritage and innovation, Lodge suggests that it is more productive to think of new fiction as 'a new synthesis of pre-existing narrative traditions, rather than a continuation of one of them or an entirely unprecedented phenomenon'.¹²⁹ Despite the interiority often associated with that impulse to experiment, 'there are', he says, 'formidable discouragements to continuing serenely along the road of fictional realism. The novelist who has any kind of self-awareness must at least hesitate at the crossroads; and the solution many novelists have chosen in their dilemma is to *build that hesitation into the novel itself*'.¹³⁰ Lodge recalls here a practice of 'conscious artistry' of the kind that Ford had applauded in Conrad and James. It is a practice whose afterlives are traced in the following discussion through the work of writers who consciously reach for new stylistic horizons but

without allowing that self-awareness to impose upon the emotional states and ethical situations they dramatise.

'CRITICALLY, CONSTRUCTIVELY, RE-CONSTRUCTIVELY:
READING MODERNIST FUTURES

It would be tempting, then, to paint a portrait of the millennial novelist still standing at the crossroads. In some respects I have done this already, by suggesting that the writers we'll be encountering are navigating a path between ironic or metafictional self-reflexivity, on the one hand, and the more realist demands of uncompromising observation and critique, on the other. Equally, though, I've also contended that we need a different language now for analysing how the very act of '[w]riting', in Don DeLillo's words, 'also means trying to advance the art'.¹³¹ What we shall see in each of the writers here is not a case of indecision, or the incorporation of hesitancy into their political and stylistic concerns, so much as it is a range of serious reflections on the integrity of what they make. 'What writing means to me', asserts DeLillo, 'is trying to make interesting, clear, beautiful language', such that '[w]orking at sentences and rhythms is probably the most satisfying thing I do as a writer'.¹³² It is a sentiment echoed by McEwan's fascination with 'shaping sentences and shaping paragraphs, and shaping parts of characters and making characters'.¹³³ Both DeLillo and McEwan seem to share Henry James's attraction to the unrealised possibilities of 'style', whereby he brought *to* that style, as Alan Hollinghurst points out, an 'awareness' equivalent to that which 'he brings to his characters and their situations'.¹³⁴ As an impressionist, James speculated that ways of knowing could be synonymous with ways of feeling, an equation that led him famously to hypothesise in 'The Art of Fiction' (1884) that 'impressions *are* experience'.¹³⁵ Despite the frequency with which he is labelled and treated as a postmodernist, DeLillo shares something of James's bold sentiment, attesting that '[o]ver the years it's possible for a writer to shape himself as a human being through the language he uses'.¹³⁶ In this claim, DeLillo also complements James's vision of the novel's futurity: just as James saw fiction's survival would be enabled by its 'free character', moving as it does 'in a luxurious independence of rules and restrictions',¹³⁷ so DeLillo believes that the novel 'hasn't quite been filled in or done in or worked out. We make our small leaps'.¹³⁸

Making *modest* advances in the novel's philosophical reach and formal capabilities is hardly what DeLillo has become renowned for. Neither, for that matter, are the writers who appear in this book. What he implies,

however, is that the only way is forward: to 'make ... leaps' means no longer standing at the crossroads. In this respect, DeLillo's conviction that fiction is not yet 'done in' not only allies him with James's futurology of the novel; looking further back still, it also reveals the remarkable prescience of Thomas Hardy's advice that 'the utmost which each generation can be expected to do is to add one or two strokes toward the selection and shaping of a possible ultimate perfection'.¹³⁹ The present study offers no speculations on who among the contemporary scene is getting nearest to achieving that perfection. But it does offer an account of how those procedures of 'selection and shaping' can be understood as incorporating modernist aims, though without suggesting that modernism's promise has been, in DeLillo's phrase, fully 'worked out'.

Two weeks into the second decade of the twenty-first century, three very different novelists gathered at London's Royal Festival Hall to discuss this issue of whether modernism is still being worked out in contemporary literary culture. Sometime metafictionist turned children's writer, A. S. Byatt, was joined by the author of the Nabokovian *Nowhere Man* (2002), Aleksandar Hemon, and the neo-Futurist creator of *Remainder* (2005) and *C* (2010), Tom McCarthy. As co-founder of the International Necronautical Society – a collective whose culturally oppositional manifestos and defence of conceptualism openly exemplify his avant-garde persuasions – one might have expected McCarthy to cheer modernism's persistence in contemporary culture. Instead of encouragement, however, came disappointment: McCarthy felt that postwar fiction was simply 'not on my radar' by virtue of the way it had dismissed 'the legacy of modernism'. Byatt, too, was campaigning on behalf of a heritage refused by social realism and parodically dissected by postmodernism; and, like McCarthy, she regarded herself as fundamentally 'a modernist' committed to prospects of formal integrity where the future of the novel is concerned. Though McCarthy aligned himself with a lineage that stretched from Beckett to Kafka to Michel Houellebecq, Byatt saw her fiction as inheriting modernism 'via a different line' – one that reached back to Eliot and Matisse.¹⁴⁰ As the third respondent, Hemon again painted a different self-portrait. Although *The Question of Bruno* (2000) and *The Lazarus Project* (2008) both experiment with retrospective narration in ways that seem idiomatically linked to Conrad and Nabokov, Hemon has elsewhere expressed some caution about becoming overtly self-referential – whether the references in question are other writers and traditions or his own devices. Wary of the 'fundamentally postmodern ... idea' that 'language always refers to itself', his fiction

takes a stand against 'watching thought evolve and meaning dissolve in the pressure chamber of abstraction'. If Hemon identifies with modernist fiction, it is because of its avoidance of ungrounded abstraction, drawn as he is (just as any impressionist would be) to evoke the exactitude of ordinary sensations pregnant with significance and affection: 'I'd rather eat a strawberry, smell my daughter's hair, or read a book that, against all postmodern odds, conjures up the intense experience of human life'.⁴⁴ In addition to highlighting such different trajectories along which the principles of early-twentieth-century writers have travelled to and been transcribed by those of the twenty-first, Byatt, Hemon and McCarthy confirm that modernist continuities cannot be homogenised just as novelists' strategies today must be particularised if we are to see how the promise of modernism survives within and because of them.

McCarthy vented his frustration at the state of contemporary fiction by claiming that, at best, it's 'the nineteenth-century novel with a few Joycean knobs on'.⁴⁵ In this book, I offer a more positive view of the vitality of modernist processes in late-twentieth- and twenty-first-century fiction, showing how the point of being a modernist today amounts to more than snatching frills from *Finnegans Wake*. Granted, influence *is* and must be a key factor in understanding how modernist aesthetics are redeployed for new politico-aesthetic ends, and the role that early-twentieth-century writers (and painters) play as interlocutors with our contemporary moment testifies to this. Such correspondences across literary-historical time, however, urge us to refine the distinction between modernism's achievements as a heritage to which writers simply allude and the more substantive function of modernist ideals as catalysts for enterprising if not unprecedented kinds of fiction.

This debate provokes us to consider what modernism was and what it still does, something I have devoted much of this Introduction to elucidating. As the institutionalisation of modernist principles through creative writing curricula invites us to observe, how we define what modernism means will continue to depend on whether we are looking at its legacies and possibilities from a critic's or a practitioner's point of view. One challenge I've faced in writing this book, therefore, has been to see whether those viewpoints – with writers' compositional ambitions or achievements on the one hand, and those political orientations or impulses of literary criticism on the other – are at all compatible and, where they are, to explore how their compatibility can enrich our understanding of the reasons for modernism's perpetuation.

Modernist Futures is thus motivated by the conviction that we ought to be able to engage with such matters concerning how tradition and

innovation intersect for contemporary writers without fearing that an accompanying attention to form will sideline broader sociological or cultural considerations. Even Jameson has applauded the 'resuscitation of aesthetics' as a disciplinary turn that seeks to correct the tendency for 'various modernist forms of the sublime' to 'effac[e] aesthetic questions as swiftly as they began to emerge'.⁴⁶ Admittedly, the present study might not initially appear to sit well with the contextualising impulses of the New Modernist Studies, impulses that avoid lending primacy to style in retrospective analyses of modernism so as to discuss (as Pamela Caughie notes in her recent summary of the state-of-the-discipline) how to address 'industry-produced, mass-consumed, machine-made art that not only reflected modern culture but also taught its audiences how modernity might be experienced'.⁴⁴ As such, some readers will no doubt perceive that my focus on technique bypasses this otherwise valuable approach to modernism's economic conditions of production and transnational reception. Yet a more thorough comprehension of the interaction between 'technicist' understandings of how fiction operates and the new modes of attention it demands (by virtue of the conventions of reception it eludes), is surely the foundation for obtaining a firmer grasp of the novel's capacity for critical work – together with the role that modernist aesthetics played, and might still play, in enhancing that capacity.⁴⁵

The discipline of modernist studies has become no less receptive to the timeliness of these interactions. I am reminded of the new directions recently mapped by Douglas Mao and Rebecca Walkowitz, who highlight precisely those 'questions pertaining to literary form' that scholars are starting to answer as they follow modernist afterlives into new geographical regions.⁴⁶ A growing body of work on modernism's extensions into late-twentieth- and twenty-first-century writing is being undertaken in ways that often seem peripheral to, or at least less urgent than, the 'transnationalist' impulse to expand the global ambit of early-twentieth-century literature.⁴⁷ By the same stroke, although Huyssen's remark almost a decade ago that '[m]ost modernist research' in the 'academy is still largely bound by the local' no longer seems fair,⁴⁸ it may be less of a misrepresentation to say that scholarship is still largely confined by period. I don't mean to suggest that the New Modernist Studies has deferred questions of modernism's continuity in favour of mapping its transnational scope, but rather to highlight that the mode of distant reading by which modernism's internationalisation is often analysed can lead to 'an abandonment', as Huyssen anticipated, 'of aesthetic and formal issues coupled with [an] unquestioning privileging of popular and mass culture'.⁴⁹ To read modernist legacies in a closer manner, as this book does, *through* the forms of their

re-articulation, is not to endorse an elite vocabulary that privileges the hallowed autonomy of the modernist art-novel over the popular marketplace of contemporary fiction's consumption. On the contrary, it marks a first step towards redrawing the lines between creative practice and critical thought. Exploring such proximities of craft and interpretation allows us to foster rather than forego what Thomas Doherty has described as 'the intimacy of aesthetics with materiality', in order thereby to discover why some of the most virtuosic novelists of our time are realising what modernism can still become in response to new social actualities.¹⁵⁰

The prospect of cultivating this intimate contact with formally innovative works – even in the methodical process of unpacking what they do and why they remain so meaningful to us – is one that Henry James pondered in a letter to Howard Sturgis in 1903. James admitted that 'I, as a battered producer & "technician" myself, have long since inevitably ceased to read with *naïveté*; I can only read critically, constructively, *re-constructively*, writing the thing over (if I can swallow it at all) *my way*, looking at it, so to speak, from within'.¹⁵¹ Like James, we cannot opt for critically naïve readings, even if it were desirable to do so; and it would be to misrepresent the legitimate interventions of 'New Formalists' to suggest that they are tacitly endorsing an unselfconscious attention to aesthetic properties simply as a response to the era of postmodern scepticism.¹⁵² The twofold imperative to read 'critically' and '*re-constructively*', as James usefully implies, *can* be squared with the demands of 'looking at' narrative fiction rigorously 'from within'. Similarly, to read a novel with the eyes of a 'technician' is not to neglect the force of its engagement with the world, but rather to observe how different writers' aims – sometimes economical, as we will see, at other times audacious – are indelibly linked to their ethical and political convictions. With this kind of approach we can start to see how modernism has enabled writers 'aesthetically', as Jahan Ramazani notes, to 'encode intersections among multiple cultural vectors'.¹⁵³ There is, however, another more curious, though no less crucial, upshot of modernism's bequest to writers and critics alike. Speaking to positions that are as important for rethinking the way we evaluate contemporary literature as they are for understanding its composition, this bequest illuminates a fruitful paradox. It is a paradox that's exploited to the full, as we will see next, by two leading writers who remake their modernist inheritance anew, setting the scene for demonstrating a logic of creativity that reaches across this book: namely, how tradition enables novelists to achieve what they have yet to do in the light of all that fiction hasn't quite done before.

CHAPTER I

'Advancing along the inherited path': Making it traditionally new in Milan Kundera and Philip Roth

Among modernism's many paradoxical attractions to what has passed, one stands out more than most. Though we could accurately call it a commitment, or hear it repeated as an obligation expressed by artists themselves, it might best be posed as a question: how can experimenters draw upon tradition without undermining their own claims to originality? Though, undoubtedly, this was a conundrum that high modernism intensified, it was hardly unprecedented. When George Eliot insisted that we notice how 'each new invention casts a new light along the pathway of discovery, and each new combination or structure brings into play more conditions than its inventor foresaw', she laid the groundwork for her poet-namesake who, half a century later in 1919, famously advised his generation of aspiring writers that 'existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them'.¹⁵⁴ T. S. Eliot may have been reluctant to admit that, as an 'inventor' himself, he might not always foresee where new 'conditions' arise for genuine innovation. Invariably, Eliot was adamant that he *could*, and he took pains to identify himself with the rigour and insight of those who could acknowledge that tradition 'cannot be inherited', because you must obtain it by great labour,¹⁵⁵ precisely in order to suggest how difficult it was for the modern poet to be new. Nonetheless, even if the two Eliots may not have agreed on the extent to which writers are capable of predicting what sort of 'combination or structure' newness will assume next, they would surely concur that the measure of 'each new invention' is the way it challenges all prior expectations – sending a ripple through assumptions of what's currently possible for the artistic medium in question. For, 'after the supervention of novelty', insists (T. S.) Eliot, 'the *whole* existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered'. In turn, 'the relations, proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted' – a mutual adjustment that reveals what he pinpoints as 'the conformity between the old and the new'.¹⁵⁶