The generation without purpose

JIMMY: I suppose people of our generation aren't able to die for good causes any longer. We had all that done for us, in the thirties and forties, when we were still kids. There aren't any good, brave causes left. If the big bang does come, and we all get killed off, it won't be in aid of the old-fashioned grand design. It'll just be for the Brave New-nothing-very-much-thank-you. About as pointless and inglorious as stepping in front of a bus.

(John Osborne, *Look Back in Anger*. London: Faber and Faber, 1957, pp. 84–5)

such as Sarah Kane and Mark Ravenhill sought to shock audiences out of a perceived complacency about the kind of society they lived in. Theatre remains in economic terms the domain of a privileged minority who can afford to attend it, even though in terms of content and form it has supported some of the most obvious attempts at radical aesthetic and political experiment in post-war literary history.

Language, forms, genres and styles

Language: whose English?

The period under survey in this chapter began with the publication of James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* (1939), the most formally and linguistically inventive text ever produced in English, but its play upon a diverse range of languages and upon the etymological roots of English make it difficult to define simply as an 'English' literary work (even aside from the complications of having an Irish author). The 'Movement' poets of the 1950s saw such linguistic dexterity as a product of the excesses of modernist experiment, and Donald Davie argued in particular that English poets after the war were instead seeking to 'purify' rather than 'expand' the language. In the twentieth century English has continued to expand as a language in the way that it has always done, through cultural interaction with a diverse range of languages, and through the localised inventions reflected in dialectal usage. In literary texts, arguably, dialect has been most notably deployed in writings produced by immigrants. Sam Selvon uses a modified Trinidadian dialect of English in his *The Lonely Londoners* (1956), for example, to give a particular cultural inflection to his immigrant characters. Rushdie frequently does the same with Indian dialects of English in his novels. At the same time, there have been attempts by working-class writers to reflect the patterns of regional, working-class speech, usually in dialogue. Usually with omniscient narration, a 'standard' English dialect is used, but it is a consistent feature of Pat Barker's early novels, for example, to bring the language of the narrator closer to that of the regional dialects of the characters. In England, perhaps more so than in many other countries, dialect is a marker of class identity, and that has been a concern of many working-class writers in post-war Britain. Other writers have been interested in the cultural politics of language in different ways: George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), for example, reflects anxieties about the ideologies engendered in

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political language, while Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange* (1962) features an invented dialect to reflect the influence of youth sub-cultures on language use.

Post-modern fiction

The post-modern is usually associated with post-war scepticism about the emancipatory claims of enlightenment modernity, particularly in the aftermath of atrocities like the Holocaust and Hiroshima. Instead of a narrative of progress, post-modern writing and art tends to reflect pessimism about the fate of modern society, and cast doubt on the idea that human life is meaningful or purposeful. The post-modern sense of cultural exhaustion and impending demise is evident in Martin Amis's *London Fields* (1989), in which the dying narrator remarks that even the babies in England are dressed as if they are old, and the marks of decay and death are present everywhere. Graham Swift's novels abound with this feeling of exhaustion, and particularly of an England spiritually and morally shattered by two world wars and the demise of its imperial glory. *Last Orders* (1996) tells the story of a funeral procession, which tours through the symbolic garden of England to its battered channel coastline, and on the way the friends of the deceased recall their own stories of post-war English decline. David Gervais observed that 'Modern England is in danger of becoming a museum of itself', and many contemporary English novels reflect this notion that England is a place receding into the past, none more so than Julian Barnes's novel, *England, England* (1998), in which 'England' is a heritage theme park.

This is one key way in which the strongly elegiac tendencies of much contemporary English fiction can be understood as conforming to a post-modern notion of the end of history, of scepticism towards the narratives of progress and enlightenment which dominated Western culture since

Samuel Beckett and post-war British drama

An alternative narrative of the history of post-war British drama might begin not with the production of John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* in 1956, but with the London premiere of *Waiting for Godot* by Samuel Beckett in 1955. Beckett was an Irish playwright who lived in France and wrote mostly in French, but arguably no British playwright had such influence on the development of post-war British drama as Beckett. After *Waiting for Godot*, Beckett's plays figured prominently in the theatre scene in Britain, and had profound influence on several playwrights, most notably Harold Pinter. Beckett stripped his plays of social reference points, so that bare scenes of often grim, unexplained lives stood symbolically for the wretched condition of human existence. His plays have often been explained in terms of existentialist explorations of the meanings of humanity shown without the trappings of civilisation and culture. Since the holocaust laid bare the horrific potential of human cruelty, and the threat of nuclear war made modern civilisation seem a precarious veneer, it could be argued that Beckett's plays were thoroughly historical in their exploration of the post-war human condition. It is Beckett's style, however, as much as his central theme, that has been influential. No other playwright has used the bare stage to such effect, nor experimented so radically with minimalist language, imagery, character and action. It is important to stress that, although Beckett is often understood as the master dramatist of bleak, existentialist themes, there are also scenes in his plays which are highly effective comic pieces. The 'banter' between Vladimir and Estragon in *Waiting for Godot*, for example, has often been discussed as reminiscent of Laurel and Hardy sketches.