

# Readings

## Introduction

In this chapter of the book, it is perhaps more difficult to say with any certainty what have been the major literary achievements of the period covered. It takes time to assess whether the writers who appear most significant in their own lifetime turn out to be so after the dust settles on their work. The canon of English literature is constantly unstable and hotly contested in every period, but it could be argued that for the period since 1939 no canon has even been established. Philip Gaskell's *Landmarks of English Literature* (1998), for example, which proposes a list of what to read to acquaint oneself with the history and development of literature, stops with Conrad, Eliot and Joyce in the modernist period. It would be difficult to get experts on the post-1939 period even to agree on such a shortlist of what to read. This section of the chapter proposes to read several texts from the period as significant literary landmarks. In doing so, it cannot help but propose a canon, although it will be immediately obvious that it is an especially tentative canon given the difficulty and inadvisability of arriving at definitive judgements of contemporary literature.

### An Englishman

It is sometimes said that butlers only truly exist in England. Other countries, whatever title is actually used, have only manservants. I tend to believe this is true. Continentals are unable to be butlers because they are as a breed incapable of the emotional restraint which only the English race is capable of. Continentals – and by and large the Celts, as you will no doubt agree – are as a rule unable to control themselves in moments of strong emotion, and are thus unable to maintain a professional demeanour other than in the least challenging of situations . . . In a word, 'dignity' is beyond such persons. We English have an important advantage over foreigners in this respect and it is for this reason that when you think of a great butler, he is bound, almost by definition, to be an Englishman.

(Kazuo Ishiguro, *The Remains of the Day*. London: Faber & Faber, 1989, p. 43)

## George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949)

Novels which are set in the future, commonly called science fiction, are routinely discussed in terms of their claims to prophecy. The year 1984 may have come and gone, but even in the twenty-first century Orwell's most famous novel can seem prescient in many respects: flat-screened panel televisions mounted on the walls of every home, able to transmit as well as receive; a national lottery, which with 'its weekly pay-out of enormous prizes, was the one public event to which the proles paid serious attention' (George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, p. 89 [A]); wars being fought against bitter enemies who had until recently been staunch allies; a surveillance society, capable of

### The end of the English novel

The English novel has been characterized by the self-depictions of its maker's dominance: the novel of sense and sensibility is informed by the authority of belonging. Today, however, the imagination resides along the peripheries; it is spoken through a minority discourse, with the dominant tongue re-appropriated, re-commanded, and importantly reinvigorated. It is, at last, the end of the English novel and the beginning of the British novel.

(Bill Buford, 'Introduction: the End of the English Novel', *Granta*, 3 (1980), p. 16)

monitoring every word and action. Such novels, however, are not written about the future, or at least not about the future as such. They are written about the present, and the omens of a dark future which are contained as possibilities in the present. In 1946 when Orwell began to write *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, there were many contexts which could and did provide for Orwell the basic material for the situations imagined in the novel: the

purges in Stalinist Russia in the 1930s, the death camps and mass hysteria of Nazi Germany, the swift transfer of hostility by the USA from Germany to Russia, the austerity and propaganda of wartime Britain, of which Orwell obviously had personal experience. Orwell's own experiences as a colonial policeman in Burma would also have fuelled his sense that twentieth-century political ideologies had an unprecedented capacity for making real O'Brien's vision of the future as 'a boot stamping on a human face - for ever' (p. 280), and of justifying such terror in the name of freedom, justice or progress.

As Orwell served the interests of imperial ideologies in Burma, and disseminated the misinformation of wartime Britain, Winston Smith is at the front line of the totalitarian state of Oceania, rewriting the documents of the past so as to tell the story demanded by his superiors in the present. At the command of Winston's pen, allies become enemies, traitors are now friends, and unwanted dissidents are airbrushed out of history. The willing revisionist by day, Winston seeks to record his true memories and feelings by night, and against the puritan, anti-human ideologies he serves, he begins to engage in sexcrimes and thoughtcrimes with Julia, and to plan for resistance against Big Brother and the thought police. In his sleep he dreams of the 'Golden Country', an imagined haven of peace and freedom to which he might escape. Winston's attempts at resistance and dreams of escape are shown at the end to be illusions, not only countered by the Party and its totalitarian state, but created by them in order to crush Winston all the more effectively. Perhaps the most compelling scenes in the novel are those in which Winston is being tortured by O'Brien into recognising obvious lies as truths. O'Brien explains in these scenes the differences between the totalitarian ideologies possible in the late twentieth century and those that went before, that whereas others believed they were terrorising in order to create better societies, Big Brother is based upon the premise that 'The object of persecution is persecution. The object of torture is torture. The object of power is power' (p. 276). Power is its own end, but it is only visible by inflicting suffering on others: 'Power is in tearing human minds to pieces and putting them together again in new shapes of your own choosing' (p. 279). Winston is forced to abandon his remaining