THE PORNOPHILIC AT THE CROSSROADS:
SEX, REALISM AND EXPERIMENT IN THE CONTEMPORARY ENGLISH NOVEL

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Abstract.

What if the novelist at the crossroads, that eponymous figure introduced by David Lodge in his 1971 essay, also doubled as a pornographer? The Pornographer at the Crossroads examines three controversial novels by three English novelists who did just that. With Crash (1973), Dead Babies (1975), and The Swimming-Pool Library (1988), writers J. G. Ballard, Martin Amis, and Alan Hollinghurst each set out to chart a new course that would cut a unique path through the metaphorical impasse between realism and experimentalism identified by Lodge and other critics of the postwar novel. It is these three writers who, during the 1970s and 1980s, began drawing inspiration from what Susan Sontag called “the pornographic imagination,” and consequently cultivated a shocking new sexual aesthetic in English fiction. They made their mark on the literary landscape with novels that appropriated the conventions of pornographic narrative, exploring in greater detail than anyone had done before, as well as introducing as a subject worthy of serious artistic attention, sex in its many forms. But this was no idle impulse, no mere ploy to sell more books or gain notoriety for its own sake. Rather, their fictional attempts to map the flows of erotic desire through a rapidly changing Britain also signaled both a break from the increasingly abstract formal experimentation of the 1960s and a divergence from established yet outdated modes of realist narrative still dominant in the postwar period. Their choice of subject matter and means of representing it, in other words, served the collective purpose of reinvigorating a moribund genre by breaking down the creative barriers which had been holding back innovation in the English novel since the end of modernism and the Second World War. My study argues, therefore, that Crash, Dead Babies, and The Swimming-Pool Library together represent a revolutionary experiment in novelistic content, and the
arrival of a very different kind of realism. This bold and explicit “pornographic realism,” as I call it, takes sex and pornography as its main focus while also using this particular focus to provide fresh perspective on and insight into relevant issues within contemporary culture, issues such as the dehumanizing effects of technology and mass media, the disintegration of traditional moral frameworks and social networks, shifting conceptions of personal autonomy and agency, and the formation of individual and collective identity. As I variously demonstrate in each of my chapters, it had been a direct engagement with both the lowbrow artistic subgenre of pornography and the subject of sex (especially sex defined as “deviant” or “transgressive”) that ultimately afforded Ballard, Amis, and Hollinghurst the opportunity to deviate from and expand the very boundaries and traditions of English fiction itself and, in turn, update the novel form to better reflect the complex and evolving realities of the contemporary period. The result is a collection of unabashedly pornographic novels which form the core of what I propose is a much ignored literary avant-garde, one whose daring and original achievements gave new direction to that mid-century novelist stalled at the crossroads and, in the end, made possible the novel in England as we know it today.
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Introduction.

At the Crossroads

In the early 1990s the late critic Auberon Waugh wrote an article on the subject of what he had come to regard as a troubling phenomenon in contemporary English fiction. The article, published in The Erotic Review, also served as an opportunity for Waugh to explain to an amused public the reason behind his recent and seemingly paradoxical decision to establish a literary prize in recognition of that same phenomenon. “For something like 15 years,” he told readers, “I had to review a novel a week in various publications, and bit by bit I noticed how practically every novelist had taken to including a sex scene which had nothing to do with the plot and added nothing to the enjoyment of the narrative.”1 Believing these depictions of sex to be responsible for diluting the quality of contemporary fiction, Waugh was thus inspired to create The Bad Sex Award. In doing so the notoriously cantankerous critic aimed “to draw attention to the crude, tasteless, often perfunctory use of redundant passages of sexual description in the modern novel, and to discourage it.”2 Today The Bad Sex Award is one of the most publicized if least coveted literary prizes in Britain. Twenty years since its inception it continues to honor the original intentions of its founder, annually recognizing predominantly English novelists for various perceived affronts to moral and aesthetic sensibility. One recent award ceremony, for example, saw Englishman Rowan Somerville subjected to a public shaming for his sexually explicit novel The Shape of Her, in which Somerville

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1 Auberon Waugh, The Erotic Review, qtd. in Arifa Akbar, “Bad Sex Please, We’re British: Can Fictive Sex Ever Have Artistic Merit?” The Independent (UK), 19 November 2010.

(among other purported sins) likens copulation to the mounting of a dead insect with a lepidopterist’s pin.¹

A gimmicky media spectacle at once “both prurient and prudish” though some have accused it of being,² The Bad Sex Award is also very much a product of its cultural moment. In fact the award should be viewed as a revealing comment on, as well as one of the inevitable symptoms of, a contemporary literary culture whose writers have had over half a century to indulge in the freedoms of writing openly about sex. The beginning of the modern era of sexual expression in English fiction is commonly traced back to the early 1960s, when a series of key censorship reforms, court rulings, and changes in cultural attitudes made it considerably easier for writers in England to represent sex in their work. With sex as a subject of fiction no longer off limits, these writers were granted access to a wealth of largely unexplored creative material for the very first time. For many, therefore, the shock and immediacy of sexual imagery came to represent a novelty and innovation in the novel form itself. But novelty and innovation can only be novel and innovative for so long, and over the course of the next fifty years, the English novel began to exhaust its sexual resources. So pervasive and so routine have sex and obscenity become that these elements are now increasingly considered to be something of a tired novelistic convention all their own. Novelist Alan Hollinghurst has spoken of the pressure faced by the contemporary writer to include sex in his fiction as an “obligation.”³ And as Guardian columnist Tim Adams has argued, such an ethos, coupled with the saturating “advance of sexual imagery and linguistic frankness into almost

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¹ The offending passage reads: “The wet friction of her, tight around him, the sight of her open, stretched around him, the cleft of her body, it tore a climax out of him with a final lunge. Like a lepidopterist mounting a tough-skinned insect with a too blunt pin he screwed himself into her,” Rowan Somerville, The Shape of Her (London: Orion, 2010).


every other area of public life,” has left “literary lust [with] nowhere left to go.” The result has been a British novel whose representation of sex has, over the past few decades, becomes less a bold artistic statement and more a crude joke. The Bad Sex Award, in other words, stands as an annual reminder of the fact that the power of sex in fiction has long since diminished.

But surely this should come as no surprise. That sex in the novel has lost its ability to shock, not to mention transform, the artistic and cultural consciousness of English readers seems hardly worth mentioning. Yet so inured have many of these readers become to the conventions of sexual representation in literature that few seem to be asking how and why sex even became part of the lifeblood of the English novel in the first place. For if we have entered a decline in fictional portrayals of sex and sexuality, when then did these things matter and what role – if any – did they play in shaping the contemporary novel? How exactly did we get here? Lost in the yearly round of obsequies over the impotence of sex in the English novel has been an impulse to catalogue and examine the significance of the writers and writing which gave birth to our modern era of literary frankness.

The present study attempts to correct this critical oversight, attributing as it does the emergence of the current period of graphic representations of sex in the English novel to the early work of three novelists in particular: J. G. Ballard (Crash), Martin Amis (Dead Babies), and Alan Hollinghurst (The Swimming-Pool Library). It is these three writers who, during the 1970s and 1980s, began drawing inspiration from what Susan Sontag called “the pornographic imagination,” and consequently cultivated a shocking new sexual aesthetic in English fiction. They made their mark on the literary landscape, that is, with novels that appropriated the conventions of pornographic narrative, exploring in greater detail than anyone had done before, as well as introducing as a subject worthy of serious artistic

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attention, sex in its many forms. But this was no idle impulse, no mere ploy to sell more books or gain notoriety for its own sake. Rather, their fictional attempts to map the flows of erotic desire through a rapidly changing Britain also signaled both a break from the increasingly abstract formal experimentation of the 1960s and a divergence from established yet outdated modes of realist narrative still dominant in the postwar period. Their controversial choice of subject matter and their means of representing it, in other words, served the collective purpose of reinvigorating a dying genre by breaking down the creative barriers which had been holding back innovation in the English novel since the end of modernism and the Second World War. My study argues, therefore, that Crash, Dead Babies, and The Swimming-Pool Library together represent a revolutionary experiment in novelistic content, and the arrival of a very different kind of realism—what I will refer to throughout as “pornographic realism.” For, as I variously demonstrate in the following chapters, it had been a direct and explicit engagement with both the lowbrow artistic subgenre of pornography and the subject of sex (especially sex defined as “deviant” or “transgressive”) that ultimately afforded Ballard, Amis, and Hollinghurst the opportunity to deviate from and expand the very boundaries and traditions of English fiction itself and, in turn, update the novel form to better reflect the complex and evolving realities of the contemporary period. The result is a collection of unabashedly pornographic novels which form the core of what I propose is a much ignored literary avant-garde, one whose daring and original achievements made possible the novel in England as we know it today.

But before this introduction and the subsequent chapters of this dissertation can begin to flesh out the details of these achievements, a deeper understanding of the social and literary historical conditions which gave rise to and necessitated them is essential.
In the years following the Second World War, an increasingly despairing chorus of critical voices had begun predicting the eminent demise of the English novel. Rose Macaulay, writing on the subject of the future of fiction in 1946, characterized the postwar literary milieu as one with very little of promise “to be seen upon the horizon,” a milieu in which the full length novel in particular teetered upon the brink of a future that could witness “the complete depreciation of [the form itself].” Some commentators went further still, concluding that the end had already arrived and that the novel form had, as Frederick R. Karl put it, entered into a precipitous “decline from which rescue [was] impossible.” Whatever the severity of the forecast, the common consensus appeared to be that the novel in England had been rendered (or was at least nearing the point of becoming) obsolete, moribund – a mode of artistic expression with nothing left to say, nowhere left to go.

Hyperbolic and alarmist though these dire assessments may seem now, there were indeed a number of compelling reasons why such pessimism had become the reigning attitude among critics and artists of the period. The shadow newly cast by modernism, for example, provided one such source of anxiety. British modernism had all but ended with the deaths of Joyce and Woolf in 1941, but the monumental legacy it would leave behind proved to be less an inspiration than a burden to a succeeding generation of English writers. Weighing most heavily upon these reluctant inheritors was the question of what to do next with a literary genre that had seemingly been pushed to its limits by the much vaunted formal innovations of the modernist avant-garde. Author Cyril Connolly, taking his own stab at the vogue for hyperbole, summed up the mood of his generation in 1944 when he asserted that “[modernism had] finished off the novel,” and that all would have to be

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"reinvented from the beginning." Such anxiety about the influence of past novelistic achievement was coupled with a broader uncertainty about the present and the future, namely, about what role if any the novel would or should play in a postwar world. To quote Macaulay again, life during and after World War II had "disintegrated, broken into odd, unshapely bits, one not fitting into another; discontinuity has been the mood of our brittle time." The ensuing years thus saw English writers sifting through these "fragments, impressions, brief glimpses," and struggling to find forms of novelistic representation adequate enough to reflect the new material and psychological realities of an English society, not only recovering from and reshaped by the traumas of a devastating war but also undergoing extensive change on both a national and international scale and in all areas of public and private life. How best to rescue the novel from irrelevance in the face of this new dispensation remained unclear, however, and what followed in the decades to come was a divisive literary debate that would ultimately create more of an impasse than it would a way forward.

One particularly useful discussion of the nature of this impasse encountered by the novel in the years following the Second World War and leading up to the late 1960s was provided by novelist and critic David Lodge in his seminal 1971 essay "The Novelist at the Crossroads." With his now famous image of the English writer pausing at mid-century at an intersection of diverging literary styles Lodge both dramatized and entered into the then ongoing debate among his contemporaries over where the postwar novel in England was, or at least should have been, headed. Throughout the essay he situates his own views on the subject within the context of the two competing approaches to the novel genre that had come to dominate the postwar period: realism and experimentalism.

9 Cyril Connolly, The Unquiet Grave, qtd. in Bradbury, Bloomsbury, 99.
11 Ibid., 73.
Realism, according to Lodge, is a delicately balanced synthesis of empirical and fictional modes of artistic representation, a compromise of sorts between “the world of discrete facts (history) and the patterned, economized world of art and imagination (allegory and romance).”12 Such a mode, he claims, is and has always been the traditional mode of the English novel – the “main road,” if you will, originating in the 18th century, expanding during the Victorian and Edwardian periods, briefly losing direction in the modernist period, and then finding its way back on course as the dominant mode after World War II. That realism reemerged at all after the War was due in no small part to the work of writers who had come to prominence in the 1950s, writers such as Kingsley Amis, C. P. Snow, and William Cooper. These writers believed that a return to that “main road” of realist convention provided the only suitable means of documenting life in postwar Britain, of giving artistic order and shape to the ensuing chaos of social and cultural upheaval, and thus served as the only viable pathway toward salvaging the English novel. The rise of the working class, the dismantling of the British Empire, the implementation by the Labour Party of a host of sweeping social reforms, and shifting attitudes toward sex and gender roles – these monumental changes taking place within British society required, so the realists argued, a movement back toward the mimetic and humanistic13 traditions of a literary form that honored fidelity of representation of reigning social realities, as well as a committed and attentive social consciousness.14 The postwar realists, in other words,


13 Lodge, as many other postwar critics and novelists have done, associates the default mode of the English novel with traditional realism and traditional realism with the politics and philosophies of liberal humanism, 108. As Malcolm Bradbury notes, the realist “novel as a moral and humanistic form […] has always had great meaning in the British tradition of writing,” Bloomsbury, 112.

14 As Richard Bradford writes, “After the war […], social change was so rapid and varied that the logical response, for the novelist, seemed to be to attempt to record it, to incorporate its particulars and incidentals as guilelessly as possible; mimesis rather than experiment became the preferred technique,” The Novel Now: Contemporary British Fiction (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 11.
decided to adapt to their historical moment the standards of artistic representation established and refined, not by Woolf or Joyce, but by earlier writers, particularly 19th century realist novelists of The Great Tradition such as George Eliot and Charles Dickens.\textsuperscript{15} Thus, just as their predecessors had done, these latter day practitioners of realism created rounded, unified, and believable characters rooted within identifiable and faithfully rendered social contexts, and related the stories of these characters through linear, chronological narratives and language “that refused to sacrifice either lucidity or reason.”\textsuperscript{16} What is more, like their predecessors, the postwar realists produced works that operated within and articulated recognizable moral frameworks, and upheld essential English social and artistic values.\textsuperscript{17} In turn, they rejected the more recent work of a “spent” modernism that, as Cooper put it, had been “too in-ward looking, too obsessed with subjectivity and the personal vision, and far too hung up on reducing the novel to a linguistic construct that made little or no reference to an external world.”\textsuperscript{18} More than just a shift in aesthetic preferences, then, postwar realism represented an ideology whose adherents believed that the times had made it a moral, political, and artistic responsibility to get back to writing, in the

\textsuperscript{15} Malcolm Bradbury points out that the reaction against modernist experiment in the postwar period had caused writers to turn “to the tradition of the British novel of the past, ... finding, beyond and behind ... Woolf and Joyce, Wells and Bennett, Dickens and George Eliot, Jane Austen and Henry Fielding,” \textit{Bloomsbury}, 100. Bradbury further claims that many of the realists of the 1950s had in fact been influenced by, and seen themselves as carrying on, the grand tradition of English realism identified by F. R. Leavis in his 1948 book \textit{The Great Tradition}, in which Leavis “argued that there was a fundamental line of evolution running through the English novel from Jane Austen, Charles Dickens, George Eliot, Conrad and D.H. Lawrence which was essentially social and moral in character, a tradition of adult moral seriousness which had been compromised by [the] aesthetic trivialities [of modernism],” 104. On this subject see also Rubin Rabinowitz, \textit{The Reaction Against Experiment in the English Novel 1950-1960}, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967).


\textsuperscript{17} Keulks, \textit{Father and Son}, 27. On reverting to these values after the war, Bradbury notes that “the traditional preoccupations of British fiction, with class and morality, reasserted themselves, in part as a mode of documentation in a changing Britain, in part as a return to native and provincial artistic sources,” \textit{Bloomsbury}, 99.

\textsuperscript{18} Qtd. in Andrzej Gasiorek, \textit{Post-War British Fiction: Realism and After} (London: Edward Arnold, 1995), 3.
words of Kingsley Amis, “believable stories about understandable characters in a reasonably straightforward style: no tricks, no experimental foolery.”

Not everyone, however, shared in this sentiment. Challenging postwar realism in the 1960s was an opposing mode of novelistic practice whose emphasis on formal and stylistic innovation suggested that its proponents had recognized in modernism an artistic project worth extending and, moreover, had been influenced by contemporary developments in the novel going on elsewhere, as in France with the nouveau roman. This new practice, generally falling under the title of experimentalism, paved the way for what is characterized in Lodge’s essay as a significant branching off from the main thoroughfare of realism, an alternate direction for the postwar English novelist to follow. Experimentalist novels, according to Lodge, were designed to “play tricks on their readers, expose their fictive machinery, dally in aesthetic paradoxes, in order to shed the restricting conventions of realism ... [and expose] the artificiality of contemporary realistic illusion.” Indeed, it is the aesthetic and ideological assumptions made by postwar realism, the attempt to capture 20th century reality in the creaking artifice of a 19th century form that had prompted a backlash from those dissatisfied with the resurgence of the realist novel in England. B. S. Johnson, a vocal supporter of experimentalism, argued that the neat, linear logic of realist narrative and its propensity toward depicting the illusion of stability and order were no longer useful. In the 19th century, he writes,

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19 Kingsley Amis qtd. in Gasiorek, 3.

20 Lodge actually recognizes three distinct alternatives to the realist novel that had come to prominence by the end of the 1960s – the non-fiction novel, the fabulation, and the problematic novel. However, throughout his essay, Lodge seems subtly to collapse the distinction between these three forms, identifying them all as somehow lacking the purity of traditional realist fiction and falling instead in the category of “experiment.”

21 Lodge, 105.

22 B. S. Johnson referred derisively in 1973 to the postwar realist novel as a “neo-Dickensian novel,” complaining that this type of novel “not only receives great praise, review space and sales but also acts as a qualification to elevate its authors to chairs at universities,” “Introduction to Aren’t You Rather Young to be Writing Your Memoirs?” in The Novel Today, ed. Malcolm Bradbury (Glasgow: Fontana, 1977), 154.
“it was possible to believe in pattern and eternity, but today what characterizes our reality is the probability that chaos is the most likely explanation” and that, along with chaos, the process of “change [is] all there is.” As a result, it was now the job of novelists to “evolve (by inventing, borrowing, stealing or cobbling from other media) forms which will more or less satisfactorily contain an ever-changing reality, their own reality and not Dickens’ reality.” Literature, in other words, had to readapt itself in order to keep up with the truths and experiences of the unfolding postmodern present without, in the words of experimentalist writer Christine Brooke-Rose, “simply pouring into old forms a reality that has completely changed.” Consequently, the writers of experimental novels experimented freely with modes of expression and representation in ways that violated the humanistic and mimetic standards of realist tradition. Their work, in varying degrees, played with metafictional techniques and reinvented traditional novel forms, exploding dominant realist conventions of plot, character, and narrative structure in order to better reflect the unstable nature of language and of meaning, of fiction and of reality in the postmodern world – to create, that is, constantly evolving forms to suit a constantly evolving subject. Like the realists, who believed any continuance of modernism would spell the end of the English novel, so the experimentalists believed that any attempt to return to realism would mean embracing a stagnant and obsolete literary style that had already begun to degrade the relevance of the novel in England as an artistic and cultural form. This trend toward radical formal experimentation, therefore, represented a new and formidable path that, to return to Lodge’s guiding metaphor, had bisected the central highway of realism, creating the very

23 Ibid., 156.
24 Ibid.
crossroads at which the modern novelist had found himself at the beginning of the 1970s.

And yet, for many novelists of the 1970s this crossroads appeared to be more like a creative roadblock; neither the main road of postwar realism nor the detours of formal experimentation seemed at all to be satisfactory directions in which to steer the novel. After all, both 1950s realism and 1960s experimentalism were already, by the 1970s, well-trodden paths that, as their travelers had increasingly come to discover, were not without dead-ends. The idea, for instance, that postwar realism was an antiquated artistic form, resurrected from the pre-modernist era and poorly equipped to convey the very different experience of English life in the second half of the 20th century, was one that persisted even among those who did not identify as formal experimentalists. The problem was not so much with the overall concept of realism as it was with the specific kind of realism that had come to be associated with the English novel. That is, the liberal humanism, traditional narrative conventions, and prescribed subject matter that had come to dominate postwar English fiction had in fact constituted only one very narrowly defined form of realism. According to Andrzej Gasiorek, realism is supposed to be a far more dynamic and multifarious entity; it is essentially “context-dependent, different from period to period” and “cannot be aligned with any particular political position or any given set of fictional techniques.”26 Like the reality it is meant to depict, in other words, the realist novel in general is expansive, mutable, heterogeneous, and historically and culturally contingent. It should, as Gasiorek maintains, “be seen as a capacious form whose general commitment to the representation of reality sanctions a diversity of narrative modes. It is not a monolithic entity.”27 Postwar English realism, however, had in many ways become a

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26 Gasiorek, 191.
27 Ibid., 18.
monolithic entity, an ossified form, its followers eschewing any diversity of narrative modes, any innovation or change. David Lodge, in fact, tellingly compares the English realist novel in “The Novelist at the Crossroads” to “the metrical and stanzaic form in verse,” defending the “elaborate code that governs the composition of realistic fiction” and even proposing that the English literary mind is naturally “resistant to non-realistic literary modes to an extent that might be described as prejudice.”

Heavily influenced by the realist techniques of the 19th century and predisposed to a particular set of social, artistic, and political concerns and values, therefore, this dominant brand of realism seemed merely to offer the contemporary writer in England an antiquated and inflexible model of novelistic representation.

Similarly, the experimentalist project was not without its limitations. The radical formal innovations of 1960s experimentalists like B. S. Johnson and Christine Brooke-Rose, for instance, were increasingly seen as “rarefied versions of the earlier shock tactics [of modernism],” and their aesthetic of experimentation as “the fag-end of a dying tradition.”

The modernist ethos of making it new had itself begun to turn stale. To quote Rita Felski, “[T]heorists who proclaim the subversive power of formal experimentation, fail to consider that the breaking of conventions itself becomes conventional, and the shock effect of any challenge to existing structures of representation is necessarily of limited duration.” Such weariness of mood and dissatisfaction with the avant-garde became pervasive in the 1970s, especially among younger writers looking to leave a unique mark of their own upon the literary landscape. As one such writer, Ian McEwan, explained in an interview in 1978, “The formal experimentation of the late sixties and early seventies came to nothing largely because the stuff was inaccessible and too

29 Gasiorek, 19.
30 Qtd. in Gasiorek, 181.
often unrewarding – no pleasure in the text. And there can surely be no more mileage to be had from demonstrating yet again through self-enclosed ‘fictions’ that reality is words and words are lies.” But this did not mean that McEwan favored dispensing with experimentation altogether, resorting instead to the restrictive conventions of traditional realism as an acceptable alternative. Rather, for McEwan, a different sort of experimental spirit needed to be enlisted in the pursuit of a new, more relevant and diverse kind of realism – and, by extension, a new, more relevant and diverse kind of English novel. “Experimentation in its broadest and most viable sense,” McEwan argued, “should have less to do with formal factors like busting up syntax and scrambling your page order, and more to do with content – the representation of states of mind and the society that forms them.” By experimenting with novelistic content and pushing the conventional boundaries of realistic narrative, he seems to suggest, the contemporary novelist could begin to move beyond the aesthetic and ideological impasse of the postwar era. A fresh approach to and a revised conception of both realism and experimentalism, in other words, offered the key to resolving the mid-century crisis of representation threatening the English novel form.

One possible means of achieving this resolution, however, had already come into existence more than a decade earlier. Running parallel to the war of attrition going on between the realists and the experimentalists was the emergence in the 1950s and 1960s of a progressively more permissive society in Britain, one of the many legacies of which had been the passing of The Obscene Publications Act of 1959. The OPA was a piece of legislation that made legal the publication of obscene and sexually explicit literature on the condition of its artistic merit. More importantly, the Act served as the basis for a 1960 court case in which a London magistrate upheld the right of

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31 Qtd. in Gasiorek, 180.
32 Qtd. in Gasiorek, 180.
Penguin Books to publish for the first time in Britain an unexpurgated version of the D. H. Lawrence novel *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* (1928). Known as the Chatterley decision, the landmark ruling ostensibly widened the possibilities for what English novelists could say about sex and how they could say it. In fact, the ensuing decade would prove a propitious moment, not only for sex in the novel, but also for sex in general. Following these changes to long-standing censorship laws came numerous changes to many other aspects of sexual life in Britain during the 1960s. For example, Parliament further enacted laws that partially decriminalized abortion and homosexuality. More liberal social policies were allowing for birth control to be made more widely and more easily available. Fashion trends were lifting the average hemline higher and higher each season. And a new wave of feminist ideologies was fostering an ever growing sense of equality between the sexes and independence among women. Such cultural upheaval signaled the arrival of what would inevitably become known as the Sexual Revolution, and with it more permissive attitudes, a weakening of established moral codes, and the rise of sexual identity politics. What it also gave rise to was an atmosphere in which English writers could feel more comfortable turning their attention to once taboo, even once illegal topics, not only because they had been granted the right to do so, but because addressing sex in the open and in all its forms clearly seemed more necessary than ever before. In the lifting of literary censorship, in other words, was a unique opportunity to experiment with and bring up to date the novel’s content. A wealth of undiscovered creative material had been made newly available to the British literary imagination, material that had the potential to provide the shock and novelty lacking in much formal experimentation, as well as the potential to expand the too narrow thematic scope of traditional realist narrative.

Among the most prominent of the first wave of writers to engage this material were Anthony Burgess, John Fowles, and Kingsley Amis. Daring as these
novelists may have seemed then, however, their efforts in hindsight mark only a tentative beginning, and suggest an early hesitance to make full use of the new freedoms placed at their disposal. Amis, for instance, that acolyte of traditional realism and author of such comic novels as *Lucky Jim* (1954), *Take a Girl Like You* (1960), and *One Fat Englishman* (1963), had actually earned himself a reputation among eminent critics of the day for being, as F. R. Leavis once called him, “a pornographer.” His protagonists, after all, often think of little else than satisfying their lustful appetites. And yet charges of pornography were as unfair as they were inaccurate. Preoccupied with the subject of sex though they may be, the novels of Kingsley Amis (according to later critics and anyone else paying close enough attention) reveal instead an author ironically possessed of inhibitions about depicting the sexual act itself—a result, no doubt, of Amis’s aesthetic conservatism as a writer staunchly observant of realist orthodoxy. Anthony Burgess, on the other hand, observed no such constraints. Burgess has the young narrator of his 1962 novel *A Clockwork Orange* relish in recounting the details of his disturbing sexual activities. These details are, nevertheless, not what one might expect, conveyed as they are in a fictional argot used by Alex the narrator and his gang of *droogs* as they wreak havoc upon the streets of a future London. Thus, when Alex brings home two ten year old *ptitsas* (girls) and rapes them, the alien language he uses to narrate the scene, while evocative, still manages to distance and shield the reader from the exact nature of the events being described. As for John Fowles, his fiction of the 1960s leaves

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34 “Dr Leavis was reported to have described his new colleague [Amis, at Cambridge] as ‘a pornographer’, a failure in close reading if nothing else, for Amis’s novels, though much concerned with sex, are notable for their reticence about the sexual act,” Ibid.

35 The passage reads: “Those two were unplattied and smeking fit to crack in no time at all […] I leapt on these two young ptitsas. This time they thought nothing fun and stopped creeching with high mirth, and had to submit to the strange and weird desires of Alexander the Large which, what with the Ninth and the hypo jab, were choosensny and zammehchat and very demanding, O my brothers,” Anthony Burgess, *A Clockwork Orange* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1986), 50–1. Even the narrator Alex is hesitant about going into too much detail: “What was actually done that afternoon there is no need to describe, brothers, as you may easily guess all,” 50.
somewhat less to the imagination. His ambitious 1966 metafictional novel The Magus, for example, has been characterized as “a daring literary thriller, rich with eroticism.” But the first edition of this novel would turn out to be far less explicit than the revised and expanded version published eleven years later. In the foreword to his 1977 update of The Magus, Fowles – a formally adventurous novelist – cops to having been somewhat less so with content, going so far as to attribute the restrained sex scenes of the earlier edition to his own “failure of nerve.”

Taken together, the work of Fowles, Burgess, and Amis demonstrates that, in the decade after the Chatterley decision, and in the midst of sexual revolution, English novelists as a whole remained relatively cautious about (perhaps even indifferent to) exploring the creative possibilities offered by more graphic and more realistic representations of sex, and were consequently slow in adapting the novel to reflect the new social and sexual realities of a much changed Britain.

Why this was so could be interpreted in any number of ways. The most probable explanation, however, is that the conflicting priorities at the center of the ongoing debate between realism and experimentalism were largely overshadowing and trivializing the teeming, untapped potential of sex as a fictional subject. As we have seen, for instance, experimental writers of the 60s were far more interested in innovating the novel through experimentation with form than with content. And when sex did enter into the narratives of more formally adventurous writers such as B. S. Johnson or even Anthony Burgess and John Fowles, their portrayals turned out to be marginal or too abstract and alienating, the transgressive content undermined by

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37 Sex crops up occasionally in Johnson’s work. In one particular scene in Christie Malry’s Own Double-Entry (1973), for instance, the narrator elliptically describes a farcical sexual encounter between the novel’s protagonist and his girlfriend. On recounting the specific details of this scene, which involves suggestive dancing and a vacuum cleaner, the narrator demurs, leaving it up to his audience to fill in the blanks: “Now there is something on which the reader may exercise his imagination!” Christie Malry’s Own Double-Entry (New York: New Directions, 1985), 58.
metafictional gambits, narrative trickery, and purposeful linguistic inscrutability – “no pleasure in the text” as McEwan had put it. For others, particularly realists like Kingsley Amis, the dearth of graphic sexual content was the result of a strict observance of certain high literary standards informed by realist dogma. Proponents and practitioners of the dominant realist style of novel writing, that is, often steered clear of explicitly portraying sex in their work due to the belief that the serious English novel should remain uncontaminated by any form of genre fiction; any such open and sustained portrayal of sexual activity would thus constitute a stepping down to the lowbrow art form of pornography. David Lodge, for example, dismissed pornography in “The Novelist at the Crossroads” as a “debased form” meant only for “the arousal and gratification of very basic fictional appetites,” where “traditional literary values are not expected to obtain.”38 Genre fiction such as pornography, in other words, stood for extremes and distortions of behavior and imagination which were incommensurate with the realist ethos and, by extension, the traditions of the English novel.

This ethos and these traditions, as well as the stilted formal innovations of much experimentalist writing, however, were eventually singled out by American critic Susan Sontag in her essay “The Pornographic Imagination” (1967) as severe impediments to the progress and development of the English novel. Sontag begins in her essay by discussing the necessity of uprooting the “tenacious cliches” of an establishment of critics and writers who “continue to identify with prose literature itself the particular literary conventions of ‘realism’ (what might be crudely associated with the major tradition of the nineteenth century novel).”39 This dominance of realism, responsible in Sontag’s estimation for many an artistic sin, had


been particularly egregious in promoting the long-standing belief that "pornography and literature are antithetical." Evidence of this dismissive critical and artistic culture in postwar England, she argues, had made it so that any works dealing with graphic representations of sex would be "unassimilable for English [...] readers – except as 'mere' pornography, inexplicably fancy trash." But for Sontag pornography possessed immense literary value, not least for its ability to delineate aspects of the human condition unaccounted for in much realist or experimentalist writing. She claims, for instance, that "equally valid as a subject of prose narrative are the extreme states of human feeling and consciousness, those so peremptory that they exclude the mundane flux of feelings and are only contingently linked with concrete persons," all of which falls, not coincidentally, within the representational domain of the pornographic. Pointing to the literary traditions in France of intrepid writers and critics taking seriously the artistic and philosophical potential of pornographic fiction, then, Sontag implies that the future of the novel in English itself lies, not so much in innovating form and structure, or remaining obligated to an obsolete set of realist values, but in expanding accepted definitions of reality and widening the boundaries of novelistic representation to include truths that only the artist as pornographer, dealing in heightened sexual and sometimes even violent

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40 Ibid., 44.
41 Ibid.
42 Ibid., 42.
43 Holding up as recent examples of French pornographic novels that deserve the designation of literature, Sontag includes Pierre Louys’ *Trois Filles de leur Mère*, George Bataille’s *Histoire de l’Oeil* and *Madame Edwarda*, and the pseudonymous *Story of O* and *The Image*, 36. Sontag argues that such novels are easily accommodated by the French literary canon because of the long, rich tradition of pornographic literature in France, a tradition largely established by Sade and maintained by the 19th and 20th century critics whose continual recognition of "the importance and influence" of Sade has itself had a profound influence "upon educated literary taste and upon the actual direction of serious fiction in France," 50. Sontag laments the absence in English and American literature of any such tradition or supporting critical apparatus, dismissing early pornographic works such as the Early of Rochester’s *Sodom* and Cleland’s *Fanny Hill* as "trash" and noting the fact that the "quality and theoretical density of the French interest in Sade remains virtually incomprehensible to English and American literary intellectuals, for whom Sade is perhaps an exemplary figure in the history of psychopathology, both individual and social, but inconceivable as someone to be taken seriously as a ‘thinker,’” 50. Not coincidentally, we will see in this study how one novelist in particular, Martin Amis, grounds his novel *Dead Babies* in and places it in conversation with traditions of Sadean pornographic narrative.
imagery, can access." For, according to Sontag, the novelist that elevates the lowbrow genre of pornographic narrative to the sanctified space of the novel is an artist that transcends boundaries and ranges over "a wider scale of experience," "a freelance explorer of spiritual dangers ... [and] the dialectic of outrage" that takes "up positions on the frontiers of consciousness [...] and [reports] back what’s there." High-flown though her rhetoric might have been, Sontag wanted merely to emphasize that, with censorship scaled back and the Sexual Revolution in full swing, the pornographic represented a unique opportunity for innovation that had, up until the late 1960s at least, remained frustratingly neglected. Thus, Sontag urged English and American writers to take aim against "the bankruptcy of taste and [...] fundamental dishonesty of method" of much contemporary fiction. And she challenged them to do so by exploring, with confidence and without fear, the extreme, wide-ranging realities and experiences of contemporary culture, not through postwar realism’s limited 19th century worldview or from experimentalism’s fractured perspectives, but through the transgressive artistic possibilities that come with embracing "the pornographic imagination."

Among the most interesting and most original novelists to take up Sontag’s challenge were J. G. Ballard, Martin Amis, and Alan Hollinghurst in the novels Crash (1973), Dead Babies (1975), and The Swimming-Pool Library (1988), respectively. These novels, as the following chapters demonstrate, each in their own way attempted to realize the unrealized potential of the pornographic imagination and, in so doing, set a new course for the novel

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44 Truths “about sensibility, about sex, about individual personality, about despair, about limits,” Ibid., 70-1.

45 The quote is from William James as quoted by Sontag in “The Pornographic Imagination.” Sontag writes, “Pornography, considered as an artistic or art-producing form of human imagination, is an expression of what William James called ‘morbid-mindedness.’ But James was surely right when he gave as part of the definition of morbid-mindedness that it ranged over a ‘wider scale of experience’ than healthy-mindedness,” 71.

46 Ibid., 45

47 Ibid., 43.
form in England. In essence, I want to identify and provide a context for Ballard, Amis, and Hollinghurst as representatives of a groundbreaking and deeply influential if still critically underappreciated vanguard of novelists that emerged in the 1970s and 1980s.\footnote{This is not to say that, individually, these novelists or these novels have failed to garner their fair share of critical attention. Nor is it to say that the critical literature lacks insightful analysis of the portrayal of sexual themes in \textit{Crash}, \textit{Dead Babies}, and \textit{The Swimming-Pool Library}. However, I have noticed that critics tend to treat the pornographic elements of these three novels in isolation and not as part of what I contend is a much larger and significant development in the English novel.} For them, the promise of innovation was not to be found in “busting up syntax or scrambling page order.” Instead, it was to be found in the very wealth of creative material made available to the British writer in 1959 by the Obscene Publications Act, material that had been only minimally developed over the ensuing decade. These novelists, in other words, indulged their pornographic imaginations like no novelists before them, treating the low art form of pornography as an essential feature of the English novel in order to tell certain stories about the contemporary period that could not otherwise be so easily told through reigning fictional models. Ballard, Amis, and Hollinghurst essentially redrew the thematic and substantive boundaries of the novel form in England by evolving a controversial yet bold literary aesthetic, one constructed from explicit depictions of various sexual acts and behaviors (many of them considered extreme or deviant), as well as from other such conventions of pornographic narrative. \textit{Crash}, \textit{Dead Babies}, and \textit{The Swimming-Pool Library} will thus be read as works of fiction that are alternately arousing and upsetting, stimulating and unnerving, their experimentations in content as shocking and as consciousness-altering as the most formally innovative of high modernist novels, and their stark lucidity, clarity of vision, and faithfulness of detail matching and exceeding the most probing and the most realistic of realist novels. For, these three works do not reject the concepts of realism and experiment altogether. Rather, they redefine them, employing an experimental spirit in approaching content rather than form and, in turn,
updating and extending the realist project to include elements of social and psychological reality not previously considered suitable subjects of novelistic inquiry – ostensibly, doing what Sontag refers to as ranging over “a wider scale of [human] experience.” The result is what I call throughout this study a “pornographic realism” that takes sex and pornography as its main subjects while also using these subjects to provide fresh perspective on and insight into the broader preoccupations of contemporary culture, preoccupations with – among other issues – the dehumanizing effects of technology and mass media, the disintegration of traditional moral frameworks and social networks, shifting conceptions of personal autonomy and agency, and the formation of individual and collective identity. As Gasiorek notes, citing Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, “the novel is a heterogeneous and mutable genre, which undermines its earlier forms in an ongoing search for new ways of engaging with a historically changing social reality.”

In Crash, Dead Babies, and The Swimming-Pool Library, my three chosen novelists will be credited for achieving just that, undermining and revising as they do earlier forms of realism and experimentation by installing within the space of the English novel an unabashedly pornographic sensibility (a pornographic imagination) uniquely attuned to the changed and changing realities of late 20th century England. Just as Bakhtin argues in Rabelais and His World that low cultural forms have always been an integral part of the novel’s development since its formation, and just as he argues that its continual

49 Gasiorek, 8. Gasiorek seems here to be paraphrasing Bakhtin in his essay “Epic and Novel”: “[The novel is] plasticity itself. It is a genre that is ever questing, ever examining itself and subjecting its established forms to review. Such, indeed is the only possibility open to a genre that structures itself in a zone of contact with developing reality,” Mikhail Bakhtin, “Epic and Novel,” The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1981), 39.

50 If postwar forms of realism or experimentalism really were so intent on corresponding with the details of contemporary reality, as well as the genuine experience of life in late 20th century England, then why had their practitioners overlooked sex? Surely, a detailed and explicit account of sexuality seemed one significant and innovative way of achieving these ends? After all, how can one truly claim to represent human “reality,” as my chosen novelists seem to ask, without giving full expression to one of the most common yet complex of human experiences? Ballard, Amis, and Hollinghurst, therefore, make sex the basis of both their novelistic experimentations and their reconsiderations of what constitutes reality and, by extension, realist narrative.
process of renewal relies on its ability to squeeze “out some genres and [incorporate] others into its own peculiar structure,” so the present study will demonstrate that these three novelists’ individual choices to incorporate the subgeneric conventions of pornography into the narrative structures of their respective novels represent a collective effort to renew, as well as to invest with a reinvigorated purpose and relevance, the very form of the English novel itself.

In the chapters that follow, then, I will trace the genesis and influence of the pornographic imagination in contemporary English fiction from Sontag’s essay to Ballard’s Crash, from Ballard’s Crash to Amis’s Dead Babies, and from the ensuing decade of sexual frankness in the novel made possible by Ballard and Amis to Hollinghurst’s The Swimming-Pool Library. Specifically, in Chapter 1 I will identify the controversial publication in 1973 of Crash as a watershed moment in the history of English literature. The novel, in part inspired by the work of Susan Sontag, will be viewed as having been the product of both J. G. Ballard’s dissatisfaction with traditional realism and his disillusionment with formal experimentation. As I will contend, Crash transgresses accepted limits of novelistic expression by drawing on the conventions of the pornographic in order to experiment with and explore, in a clinically methodical manner and in starkly realistic detail, the repressed and disturbing psychological drives and erotic desires underpinning contemporary English culture. In particular, the narrative focuses on a cast of characters who seek, through the sexual possibilities unleashed by the trauma of the automobile accident, and in the awakening sensations of violence and disfigurement it visits upon their minds and bodies, deliverance from a postmodern world in which human feeling and emotion have become progressively deadened by the impersonal, dehumanizing forces of science and technology, mass media, consumerism, and other such

supporting structures of late capitalist society. For these characters, therefore, the car crash becomes the gateway to a new sexuality, a site of sexual obsession and fetishism that represents a means of accessing a more authentic and heightened experience of reality. And as I will argue, in depicting the deviant impulses and behaviors that are prompted by these crashes, Ballard also expands the thematic and substantive boundaries of the novel form, creating for himself in Crash an unrestricted fictional space in which to contain and engage with the volatile erotic energies and complex psychopathologies informing postmodernity. Thus, as I will demonstrate in this chapter, just as the automobile disaster serves as a vehicle for changing the banal, enervating postmodern existence of Ballard’s characters, so the jarring, unnervingly explicit imagery and subject matter of the novel, and so Crash itself, served as a vehicle for radically changing what readers, writers, and critics of the period had come to expect of the English novel and its seemingly diminished capacity to function as an innovative mode of artistic representation.

One writer whose expectations Crash’s pornographic unsettling of realist and experimentalist paradigms had altered, for example, was Martin Amis. In Chapter 2, therefore, I begin by arguing that Ballard’s seminal text was a direct influence on the 1975 novel Dead Babies, facilitating the younger novelist’s rebellion against the obsolete yet still dominant standards of postwar realist fiction represented by Amis’s father Kingsley. In effect, Dead Babies builds on Ballard’s innovative work with pornography, but ultimately adapts it, even drawing on traditions of pornographic narrative established by the Marquis de Sade, to suit its author’s own thematic preoccupations. For, Amis locates in pornography, particularly Sadeian pornography, an apt medium through which to dramatize and satirize the permissive society of the 1960s and 1970s, graphically portraying as his novel does sex and violence among a group of modern English libertines during
a weekend of debauchery at a Hertfordshire country house. I will argue that, through these characters and their ordeals, *Dead Babies* works through broader cultural anxieties about what happens when the moral certainties and established social networks of an older order are superceded by the chaos and uncertainty of revolution, in this case sexual revolution. Indeed, a child of the Sexual Revolution like the characters of his novel, Amis will be viewed in this chapter as tracing out to their logical extremes liberal philosophies of sexual and social freedom fashionable during the period, as well as documenting the subsequent role these revolutionary philosophies played in shaping a young, unabashedly hedonistic and amoral generation whose experiences of reality turn out to be best expressed through the language, imagery, and formal structures of pornography. What is more, in experimenting with and cultivating this kind of pornographic realism, we will see that Amis also carries forth a different revolution, a revolution in novelistic content and the pornographic imagination called for by Sontag and begun by Ballard, and one that would further encourage a generation of English writers like Amis to breathe new life and relevance into the novel form.

The legacy and influence of the likes of Ballard and Amis on the next two decades of novel writing would also have a profound impact on novelist Alan Hollinghurst. In fact, Hollinghurst once indicated in an interview conducted during the 1990s that the “quite strikingly huge burgeoning of sex as a fictional subject in the last twenty years” had made possible his own groundbreaking work writing about themes of gay male identity and sexuality, the most controversial and influential of which being his 1988 debut novel *The Swimming-Pool Library*. In Chapter 3, therefore, I argue that in this novel Hollinghurst makes strategic use of gay pornography and conventions of realist narrative to boldly thrust homosexuality into a tradition of literary fiction where before it had been forced to conceal itself, creating what is

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52 Galligan, Interview with Hollinghurst, 10.
essentially the very first openly and exclusively gay space in British literature. On one level, I contend, Hollinghurst uses physical descriptions of both sex and urban space to dramatize the thriving and threatened underground gay scene in London during the summer of 1983. But by claiming the traditional form of the English realist novel as the venue for staging this provocative content, Hollinghurst also echoes the process by which the very characters he is depicting appropriate certain physical spaces to house their own provocative behavior. That is, the ways in which his characters annex portions of the public sphere for the purpose of creating semi-private havens of erotic expression will be read as a crucial metaphor for what is actually taking place in the novel on a metafictional level, at the level of form, namely, the appropriation by a gay author of a mainstream literary genre. The Swimming-Pool Library, in other words, represents Hollinghurst’s own appropriation of the artistic space of the English novel to accommodate, for the very first time, the telling of a new kind of story, one told from a gay point of view, written by a gay author, populated by gay sex, and involving exclusively gay themes. And with this literary debut, I argue, Hollinghurst assumed a prominent place within that vanguard of contemporary innovators who dared to experiment with graphic representations of sex, and consequently redefined what is acceptable and what is possible in English fiction.

Asked about the reasons why there had been a “preponderance of sexual matter” in the English novel since the early 1970s, Hollinghurst offered in his 1998 interview a few insightful theories, but he also cautioned against settling on a too definitive explanation, reasoning that it was “probably too soon to be able to see the whole thing in a proper context.” The present study, however, insists that the time for viewing this issue within its

53 Ibid.
proper context has long been ripe, and that a thorough and focused critical evaluation of the role sex has played in shaping the contemporary English novel is long overdue. While this is not to suggest that critics over the past few decades have uniformly avoided addressing the topics of sex and pornography in the contemporary novel, it is to suggest that novelistic innovation by means of the explicit language, imagery, and narrative devices of pornography – particularly during the 1970s and 1980s – has too often and too easily been glossed over in discussions about how the novel has evolved from its postwar to its contemporary form. Of course, there has been no such shortage of recent studies examining the various other means by which novelists had rescued the English novel from that mid-century impasse between realism and experimentalism so dramatically mapped out by David Lodge. Studies such as Andrzej Gasiorek’s *Post-War British Fiction: Realism and After* and Richard Bradford’s *The Novel Now: Contemporary British Fiction*, for example, recognize numerous noteworthy developments in the contemporary English novel, among them the mythical and philosophical realism of William Golding and Iris Murdoch; the historiographic metafiction of Julian Barnes and Graham Swift; and the magical realism of Salman Rushdie and Angela Carter. None of these (or any other) studies, however, have quite been able to identify and place within a proper context the work of those writers who turned to explicit sex and the pornographic imagination to innovate the novel form, to subtly rethink and redefine accepted notions of realism and experiment; nor have any studies quite offered a full accounting of why the specific subgenre of pornography had become such a source of inspiration for certain English writers like Ballard, Amis, and Hollinghurst, or just how strongly this subgenre and these writers would impact the state of fiction in England. Critics, to put it simply, have generally been content with taking graphic sex in the novel for granted and have failed to recognize pornography as the catalyst for a major artistic literary movement that has influenced
the very conventions, the very style and substance, of the late 20th and early 21st century English novel. As I have gone to great lengths in this introduction to emphasize, however, the present study aims to correct this oversight. Taken together, then, the following chapters represent an attempt to construct an alternate critical narrative about how writers managed to resolve the crisis that the English novel faced in the decades after the Second World War, and how this resulted in a reinvigorated novel equipped to meet the challenges and complexities of the contemporary period. In short, the following chapters represent a critical narrative that begins with a metaphorical impasse and three novelists inspired to elevate pornography to high art – a narrative, to put it simply, that begins by asking the question of what happened when Sontag’s pornographers arrived at Lodge’s crossroads.
Chapter One.

A Vehicle for Change: J. G. Ballard’s Crash

I.

Often overlooked by critics of J. G. Ballard is the fact that the story surrounding his controversial 1973 novel Crash — its creation, reception, and legacy — is, in many ways, inextricably bound up with the very story that the novel itself sets out to tell. Set in an industrialized London marked by an endless network of identical motorways and suburban housing developments, and blighted by forests of looming billboards and the flickering images of a million television screens, Crash is told from the point of view of its protagonist and authorial namesake James Ballard. Early in the novel James recounts how, following the traumatic ordeal of an automobile accident and his subsequent encounter with the deranged research scientist Dr. Robert Vaughan, he is suddenly awakened to the hidden potential lying just beneath the surface of the world around him. His car crash, he comes to discover, has torn away the carefully imposed facade of his bleak modern existence, unearthing for him a new level of reality by stimulating a host of desires long deadened by the effects of a life lived in a technology dominated, media saturated society. “The crash,” James explains, “was the only real experience I had been through for years.” ¹ This one experience then sets off a narrative exploration in which various permutations of violent and erotic couplings between and among humans and machines arecatalogued in explicit detail, as James and each character he meets pursue the promise of reinvigorating their enervated lives, of accessing ever more heightened forms of that “real

¹ J. G. Ballard, Crash (New York: Picador, 1973), 39. All direct references to Crash will hereafter be indicated parenthetically within the body of the text.
experience," by engaging in an array of morally and socially transgressive sexual acts all centered on the totemic site of the automobile.

But Crash does not merely tell the story of an epochal shift in the ways that James and his fellow crash enthusiasts come to perceive their world; it also tells the story of an important change in direction for, as well as an important change in the perception of, both the career of J. G. Ballard and the history of the English novel. For if the title of Crash refers on one level to the many vehicular collisions that jarringly transform the once pedestrian thoughts and behaviors of Ballard’s characters (a process the narrator calls “the remaking of the commonplace”), it also echoes on a broader level the momentous, unexpected break that Crash represents in Ballard’s own approach to novel writing and, ultimately, the shockwave that this break was meant to send throughout the entire literary landscape. In moving away from his formal experimentation phase of the 1960s and toward the practice of a revised conception of realism, Ballard created with Crash an innovative narrative form through which he could best depict and anatomize the increasingly complicated, uncertain, and oftentimes bizarre realities of life in late 20th century England. And in so doing, the following chapter suggests, Ballard facilitated his own “remaking of the commonplace” – in this case, the commonplace that the English novel as a literary genre had all but become by the early 1970s. Thus this chapter examines in detail the connections between Ballard the author and Ballard the narrator as the two preside over their respective “crashes” to conventional modes of thinking. More specifically, it explores how the fictional irruptions of erotic energies into and through the continuously expanding and contracting spaces of crashed automobiles both reflect and inform Ballard’s larger authorial project, a project in which the author redefines the dimensions of the realist novel through a revolutionary application of the pornographic imagination and the incorporation of pornographic convention.
In the next section, therefore, I want to begin telling the twinned narratives of the two Ballards by first exploring and uncovering J. G. Ballard’s motivations for writing *Crash*. I aim to demonstrate that *Crash* is the product of Ballard’s dissatisfaction with the competing traditions of postwar realism and experimentalism, and a desire to make the outmoded English novel relevant again and capable of recording a contemporary reality that Ballard believed was no longer representable through existing fictional forms. And as we shall see, facilitating this desire and adding dimension to Ballard’s efforts to move beyond the realist and experimentalist crossroads faced by his fellow novelists is his awakening during the same period—an awakening prompted in part by the work of Susan Sontag—to the artistic potential and increasing social relevance of pornography. Thus in the latter half of this chapter, I shift focus from Ballard the author to Ballard the narrator, analyzing through narrator James Ballard’s own awakening to the sexual excitements of the car crash just how it is that pornography functions in *Crash* and what questions it raises and critiques it offers about the postmodern condition. Together these sections will show that in much the same way as automobiles and, by extension, human bodies are being recontextualized and rearranged in *Crash* to form new vehicles of perception and sensation for the characters, so Ballard the author is doing the same by introducing pornography into the English novel, recontextualizing and rearranging this novelistic space to form a new and critical vehicle of artistic representation.

II.

To best understand the nature and significance of *Crash* is to first understand the conditions and context which gave rise to its creation. And the best way to begin doing that is to consider Ballard’s experimental fiction of the mid to late 1960s and, particularly, his most representative
work from that period, *The Atrocity Exhibition* (1970).\(^2\) Made up of a collection of loosely connected short stories written between 1966 and 1969, *The Atrocity Exhibition* is considered one of the more notable examples of the postwar vogue for radical experimentation with the traditional forms and structures of the English novel.\(^3\) Its fragmentary chapters form the semblance of a narrative whose protagonist, a psychiatric patient, assumes a multitude of identities as he undertakes a disturbing psychological odyssey through the collective, mass mediated traumas of the 1960s: the Kennedy assassination, the Vietnam War, Cold War nuclear weapons testing, even the death of Marilyn Monroe. His ultimate goal is to start World War III within the precincts of his own mind, believing by some perverted logic that this will help him make sense of these traumatic cultural events.\(^4\) Yet there is, by design, no sense to be made here. The instability of the central narrative consciousness, coupled with Ballard's preference for a conceptual rather than mimetic style of representation, lead to a confusion throughout the novel between reality and the symptomatic figments of the protagonist's numerous psychopathologies. As a result, the setting is presented as one of merging internal and external landscapes where boundaries separating the two are placed under constant erasure. Characterization, too, is rendered fractured and unreliable, and the ontological status of characters often remains unclear, dying as some of them do in one chapter only to return alive in another. What is more, the linearity of traditional storytelling is upended at every turn by the random

\(^2\) Ballard had begun his writing career in the late 1950s as a writer of innovative, often realistic science fiction. And yet while this early work had attracted the admiration of some prominent proponents of realism (Kinglsey Amis foremost among them), Ballard soon began seeking more radical forms for his fiction. In the following decade, he became inspired by the iconoclastic artistic techniques of the Surrealists and the cut-up style novels of William S. Burroughs, and began conducting experiments of his own with the form and structure of the English novel, of which *The Atrocity Exhibition* is the culmination.

\(^3\) See Introduction for an overview of the experimental novel in postwar England.

\(^4\) "[H]is intention is to start World War III, though not of course, in the usual sense of the term. The blitzkriegs will be fought out on the spinal battlefields, in terms of the postures we assume, of our traumas mimetized in the angle of a wall or balcony." J. G. Ballard, *The Atrocity Exhibition* (London: Flamingo, 2001), 7.
arrangement of the chapters themselves;\(^5\) events occur in no particular order and are often punctuated by the inclusion of snippets from technical manuals and unrelated lists of unrelated objects.\(^6\) In 1966 Ballard had signaled his intent to portray through a “new kind of fiction” the condition of a contemporary culture where “the outer world of reality [was becoming indistinguishable from] the inner world of the psyche.”\(^7\) With *The Atrocity Exhibition*, then, Ballard had attempted to create that unique novelistic form which would faithfully convey and effectively dissect what he had come to regard as the increasingly surreal, disorienting experience of postmodernity in the decade of the 60s.

But this unorthodox form, achieved in defiance of the established codes of realist narrative, would eventually prove inadequate in giving full shape to Ballard’s vision. While the book is now considered a masterwork in the Ballardian oeuvre, it has for obvious reasons never quite outrun accusations of being overly obscure and solipsistic, of indulging in the very worst excesses of the experimentalist strain of fiction writing prevalent in Britain after the War.\(^8\) Early reviewers, for instance, made much of their difficulties in determining its genre and were often quick to dismiss it outright.\(^9\) They saw *Atrocity* as a “cold-blooded fantasy of aberrant

\(^5\) Ballard suggests in the Author’s Note to *Atrocity* the following reading strategy, “Readers who find themselves daunted by the unfamiliar narrative structure – far simpler than it seems at first – might try a different approach. Rather than start at the beginning of each chapter, as in a conventional novel, simply turn the pages until a paragraph catches your eye. If the ideas or images seem interesting, scan the nearby paragraphs for anything that resonates in an intriguing way. Fairly soon, I hope, the fog will clear, and the underlying narrative will reveal itself. In effect, you will be reading the book in the way it was written,” *The Atrocity Exhibition*, vi.

\(^6\) For a discussion of the influence that the Surrealist techniques of collage and the readymade object had on the form and structure of *The Atrocity Exhibition*, see Jeanette Baxter, *J. G. Ballard’s Surrealist Imagination: Spectacular Authorship* (Surrey, England: Ashgate, 2009), 82-3.


\(^8\) *The Atrocity Exhibition* appears to commit all the sins of the experimental novel described by proponents of realism such as Kingsley Amis, C. P. Snow, and William Cooper (and quoted in the Introduction): “too in-ward looking, too obsessed with subjectivity and the personal vision, and far too hung up on reducing the novel to a linguistic construct that made little or no reference to an external world.” See Introduction.

\(^9\) Baxter, 78-9.
proportions ... a horrible, [...] boring and pointless book”

In attempting to present and diagnose the ills of an alienating contemporary culture, in other words, Ballard had merely created instead an alienating text. Later in his career Ballard himself seemed tacitly to agree with some of these charges, acknowledging that *Atrocity* was and remains a curious creature of its cultural moment, both in the political and social radicalism it depicts and in the artistic radicalism it enacts. Moreover, his participation in annotating a new edition of the book in 1990 may be read as a concession to decoding the novel’s notorious impenetrability and an answer to the request by one reviewer for the author to provide a reader’s guide to understanding his perplexing literary creation. In the end, however, there is no greater evidence that Ballard had come to recognize the limits of employing radical formal experimentation in achieving his authorial aims than the fact that he decided to break from this approach soon after the book’s publication, never to revisit it again. A new, more suitable form was needed, and in searching for it Ballard would go on to develop a very different kind of novel – the first and most important of which being his next novel, *Crash*.

With *Crash* Ballard surprised critics and readers alike by turning to a more recognizable and accessible (but by no means traditional or simplistic) narrative form which, at first glance, appeared to indicate a turn toward the conventions of realism. In an effort to make sense of this sudden change in creative direction, some critics went so far as to conclude that, following the high-flown conceptual experiments of *The Atrocity Exhibition*, Ballard had

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decided at last to join the majority of his contemporaries in venturing down
the crowded, well trodden path of the realist novel. David Pringle, for
instance, observed that in his fiction of the 1970s Ballard was “making
larger concessions to social realism. That is to say, [...] he [was] trying to
become more of a novelist.” And according to Peter Brigg, “A detailed
realism of scene is [...] one of the aspects of surreal presentation, but
Ballard [seemed] to be angling closer to actual realism in [the novels Crash
(1973), Concrete Island (1974), and High-Rise (1975)].”

Of course, attributing the label of realism to Crash is, to some extent,
apt. For one, this novel sees Ballard hewing much closer to realist
conventions of narrative structure than he had done in his previous effort.
Except for a proleptic first chapter wherein James the narrator discusses the
eventual death of Vaughan (the man who turns James on to the mind expanding
possibilities of the car crash), the plot unfolds in a more or less linear
fashion. And like the protagonist of a realist novel, James is the fully
realized and complex character at the center of that plot, an ordinary man
who must navigate both the mundane and the momentous in an uncomfortably
recognizable modern world of strip malls and suburbs, marital infidelities
and highway accidents, in search of a greater understanding of his place
within it all. But the realist convention that Crash most makes use of is a
mimetic mode of representation, which here takes the form of an intensely

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14 There were, however, just as many reviewers and critics who saw Crash as a continuance of the postwar strain of experimentalism embraced by Ballard in The Atrocity Exhibition. As Martin Amis points out in The War on Cliché, Kinglsey Amis who was once an admirer of Ballard’s earlier realistic science fiction “was decisively turned off by Crash [...] on anti-experimentalist grounds,” and even Martin himself admitted to once being too quick to classify Crash as part of a stereotypical “neo-Sixties avant-garde associated with confrontational theatre, conceptualist painting, installationist sculpture, experimental fiction, and the ICA.” See Martin Amis, The War on Cliché, (New York: Vintage, 2001), 110. That critics were hard-pressed to place Crash within any existing novelistic category, however, speaks directly to the point that I make in the following pages, namely, that Crash represents the first and most important example of Ballard’s success in innovating the contemporary English novel by combining various elements borrowed from experimentalism, realism, and the subgenre of pornography in order to create a fresh and relevant new novelistic form.


vivid, almost photographic detailing of objects and events. Whereas the form and structure of *The Atrocity Exhibition* mimicked the fractured subjectivity and tenuous grasp on reality exhibited by its schizophrenic, central narrative consciousness(es), *Crash* presents us with something quite different: a cogent and coherent narrator whose story seems all the more believable, all the more immediate, because so realistically portrayed. Here, for example, is James recounting the lead-up to his automobile accident:

As I drove home from the film studios at Shepperton on a rain-swept June evening, my car skidded at the intersection below the entrance to the Western Avenue flyover. Within seconds I was moving at sixty miles an hour into the oncoming lane. As the car struck the central reservation the off-side tyre blew out and whirled off its rim. Out of my control, the car crossed the reservation and turned up the high-speed exit ramp. Three vehicles were approaching, mass-produced saloon cars whose exact model-year, colour schemes and external accessories I can still remember with the painful accuracy of a never-to-be-eluded nightmare. The first two I missed, pumping the brakes and barely managing to steer my car between them. The third, carrying a young woman doctor and her husband, I struck head-on. The man, a chemical engineer with an American foodstuffs company, was killed instantly, propelled through his windshield like a mattress from the barrel of a circus cannon. He died on the bonnet of my car, his blood sprayed through the fractured windshield across my face and chest (19-20).

The above passage reads as if it were being narrated by an outside observer, a third person omniscient narrator, and not the actual victim of the crash. Such detached fidelity in describing the sequence of events and the minute details of the cars and people involved, lends to the description a
scientific quality of sorts. And it is precisely this quality that pervades the rest of the narration, as the narrative voice remains throughout the course of the novel one that is simple and matter-of-fact in its utterance and largely unmoved yet scrupulous in relating the minutiae of even the most extreme circumstances. What is more, this scientifically precise, photographically realist style also serves a larger purpose. In his introduction to the French edition of Crash, Ballard claimed that the role of the writer in contemporary society, “his authority and licence to act, [has] changed radically,” and that the role of the author had now become not unlike “that of the scientist, whether on safari or in his laboratory, faced with an unknown terrain or subject.” It is no coincidence, then, that the similarly named narrator James Ballard goes about telling his story like a man of science, or an explorer with camera in hand, objectively cataloguing and documenting a myriad of strange new experiences and phenomena. That is to say, a stark, clinical realism not only defines the narrative voice, but in naming the narrator after himself, J. G. Ballard seems also to be confirming through Crash his own endorsement and adoption of a stark, clinically realist style and, by extension, a new approach to novel writing.

To suggest that Crash signals the beginning of Ballard’s capitulation to realism, however, is at once to overlook Ballard’s antipathy toward the accepted traditions of realism as it had been practiced in the decades following World War II, as well as to ignore the updates and innovations that he makes to this ailing form within this very novel. Ballard had long been critical of realism; to him, the realist novel as his contemporaries understood it seemed antiquated and inadequate, unworthy even of recognition.

In one of his annotations to the 1990 edition of The Atrocity Exhibition, he

17 There are exceptions to this, of course, as in the scene when James narrates the surreal events that unfold during an acid trip, a scene which is discussed in detail later in this chapter. Still, although James’s obsession with cars and the car crash increases over the course of the novel, the tone of the narrative voice remains relatively sober and even throughout.

draws particular attention to a conspicuous absence from the text: "Readers will have noticed that, by contrast, there are almost no references to literary works [in AE]. The realist novel still dominant [in the late 60s] had exhausted itself." Indeed, the lack of any influence from practitioners of realism indicates Ballard’s almost wholesale rejection of realist fiction as a vital, viable literary form. Why he was so hostile to the postwar tradition of realist writing in England stemmed, not so much from an aesthetic or even ideological disagreement, but from his own deeply held belief that old definitions of reality itself no longer seemed to apply. Consequently, Ballard questioned whether the "techniques and perspectives of the traditional 19th century novel" were of use any longer:

Is [the novelist’s] subject matter the sources of character and personality sunk deep in the past, the unhurried inspection of roots, the examination of the most subtle nuances of social behaviour and personal relationships? Has the writer still the moral authority to invent a self-sufficient and self-enclosed world, to preside over his characters like an examiner, knowing all the questions in advance? Can he leave out anything he prefers not to understand, including his own motives, prejudices and psychopathology?

The answer to these questions is, of course, no. For Ballard, the very concept of reality had been turned on its head in the advent of the postmodern, late capitalist age, and he felt that it was the job of the fiction writer to adapt his artistic medium in order to keep up with the changing face of that reality:

19 Ballard, The Atrocity Exhibition, 139.

20 Ballard instead emphasizes his debt to the writing of American author William Burroughs and the art of the European Surrealists. Ibid.

I feel that the balance between fiction and reality has changed significantly in the past decades. Increasingly their roles are reversed. We live in a world ruled by fictions of every kind - mass-merchandizing, advertising, politics conducted as a branch of advertising, the pre-empting of any original response to experience by the television screen. We live inside an enormous novel. It is now less and less necessary for the writer to invent the fictional content of his novel. The fiction is already there. The writer’s task is to invent the reality. 22

As we have seen above, this vision of the contemporary landscape as one of deceptive realities and questionable authenticities was what inspired Ballard to undertake the formal and structural experimentations of The Atrocity Exhibition. His ultimate dissatisfaction with this voguish brand of literary experimentation, however, inevitably left him at something of a crossroads. Should he continue on the path of experiment, with its radical abstractions and obscurities, its tendency more toward conceptual art than novelistic representation, or would he have to resort to the dreaded main road of realism, with its tired practices and anachronistic preoccupations? In Crash, Ballard chooses to adapt to his own specifications elements from both of these conflicting novelistic approaches, applying an experimental impulse and sensibility to what is ultimately an updating of the realist novel. Ballard realized that realism was a salvageable and necessary form, but for realism – and, by extension, the English novel generally – to be relevant again, it must be made to be more reflective of this external world overrun by technology and mass media where fiction had become indistinguishable from reality, and it must be made to serve as a space for the writer-as-scientist

22 Ibid.
to experiment with and explore theories, actions, and strategies for negotiating the challenges posed by postmodernity. Thus, Ballard uses a seemingly more realist style in Crash (a linear plot structure, mimetic representation, more ontologically stable and recognizable characters and settings), but he does so in the service of revealing just how fine the line has become between what is real and what is fiction, to the point where the inability to distinguish between the two throughout James’s narration is one of the most unnerving features, and one of the most important innovations, of the novel. Looking back at the passage from Crash excerpted above, for example, we saw that the narrator records the objects and events of his crash in a starkly realistic manner, but upon closer inspection it would appear that in doing so he is also putting all of these objects and events on an equal footing. His clinical narration is as dispassionate in describing the “mass-produced saloon cars” he narrowly misses as it is in describing the “chemical engineer with an American foodstuffs company” that he kills (19). In fact, the saloon cars even seem to be more real, more valuable and worthy of recognition to the narrator than the identity of the crash victim, of whom no name or physical description is at first given (aside from his association with a large, nameless corporation), though James has no trouble himself bringing to mind the “model-year, colour schemes and external accessories” of the vehicles he passes en route to his crash (19). So much a product of his mass mediated environment is James that, for him, the fictions of modern advertising and commodity culture represented by these automobiles have become bound up and confused with, and even overshadow, the humanity of the dead engineer, indicating a death of affect and lack of moral sensibility. Ballard emphasizes the point a page later when, staring at the hand of the dead man lying on the hood of his car, James notices that “the pattern of a sign formed itself as I sat there, pumped up by his dying circulation into a huge blood-blister – the triton signature of my radiator emblem” (20). Such
vivid, realistic detail is meant both to conceal and yet underscore the fact that the human body and mind have become marked and colonized by the advanced technologies and corporate branding of a postmodernity in which emotion and moral and ethical judgment seem no longer to have any value. Crash does not, like The Atrocity Exhibition, then, present us with a fragmented, disjointed reality that is as alienating as it is incoherent and unintelligible; Crash instead creates the semblance of a coherent reality, one that appears all too familiar and authentic, yet one that is also disturbing exactly because it is portrayed as seamlessly masking the artifice, psychopathology, amorality, and cultural influences which ultimately make up our collective perception of life in the late twentieth century. In depicting the nuance of this new dispensation, with all its deceptions and uncertainties, Ballard creates in Crash, neither a wholly experimental novel nor a wholly realist or social realist novel, but a wholly innovative hybrid novel – fastidious in its representation of the glimmering surfaces of the world as we know it yet, unlike the novelistic traditions it updates and displaces, sensitive to what lies beneath those surfaces, sensitive to the altered nature of reality, the central role our minds play in creating and engaging with that reality, and the absence of any moral or ethical judgment befitting a period in which both morals and ethics have been subsumed by the dictates of technology and mass media. Crash, in the end, is Ballard’s effort to redefine the realist novel with a new definition of the “real” by way of a spirit of experimentation applied less to form or structure than to content.

And in these efforts to redefine the capabilities and possibilities of the English novel, the type of content with which Ballard most often experiments is the graphic depiction of sex in its various forms. That is, serving as the true foundation and driving force behind Ballard’s larger artistic project is his newfound commitment in Crash to experimenting with pornography as both a subject and style of novelistic representation. The
book’s notorious reputation, after all, is based largely on its brutally realistic, intensely detailed descriptions of disturbing sexual acts, descriptions which at the time of publication had elicited from a shocked readership accusations against the author of perversion and mental derangement. But why the sudden fixation with pornography in particular, especially for a writer who for a decade had not shown much interest at all in representing anything related to sex in his fiction? What would sex, especially deviant sex, contribute to Ballard’s authorial mission to reshape the boundaries of English fiction and bring the novel up to date in its representation of the changing realities of a contemporary world? And what was it about that contemporary world that fostered the conditions out of which such a novel could emerge?

To answer the last question first, pornography had become widely available in Britain in the late 60s and early 70s; so ubiquitous was it (in print, on film, on the stage) that it even prompted a government inquiry into its suspected role in promoting “social evils.” Explicit depictions of sex and sexuality, however, seemed to exist in something of a parallel universe from that of literary fiction being produced during the same period. Aside from a few isolated and comparatively tepid exceptions, graphic scenes of sexual activity continued to remain largely absent from the English novel – this, despite the existence of such potential catalysts as the lifting of censorship laws a decade earlier and the ongoing events of the Sexual Revolution. In part this may have been because of a deeply rooted, prewar sense of propriety and hesitancy about openly discussing matters that were

23 Ballard was fond of telling one particular story about his own publishing house’s initial reaction to the original manuscript of Crash: “One of the publisher’s readers was either a psychiatrist or the wife of a psychiatrist, and she wrote the most damning and vituperative reader’s report [the publisher] ever received. It included the statement: ‘The author is beyond psychiatric help.’” Ballard interview in Alan Burns and Charles Sugnet, The Imagination on Trial: British and American Writers Discuss Their Working Methods (London: Allison, 1981), 22.

24 That government inquiry would become known as The Longford Report.

25 For more of this historical background, see Introduction.
best left to play out behind closed doors. Most likely, though, the dearth of such content was the result of the pervasive influence of a certain snobbish, high literary attitude. Proponents and practitioners of the dominant realist style of novel writing often steered clear of explicitly portraying sex in their work due to the belief that the serious English novel should remain uncontaminated by any form of genre fiction; any such sustained portrayal of sexual activity would thus constitute a stepping down to the lowbrow art form of pornography. Realist novelist David Lodge, for example, dismissed pornography as a “debased form” meant only for “the arousal and gratification of very basic fictional appetites,” where “traditional literary values are not expected to obtain.”26 Genre fiction such as pornography, in other words, stood for extremes in behavior and imagination which were incommensurate with the realist ethos.

This ethos, however, was eventually singled out by American critic Susan Sontag in her essay “The Pornographic Imagination” (1967) as being one of the major obstacles standing in the way of the progress and development of the English novel. In her essay, Sontag discusses the necessity of uprooting the “tenacious cliches” of an establishment of critics and writers who “continue to identify with prose literature itself the particular literary conventions of ‘realism’ (what might be crudely associated with the major tradition of the nineteenth century novel).”27 This dominance of realism had promoted the long-standing belief that “pornography and literature are antithetical,” and such a dismissive critical and artistic culture in postwar England had made it so that any works dealing with graphic representations of sex would be “unassimilable for English [...] readers – except as ‘mere’ pornography,


inevitably fancy trash.” 28 Sontag, therefore, makes the case that “equally
valid as a subject of prose narrative are the extreme states of human feeling
and consciousness, those so peremptory that they exclude the mundane flux of
feelings and are only contingently linked with concrete persons – which is
the case with pornography.” 29 She goes on to urge English and American writers
to take aim against “the bankruptcy of taste and [...] fundamental dishonesty
of method” of much contemporary fiction and instead explore, confidently and
without fear, these extreme states of consciousness through the artistic
possibilities that come with embracing the pornographic imagination. 30

Having embarked upon his own tireless endeavors in the late 60s and
early 70s to rehabilitate and modernize the novel form, it should come as no
surprise then that Ballard became one of the first British writers to answer
Sontag’s call. And while it may be assumed that he had already been moving
independently toward similar ideas about the value and necessity of
pornography as a literary genre, 31 it is clear that Ballard was emboldened and
deeply influenced by what he called “Sontag’s brave 1969 [sic] essay,” of
which the writing of Crash was perhaps partially a result. 32 In fact, one
could go so far as to say that the role the character Vaughan plays in
awakening narrator James Ballard to the “eroticism of the car crash”
consciously echoes the role Sontag played in awakening author J. G. Ballard

28 Ibid., 44.
29 Ibid., 42.
30 Ibid., 43.
31 Ballard was at first quite slow in turning his authorial attentions to the possibilities of
pornography, having gone many years into his career before even broaching the topic of sex in his
work. Graphic (albeit scant and abstract) depictions of sex first entered his fiction as late as
1966 in the stories of The Atrocity Exhibition. In fact, one brief chapter entitled “Crash!”
which introduces many of the themes Ballard would later explore in the novel of the same name
takes the form of a pseudo-scientific report on the subject of “the latent sexual content of the
automobile crash.” Yet it would not be until 1973 with Crash that Ballard would transform these
ideas into a fully fleshed out and more consistently realistic narrative, a narrative that would
also explicitly depict sex in a fuller, more consistent and more realistic way. That is, it is
not until the novel Crash that Ballard truly begins to exploit the artistic potential of the
pornographic imagination and the literary subgenre of pornography.
32 Ballard, The Atrocity Exhibition, 53.
to the artistic and literary possibilities of pornography. Though the extent of the influence is debatable, the fact remains that Ballard was quick to adopt the concept of the pornographic imagination, defining it on his own terms as being a phenomenon that is “unlimited in scope and metaphoric power, and [one that] can never be successfully repressed.” What is more, while he acknowledged his debt to Sontag, he wanted to go “much further in [his] claims,” arguing that pornography should also be seen as “a powerful catalyst for social change, [whose] periods of greatest availability have frequently coincided with times of greatest economic and scientific advance.” In regarding it as a reflection of and a harbinger of cultural upheaval, a catalyst for social change, Ballard was identifying in pornography both the ideal platform from which he could launch an exploration of the current cultural climate, as well as the perfect tool with which he could achieve his goal of initiating a change in the way people approached and conceived of the English novel. Indeed, Ballard seized upon the pornographic imagination as the vehicle that would finally and fully help him revitalize a flagging literary form and take it beyond the impasse posed by the ongoing clash between realism and experimentalism. His very inclusion of pornographic convention into the novelistic space of Crash, for instance, offers a direct challenge to the “tenacious cliches” of the traditional and entrenched literary establishment against which Sontag rails. Crash collapses the artificial boundaries separating the supposedly “antithetical” artistic modes of serious literature and pornography with a profusion of detailed descriptions of extreme acts of sex and violence, which offer a fuller, more realistic and representative range of human behavior and the contemporary experience than anything offered by the status quo of realist (or

33 Critic Sam Francis has suggested that Sontag was a “probable” influence on Ballard. Sam Francis, “‘Moral Pornography’ and ‘Total Imagination’: The Pornographic in J. G. Ballard’s Crash,” English 57, no. 218 (2008): 147. In the same essay, Francis also examines the relationship between this concept of the pornographic imagination and the novel Crash, an argument from which the present chapter draws much influence, but which also, as we shall see, complicates and builds upon throughout.

34 Ballard, The Atrocity Exhibition, 54.
experimentalist) fiction during the postwar period. What is more, Ballard made use of pornography in Crash because he discovered that the pornographic was already a deeply imbedded part of the postmodern landscape that he meant to represent. That is, pornography appeared to be in many ways a key to understanding and negotiating the very postwar English society whose essence and feeling Ballard had been striving to capture within his work for years.

In the repetitious monotony of contemporary life, the dehumanizing effects of a sprawling technological and mass mediated landscape, the growing emotional distances between people, and the widespread moral and ethical bankruptcy, Ballard recognized the very conventions and features that defined pornography itself – its repetitiveness, its absence of authentic emotion and genuine passion, its breaking down of sexual participants into their component parts, its exploitation and objectification, its ultimate erasure of individual human identity. Pornography, in other words, is not only more widely available during “times of greatest economic and scientific advance,” but it can also serve as an accurate gauge of the spirit of such times and as an invaluable tool in documenting the effects of such economic and scientific advance on the behaviors, perceptions, and psychology (or psychopathologies) of a particular society – in this case, an English society in thrall to the advanced technologies and mass media of the decadent era of late capitalism.

Moreover, Ballard’s adapting of Sontag’s pornographic imagination also allows him to transform the novel itself into a kind of laboratory, a space where he and his characters can experiment freely with transgressive sexual acts as a means of possibly transcending this decadent, affectless era by uniting aspects of the human body and sexuality with the forces of technology, and in turn actively creating a new path and a new place for humanity within the technological landscape.

35 Ballard once wrote, “[P]ornography is the most political form of fiction, dealing with how we use and exploit each other, in the most urgent and ruthless way,” “Some Words…”, 45-54.
Ballard’s use of pornography in *Crash*, therefore, is not only an attempt to fill the absence of sexual representation in the English novel. It takes realism to its extreme conclusion by drawing back the curtain of the sexual lives of fictional characters and thus exposing the work of traditional realists as representing a highly selective and unrealistic version of “reality.” It also examines the nature of and poses uncomfortable questions about an external world in which the pornographic has already become an inextricable part of the postmodern condition. In adapting the conventions of pornographic literature to the literary novel, Ballard further undermines the dominant traditions of realist narrative in England, allowing him to expand the scope and possibility of the English novel, as well as its ability to adapt to and reflect the shifting realities of the contemporary milieu. In doing so, *Crash* also rejects the extremities of formal and structural experimentation in favor of what Ballard saw as a more vital experimentation in content. Combining a graphic treatment of sexual subject matter and a pornographic style with certain elements of realism is an experiment that at once exposes the limitations of conventional realist fiction and creates a new type of novel more suited to a faithful portrayal of life in late twentieth century England.

III.

If the last section focused primarily on author J. G. Ballard’s dissatisfaction with existing novelistic conventions and his awakening to pornography and the role it could play in creating a new kind of novel, then this section will attempt to support many of the claims made above through a close analysis of narrator James Ballard’s dissatisfaction with the
conventions of modern life and his own subsequent awakening to a new kind of reality through his firsthand experience of the car crash.

In the opening chapters of Crash, Ballard establishes the central conflict of the novel by revealing that the contemporary world inhabited by his characters is no longer centered on them (that is, on humanity or nature), but is instead oriented around the dictates and demands of technology, industry, urban and suburban development, consumerism and mass media. The early chapters explore the negative consequences of these unavoidable features of postmodernity through flashbacks to the time before the narrator is involved in a traumatic car crash and through his observations directly following it. And it is through reference to his sexual experiences in particular that the novel demonstrates just how insidious and disruptive the effects of this postmodern landscape have become on the lives of its inhabitants. Ballard first gives the reader a full sense of the breadth of the imprint rapid modernization has left on late twentieth century England in Chapter 5, when James sets out to take an aerial tour of his neighborhood during his convalescence following his automobile accident. From his apartment balcony, James looks out as if for the first time upon a previously unnoticed panorama of “concrete and structural steel” (48). In an effort to orient himself, he locates the high rise in which he lives with his wife Catherine as being “a mile to the north of the airport in a pleasant island of modern housing units, landscaped filling stations and supermarkets, shielded from the distant bulk of London by an access spur of the northern circular motorway which flowed past us on its elegant concrete pillars” (48). What is particularly interesting here is James’s use of nature metaphor to identify the physical features of his surroundings. He lives on “a pleasant island” around which “flowed” a stream of cars. Elsewhere in the novel, he similarly describes rush-hour traffic as “sweeping me back in a huge tidal race” (59) and the sunlit roofs of automobiles in a parking lot as “[forming]
a lake of metal” (76). In associating these natural phenomena (lakes, islands, tides) with the “concrete and structural steel” of vast networks of motorways and suburban housing developments, James is in fact revealing, however indirectly, that the dominant forces of technology and industry have themselves become natural features – the only natural features – of the world around him. Employing the language of a flowing river to describe superhighways and not actual rivers (the presumably nearby Thames is never once seen or mentioned by any of the characters) clearly indicates that a process of displacement has occurred, that the artificial has outstripped nature and laid claim to its domain. This is never more apparent than when James meditates on the “fragments of broken safety glass” he sees along the side of the road and imagines that “[w]ithin fifty years, as more and more cars collided here, the glass fragments would form a sizable bar, within thirty years a beach of sharp crystal” (56). Modern technology, in other words, has been imbued with such power and influence that it has even assumed the literal capacity, once possessed only by nature, to generate its own unique geological formations.

More important than what it creates, however, is what it destroys. Looking out later from the top floor of the multistory parking lot of his local shopping center, James begins to realize “that the entire zone which defined the landscape of my life was now bounded by a continuous artificial horizon, formed by the raised parapets and embankments of the motorways and their access roads and interchanges” (53). His use of the word “island” earlier starts to take on a certain resonance here, indicating as it does that the people residing in the midst of this sprawling landscape within their individual suburban enclaves have become marooned. They have been “bound” and cut off from each other, from nature, and from the wider, more vibrant cultural life of a less fragmented, more cohesive society by the rushing, tidal forces of an expansive highway system which no individual can
possibly negotiate without the help of another product of modern technology, the automobile. The point is driven home further still when, considering this looming artificial horizon of parapets and embankments, roads and interchanges, James likens the resulting physical boundaries of his suburb to "the walls of a crater several miles in diameter" (53). The image of a crater is meant to symbolize not only how isolated these individual communities have become but also how devastating the impact of modernization has been on human community in general, that last remaining and most complex of all natural phenomena. In gazing out over the floors of this vast "crater" carved out of a forbidding terrain, James is struck by its "immense silence" and emptiness, the only thing balancing out its near complete absence of people being its overwhelming presence of parked cars and massive shopping precincts, now the only population that truly seems to matter (52). This isolated pre-planned suburb, in the end, represents just one of many such social spaces that have been cratered, so to speak, as if a meteor in the form of blind late capitalist progress and the encroachment of urban and suburban sprawl had come and obliterated all traces of nature, all traces of life itself.

Of course, this form of death and devastation is not literal but metaphoric, reflecting as it does the physical, psychological, and emotional toll the imperatives of a rampant mechanistic and industrial age have taken upon humans exposed to a highly artificial environment in which they no longer form the center and focus. Indeed, if on a broad scale these modern forces have displaced and assumed the powers of the natural world, and have

36 James describes the profusion of cars, all assembled around the suburban enclave's shopping district, "The tree-lined avenue which led to the neighbourhood shopping centre was deserted, cars parked nose to tail under the plane trees. [...] Cars filled the main thoroughfare, double-parked in the side-streets while their drivers rested indoors out of the hot sunlight. I crossed the tiled piazza in the middle of the shopping mall, and climbed the staircase to the carpark on the roof of the supermarket. Each of the hundred parking spaces was filled, the lines of windshields reflecting the sunlight like a glass testudo," (52-3).

37 Regarding this idea of death and the extinction of life, the narrator later refers to his apartment building as towering over his suburb "[l]ike an up-ended glass coffin" (106).

38 Indeed, as James and the reader slowly come to recognize, "the human inhabitants of this technological landscape no longer provided its sharpest pointers, its keys to the borderzones of identity" (48-9).
also shaped and hollowed out the social and cultural life of humanity, then it must follow that a similar process has occurred on a more personal and private level. That is why, just as we see James applying the now obsolete language of nature to his descriptions of the technological landscape, so Ballard shows us James using metaphors of the inanimate and the artificial to describe other human beings and his relationships with them.²⁹ Throughout the novel, for example, James is only able to see and understand his wife Catherine by framing her and their relationship (particularly their sexual relationship) in terms of the imagery of machinery, consumer goods, or sometimes both. At times he likens her body to a “sexual exercise doll fitted with a neoprene vagina” (51), her loins to something that has “been furnished by an eccentric haberdasher” (46). But more often than not he seems to compare her with a much more complex and valuable machine. James recounts an interlude prior to his crash in which he watches his wife being seduced by her secretary Karen in a changing room:

Now and then I glanced through the curtains and watched them together, their bodies and fingers involved in the soft technology of Catherine’s breasts and the brassieres designed to show them off to this or that advantage. Karen was touching my wife with peculiar caresses, tapping her lightly with the tips of her fingers, first upon the shoulders along the pink grooves left by her underwear, then across her back, where the metal clasps of her brassiere had left a medallion of impressed skin, and finally to the elastic-patterned grooves beneath Catherine’s breasts themselves (33-4).

Here Catherine is seen by James as something of a technological artifact, revealed from behind a curtain in a store as though she is on display for

²⁹ That is not to say, however, that the physical landscape itself has not also taken on human-like qualities. James, for instance, observes at point that the highway “flyovers overlaid one another like copulating giants, immense legs straddling each other’s backs” (76).
purchase. No longer are Catherine’s breasts extensions of her anatomy but instead form a “soft technology,” suggesting that her female body is now like an object constructed solely for the sexual and commercial consumption of others. As Karen moves her hands over Catherine’s body, James gives us less a sense that she is doing so to arouse Catherine, and more a sense that she is demonstrating for James the quality workmanship and performance of some kind of elaborate machine, running her fingers along its “grooves,” manipulating its “metal clasps,” and drawing attention to its manufacturer’s “medallion” (34). That this scene appears to conjure up an image of an automobile on a showroom floor is made explicit a page later when, readying himself to take Catherine home, James begins to treat their car in a similar fashion, his “fingers [moving] across the control panel, switching on the ignition, the direction indicator, selecting the drive lever,” as if he is literally going to drive Catherine home (34). Ballard further reinforces the connection that James makes between Catherine and contemporary society’s most revered and most essential mechanical consumer product when the narrator later admits to what attracted him to his wife in the first place, namely, “her immaculate cleanliness, as if she had individually reamed out every square centimetre of her elegant body, separately ventilated every pore,” as well as “the porcelain appearance of her face, an over-elaborate make-up like some demonstration model” (112). The things that attract James to Catherine are the same things that attract James to advertisements for “custom-built sports cars [...] air-brushed in vivid pastel and acrylic colors” (111) and to the “immaculate body” of a car that has just gone through a car wash (163) or the “immaculate vehicles” presented at an Earls Court motor show (174). Through James’s voyeuristic and assessing gaze, therefore, we begin to see that the line separating human and machine, inhabitant and environment, has ceased to exist. In the case of Catherine, Ballard uses the pornographic convention of

40 Francis, 155.
female objectification not so much to titillate the reader as to underscore how the traditional Western object of sexual desire no longer occupies the realm of the human but has instead been displaced from the female body onto the body of the inanimate, the mechanical – in this case, onto the body of the automobile. But the female body is not the only one to undergo such dramatic reconstruction; men too are not immune. Ballard sees himself as a “huge jointed doll” within the hands of an x-ray technician at one point (40), and later compares “the metallic sheen of [Vaughan’s] skin” to the “worn vinyl” of the interior of a car (90). Thus, Crash portrays a dehumanized and dehumanizing world where technology, industry, and consumerism have created an increasingly artificial environment that has reshuffled psychological and emotional priorities and expectations, as well as invested humans themselves with the very qualities of the artificial.

Ballard further explores the effect that this process of dehumanization has had on experiences of desire, emotion, and even morality through a detailed portrayal of the sexual relationships of his characters. As we have seen, James’s erotic fantasies seem to include his wife Catherine only in so far as he confuses her with the various inanimate objects upon which his desires have been displaced. We learn too that Catherine’s own erotic interests have grown abstract, centering more on the mere “idea of making love [than on] the actual pleasures of the sex act itself” (34). Not surprisingly, then, the couple’s actual sexual encounters are marked by disinterest and apathy (“I thought of my last forced orgasms with Catherine, the sluggish semen urged into her vagina by my bored pelvis”), and require certain forms of mediation to help prompt stimulation and achieve sexual fulfillment (41). “Before my accident,” James admits in a moment of recollection, “our sexual relationship was almost totally abstracted, maintained by a series of imaginary games and perversities” (83). One of

41 For an engaging feminist reading of the objectification and commodification of women in Crash, see Francis, 154-5.
these games involves transgression of the moral and social boundaries of marriage through acts of mutual infidelity. Their carrying on of affairs and then revealing the names of their “illicit partners” during sex in order to “produce the most exquisite orgasms” is a game, James claims, “she and I needed to play” (31). Once again the increasingly common practice of seeing and using others as inanimate objects is reflected in the way that James and Catherine initiate these affairs “merely to provide the raw material for [their] sexual games” (31). Their illicit partners, like Catherine’s secretary Karen, are thus reduced to raw materials that are consumed for the purposes of bridging an ever widening gap of intimacy between husband and wife, and of accessing an ever more elusive level of sexual excitation. The endeavor is doomed, however, as each new game itself becomes something of a predictable routine (31). Sex for them is thus reduced to merely a “language in search of objects,” an abstract concept “divorced from any possible physical expression” (35). That James and Catherine can no longer create a heightened experience of sexual and emotional satisfaction for their partner or for themselves is not a matter unique to their bedroom, however. The rest of their “placid suburban enclave [is] drenched in a thousand infidelities,” as their neighbors too struggle to pursue pleasures that seem less and less likely to be fulfilled in any normal or conventional way (49). The more humans are passively exposed to and claimed by the sterile technologies and artificialities of their postmodern environment, Crash seems to suggest, the more removed they become from their own physical and emotional needs and responses, and the more meaningless, abstract, and routinized become their attempts to compensate for this through sexual fulfillment. This is because sex in Ballard’s vision of contemporary society no longer possesses any kind of physical or emotional impact or value. While in the hospital, for example,

James quickly acquires the ability to guess the identities of Catherine’s affairs well ahead of time: “For years I had been able to spot Catherine’s affairs within almost a few hours of her first sex act simply by glancing over any new physical or mental furniture [...]. Often I could guess the name of her latest lover long before she released it at the climax of our sexual acts” (31).
James fantasizes about Catherine performing a lewd act on his nurse only to conclude that the nurse would be “unmoved by this sexual gesture, no more significant than the most commonplace remark” (35). So commonplace and detached from emotion and desire is sex, in fact, that the entire narrative itself lacks any emotive or colloquial descriptors for bodies or sexual activity. There is no “ass, no dick, no cunt but: the anus, the rectum, the vulva, the penis, coitus.” Ballard employs such a unique narrative language in order to emphasize the clinical and impersonal nature of contemporary sexuality. Moreover, his use of anatomical and biological terms to construct explicit sex scenes is meant to draw an illuminating parallel between pornography and those dispassionate scientific and medical processes in which the human body is broken down into its component parts and examined in stark, objective detail. Indeed the invasive, emotionless discourses of science and medicine are extensions of that dominating technological and industrial landscape which, as we have seen, has decentered human identity and turned the human body into little more than a passive object. As Sontag states in “The Pornographic Imagination”, “[T]he basic tone of pornography is affectless, emotionless,” and as Angela Carter states in The Sadeian Woman, “Pornography involves an abstraction of human intercourse in which the self is reduced to its formal elements.” Throughout Crash, Ballard takes both of these pornographic conventions to their extremes in order to perform a post-mortem on the sex life of a postmodern society in which humans have become deconstructed and decontextualized, broken down into their formal

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44 Francis, 157-8.

45 Ballard often explicitly highlights the similarities between science and pornography, and emphasizes the seemingly seedy and illicit qualities of science’s tendency to dehumanize and objectify the human body. One example is when James describes common hospital materials as “pornographic x-ray plates and blacklisted urinalyses” (43).

46 Sontag, 55

elements, and eventually rendered inert and closed off from any form of authentic, unmediated physical or emotional experience.

Although Ballard spends a good deal of time in Crash painting a chillingly accurate picture of this dehumanized contemporary society, however, the thrust of the novel is meant to document James and other characters’ attempts to overcome this affectless and artificial existence. And such attempts, it should come as no surprise, all originate from and revolve around the experience of the car crash. James does not remain completely passive to or unaware of the enervating effects of his environment. The trauma of his automobile accident tears away the shiny but shallow glass and metal façade of his daily life and both awakens him to the oppressive nature of the suburban landscape in which he has been living, as well as produces feelings and sensations which allow him to access long buried physical, emotional, and psychological depths. “After being bombarded endlessly by road-safety propaganda,” James explains, “it was almost a relief to find myself in an actual accident” (39). The simulations of violence and injury that he has been exposed to through mass media and advertising campaigns, and which represent a kind of fictional narrative of disaster that has replaced the collective reality of such extreme events, are shattered by the firsthand experience of the car crash itself. That is, the crash disrupts the fictions and “commonplaces of everyday life” and forces James for the first time to be “in physical confrontation with [his] own body” (39). Describing the crash as being the “first real experience I had in years,” James is thus portrayed as having undergone something of a rebirth. When he emerges from the cocoon of his head bandages, for instance, he looks in the mirror and notices that the “severed nerve in my scalp had fractionally lowered my right eyebrow, a built-in eye-patch that seemed to conceal my new character from myself. This marked tilt was evident in everything around me” (36). Here James discovers that a new, as yet unknown persona has been born.
of the intense reality of his traumatic ordeal, and that the resulting
physical injury has in turn radically transformed — or “tilted” — the way in
which he perceives and will perceive both himself and his surroundings. While
in the hospital, James also notices that “[the nurses] seemed to attend only
to my most infantile zones ... my bowels ... my penis ... my mouth ... these starched
women in all their roles reminded me of those who attended my childhood,
commissionaires guarding my orifices” (32-3). Through this imagery of birth
and infancy, Ballard is therefore showing us that the crash has sent James to
the hospital, not so much to recover from his injuries, as to prepare him
like a newborn to face a new world. What is more, the references to the
Freudian oral, anal, and phallic stages of psychological development suggest
that his accident has also returned James to a state of polymorphous
perversity, alerted to and eager to explore as he is the sexual and erotic
potential of everything around him.48 James, in the last days of his
hospitalization, is even aroused by his wife, and she by him, the two
celebrating his first orgasm after the crash as a “unique event” (45). With
Catherine seeing James “in a new light” (45) and experiencing her own “hyper-
excitement” (46), this orgasm produced by her manual stimulation of his penis
represents the narrator’s emergence into a new world of sexuality. The
intimate moment between husband and wife is even likened to the strange acts
of a Milanese governess the couple had once encountered who “had lavished her
life on the sexual organ of the two-year-old boy she tended, for ever kissing
his small penis, sucking the glans to engorge it, showing it off with immense
pride” (46). Catherine’s role as a newly attentive and devoted wife is
similar, then, to that of the governess, in that she oversees and officiates
the first orgasm of James’s second sexual coming-of-age.

Once out of the hospital, James’s unleashed erotic energies find
multiple outlets, most notably in Helen Remington, the woman who had been

48 “This obsession with the sexual possibilities of everything around me had been jerked loose
from my mind by the crash” (29).
involved in James’s crash and whose husband had been killed in the same collision. Helen, as it turns out, has also experienced a marked increase in her libidinal appetites, and the two soon begin an affair. Drawn to each other for reasons they do not fully understand, their initial sexual encounter takes place within James’s car, an identical model of the vehicle he had totaled in the accident. Both James and Helen seem to require this familiar space in order to stimulate and maintain their arousal by replicating the conditions of their car wreck. “My hand moved around the outer curvature of Helen’s thighs,” James begins, “feeling the open zip of her dress. As these razor-like links cut my knuckles I felt her teeth across my ear. The sharpness of these pains reminded me of the bite of the windshield glass during my crash” (79). Their encounter is thus invested with the very same intensities of feeling and sense of heightened reality prompted by the crash, as Helen takes on the properties of a crashing vehicle by imprinting herself and inflicting enlivening sensations of pain (and pleasure) upon James’s body. Such a description is meant to echo the narrator’s earlier observation that the wounds caused by the flying debris of his accident seemed similar to the physical reminders left by a lover’s embrace, “wounds […] like the contours of a woman’s body remembered in the responding pressure of one’s own skin for a few hours after a sexual act” (28). In this scene, then, the novel’s recurrent similes connecting the body of a lover to the body of a car, the sex act to the car crash, at last become literalized, the intimacy the two lovers experience being intimacy shared as much with each other as with the eroticized physical object of the car itself. In other words, the latent desires that James had experienced before his accident, as evidenced for example by his confusion of Catherine’s body with the body of an automobile, become manifest in this scene. This is never more apparent than when, his penis in Helen’s hand, James arrives at his orgasm just as a large truck passes by the car. The resultant “vibrating” of
the automobile at once initiates and mimics James’s orgasmic experience (80), uniting both the human and non-human participants of this complex act of copulation and, in turn, “generating” what James fantasizes as being some sort of hybrid creature, “an homunculus of blood, semen, and engine coolant” (81). Without the car or the simulated conditions of their car crash, however, James and Helen soon sink back into a default mood of boredom and impotence, unable to generate on their own any similar erotic highs:

“Strangely, our sexual acts took place only within my automobile. In the large bedroom of her rented house I was unable even to mount an erection, and Helen herself would become argumentative and remote” (82). The trauma of the crash has clearly altered the psychologies of these two characters, having granted them a glimpse into a real yet fleeting world of sensation that they seem intent on recreating, but which can only be done so within the space of the automobile. And for James in particular this leads finally to a dawning awareness of just how central the automobile has become in his life and within the collective life of his culture. “[M]y relationships,” he realizes, “[are] mediated by the automobile and its technological landscape” (101). The significance of such realizations continues to elude him, however, and are not fully articulated or explored until later when the narrator makes the acquaintance of Dr. Robert Vaughan.

Described by James as a “hoodlum scientist” whom he credits for his understanding of “the real excitements of the car crash,” Vaughan is introduced by the narrator as a charismatic if seemingly unhinged figure who appears to have discovered the key to both navigating and overcoming the sterile, affectless conditions of the postmodern environment. Himself the victim of a serious motorcycle accident, which inevitably ended his career as a TV presenter of science documentaries, Vaughan spends his days treating the roads and highways of greater London as his own personal open air laboratory. His incessant photographing of random accident scenes (this is how he first
meets James), his orchestration of violent sexual demonstrations in the backseats of numerous cars, and his abiding willingness to initiate minor and major collisions with other motorists all comprise a program designed to recreate, experiment with, and understand the erotic energies unleashed by the traumatic forces of the car crash. Thanks to this unorthodox and obsessive method of research, in fact, the novel abounds in seemingly inexhaustible lists of specific road accidents and their resultant damages, the wealth of photographs and experiences amassed by Vaughan comprising a "terrifying almanac" (13) and "an immense encyclopedia" (29) of automobile disasters and wounds. Asked at one point to look through a photographic dossier given to him by the rogue scientist, James notices that "[a]lmost every conceivable violent confrontation between the automobile and its occupants was listed" and that genital wounds were what "clearly most preoccupied Vaughan" (133). The narrator goes on:

As Vaughan turned the car into a filling station courtyard the scarlet light from the neon sign over the portico flared across these grainy photographs of appalling injuries: the breasts of teenage girls deformed by instrument binnacles, the partial mammoplasties of elderly housewives carried out by the chromium louvres of windshield assemblies, nipples sectioned by manufacturers’ dashboard medallions [...]. A succession of photographs of mutilated penises, sectioned vulvas and crushed testicles passed through the flaring light as Vaughan stood by the girl filling-station attendant at the rear of the car, jocularly talking to her about her body (134).

On its surface, this is merely a gruesome forensic assemblage of the vast variety of injuries made possible in the modern age of the motorcar, but looking more closely one notices something else. The detail of the “scarlet
light” is meant to conjure up an image of a red light district, lending to these “grainy photographs” an illicit and quite obviously pornographic aspect. On one level, Ballard is here once again underscoring the disconcerting similarity between the obsessions of contemporary science and pornography.49 In his own obsession with the bodily mutilations depicted in the collection of medical photographs described above, that is, Dr. Robert Vaughan can be seen as dissolving the distinction between and uniting the scientific and the pornographic gaze.50 However, another more important similarity between these two discourses that Ballard appears to be drawing our attention to in this passage (and in every other passage in which automobile accident injuries are catalogued in detail) is the one regarding what critic Sam Francis calls, “[science and pornography’s] shared concern with the experimental exploration of possibilities and permutations.”51 In his essay “Some Words about Crash!”, Ballard argued that the “main ‘fact’ of the 20th century is the concept of the unlimited possibility,” a concept which he saw as a “predicate of science and technology.”52 The unlimited possibility is also, not coincidentally, a central feature of pornography, in that the pornographic by definition embodies the promise of the inexhaustibility of sexual acts and the limitless combinations of human intercourse. Therefore, in his twin role as scientist and pornographer, Vaughan appears to be amassing photographs and experiences of automobile injuries and accidents, not only because in doing so he is satisfying his scientific duty of diligently documenting all the possibilities and permutations of his particular object of study, but because in doing so he is also satisfying his

49 As Ballard once stated in an interview, “The pornographic imagination detaches certain parts of the human anatomy from the human being and becomes obsessively focused on the breast or genitalia, or what have you. That sort of obsession with what I call quantified functions is what lies at the core of science; there is a shedding of responsibility by the scientist who is just looking at a particular subject with the tendency to ignore the contingent links.” Jeremy Lewis, “An Interview with J. G. Ballard”, Mississippi Review 20 (1991): 29, qtd. in Sam Francis, 157.

50 Elsewhere we see another example of this when Vaughan involuntarily has an orgasm during a test crash demonstration sponsored by a governmental agency, which he is invited to observe (125).

51 Francis, 158.

52 Ballard, “Some Words…”, 45-54, qtd. in Francis, 159.
desire to pursue all of the sexual possibilities and permutations which he believes such crashes inevitably create. For Vaughan sees in the car crash the unlimited possibilities of 20th century science and technology making possible, in turn, the unlimited possibilities of a new sexuality—a sexuality based on the myriad random conjunctions and interactions between man and machine. As James begins to learn from Vaughan, “the deviant technology of the car-crash provided the sanction for any perverse act” (137). But more than that, this deviant technology literally creates new openings through which humans can experience the heightened sensations and authentic realities of a fresh sexuality that lies far outside the stifling boundaries of a mundane, artificial, and conventional postmodern existence.

Nowhere do we see a greater example of this than in the character of Gabrielle, a severely scarred and disabled car crash victim whose crash is fastidiously documented and compiled in yet another photographic dossier. Reading through this dossier, with Vaughan standing over his shoulder “like an instructor ready to help a promising pupil” (102), James begins for the first time to understand Vaughan’s vision (and by extension the significance of his own unarticulated desires); he observes in the photo of Gabrielle’s crushed sports car that the wreck “had turned her into a creature of free and perverse sexuality, releasing within its twisted bulkheads and leaking engine coolant all the deviant possibilities of her sex” (99). In pursuit of these deviant possibilities and in conjunction with the unleashed erotic energies that had come to dominate his life after his own crash, James develops an attraction to Gabrielle, which he consummates later in the novel:

My first orgasm, within the deep wound on [Gabrielle’s] thigh, jolted my semen along this channel, irrigating its corrugated ditch. […]

During the next few days my orgasms took place within the scars below her breast and within her left armpit, in the wounds on her neck and
shoulder, in these sexual apertures formed by fragmenting windshield louvres and dashboard dials in a high-speed impact, marrying through my own penis the car in which I had crashed and the car in which Gabrielle had met her near-death (179).

Gabrielle is one of Vaughan’s medical case studies come to life, an object of both scientific and pornographic interest whom he offers to James as a platform for sexual experimentation, and as a mode of indoctrination to the truth about sex and technology that Vaughan believes he has uncovered. For in Gabrielle we find the embodiment, perhaps even the apotheosis, of Vaughan’s theory of the limitless potential of a new sexuality fashioned by the perverse technology of the car crash, her wounds seen by both Vaughan and his protege James as “the templates for new genital organs” (177) that symbolize the future of infinite sexual possibility.53 In the end, Vaughan’s whole project attempts to prove that, while technology has played a role in the death of affect and the process of dehumanization unfolding at the heart of contemporary society, its perverse pornographic logics can also be exploited and used in the service of re-imagining and reconfiguring the human body and mind, and thus revitalizing the sexual and emotional lives of those who have become numbed to technology’s pervasive influence. And it is the automobile, the very symbol of late 20th century society and technology, that becomes the vehicle for doing so.

In articulating and promoting through his unorthodox research the significance of the interpenetrations between man and machine, then, Vaughan essentially awakens the narrator (and all other crash victims drawn into his orbit) to the promise of a new beginning, an emergence into a new world. The unlimited possibility produced by the mating of the pornographic and sexual with the scientific and technological in the form of the car crash is

53 The narrator suggests that the skills a sexual partner would need to handle Gabrielle’s transformed body are “the exact analogue of the other skills created by the multiplying technologies of the twentieth century” (100).
inevitably revealed by Vaughan to his followers as being the key to overcoming the sterile, dehumanized postmodern landscape in which they live—in other words, the key to achieving something akin to a physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual transcendence of their material reality. And indeed, while he may in one sense be a former scientist intent on researching the effects that road accidents have on humans, Vaughan is at the same time a prophet bent on preaching the profound consequence of his mission, a mission that for both himself and his self-described “disciple” James takes on religious dimensions throughout the course of the novel. As previously noted, images of birth and rebirth are prevalent in Crash, as when the narrator characterizes his recovery in the hospital as a second infancy. Later in the novel, however, as James becomes more and more devoted to Vaughan, these images begin to assume an even greater, almost holy resonance. James, for example, compares Gabrielle’s bloody rescue from the scene of her accident to the ritual of “an insane cultist in the American South [being] baptized in a font of lamb’s blood” (98). The idea of entering into a second life also applies once again to James’s body, this time striking a Lazarus-like note when he sees himself as a “resurrected man basking in the healed injuries that had brought about his first death” (157). The processes of baptism and resurrection are thus an integral part of Vaughan’s evangelical notions about how the possibilities unleashed by the experience of a traumatic automobile accident represent a path toward mankind’s deliverance to a heightened, more authentic reality. In fact, this act of deliverance comes into particularly sharp focus when Vaughan and James drop acid. Tripping on the drug and driving with Vaughan along the highway in hopes of instigating a crash of their own, James describes what he sees in the hallucinatory language of someone experiencing a religious ecstasy. The car he drives cuts through

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The theme of transcendence in Crash, which I discuss in more detail below, has been identified and explored by a number of other critics. See, for example, Francis, 165-7, and Gregory Stephenson, Out of the Night and into the Dream: A Thematic Study of the Fiction of J. G. Ballard (New York: Greenwood, 1991), 68-9.
“golden air” (196), his wounds flower into “paradisial creatures” (198), and oncoming traffic forms an “armada of angelic creatures [...] landing everywhere on these endless runways that covered the landscape” (199). Whereas once the technological landscape with its concrete and steel motorways marooned James on an artificial island and entombed him in an apartment block that took on the aspect of an “up-ended glass coffin,” here it appears to offer a route of escape, “flight paths” for the cars to “[ascend] from the traffic jams that had locked them together” (199). Influenced by the drug and by the intoxicating vision of Vaughan, James’s imagination has expanded to the point where he can literally see the potential of the automobile to go from being a mode of transportation constantly shuttling passive motorists around the imposing technological landscape, to a vehicle of transcendence raising those same motorists to a higher plane of existence – to “heaven” itself (209).

That the imagery of religion and transcendence becomes increasingly prevalent in the second half of the novel is by no means a coincidence, however. As Susan Sontag argues, any modern day attempts to transcend the material world – be they through art, sex, politics, or madness – “have chronically borrowed the prestige of the religious vocabulary.”55 This is because “the old religious imagination, with its secure monopoly of the total imagination, began in the late eighteenth century to crumble.”56 And yet nothing has since stepped in to take its place, a situation that Sontag describes as “the traumatic failure of modern capitalist society to provide authentic outlets for the perennial human flair for high-temperature visionary obsessions, to satisfy the appetite for exalted self-transcending modes of concentration and seriousness.”57 Therefore it is no surprise that James couches his descriptions, particularly of Vaughan’s attempts to harness the energies and possibilities of the car crash, in religious terms. For Vaughan is inevitably

55 Sontag, 69.
56 Ibid., 70.
57 Ibid.
a visionary figure who labors to replace that source of ultimate meaning and total imagination once provided by religion and spirituality but now left vacant by the material world of postmodernity and late capitalism. Whereas the prophets and visionaries of old could use the established framework of religion to raise their flocks from a sea of moral and spiritual torpor, and to make sense of a threatening and chaotic world, Vaughan has no similar framework upon which to rely. That is why, as we have seen, he seeks an “authentic outlet” for “his high-temperature visionary obsessions” in the only two things from which he believes one can derive any true meaning in the modern world, namely, sex and technology – and by extension, the intersection between the two that is symbolized by the car crash.

A secular prophet of the postmodern age dealing in a dangerous medium, Vaughan is eventually consumed by his passion, perishing in a wreck while attempting to crash into the car of actress Elizabeth Taylor in order to draw wider attention to his message and his mission. Evoking the image of Christ, James looks upon Vaughan’s dead body and describes his hands as being turned “palm upwards at his sides, […] covered with blood from his injured kneecaps” (9). The final chapter even sees James and all the others whose lives had been affected by Vaughan (Gabrielle, Helen, and Catherine) pay a visit to the wrecking yard in which Vaughan’s death car has been placed like pilgrims to the holy site of a sacred shrine (223). In one sense, then, Crash can be read as a novel that celebrates Vaughan’s martyrdom, a testament of devotion recounted by one of his disciples which also documents James’s personal awakening to “the real excitements of the car crash” and enacts his desire to spread Vaughan’s word and carry on his work. One can even see in James’s awakening to the sexual possibilities unleashed by the car crash an analogue to Ballard’s own awakening in Crash to the power and possibility of graphic representations of sexuality in literary fiction, the significant similarities between the two perhaps acknowledged in the author’s choice to
name his protagonist after himself. And indeed, that the narrator and author share a name further suggests that, like James, Ballard also admires and believes to some degree in the experimental spirit, ambition, and motivation behind Vaughan’s mission, tacitly endorsing its perpetuation in the survival of his narrator and namesake. For Vaughan’s (and James’s) experiments are essentially Ballard’s experiments, as well. Ballard is after all the one who famously formulated the equation “Sex x Technology = The Future,” and Crash is the laboratory in which he tests out this hypothesis. Through the actions and obsessions of the rogue scientist and the narrator, Ballard strains the limits of novelistic representation by uniting the conventions of realism and pornography to depict in vivid, realistic detail the violent impulses and unconventional sexual desires inherent within contemporary society, and to explore what happens when these forces are unleashed. Just as Vaughan does with James, Ballard takes the reader to the frontiers of consciousness and offers a crash to conventional modes of understanding and perception, using not the literal space of the automobile but rather the artistic space of the English novel to do so. Crash, in other words, stands as an example of the increasingly outdated medium of the English novel form being updated and adapted by Ballard for the purpose of both exposing the psychological, emotional, and imaginative impoverishment of our present day technologically mediated existence, as well as experimenting with the possibilities offered by sex and technology for moving beyond that existence.

But in the end it is Ballard’s authorial project to examine through fiction the limits of embracing the erotic and deathly drives at the heart of the postmodern landscape, and not Vaughan’s project to achieve transcendence by becoming one with technology, that ultimately succeeds. As Sontag cautioned, contemporary society “provides mainly demonic vocabularies in which to situate that need [for transcendence] and from which to initiate action and construct rites of behavior,” which oftentimes lead down a path to
self-destruction. Vaughan’s mission, relying as it does on the violent and death-dealing vocabularies and consequences of the car crash, is therefore revealed by the novel to be inevitably a self-defeating and self-destructive one. Indeed, while the narrative voice often strikes a morally and ethically neutral tone throughout the course of the novel as James bears witness to and engages in a host of obscene and often deviant behaviors, there are subtle indications that Ballard has not drawn the same conclusions about Vaughan’s experiments as his narrator has. For instance, it becomes apparent to the reader in the latter stages of the novel that Vaughan is becoming increasingly unhinged and dangerous, and that not all characters welcome this turn of events. When Vaughan turns his attention to Catherine and repeatedly attempts to crash her car, Catherine does not appear to be as “calm” (214) and willing to be sacrificed for Vaughan’s cause as the narration suggests. Glossed over by the narrator are details which indicate Catherine’s fear of Vaughan: her suggestion to call the police (214) and her obvious moment of panic when Vaughan nearly runs her over on the street (219). Yet another subtle hint that Vaughan’s lofty aspirations for a kind of cult of the car crash are not only dangerous but doomed to failure comes right after the scene in which Vaughan and James drop acid and view the highway as being full of objects and creatures of flight. Images of flying angels, that is, soon give way to images of flies once James comes down from the drug: “Flies crawled across the oil-smeared windshield, vibrating against the glass. […] The flies covered Vaughan’s face, hovering around his mouth and nostrils as if waiting for the rancid liquors distilled from the body of a corpse” (204). Although only a visual hallucination, the flies are an unheeded warning from James’s unconscious that this kind of transcendence cannot be maintained, that it must eventually come crashing down to earth and lead possibly to death. In these two examples, then, we get a sense that although Ballard may

58 Ibid.
admire the sentiment behind Vaughan’s single-minded drive to chart a new path and seek a higher plane of existence through the experience of the car crash, he also diverges from his narrative self in recognizing the limits of such an endeavor.59

And yet it was for the very reason of understanding the limits of this endeavor to play out to their extremes the deviant and destructive sexual and technological logics of the postmodern landscape that J. G. Ballard wrote Crash in the first place. Invoking Joseph Conrad and Lord Jim,60 Ballard once said in an interview that it is necessary for one to partake in “the deliberate immersion of oneself in all sorts of destructive impulses – let’s say the deliberate immersion of one’s imagination in all sorts of destructive impulses.”61 Vaughan and the fictionalized James Ballard, in other words, are J. G. Ballard’s attempt through an act of the imagination to immerse himself (and the reader) in the destructive, the pornographic, and the obscene impulses of contemporary society within the safety of the novelistic medium. Because – as Crash demonstrates – it is through the novel and the imagination, and not through any sort of physical and potentially dangerous enactment of such impulses, that one can best discover the most effective means of negotiating and even transcending the oppressive realities of postmodernity. And Ballard’s particular tool for achieving this is what he calls the “morally free psychopathology of metaphor.”62 In Crash, Ballard works through and attempts to understand the dominant metaphors of a society that equates humans and machines, nature and technology, sex and the automobile through characters who take these metaphoric correspondences literally. As Andrzej Gasiorek puts it, “The book’s subtlety lies in the fact

59 For a slightly different take on this point, see Francis, 167.

60 The lines in Lord Jim to which Ballard alludes are “The way is to the destructive element submit yourself...” and “In the destructive element immerse.” Joseph Conrad, Lord Jim (London: Penguin, 1989), 200.


62 Ibid.
that what it treats as metaphor, its characters construe as quiddity. They are, in short, poor readers, who prove incapable of interpreting the subtexts of a culture in which the car, a metaphoric object par excellence, carries a potent psycho-sexual freight that needs to be decoded."\textsuperscript{63} Crash attempts to decode these cultural subtexts, emphasizing the central role art and the imagination must play in doing so, while highlighting the dangers posed by those who, like Vaughan, literalize the metaphors suggested by the postmodern landscape and carry them over into reality, “into the domain where [they have] no place,” eventually unleashing “an id-driven psychopathology that lays waste to human life.”\textsuperscript{64}

While Vaughan and James ultimately fail to discover through the car crash the means by which humans can overcome the artificial, deathly, and dehumanized nature of the contemporary world, it is through the novel Crash that Ballard opens up for himself, his readers, and his fellow writers new possibilities for exploring and confronting that world. As we have seen in this chapter, Crash draws together the spirit of experimentalism, certain realist conventions, and most importantly the subgenre of pornography in order to update the English novel and adapt it to the complexities and realities of late 20\textsuperscript{th} century England. With Crash, Ballard remakes the commonplace that had become the English novel, infusing elements of pornography into realist narrative in order to construct a more faithful depiction of a society dominated by its own pornographic obsessions with science, technology, and media; to transgress the obsolete limits of traditional novelistic representation by presenting in explicit detail sexual behaviors that both reflect and are shaped by the forces of an ever changing and challenging postmodern world; and to treat sex in general as a critical metaphor for understanding the liberating yet volatile and potentially

\textsuperscript{63} Andrzej Gaziorek, \textit{J. G. Ballard} (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2005), 84.

\textsuperscript{64} Ibid., 212.
harmful social and psychological energies coursing through the heart of our present day technological landscape. Considered the first pornographic novel based on technology,\(^\text{65}\) *Crash* is also significant because it is the first in a long line of postwar novels to openly and purposely derive inspiration from the pornographic imagination, the first to push the subgenre of pornography to the level of high literary art. In the end, this repurposed form allows for a more viable space for experimenting with important ideas and content relevant to the condition of late capitalism, ideas and content once considered too taboo, too extreme, too out of step with the traditional aims of particular modes of novelistic representation. *Crash* provides for its bereft literary historical period, therefore, a critical artistic testing ground for new modes of perception and experience; ultimately demonstrating in this and through this particular novel that it is the form of a revitalized English novel that can serve as the true vehicle for understanding and transcending the impediments to human society, culture, psychology, and imagination presented by the current milieu. Indeed, in deftly and subtly highlighting the dangers and impossibility of seeing in technology, particularly in the automobile, a vehicle for transcendence to a more authentic and heightened reality, *Crash* achieves a kind of transcendence of its own, moving beyond the realist and experimentalist debate holding back innovation in the postwar novel and toward a future of unfettered, uncensored novelistic representation more realistically in tune with, not only the role of sex in modern society, but also with modern society itself. Susan Sontag wrote of her ideal artist-pornographer, “He who transgresses not only breaks a rule. He goes somewhere that the others do not; and he knows something that others don’t know.”\(^\text{66}\) J. G. Ballard, so influenced by Sontag and so eager to embrace the truths revealed by the pornographic imagination, is clearly that

\(^{65}\text{Ballard, “Some Words...”, 45-54.}\)

\(^{66}\text{Sontag, 71.}\)
trailblazer in postwar British fiction who can truly be said to be the first to fit this description.\textsuperscript{67} And while I suggested earlier that Sontag is to Ballard what Vaughan is to James, in the end it is Ballard who becomes a Vaughan-like figure (albeit a more inspiring and successful one), prompting other novelists toward an awakening, an awakening to the vast potentials inherent in a once dying literary form that can and must be remade and reborn through the consideration and implementation of pornography as both a high literary style and a subject of serious artistic interest.

\textsuperscript{67} Sontag had called Ballard "one of the most important, intelligent voices in contemporary fiction."
Chapter Two.

Children of the Revolution:
Martin Amis’s Dead Babies

I.

Of the next wave of English novelists to follow J. G. Ballard in breaking from the conventions of postwar realism and experimentalism, and in establishing pornography as both a requisite novelistic style and a representative subject of the contemporary period, it is Martin Amis who stands out most distinctly. The son of Kingsley Amis, the highest profile practitioner of postwar realism, Martin had made his first splash on the London literary scene at the age of 24 with The Rachel Papers (1973), a critical and commercial success. His second novel, however, would turn out to be very different. That novel, entitled Dead Babies (1975), would represent a significant change in Martin Amis’s style and focus as an author, a change which would indicate that it had been the publication of Crash in 1973 and not the publication of his own novel in the same year that had had the greater impact on Amis. Considered by most critics as well as the author himself to be a minor work at best, Dead Babies should instead be considered nothing less than a milestone in British fiction of the 1970s, representing as it does the first clear engagement with and extension of the shocking yet artistically innovative work begun by Ballard. Its very title, in fact, is designed to shock, to provoke, to put the reader off guard. The title announces that no subject is off limits and that nothing is sacred, and indeed nothing is sacred in this novel. A black comedy which takes place at an English country house at a time only eight to ten years into the future, Dead Babies follows ten young adults of college age who gather together for a weekend of deviant sexual escapades and illicit drug use. More than just the extended debauch that they had been anticipating, however, the weekend also
sees the characters enduring a series of physical and emotional humiliations and tortures, all of which culminates in mass murder. Not surprisingly, then, the appearance of Dead Babies in 1975 had managed to elicit from readers the same sort of dismay and confusion as Crash had done only two years earlier. And while in a number of details very different from Crash, Dead Babies must nonetheless be read as being a critical continuation of the tradition established by that earlier, seminal novel, particularly in the way its author deploys graphic images of sex and violence, as well as in the way he uses various other pornographic conventions to construct his narrative. For, as we shall see in the present chapter, the young Amis had been very much emboldened by Ballard’s example. Though at first slow to recognize its importance (he had initially given Ballard a very unfavorable review), Amis eventually follows Crash in re-imagining the English novel as a vital medium whose traditional formal and substantive boundaries must be radically redrawn in order to better capture the intense, often obscene and unsettling realities of a postmodern England.

As we will also see, however, Amis’s attempt to provide a portrait of the state of late 20th century English culture is as much an extension of Ballard’s experiments with novelistic form and content and the pornographic imagination as it is an attempt for Martin Amis to find a distinctive artistic voice of his own, as well as to give voice to the unique experience of his own particular generation. Unlike Ballard who had been born in 1930 and had grown up during the war years, Amis had represented in the 1970s the coming of age of the Baby Boomer set and, by extension, the arrival of a very different historical perspective. His was a peer group that had actually been raised in the hothouse atmosphere of 60s countercultural rebellion, had come into an early sexual maturity that coincided with the febrile heights and excesses of the Sexual Revolution. Thus, it is the individual and collective effects of growing up within this cultural context that is of primary
interest to Amis in Dead Babies. What he presents us with in his second novel, therefore, is a comic yet disturbingly explicit dramatization of the permissive society and its liberal social attitudes taken to their logical extremes. Dead Babies allows Amis, in other words, to expose a hedonistic and narcissistic culture glutted on free love and unchecked personal liberties, and to anatomize the cynical and sadistic, emotionally inert and perversely amoral crop of young Britons which such a culture had inevitably produced. And it is in his depiction of these young Britons that we see Amis drawing inspiration from but also, more importantly, moving beyond Ballard’s precedent, and adapting the artistic possibilities of the pornographic imagination to suit the specific thematic requirements of his narrative. We will see in the next section, for example, how Amis appropriates and experiments with the pornographic conventions of plot structure, character development, and narrative voice established by the Marquis de Sade in The 120 Days of Sodom, recognizing as he does in Sade’s portrayal of Enlightenment era French libertinage an illuminating parallel with the contemporary era of social and sexual excess that serves as his novel’s main focus. A child of the Sexual Revolution just as much as the twentysomething characters in Dead Babies, Amis will be seen in this chapter as taking Crash’s innovations as a point of departure for his own fictional exploration of a generation whose experiences of reality prove to be best expressed through the language, imagery, and formal structures of pornography. And in turn we will see Amis discovering a distinctive authorial voice that will resonate throughout the rest of his career.

In the following section of this chapter, therefore, I will begin by considering the young Amis’s two most important creative influences. I will examine how his complicated relationships with the works of Kingsley Amis and J. G. Ballard helped to shape his burgeoning attitudes toward the English novel form. Of the latter writer in particular I will demonstrate how it is
that Amis’s initial public posturing in reviews and newspaper articles against the extremely obscene and pornographic novel Crash, as well as against the social and artistic phenomenon of pornography in general, is undermined in Dead Babies – itself an extremely obscene and pornographic novel. Indeed, we will see Amis the critic giving way to Amis the novelist as he borrows freely from Ballard, even going so far as to plagiarize his work. But, more than that, we will see Amis transgressing the limits of novelistic representation, much as Ballard had done, by treating pornography as both a relevant subject of artistic inquiry and as an essential feature of the contemporary English novel. In light of this experimentation with the novel genre, I will further argue that Dead Babies, billed by its authors and by critics as a Menippean satire, may instead be read as something of a Sadeian satire, consciously built as the narrative is on the model of Sade’s The 120 Days of Sodom. That is, we will see how Amis uses this specific pornographic model to dramatize and to satirize, through a representative cast of dissolute characters, the shallow, decadent, and perverse state of English society during the decade of the 1970s. And I will also demonstrate how Amis uses this model, not only to stimulate the reader to an awareness of the moral and emotional bankruptcy of contemporary society, but also to prompt the reader to interrogate his own relationship to and possible complicity in a broader process of cultural decline. Finally, in the concluding section of the present chapter, I will consider how Dead Babies represents a rejection of the dominant and restrictive formal and thematic conventions of traditional postwar English fiction and a movement toward a new kind of realism, one whose reliance on the pornographic makes it better equipped to faithfully render, what Mikhail Bakhtin calls, “reality itself in the process of its unfolding.” In fact, I will even posit that Amis draws on Bakhtinian theory to give legitimacy to his experimentation with the low art form of pornography, to place Dead Babies within the context of a larger, developing
narrative of the English novel’s re-birth through the elevation of the pornographic as a viable and essential novelistic form. Overall, this chapter aims to portray *Dead Babies* as another representative of a new form of novel that rethinks accepted notions of realism and experimentalism, as well as reaffirms the fresh, creative force of the pornographic imagination as an indispensable tool of the contemporary English novelist.

II.

Before we can begin a thorough investigation of Martin Amis’s 1975 novel *Dead Babies*, it is of course important that we first consider the two novelists whose work had most preoccupied Amis during this formative period. The first of these two novelists that we must consider is Amis’s father Kingsley. As we have already learned in the introduction to this chapter and in the introductory chapter of this study, Kingsley Amis had loomed large upon the landscape of postwar English literature. His 1954 comic novel *Lucky Jim*, about a lower class university lecturer named Jim Dixon and his vexed relationship with the high snobbery of academic life, had signaled a bold return to the realist style in the English novel in the years following the end of the Second World War. Kingsley Amis’s novels like those of many from his generation had been a reaction to, as critic Gavin Keulks puts it, “the narrative experimentation that so marked literary modernism,” and had instead been inspired by earlier, more socially conscious realist authors who had “developed their characters within the contexts of firmly established social networks and [had] portrayed them in language that refused to sacrifice either lucidity or reason.”¹ What is more, like their predecessors, the postwar realists produced works that “posited a fixed moral landscape,

insisting upon the essential validity of social as well as literary artistic values.”

Indeed, these writers would often update their realist principles in order to engage with the pressing modern issues faced by England in the postwar period, tackling matters such as changing perceptions of class and the changing relations between the sexes, but they did so in a formally and substantively measured and controlled way (on the subject of sex, particularly) so as to remain in keeping with the central tenets of the realist aesthetic. And it was these tenets that would soon come to dominate the English novel once again, just as it was Kingsley Amis who would soon come to represent this dominant aesthetic.

But it would also be against this literary aesthetic that Martin Amis would eventually rebel. Martin’s rebellion, however, was not yet readily apparent in his debut novel The Rachel Papers. Published in 1973, The Rachel Papers is a comic novel that follows its protagonist Charles Highway as he courts a girl named Rachel in the year before he leaves home to attend university. The novel is, according to critic James Diedrick, “an audacious first novel [that] makes high comedy out of its own self-reflexiveness” and, among other things, “can be read as a (male) adolescent coming of age story [that] can just as easily be taken as a parody of the genre, not to mention a parody of the kind of comic romance Kingsley produced in Lucky Jim.”

But while Diedrick considers Martin’s debut as an “exorcism of his father’s precedent” and of “his father’s generation,” The Rachel Papers – as Martin himself later put it – is only “mildly and peripherally post-modern” and may instead be considered, like his treatment of the subject of sexuality in the

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2 Ibid.
4 Ibid., 36.
5 Ibid., 47.
same novel, “obsequiously conventional.”7 As a result, rather than causing a rift in the family, the novel had actually been met with approval by the ever critical Kingsley; after reading it, the father wrote a letter to his son, telling him that he thought the book was “good and great fun, too.”8 Dead Babies, on the other hand, would prompt a very different sort of paternal response. Martin Amis writes of its cold reception in his memoir Experience, “I felt the squeeze of immediate hurt when Kingsley, who claimed to like my first novel, said he ‘couldn’t get on’ with my second.”9 Kingsley’s inability to make it through Dead Babies is, of course, no surprise. This second novel of Martin’s is, unlike its predecessor, far more eager to explore extreme subjects and experiences and to depict them graphically, far less observant of postwar realist conventions and values, and generally inclusive of the sort of formal postmodern experimentation (pastiche, intrusive narrator, etc.) that Kingsley and his kind had always found so abhorrent.10 This is to say that it is Dead Babies and not The Rachel Papers that marks a clear and decisive break from Kingsley Amis’s precedent and aesthetic, and ultimately represents the blueprint for what would become most characteristic in Martin’s later work.11 It is this novel, in which its jaded young college student characters consider “reading an English novel” to be as antiquated and unfashionable a pastime as “eating a cooked breakfast [or] going to bed in pajamas,”12 that openly sets itself against tradition and seeks by various

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7 Ibid., 110.
8 Qtd. in Zachary Leader, The Life of Kingsley Amis (New York: Pantheon Books, 2006), 615.
10 As Elaine Feinstein writes, “Second novels are difficult; following success is difficult; one thing Martin Amis ensures: Dead Babies offers no repetition of the joyous hilarity of The Rachel Papers. It is more like a declaration of war on the assumptions that made the first book possible,” “Killing Time,” New Statesman (October 17 1975), 480.
11 Not surprisingly, then, Kingsley’s dismissal of Dead Babies would be the beginning of an Amis family tradition; Kingsley would have a very similar reaction to most of Martin’s subsequent novels. As Amis had written in a 1995 New Yorker article, “My father has read my first, third, and seventh novels, and none of the others. He can’t get through them. He sends them windmilling through the air after twenty or thirty pages,” “Buy My Book, Please,” New Yorker (June 26-July 3 1995), 97.
12 Martin Amis, Dead Babies (New York: Vintage, 1991), 10. All direct references to Dead Babies will hereafter be indicated parenthetically within the body of the text.
means to make the novel genre relevant again, to make it worthy of the unique historical moment in which its author finds himself just as his father and his fellow realists had refashioned the genre to suit their own historical moment. Here Martin Amis recognizes just how much the experience of contemporary reality in England had changed since these postwar realists had begun recording it, and thus Dead Babies becomes his first sustained and defiant attempt at redressing this problem by bringing the slowly stagnating form, content, and thematic scope of the English novel into greater accord with the times.

If Kingsley and the realists had represented a reigning model of fiction writing that was no longer a suitable one to follow, however, then where did Amis find the inspiration he needed to take the novel in the direction that he felt it needed to go? As Diedrick and other critics have noted, young Martin’s search for guidance and literary mentorship during this formative period is similar to that of an orphan questing for a surrogate parent; that is, the general lack of encouragement and clashing artistic aesthetic that he had experienced with his father had created in Amis an impulse to find what he lacked in the work of other, older male writers whose views on fiction diverged significantly from that of Kingsley’s — to find what he lacked, in other words, in the work of “substitute literary ‘fathers.’” Most notable and most widely commented upon among these influential substitutes were Vladimir Nabokov and Saul Bellow. Often less recognized by critics for its impact on the developing creative imagination of Martin Amis, however, is the work of J. G. Ballard. As I had demonstrated in the previous chapter, Ballard’s novel Crash had proposed a new way forward for the novel in England with its shrewd synthesis of experimentalism and realism, its creation of a

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13 Diedrick, Understanding..., 13. James Diedrick reads Amis’s situation as a quite literal instantiation of “the anxiety of influence,” noting, “According to Bloom’s theory, the proximity and intensity of his father’s influence have led him to seek a series of father substitutes whose influence he can acknowledge without filial conflict,” 13-14. For a more expansive treatment of this subject, see Keulks, Father and Son.
postmodern pornographic realist style, and its breakthroughs in novelistic content. *Crash* had quickly established itself as a seminal text that few could ignore, and Amis was certainly no exception.

But at first it seemed that, in J. G. Ballard and his particular use of pornographic convention, Amis had found yet another model against which he would have to define himself, this model being one that he identified as inhabiting the broadly “experimental” end of the fiction writing spectrum. In his highly sarcastic review of *Crash* in a July 1973 issue of the *Observer*, Amis begins by lamenting that “[e]xperimental novels have a habit of looking easy (certainly easier to write than to read), but their failure-rate is alarmingly high – approaching, I sometimes fear 100 per cent.” He follows this pronouncement with a quick dismissal of Ballard’s previous work of formal experimentation *The Atrocity Exhibition*, and then sets about dismantling his new novel *Crash*. After a sneeringly reductive plot summary and some poking fun at the number of times Ballard repeats certain words and phrases throughout his book, our reviewer concludes:

> *Crash* remains heavily flawed: loose construction, a perfunctory way with minor characters, and a lot of risible overwriting make it hard not to see the book as just an exercise in vicious whimsy. True, the novelist must take from life what he can use rather than what he dares print; but Mr Ballard’s obsessions are too one-colour and too solemnly redeployed to sustain a whole book. In science fiction Ballard had a tight framework for his unnerving ideas; out on the lunatic fringe, he can only flail and shout.\(^\text{15}\)

\(^{14}\) Amis, War..., 95.

\(^{15}\) Ibid., 96-7.
Here we see Amis casting harsh judgment upon the novel’s prose style and structure, but also we see in his accusations of “vicious whimsy,” narrow authorial “obsessions,” and “unnerving ideas […] out on the lunatic fringe” an uneasiness with the novel’s shocking and subversive content. Amis, it might be said, is almost troubled by how far Ballard pushes the envelope with respect to his unusual conceptual formulations and depictions of extreme acts of sex and violence, at one point even obliquely raising a question about “the nature of the author’s personal problems.”

“Ballard,” Amis writes, “isn’t out to rationalize but to actualize, to show us perversion from the inside. And this particular perversion needs all the actualizing it can get: beside it, Joyce’s penchant for excrement and Burrough’s interest in scaffolds seem sadly quaint.” This objection to Ballard’s graphic representation of perverse sexuality finds an echo in the sharp criticism of pornography which had been the focus of Amis’s other journalistic writings of the same period. In his 1973 articles on strip clubs and porn magazines, for instance, Amis had singled out pornography as a corrupting form of entertainment and as a ruinous social phenomenon responsible in part for the dehumanization, lack of affect, and collapse of morality plaguing postmodern society.

In one article, he even describes pornographers with the same epithet he uses to describe Ballard — that is, as comprising an unsettling

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16 Ibid., 96.
17 Ibid., 95. To be fair, Amis does concede what he claims to be a “generous rationale” that the use of this perverse, pornographic imagery “isn’t designed to convert or excite the reader” — though Amis doesn’t bother to look too deeply into what it is that Ballard is trying to achieve by deploying this sort of transgressive content, 96.
18 Amis had written these articles under the pseudonym “Bruno Holbrook.” See especially “Fleshpots,” New Statesman (September 14 1973), 362 and “Coming in Handy,” New Statesman (December 14 1973), 922-23. In the former, for instance, he describes the feelings he had experienced while attending a strip club as “craven, indignant, ridiculous, feebly perverted.” And in the latter he describes what he sees as the dehumanizing effects of pornographic magazines on both its subjects and on its consumers: “For the most part the lower-order mags are grey, dispiriting bestiaries, in which haggard and portly persons display their charms with a combination of listlessness and unalluring candour. Legs are parted, breasts cupped, derrières hoisted towards camera, while the face — in life, the sexiest part of the naked female — remains dourly stupefied or else contorted in cynical ecstasy. […] On the one hand, the nudes; on the other, the husky, nudging captions: caught in that sensual music, presumably, the subscriber grinds himself empty.”
and unstable “lunatic fringe.” Amis, in other words, seems to be drawing in his review of Crash a damning connection between Ballard’s work and the violent, desensitizing work of pornography. He suggests, in effect, that Ballard’s novel is failed art because it fails to contain, represent, or critique the culture of excess that has come to define the contemporary world but has instead succeeded in becoming just another manifestation of it. In Ballard, therefore, it would seem that Amis had found the antithesis of Kingsley’s postwar realism but that this particular alternative represented another problematic extreme. It would be between these two extremes, between an outmoded realism and an overreaching experimentalism, then, that Amis would have to articulate his own distinctive novelistic approach.

Or that is at least how Amis had publicly formulated his dilemma. In reality, however, his second novel Dead Babies demonstrates less an aversion to and more of an affinity for Ballard’s precedent, the novel redeploying as it does various Ballardian concepts, tropes, and narrative strategies in its attempt to portray the amorality and emotional emptiness of a post-Sexual Revolution generation. For Crash is far more nuanced and makes use of elements of pornography far more shrewdly than Amis gives it credit for doing in his review. Indeed, Amis comes across in said article as willfully blind, as well as spiteful and defensive and personally affronted by Crash. Perhaps this is because of his feeling at the time of having been upstaged by a novel that had provoked the kind of sensation and effect that he was hoping The Rachel Papers would provoke with its publication only a few months later. Regardless of whether or not the 1973 review was a product of his desire to

19 This same phrase comes from Amis’s 1973 New Statesman review of the collection The Best of Forum. See Amis, War…., 58.
20 That Amis appears here to be reacting to feelings of inadequacy are borne out somewhat by his later admission that he had always felt that The Rachel Papers was conventional compared to Crash, and that his own impulse toward creating change in the English novel had seemed at the time to compare to Ballard’s impulse in the same way that a social democrat’s convictions compare to that of a Marxist’s: “In literary terms I was a social democrat and Ballard was a marxist” (War…., 96). His aggressiveness toward Ballard was indeed, as he admits in the introduction to The War on Cliché, a defense mechanism prompted by his own anxieties of influence, xv. In a footnote in that same collection of essays, Amis goes on to confess: “It took me a long time to get the hang of Crash, and of Ballard. My review, here, is so straitlaced that I hesitate to preserve it. But I do: readers should always be wrestling with the writers who feel intimate to them,” 96.
underplay Ballard’s novelistic achievements in order to bolster his own, the fact remains that his subsequent book Dead Babies ultimately takes the form of a novel that so clearly bears the mark of having been influenced by the older writer.

The Ballard influence, in fact, is so strong in this novel that it can easily be found at the most superficial textual level, namely, in passages that bear striking similarities to passages from Ballard’s work. For example, at one point in Dead Babies the characters discuss the existence of The Conceptualists, an art collective-cum-terrorist organization whose members are said to shower large cities with “a bizarre confetti of pornographic postcards, atrocity photographs, suppressed medical reproductions, vetoed X-ray plates, and blacklisted urinalyses” and who perform “perversive sexual scenarios” – one of which includes “a stylized car crash, the impacted instrument panels of either vehicle stained with semen” (89). Here Amis clearly borrows from the language and imagery of both The Atrocity Exhibition and Crash in order to set an ominous tone and establish a key element in his narrative. In another scene, a Vaughan-like drug guru named Marvell Buzhardt explains that the drug he is about to administer to the other characters will send them all on a strange mental journey back into their respective pasts. He supports this claim by elaborating on a certain theory which has it that:

The central nervous system is a coded time scale [...] and each overlap of neurons and each spinal latitude marks a unit in neuronic time. The further down the CNS you go – through the hind brain, the medulla, into

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21 One might actually, and quite rightly, refer to these similarities as more than mere homage. And Amis himself does just that in a 2001 interview in The Telegraph, calling Dead Babies a “crude” work, one that is “riddled with little influences – indeed, plagiarisms,” “The Living V-Sign,” The Telegraph (January 26 2001).

22 The novel also alludes to Crash briefly in its portrait of the early days of the American character Skip, describing him as “the occasional witness of optimum sex tortures and genital mutilation profiles, a blank figure in the tumescent heat-hazed carscape, silent, unreflecting, and alone” (54).
the spinal track – gene activity increases and concentrates and you
descend into the neuronic gallery of your own past (163).

As it turns out, this concept which sets in motion a pivotal sequence of
events in the plot seems also to have been cribbed from the Ballardian
oeuvre, this time from the character of Dr. Bodkin who proposes a similar
theory in Ballard’s 1962 novel *The Drowned World*:

[The] central nervous system is a coded time scale, each nexus of
neurons and each spinal level marking a symbolic station, a unit of
neuronic time. The further down the CNS you move, from the hind-brain
through the medulla into the spinal cord, you descend back into the
neuronic past.23

Even in passing moments of description we see Amis hewing closely to
Ballard’s model. For instance, this darkly poetic line in Ballard’s 1974
novel *Concrete Island*, “The sodium lights shone down on the high span of the
overpass, rising into the air like some disused back entrance to the sky,”24
becomes in *Dead Babies*, “Overhead, the beams of a million streetlamps joined
in a shaft of neutral, watery sodium which filtered off into the sky like an
abandoned gateway to the night” (86). Highlighting the many irruptions of
Ballard’s voice within *Dead Babies* is not, however, to suggest that the Amis
novel is an unoriginal or derivative text. Rather, these similarities are
meant to demonstrate that behind all his petty critical bluster Martin Amis
had, by the time of his writing *Dead Babies, finally and most definitely

50th anniversary edition of the novel is introduced by Martin Amis. For an interesting reading on
Amis’s plagiaristic appropriation of this particular passage, see James Diedrick’s essay “J. G.
Ballard’s ‘Inner Space’ and the Early Fiction of Martin Amis” in *Martin Amis: Postmodernism and

24 J. G. Ballard, *Concrete Island* (New York, Picador, 2001), 26. Interestingly, Amis refers
specifically to this line in his review of Concrete Island. See Amis, War…, 99.
found in the figure of J. G. Ballard an artistic example to follow, a substitute literary "father" worthy of emulation.\textsuperscript{25}

Nowhere is this influence greater or more significant than in Amis’s treatment in \textit{Dead Babies} of pornography as both a subject of novelistic representation and as a source of narrative technique. In \textit{Dead Babies}, for example, we see Amis preoccupied in particular with the social and personal impact of the era of the permissive society and the Sexual Revolution, setting the narrative as he does a few years into the future in an England where “sexual lassitude and disgust [seem] to be everywhere among the young” (68) and where authentic sexual feeling has been replaced by the hollow eroticism of pornography and the all-pervasive “iconography of desire” (123). Amis paints a portrait of a world in which the wanton expressions of free love, the materialist rapacity of late capitalism, and the limitless use of drugs have created a succeeding generation whose members are addicted yet also desensitized to sex and violence, deadened to their own emotions and those of others, and estranged from any coherent moral framework or guiding ethical impulse. And Amis is able to depict this world in his novel because he chooses, for the first time, to immerse himself in the creative element of the pornographic imagination. Here, in other words, he does what he had only two years earlier chided Ballard for doing: he tests the limits of novelistic representation with graphic portrayals of deviant sexuality and violence – in this case, of everything from scatological episodes (13, 56-7) to gang rape (170-2), from bestiality to snuff films (165) – in order to confront the reader with a hellish vision of a plausible future that is projected from the grim tendencies of an ailing present and in which boundaries no longer exist and nothing is taboo. Like Ballard, then, Amis seeks to understand and convey

\textsuperscript{25} On the other hand, one might make the argument that these moments of “plagiarism” in the novel are meant to be satirical jibes at Ballard’s work, especially the references to \textit{Crash}. However, never does it quite seem that these passages are being imbued with parodic language or held up for direct ridicule; these moments either help to advance the plot or are references too obscure to be anything more than a young writer coming into his powers by paying dubious homage to that of an older writer at the height of his.
the full magnitude of his subject by venturing out onto the "lunatic fringe." 26 For, this fringe is essentially a place that Susan Sontag describes in "The Pornographic Imagination" as one which offers "a peculiar access to some truth [...] about sensibility, about sex, about individual personality, about despair, about limits." 27 And, just as Ballard had done before him, Amis attempts in Dead Babies to access this truth and in so doing becomes, to use Sontag’s words, "a broker in madness [...] making forays into and taking up positions on the frontiers of consciousness [...] and reporting back what’s there." 28 But of course in order to report back on a subject that itself exceeds conventional limits of experience and understanding the artist must also push to expand the representational boundaries of his medium. Having once accused Ballard of lacking a "tight framework" in Crash, it would seem that by the time of his writing Dead Babies Amis had found that the old, tight frameworks of novelistic convention (Kingsley Amis’s postwar humanistic realism, for one) 29 are in fact no longer suitable to the task of representing the postmodern condition. What he appears instead to have learned in the intervening years is that the implementation of the formal and substantive elements of pornography can help to enlarge these restrictive frameworks and thus better allow the English novelist to unmask and evaluate the true perversities and destructive energies existing at the heart of contemporary society. Dead Babies, then, is the evident result of this change in thinking.

26 While most critics stopped short of accusing Amis of being some kind of madman, as Amis had indirectly done in his review of Crash, there was in fact a collective sense of bewilderment and disgust among early reviewers of Dead Babies (not unlike the bewilderment and disgust felt by reviewers of the Ballard novel), as well as a general disappointment in the radical departure in tone and subject from that of Amis’s first and more conventional novel The Rachel Papers. See for instance, Jerome Charyn, review of Dead Babies, by Martin Amis, The New York Review of Books (February 8 1976), 3, and Elaine Feinstein, “Killing Time,” New Statesman, (October 17 1975), 480.


28 Ibid., 45

29 As well as any derivatives of that postwar humanistic realism, of which The Rachel Papers is one. As Gavin Keulks writes in Father and Son, “An aggressive, explicit, and relentless satire whose prose was described by one reviewer as ‘excremental,’ Dead Babies confronts not only the humanism that undergirds his father’s novel [Ending Up (1974)] but also the comic good humor that made The Rachel Papers so successful,” 140.
In it, Amis takes on the creative challenges and possibilities offered by pornography, adapting this artistic subgenre to suit his own abiding thematic preoccupations. All of this, that is to say, reflects both a decisive break from his earlier, more conventional approach in *The Rachel Papers*, as well as a repudiation of his previous skepticism of the pornographic experiment in the English novel begun so controversially yet so promisingly in *Crash*.

The pornographic, therefore, is deployed in a myriad of ways in *Dead Babies*. Like the contemporary reality that it is meant to depict, Amis’s second novel is suffused with pornography – its plot, its characterization, its narrative voice, and of course its content all bear in some way the mark of the pornographic. And by analyzing one illuminating and representative passage in particular we can begin to get a better sense of just how it is that pornographic convention is meant to function in this novel. The passage in question appears during a scene in which all six of the inhabitants of the Hertfordshire country house known as Appleseed Rectory assemble with their four guests to watch a series of disturbing pornographic videos. The narrator describes the content of the videos thusly:

Various unspeakable acts had been variously portrayed. A porker had indeed made a young lady his, and there had been an additional coupling between a twelve-year-old boy and a representative of the monkey tribe. Large helpings of excrement had been consumed […], people had showered in urine, and they were shown a genuine sex death, in which an elderly actress was asphyxiated on a brace of craning phalloi. The remainder was a jangling bestiary, in whopping closeup, of gaping vaginas, rhubarb penises, and gouged behinds (165).

For a different take on Ballard’s influence on Amis’s early fiction, see James Diedrick’s thoroughly researched and highly informative essay “J. G. Ballard’s ‘Inner Space’ and the Early Fiction of Martin Amis” in *Martin Amis: Postmodernism and Beyond*, 180-196. In this essay, Diedrick suggests that it is primarily the science fictional, technological, and apocalyptic aspects of Ballard’s work that had most influenced Amis. Diedrick, however, appears to gloss over the fact that it is Ballard’s pioneering engagement with the conventions of pornography in his novel *Crash* that also significantly impacts Amis’s work, particularly *Dead Babies*. This is a critical oversight which it is the aim of the present chapter to correct.
In a sense, the first sentence of this passage appears self-referential in that it can just as easily serve as a succinct account of the novel itself. And this is because, rather than leave his description of the scenes in these videos to the broad and circumspect designation of “various unspeakable acts,” the narrator goes further—with his words the unspeakable becomes spoken, the limits of novelistic representation become transgressed through the very act of his narration. Here, in detailing one sexual scenario more outrageous than the one before it, Amis draws attention to his text as a pornographic medium and trades on the shock value of his deviant imagery in order, in part, to designate *Dead Babies* as a significant deviation from what had once been considered unrepresented and unrepresentable in English fiction. But the real power and thematic significance of this scene inevitably lie in how the characters react to what they see before them on the television screen. That is, far more obscene than anything depicted in this pornographic catalogue is the fact that these porn films, as we learn from the narrator, leave “the room aweeze with boredom” (165). For the residents of Appleseed Rectory and their guests, not only do the videos fail to excite them but they also fail to evoke any emotion from them whatsoever. In fact, the language and images of destroyed bodies and taboo sexual unions, which in *Crash* had been used to describe the triggers of the ecstatic transcendence of characters like James and Vaughan, are here portrayed as decidedly inert, suggesting that Amis’s vision of the dehumanizing effects of postmodernity is even bleaker than Ballard’s. The characters of *Dead Babies*, that is to say, are the embodiment of the fashionable tenets of sexual liberation and revolution taken to their logical extremes; they are representatives of a future close at hand in which every possible sexual combination has been exhausted and every sexual desire acted upon, in which every conceivable taboo and boundary has been breached. For them, there is no
means of transcendence left, no authentic emotion or sensation left to access. And, as the above passage makes clear, this grim situation has resulted in the complete dissolution of their humanity. The narrator’s repeated mention of acts of bestiality and the use of the term “bestiary” to describe a series of closeups of human sexual organs, for example, suggests that postmodern man has devolved to the material state of an animal. And, like animals, the characters in the novel regard sex as merely “something your body does, like eating or shitting” (123). Moreover, their inability to be stirred by witnessing “a genuine sex death” further suggests that these characters are so desensitized by a culture oversaturated with sex and violence that they have become incapable of registering any sense of outrage or empathy for the suffering of others. In the end, we see that Amis is here adapting the pornographic convention of graphic sexual representation in order to face the reader with an appropriately unpleasant and unavoidable symbol of the decadence and greater corruption and decay of late 20th century English society. What is more, the depiction of the impassivity exhibited by Amis’s characters in this scene is an example of the author employing yet another pornographic convention to suit his larger aims. As Sontag notes, pornography often deals in scenes in which there is a “disparity between the understated or anesthetized feeling [of a character] and a large outrageous event, [an] incredible underreacting of the erotic agents to the situations in which they’re placed.”

Sontag adds that this absence of emotion is meant to leave space for the reader’s own “sexual reaction.” Amis, however, portrays his “underreacting” characters in the midst of the “outrageous event” of watching ultra-harcore porn, not to stimulate sexual arousal in the reader, but rather to arouse in his audience the kind of moral disgust that the characters of his novel so desperately lack.

31 Sontag, 54.
32 Ibid.
Of course, along with disgust the above passage may also elicit from the reader some uncomfortable laughter, and one might draw the conclusion that it and other passages like it throughout the novel are meant to be simple parodies of the pornographic. Indeed, the quote from Menippus with which Amis begins the novel would indicate that *Dead Babies* strives to be a satire, and plenty of critics have upheld this genre designation, comfortable as they are in accepting that pornography is just another of the author’s satirical targets. Surely, at times, Amis’s handling of certain subjects (particularly, the subject of porn) is funny – his image of an old woman becoming asphyxiated by a couple of craning penises is, after all, a note of dark, absurdist humor pitched to its highest key. But, as Sontag said of the 1958 American novel *Candy*, *Dead Babies* “may be funny, but it’s still pornography.” To quote Sontag again:

> [P]ornography isn’t a form that can parody itself. It is the nature of the pornographic imagination to prefer ready-made conventions of character, setting, and action. Pornography is a theatre of types, never of individuals. A parody of pornography, so far as it has any real competence, always remains pornography. Indeed, parody is one form of pornographic writing. Sade himself often used it [to invert] the moralistic fictions of Richardson.

In many ways, this description applies to *Dead Babies* and its use of pornography. And, as we will see in a moment, more than just exploiting the general pornographic convention of graphic sexual representation, Amis also experiments with these other “ready-made conventions” and even bases his

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33 The novel’s epigraph from Menippus reads: “...and so even when [the satirist] presents a vision of the future, his business is not prophecy; just as his subject is not tomorrow... it is today.”


35 Ibid., 51.
narrative in part on a Sadeian model. However, this is not to suggest that Amis adopts various pornographic forms in order to glorify pornography or to achieve the banal goal of titillating the reader. But neither does he draw on the pornographic simply to ridicule it. Rather, he does so because pornography is a form uniquely reflective of and capable of providing insight into the unbridled liberties and permissiveness of the post-Sexual Revolution age. He seeks, like Ballard had done, an appropriate form to suit his content, and ultimately it is not pornography that he satirizes or parodies so much as it is pornography that he uses to satirize and to parody, to represent and to critique, the degenerate, dehumanizing society that produces it.

It is perhaps no surprise then that, in attempting to contain and evaluate the decadence and cultural decline of his historical moment, Amis models his structuring of the plot, character, and narrative voice of Dead Babies on the standard of all pornographic literature: the Marquis de Sade’s The 120 Days of Sodom (1785), another controversial work of fiction that had emerged out of a volatile period of social and moral flux, a period that had given rise to liberating but also easily corruptible liberal philosophies extolling the virtues of freedom, of pleasure, of the individual self. Amis, that is to say, sees in Sade’s time a reflection of his own, and thus the similarities between Dead Babies and Sodom are many, as Amis adapts the full range of ready-made conventions of Sadeian tropes and techniques to fit his

36 In spite of the fact that it is unfinished, Sontag sees The 120 Days of Sodom as “probably the most ambitious pornographic book ever conceived (in terms of scale), a kind of summa of the pornographic imagination,” 52. Sade himself touts the definitive nature and ambition of his work in his introduction to Sodom, “And now, friend-reader, you must prepare your heart and your mind for the most impure tale that has ever been told since our world began, a book the likes of which are met with neither amongst the ancients nor amongst us moderns,” The 120 Days of Sodom and Other Writings, trans. Austryn Wainhouse and Richard Seaver (New York: Grove Press, 1966), 253.

37 I refer of course to the decades of intellectual, political, and cultural foment leading up to the French Revolution, but also to the general period of Enlightenment thinking in which the liberal philosophies of individual liberty had paved the way for the dangerous and extreme philosophies of libertinism, to which Sade subscribed. In fact, “the hedonistic sensualism of the eighteenth century,” to use Simone de Beauvoir’s phrase in her essay on Sade, might even be called an eighteenth century “Sexual Revolution” of sorts – so it is no wonder that Amis identifies certain parallels between Sade’s historical moment and his own.
own narrative and thematic exploration of the condition of post-Sexual Revolution England. For instance, both novels contain plots that are linear in chronology yet episodic in nature. More specifically, the two works loosely structure their stories around a series of outrageous acts performed by and performed upon a cast of dissolute characters who assemble for a marathon of debauchery at a grand, isolated residence (in *Sodom* it’s a castle, in *Babies* it’s an English manor house). As Sontag says of the plot of *The 120 Days of Sodom*: “Sade’s express train of outrages tears along an interminable but level track … [and this makes] possible an endless, nonculminating kind of ultimately affectless activity.”

In following so closely Sade’s example, Amis achieves a similar effect in his novel. However, unlike Sade his goal is not to exalt libertinage but to expose the troubling aftereffects of its modern incarnation. In both texts the many episodic scenes seem merely to exist in order to confront the characters and the reader with a continuous catalogue of perverse behaviors and activities. But in *Dead Babies* this is not meant, like it is in Sade, to demonstrate that the freedoms and pleasures of an ultra-enlightened libertine lifestyle are infinite and inexhaustible. Rather, for Amis there are limits to sexual and social liberty, and reaching them can lead to physical and spiritual

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38 Sontag, 52.

39 As Sade says of his pornographic and philosophical goals in writing *Sodom*, “Many of the extravagances you are about to see illustrated will doubtless displease you, yes, I am well aware of it, but there are amongst them a few which will warm you to the point of costing you some fuck, and that, reader, is all we ask of you; if we have not said everything, analyzed everything, tax us not with partiality, for you cannot expect us to have guessed what suits you best. Rather, it is up to you to take what you please and leave the rest alone, another reader will do the same, and little by little, everyone will find himself satisfied. It is the story of the magnificent banquet: six hundred different plates offer themselves to your appetite; are you going to eat them all? No, surely not, but this prodigious variety enlarges the bounds of your choice and, delighted by this increase of possibilities, it surely never occurs to you to scold the Amphitryon who regales you. Do likewise here: choose and let lie the rest without declaiming against that rest simply because it does not have the power to please you. Consider that it will enchant someone else, and be a philosopher,” 254.

40 Of course, *Sodom* fails in its attempt to record an infinite number of passions, but Sade nonetheless takes pride in his ability to render every shade of perversion that he can — in this case “six hundred” of them. He writes, “As for the diversity, it is authentic, you may be sure of it; study closely that passion which to your first consideration seems perfectly to resemble another, and you will see that a difference does exist and that, however slight it may be, it possesses precisely that refinement, that touch which distinguishes and characterizes the kind of libertinage wherewith we are here involved,” Ibid.
exhaustion as well as a detachment from any greater sense of meaning or value in the world. We are told throughout the narrative, for instance, that the characters have grown up and participated in a culture in which experimentation with sex and drugs begins at an early age, in which “kids [are] fucking in the first grade ... blowing each other in the fuckin’ playpens” (122), and that this kind of out of control cultural permissiveness has already taken its toll in the form of a whole host of psychological and existential disorders from which each character suffers: “lagging time and false memory, [...] night fatigue and canceled sex” (20). So riddled with these conditions is the character of Andy Adorno that he has to apologize to his girlfriend for not having sex with her as a result, “Nothing personal, Diana. [...] I hardly want to fuck anyone these days” (153). Yet throughout the novel we see every character (especially Andy) wearily attempting over and over again to have sex, watch porn, get high, or engage in violence because that is how they have been conditioned to act: they simply cannot conceive of anything more to do and assume, mistakenly, that this ceaseless, unthinking activity will lead them eventually to some form of deliverance from their bleak condition. They are themselves embodiments of the classic pornographic archetype “endowed with neither will nor intelligence nor even, apparently, memory,” archetypal figures that are always ready to get “in place for another round [of debauchery], as uninstructed by [their] experience as ever.”41 The “endless nonculminating [...] affectless activity” of Sodom is thus reduced in Dead Babies to a nightmare of repetition divorced of any sense of pleasure or fulfillment. This is most starkly dramatized in a scene in which the characters find themselves coming down from another drug high:

Then came the lagging time [...] with its numbness and disjunction, its inertia and automatism, its lost past and dead future. Now they were

41 Sontag, 53.
all moving to no effect — just moving, just switching things off and switching things on, just picking things up and putting things down and picking things up and stroking the cat and counting the mugs and fighting for air. It seemed that everything they did had already been done and done, and that everything they thought had already been thought and thought, and that this would never end (120).

No sooner do they recover from this, however, than they decide to get drunk and begin the cycle all over again. The repetitious structure of the plot and the resulting mood of interminability, therefore, are meant to underscore the fact that the characters in Dead Babies are trapped in a perpetual present which bars them from the consolations of the past and the possibilities of the future. That is, they remain forever cut off from the old humanist values and moral frameworks of the pre-Sexual Revolution era ("dead babies" is the slang the characters use to refer to such outmoded concepts as love, faithfulness, and compassion), leaving little left for them to look forward to beyond the diminishing physical and emotional returns of the same old round of tired and tiring material diversions. Whereas Sade employs a loose and episodic pornographic plot structure in order to celebrate the unceasing multiplicity of ecstasies enjoyed by his libertine aristocrats, Amis uses the same type of structure to demonstrate that the privileged young libertines of England in the second half of the 20th century are ultimately all slaves to the myth of sexual and social freedom, condemned as they are to act on this

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42 One example of the use of this slang term comes when the characters of Quentin Villiers and Marvell Buzhardt argue over the concept of love. Villiers, the only character in the novel to defend such concepts (though, as we find out at the end of the novel, his defense of them is only just a façade), boasts of his marital bliss with Celia Villiers, claiming that he had married his wife "to keep sex emotional" and protesting, "'I know what love is, I know when I'm in love, and I'm in love'" (123). To this Marvell and the others react with disgust and disappointment: "'Love's through. Love's all fucked up.' [...] Marvell hung his head again. 'Babies,' he muttered, 'Dead, dead babies!'" (124). And as Marvell says earlier in the novel, summing up the prevailing mood of the novel's present, "Fuck all this dead babies about love, understanding, compassion..." (44).

43 "'We're ecstatic materialists,'" Andy proclaims defiantly at one point, "'Meaning, we grab whatever the fuck's going'" (140).
freedom endlessly without ever deriving any substantive and lasting pleasure or fulfillment from it. To put it in the words of one character’s father who, at one point in the novel, draws a distinction between the lot of his generation and that of his daughter’s:

I’ve always thought that fucking was a godsend for us oldsters and a bane for you youngsters who came up with the idea in the first place. Bloody marvelous! All these people suddenly willing to do it, and no guilt! That was the really new thing for us. [...] Well, our sexual natures were formed, so we could never suffer from anything worse than ennui. I think that’s why we let you do this to yourselves. To liberate us. But your lot, lovey, you free libbers... you thought you’d get free. You didn’t get free (158).

Indeed, the characters of Martin Amis’s second novel are not free; they are themselves the “dead babies” of the title, a soulless generation born without the experience of innocence, without access to any authentic feeling or emotion, without any foothold in history or the future—born, in other words, without any semblance of life or humanity.

Amis goes on to further develop these themes by borrowing from and making creative use of two other features of The 120 Days of Sodom. Another similarity between the two novels, for instance, is that they both rely on the same formal techniques to provide characterization. Both Sade and Amis furnish their readers with dramatis personae. The two authors also include (the former at the beginning of his novel and the latter throughout) brief, individual sketches of each principle character, relating their physical characteristics, their social backgrounds and status, and—most significantly and disproportionately—their sexual proclivities and histories. Sade it would seem utilizes these features in order merely to get
the issue of character development out of the way so that this detail will not later detract from the reader’s enjoyment of his encyclopedic pornographic narrative. Such facile and flimsy characterization and its attendant emotional flatness are “not a failure of artistry,” of course, but are instead meant to do what all conventional pornography is designed to do: leave ample space for “the release of a sexual response” from the reader. Amis, on the other hand, means to achieve the effect of emotional flatness by employing this highly artificial narrative device in order to draw attention to (rather than away from) the inherent flatness and artificiality of his characters. For, as we have already seen in our discussion of the mechanics of the plot, the characters in *Dead Babies* are in many ways like automatons engaged in ceaseless and unproductive activity, possessed of little will and no moral or spiritual depth; that is, they are the very embodiment of postmodern identity: all surface and one-dimensional, their humanity corrupted by the materialism, hedonism, and amorality of late capitalist society. The use of a stilted, narratively inorganic technique to establish the major players in the novel only serves to reinforce this point. And while the short character sketches which punctuate the frenetic movement and agitation of the plot do convey some important information about the characters, these sketches are ultimately meant to be reductive, only going so far as to confirm that the actions and motives of each character are mainly functions of their individual and collective relationships with and attitudes toward sex. For example, in his “word about Diana’s sex life,” the narrator tells us that, for the character of Diana Parry, sex is “a dial in the machinery of her self-regard, a salute to her clothes sense, applause for her exercises, [...] the means socially to measure herself against others” (67) and that, as a result, her very social existence is formulaic, even mechanistic: “The party, the man, the dinner, the flat, the fuck, the taxi,

"Sontag, 54. Sontag concludes, “Only in the absence of directly stated emotions [in the characters] can the reader of pornography find room for his own responses,” 54."
the scalding bath” (68). And in his “radically telescoped resume of Andy’s sex life,” the narrator rattles off a long, anonymous list of Andy’s proud conquests, from “a melancholy girl with distant eyes” to “school girls” and “widows,” from “the one that liked him beating her up” to “the short Geordie that had no hair” (181-2). The narrator, however, also relates the first time Andy is unable to perform sexually, what is referred to in the parlance of the novel as “canceled sex.” This event causes Andy to view his situation with a detached “theoretical weariness” and, for a fleeting moment, makes him feel “like a bit player in some far-flung organization, the servile motor of another’s body” (182). No doubt this is meant to be a profound and illuminating insight into both himself and his dehumanizing, sexually obsessive culture, but it turns out to be one that, unfortunately, Andy dismisses with much self-justifying macho bluster (183). Rather than lend dimension to each character, then, these sketches serve only to reaffirm their superficiality and emptiness, their smallness and inhumanity, so that it would seem that all there really is to know about them can be comfortably contained within the reductive conventions of Sadeian characterization. Like the stock “personages in pornography” identified by Sontag, in other words, the characters in Dead Babies are largely meant to be “seen only from the outside, behavioristically,” because, in the affectless and shallow materialistic and narcissistic culture in which they exist, their outward appearance and behaviors have essentially become the only things which constitute their value and identity.\footnote{Sontag, 54.}

At one point in the novel, however, the character of Keith Whitehead, described in the dramatis personae as “very tiny, very fat – court dwarf to Appleseed Rectory,” has a moment of self-awareness and asks whatever higher power might be listening to him why he is the way he is. Though just as superficial and vicious, just as addicted to drugs and obsessed with sex as
any of the other characters, Keith’s physical appearance often keeps him from partaking in that latter activity and thus makes him significantly more dissatisfied with his lot than his fellow Appleseeders. To his question, then, of “’[W]ho’s doing it all to me? Who?’” the narrator takes it upon himself to respond: “Well, we’re sorry about it, Keith, of course, but we’re afraid that you simply had to be that way. Nothing personal, please understand – merely in order to serve the designs of this particular fiction” (146). Indeed, as the narrator tells the reader earlier in the novel, these characters and this plot all “answer to our purposes” (19), and these purposes are not only to reflect but also, more importantly, to critique and condemn the corrupt state of contemporary English society and the troubled and troubling generation that it has spawned. And this, it would seem, is where we find the third shared feature of The 120 Days of Sodom coming into play in Dead Babies, namely, in the role of the narrator and the unique influence he exerts over his narrative. That is, both novels employ omniscient narrators who slip easily from the third-person to the first, occasionally interrupting the narrative to highlight certain elements in their own narration or to address the reader directly. Sade’s narrator in particular is a genial recorder and explicator of the events which transpire, checking in on occasion to confer or gossip with his audience about the goings-on of his cast of characters.46 Amis’s narrator is a recorder and explicator, too, and is even more frequent in his interactions with the reader. But Amis further expands on the narrator’s role in Sodom, identifying closely with his narrative persona and creating, in turn, a god-like narrator that becomes almost indistinguishable from the author. Under this guise Amis reminds us again and again that, more than a mere passive eyewitness to the perverse events which he recounts, he is in fact the one orchestrating the

46 An example of the narrator’s interaction with the reader: “Ah, but what is the spirit of evil that inhabits libertines? Some glimmer of it may be obtained by analyzing Constance’s prodigious fault. O reader, what do you suppose it was had waked Curval’s wrath? Even worse than you may have dreamt...,” Sade, 443.
events of the narrative, that it is he who is in control of his characters and thus, in punishment for their depravity, it is also he who ushers them through a series of trials and humiliations throughout the course of the novel. The narrator, as it turns out, is not only similar to Sade’s narrator but he is also not unlike the libertine protagonists in *Sodom* who are themselves responsible for devising and administering the many graphic scenes of torture in that novel. Amis in the guise of his narrator, in other words, can be described in some sense as assuming the role of a sadist himself, with the characters of *Dead Babies* serving as both his subjects and his victims.

We see, for instance, (“Look!” the narrator demands of us) Keith Whitehead bearing the brunt of this torture: the narrator endows little Keith with a dangerously slow metabolism (19), “paint-bubbling halitosis, [and] 100 per cent constipation” (100); outfits him with uncomfortable platform boots “in which his crushed, unsocked feet [...] groan and rot” (84); and generally makes him available to suffer whatever stray beatings his acquaintances care to dole out. But these acquaintances of his are also not exempt from the author’s cruel machinations. In one scene, for example, Andy is suddenly relieved of his erection just before he is about to have sex with the American houseguest Roxanne Smith (101) and is subsequently made to endure the scornful laughter of his friends when Roxanne recounts the episode (104). Diana and Celia are tormented, too, in this case by death threats (81) and grotesque defilements (173) perpetrated by a mysterious prankster named Johnny – who, as we will see below, has much in common with Martin Amis. Even the entire cast of characters as a whole is subject to the diabolical whims of the author and his narrator, as in the comical scene in which everyone is forced to abandon a picnic and scramble over a barbed wire fence when, out of the blue, a curious heifer comes charging in their direction. Their heap of bodies on the other side of the fence is described as “a collapsing balloon of flesh in the adjacent field” (62). “Whispered obscenities,” the narrator
continues, "broke the silence as the wheezing tangle of limbs gradually came apart and a dazed cataloguing of injuries began" (62). Here, as elsewhere, Amis is mocking and inflicting harm upon his characters for their collective superficiality and emptiness ("collapsing balloon of flesh") and showing us just how insubstantial and interchangeable ("wheezing tangle of limbs") these uniformly despicable characters happen to be.

And surely, all of the characters seem at one point or another to be put through their paces by their creator – all characters save one. For most of the novel, Quentin Villiers is portrayed as the learned, urbane, and chivalrous owner of Appleseed Rectory who, unlike his housemates and guests, steadfastly defends and adheres to an unfashionable code of secular humanism and romantic idealism. We see him throughout the novel upholding the sanctity of his marital vows to his wife Celia, professing the transcendent virtues of love and fidelity, and arguing against the au courant hedonist and materialist philosophies espoused by Buzhardt Marvell. That is, until it turns out that this is all just a pose on Quentin’s part and that he is actually the mysterious, anarchic prankster Johnny who has been anonymously tormenting everyone and has been arranging to execute the mass murder of every character at the Rectory. The sadistic Quentin/Johnny thus remains untouched by Amis because he is, like the narrator, a stand-in for the author himself, doing Amis’s bidding at the level of plot. For, as critic James Diedrick points out, Quentin/Johnny has a number of things in common with Martin Amis: he, like his author, has come to prominence through his caustic book reviews and his editing of a “satirico-politico-literary magazine” (38).

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47 See footnote 42 above.

48 A representative snippet from one of Quentin’s conversations with Marvell:

"That’s what they did. In the seventies. That’s what they achieved. They separated emotion and sex."

"Nonsense, Marvell," said Quentin. "They merely showed that they could be separable. In the last analysis, of course, they aren’t separable at all" (122).

49 In the early and mid-1970s, Amis had variously been a reviewer and editor for such publications as the TLS, the New Statesman, and the New Review.
and, also similar to Amis, is “adept at character stylization, a master of pastiche, a connoisseur of verbal self-dramatization” (38).50 These similarities between Quentin/Johnny and his author are meant to converge at the end of the novel, inevitably allowing Amis to cast a final, savage judgment upon contemporary English society as well as the young people who are the very product of that society. As Diedrick concludes:

Quentin’s calculated ruthlessness in dispatching the other characters has an eerie parallel in Amis’s own attitude toward them. Dead Babies is full of animus and condescension toward Amis’s generation, and Quentin’s final burst of murderous violence is its ultimate symbolic expression.51

What I would add to this is that, through the slippery status of his narrative voice and his creation of the character of Quentin/Johnny, Amis appropriates the roles of Sadeian narrator as well as libertine protagonist and conflates them to form his own unique authorial persona, in effect, turning Dead Babies on one level into a torture porn satire that revels in literally enacting punishment upon the targets of its satirical rage.

What is more, this sadistic treatment of the characters is also meant to turn Amis’s critique of contemporary society back upon the reader. Although we are disgusted by the characters’ behavior, Amis’s flair for dark humor and his engaging prose style keep us enthralled and entertained for much of the novel. In writing about Amis’s 1984 masterpiece Money, Richard Bradford argues that the novel involves virtuoso writing and “matchless, consummate irony in which repulsive activities and states of mind are made crisply, horribly amusing [...] causing the reader to feel a kind of complicit

50 Diedrick, Understanding..., 46.
51 Ibid., 47.
involvement with [the main character and the world he represents]."^{52} The same must be said of Dead Babies. But I would go even further than Bradford does in making this point about readerly complicity. At one point in the novel, the narrator tells us that Keith had once been an inmate at a mental institution, but that he seemed to have been “cured” of his madness just by observing the people around him:

And with every day that passed little Keith took solace and grateful encouragement from his fellow inmates [...]. every now and then his face folding into a sneer or lightening with a thrill of relish as his colleagues made their twitching way past him. He had overheard it said that you always went madder at the Institute because “there was nothing to relate to.” But Keith didn’t want to relate to anything; he felt only hatred and contempt for the mutants around him (132).

We are, in part, asked to condemn Keith in this passage for being so blind and hypocritical, for thinking that he is above the other inmates at the Institute. This passage, however, can just as easily apply to the experience of the reader reading this novel. For, Amis invites us at every turn to mock and “feel only hatred and contempt” for the madhouse of characters at the Rectory, to “sneer” or feel “a thrill of relish” every time these characters come “twitching” across the page, but then by doing so we run the risk of being just like Keith, bypassing any opportunity at self-examination for the easier role of passing judgment upon others. In fact, by the end of the novel, we have become so convinced of our superiority and so inured to the characters and their actions that their deaths at the hands of Quentin and Amis seem to be of no consequence to us. And so, as it turns out, we become

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the ones who are impassively watching the snuff film,\(^{53}\) we are the ones who now possess no sympathy or compassion for the absurd and obscene violence and suffering we see before us. Amis’s trick, then, is to use the conventions of pornography, Sadeian pornography, to create a truly realistic novel in the most literal sense,\(^{54}\) one that not only reflects and condemns the characters and the era of excess and extremity they represent, but also demonstrates just how easy it is to lose sight of our own moral and emotional bearings, and just how close the future world depicted in *Dead Babies* is to the reader’s own. After all, the narrator frequently reminds us that his fiction is set only about eight to ten years into the future and is merely a continuation of our present. That is, he often invites us to go out into the world and pay a visit to these characters who are still only in their teens at the time of the novel’s creation. Amis says of Keith’s family, for instance, “At the time of writing you could just go along to Parky Street, Wimbledon, any Sunday, one o’clock in the afternoon – and you’d see them, taking their seats in the Morris for the weekly Whitehead jaunt to Brighton” (129). The narrator also informs the reader to be aware of Diana as she gets ready to hit the London social scene, as we “can expect to see her about the place in six or seven years’ time” (65). In other words, though the story takes place in the future the narrator keeps the actual time frame planted firmly in the reader’s present, suggesting that it is the present that has already set in motion the events of this nightmarish future, and that it is we who are ultimately responsible for bringing up these dead babies.\(^{55}\)

For this dire predicament, however, Amis appears in the end to provide few solutions. And although one early reviewer of *Dead Babies* had detected in the novel an undercurrent of sentimentality, a nostalgic desire to return to

\(^{53}\) Just as the characters of *Dead Babies* had done in a scene (165) discussed above.

\(^{54}\) I use the term realistic here, because what could possibly be more realistic than a novel that makes the reader feel complicit in and part of the very events transpiring upon the page?

\(^{55}\) And here I want again to refer to the novel’s epigraph from Menippus: “…and so even when [the satirist] presents a vision of the future, his business is not prophecy; just as his subject is not tomorrow… it is today.”
a more cohesive society grounded in traditional values, the fact is that Amis
seems to be skeptical of those values, as well. 56 As we have seen, the only
character in the novel that defends such values is revealed in its final
stages to be an imposter and a psychopathic murderer. The old humanist
pieties of love, community, and compassion turn out to be false and dangerous
ideals, “a trap laid for the reader” – to quote Diedrick again. 57 Indeed, the
most disturbing aspect of the novel is that it concludes on such a dismal
note without offering even a suggestion of what it might take to reverse or
halt this seemingly inexorable process of cultural decay and social
disintegration. What is more, in identifying himself so closely with the
character of Quentin, Amis is also suggesting that the role of the novelist
as groundskeeper of “a fixed moral landscape” and defender “of social as well
as literary artistic values” (as the postwar realists had been) is no longer
a tenable position for the contemporary novelist to occupy. 58 And herein, as I
intend to discuss in the next section of this chapter, lies the foundation of
Amis’s ambitious artistic project. That is, the contemporary writer of
fiction, as Amis demonstrates in Dead Babies, can no longer operate within or
remain subject to what are now the dissolved social, moral, and artistic
frameworks of a previous era. Nor should the contemporary writer be called
upon to impart any kind of “human lesson” upon the reader, as Kingsley Amis
had believed it was the job of the novelist to do, 59 but must instead be ready
to embrace postmodern life in all its uncertainty and extremity, and must be
ready to ensure that the English novel is equipped with the tools it will
need to make sense of and give form to these new conditions. Dead Babies,
then, consciously seeks to overthrow traditional expectations of what a novel

56 See Mellors, “Raw Breakfast,” 582.
57 Diedrick, Understanding…, 47.
58 Keulks, Father and Son…, 27.
59 “If a narrative imparted no human lesson, Kingsley maintained, it degenerated to an
exhibitionist display of verbal ability; it became a language game, ostentatious, solipsistic and
affected;” Ibid., 28.
must represent and what it must do and, in turn, offers itself up – just as Crash had done before it – as the starting point for a new direction in the English novel.

III.

While Dead Babies may fail to offer any coherent alternative to the depraved and moribund state of England in the 1970s, and while it may be described as something of a sneering and bitter account of Amis’s own lost generation, it must at least be seen as a defiant announcement of the arrival upon the literary landscape of a new kind of English novel. In this chapter, I have attempted to demonstrate that, contrary to his publicly expressed opinions in reviews and magazine articles of the time, Martin Amis draws heavily in his sophomore novel on the example set by J. G. Ballard in Crash. He draws inspiration in particular from Ballard’s innovative use of the conventions of pornography to transgress the traditional limits of novelistic representation and the narrow thematic scope of the postwar English novel. So inspired by the artistic possibilities offered by the pornographic imagination is Amis that he even chooses to appropriate and experiment with classic pornographic narrative devices established by the Marquis de Sade in The 120 Days of Sodom. Why he turns to Sade is explained by the fact that, in the context and subject matter of Sade’s work, Amis sees parallels with his own historical moment and his own thematic preoccupations, representing as Amis does the dark side of a materialist and amoral culture that has begun to lose its humanity by taking its enlightened ideas and liberal attitudes to ever more disturbing extremes. His indulgence, then, in shockingly graphic representations of often deviant acts of sex and violence, as well as his strategic application of pornographic conventions of plot, character
development, and narrative voice, is evidence of both Ballard and Sade’s direct influence on the young writer. And even more than just an imitation of Crash or Sodom, Dead Babies sees Amis adapting these influences to suit his own bleak yet comic vision of late 20th century society. But this is not to say, of course, that in assuming the pornographic imagination Amis fully embraces pornography as a social phenomenon or as an acceptable mode of entertainment in its purest form. Instead, it is to suggest that Dead Babies represents Amis’s first recognition of the necessity of using pornographic narrative to portray and engage with a world that has itself increasingly taken on the aspect of the pornographic. 60 Although satirical, the novel treats pornography less as an object of satire than as a means of satirizing — of reflecting and criticizing — the decadent and grotesque culture that gives rise to it. Amis as an artist, in other words, comes to articulate through Dead Babies that pornography is not one of the causes of the ills of society but that it is one of its symptoms, and it is through this symptom that Amis attempts to diagnose the larger disease.

And yet, this is also not to say that pornography is the only literary style or genre which Amis uses to construct his narrative. Critics over the years have identified a myriad of different such strands woven into the fabric of the novel: Menippean satire and the Rabelaisian carnival-grotesque chief among them. 61 But while critics have already commented on Amis’s treatment of these forms in Dead Babies, I want to add that his choice of these forms in particular reveals something important about what Amis is

60 As Amis says of the experience of contemporary reality: “Modern life... is so mediated that authentic experience is much harder to find... we’ve all got this idea of what [life] should be like — from movies, from pornography,” qtd. in Diedrick, Understanding..., 223.

61 For a sampling of critics who have discussed at length Amis’s use of satire, particularly Menippean satire, see footnote 34 above. As for Rabelais, the term “Rabelaisian” has been used to describe Dead Babies in a countless number of reviews and critical essays. For instance, in John Mellors’s review of the novel, he uses just such a term to identify Amis’s treatment of Keith Whitehead, specifically his description of the Whitehead family loading their obese limbs into the family car, “Raw Breakfast,” 582. Indeed, the novel’s abiding preoccupation with bodily functions, occasionally slapstick violence, and profanity brings to mind the early pagan forms of the “carnival-grotesque” identified by Bakhtin as being a central component of the seminal work of Rabelais. See Mikhail Bakhtin, Rabelais and His World, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Pres, 1984).
trying to accomplish in his second novel, especially with regard to his use of pornography. That is, Menippean satire and the Rabelaisian carnival-grotesque are at the heart of the work of literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin. It is Bakhtin who had identified the central role that both had played in the formation of the modern novel, and it is Bakhtin who had also advanced related theories about the heteroglossic and dialogic qualities, as well as the always-evolving composition, of the novel form. These are theories with which Amis had already been familiar during his writing of Dead Babies, having reviewed The Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics for the Times Literary Supplement in 1974. And I want to posit that Amis has in mind this larger Bakhtinian narrative of the development of the novel and that he means to place his own work within the context of this narrative. He means to give greater context in particular to his overall project of adding the low form of pornography to, what Bakhtin identifies as, the heterogeneous mix of both high and low forms that is the novel. More specifically, he appropriates the Menippean and the Rabelaisian along with pornography, because Dead Babies is meant to serve as a platform for the rebirth of the English novel itself — as in, it is meant to signal both the rejection of traditional postwar realism as the standard of the English novel form as well as a movement toward a new conception of novelistic representation. As Bakhtin writes in his essay “Epic and Novel,” the novel cannot have a standard or conventional form since its boundaries are constantly in flux: “the generic skeleton of the novel is still far from having hardened, and we cannot foresee all its plastic

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63 These theories are developed in The Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics and Rabelais and His World, as well as in Bakhtin’s other critical writings.

64 Martin Amis, review of The Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics, by Mikhail Bakhtin, Times Literary Supplement (March 29 1974), 346.

65 While I am not the first to bring Bakhtin into a discussion of Dead Babies, Bakhtin’s influence on Amis seems only to have been explored, as it is in Diedrick and Keulks, in the context of his use of Menippean satire. See Diedrick, Understanding…, 39-47; Keulks, Father and Son, 147-53.
Bakhtin goes on to say that the novel undergoes a continuous
process of renewal, that “it squeezes out some genres and incorporates others
into its own peculiar structure, reformatting and re-accentuating them.”
That Amis decides to reformat and re-accentuate the Menippean and the
Rabelaisian is significant, then, as both allude directly to Bakhtin’s
theories about the earliest stages of the novel’s development, underscoring
as this does the original stylistic and generic heterogeneity of the form.
More than that, however, Amis adds the pornographic to this foundational mix
in order to emphasize the fact that pornography must now play a pivotal role
in the re-development of the English novel. It must play a pivotal role, that
is, if the English novel is to thrive and if it is to better reflect the
sadism and perversity, the new permissiveness and the waning of affect which
constitute the transforming social realities of postmodern England. For, as
Bakhtin says of the novel in general:

It is intimately woven with [...] direct changes in reality [...]. The
novel is the only developing genre and therefore it reflects more
deeply, more essentially, more sensitively and rapidly, reality itself
in the process of its unfolding.

Like J. G. Ballard had done before him, Amis recognizes and embraces the
importance of this process and, in Dead Babies, provides an update to the
novel form so that it can better handle its evolving subject matter. After
all, according to Bakhtin, “contemporaneity, flowing and transitory,” had
been the primary object of representation for the various “low genres” that

Ibid., 5.
Ibid., 7.
had eventually come together to form the modern novel. So it is fitting that, in his attempt to find a more relevant and accommodating contemporary form for the novel in England, Amis would choose to enlist another low genre: the pornographic. No longer convinced that the hardening traditions of postwar English realism are suited to or can contain the unfolding reality of postmodernity, Amis thus becomes the second major English author of the 1970s to reconfigure the generic makeup of the novel by injecting into its ossified form the subgenre of pornography, boldly affirming the timeliness and significance of a new kind of realism – a pornographic realism – in contemporary English fiction. And that he looks to Bakhtinian theories of the novel to accomplish this may also be due in part to the fact that the young Martin Amis, standing as he does in the midst of the epochal transition between the pre- and post-Sexual Revolution generations, finds himself in a similar position to that of Bakhtin, as well as that of Rabelais. Writing of the modern Russian theorist and the early French Renaissance writer who had been his object of study, critic Michael Holquist explains:

Both Bakhtin and Rabelais knew that they were living in an unusual period, a time when virtually everything taken for granted in less troubled ages lost its certainty, was plunged into contest and flux ... [and that these] were periods [...] when certain generations were presented with unusual dangers and unique opportunities.

Out of these moments, Holquist argues, Bakhtin (in the years after the Russian Revolution) and Rabelais (in the transition from the Middle Ages to

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69 Ibid., 20.
70 Bakhtin writes, “The novel [...] is associated with the eternally living element of unofficial language and unofficial thought (holiday forms, familiar speech, profanation),” Ibid., 20. I would put forth that pornography is, in its own way, another manifestation of this kind of unofficial language and unofficial thought.
71 Michael Holquist, “Prologue,” Rabelais and His World, xv.
the Renaissance) had produced two groundbreaking works: Rabelais and His World and Gargantua and Pantagruel, respectively, “for the multitude of shattered unities we call revolution brings forth texts with peculiar forms of unity.” Amis, as I have argued throughout this chapter, faces the same circumstances and achieves the same ends. He bears witness to the “shattered unities” left in the aftermath of the Sexual Revolution and the subsequent effect that this has on his generation, and seizes his own unique opportunity to then record and make sense of the fragmented world that is left after the chaos of a new order supplants the certainties of the old. It is Dead Babies that is the result – a text whose peculiar form of unity is itself made possible by its author’s artistic application of the pornographic, which in turn informs the many other literary styles, genres, and forms present within the novel. In Dead Babies, therefore, Bakhtin and his theories, as well as elements of Menippean satire and the Rabelaisian carnival-grotesque, are all invoked in order to give context and legitimacy to its author’s appropriation of pornography in what is, inevitably, his broader attempt to renew the English novel and bring it into greater accord with its historical and cultural moment.

It is not surprising, then, that Kingsley Amis had not taken too kindly to Dead Babies. His son’s novel had clearly marked not only a child’s rebellion against the example set by his father, but it also represents the rebellion by a younger artist against the dominant aesthetic precedent set by an older one. Whereas The Rachel Papers merely imitated and parodied Lucky Jim, Dead Babies decisively dismisses the influence of Kingsley Amis in favor of other, very different sources of literary inspiration – Ballard, Sade,

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72 Ibid., xiv

73 As Amis wrote in the New Yorker in 1995, “Older writers should find younger writers inimical, because younger writers are sending them an unwelcome message. They are saying, ‘It’s not like that anymore. It’s like this.’ In the present context, ‘that’ and ‘this’ can be loosely described as the thought-rhythms peculiar to your time. Implicit in these thought-rhythms are certain values, moral and aesthetic,” “Buy My Book, Please,” 97.
Gone is any trace of the postwar realism espoused by the likes of Kingsley and his fellow realists. Gone are its restrictive narrative conventions, limited thematic scope, and humanist values and assumptions. In its place is a new kind of realism, one that is fashioned out of the graphic excesses and the emotional and moral emptiness of the pornographic, supple and pliant enough to register without hesitation any detail no matter how unpleasant or shocking. Amis’s version of realism in Dead Babies is, in fact, not unlike the kind of realism which critic Richard Bradford had seen beginning to take shape in late 20th century England, one that was “not beholden to any fixed or determining set of social or ethical mores,” one that presented “society and its ills as little more than a patchwork of hopeless grotesques to be treated with nerveless, sometimes comedic, scrutiny.” Such a description applies perfectly to Martin Amis’s second novel. Bradford even recognizes Amis as one of this new breed of realist. Referring specifically to Amis’s 1984 novel Money, Bradford argues that “Amis had not abandoned realism in the manner of what by the 1970s and 1980s had become virtually the complacent conventions of postmodernism. […] For Amis it is the text itself that subtly rethinks realism, not his self-conscious participation in it.” The distinctive realism found in Amis’s work is even the subject of J. G. Ballard’s review of Other People, another of Amis’s later novels. Ballard argues in particular that Other People “hurls another spadeful of earth onto the over-ripe coffin of the bourgeois novel” and that it “could not be further away [from the] true-to-life worlds” of traditional

74 It should perhaps be noted that Kingsley Amis, once a vocal admirer of Ballard’s early science fiction work, had also reacted negatively to Crash upon its publication. But, unlike his son, Kingsley never did revise his opinion of the novel.

75 Keulks explains the greater relevance of the conflict between Kingsley and Martin’s distinctive and divergent approaches to realism: “Their was a battle over the nature of reality itself, a twentieth-century realism war conducted by loving family members but rival, antithetical writers,” Father and Son, 252.

76 Bradford, 9.

77 Bradford, 15-16.
realist novelists, "nor be 'closer to our own.'" This chapter has demonstrated throughout that what Bradford and Ballard propose regarding Amis's later work also applies to *Dead Babies*, which— in its adaptation of and preoccupation with pornography, its black comedy and stylistic individuality, and its focus on unmasking the absurd and obscene realities of post-Sexual Revolution England—is a novel that had established a blueprint which Amis would follow for the rest of his career. For, in novels such as *Success* (1978), *Other People* (1981), *Money* (1984), *London Fields* (1989), *Yellow Dog* (2003), and *The Pregnant Widow* (2010), we see the recurrence and further development of the same stylistic hallmarks and thematic obsessions, the same willingness to experiment with the limits of representation, introduced in *Dead Babies*. And so too does this early novel prove to be an exemplar of the work being done by other young English writers coming of age at the same time as Amis, writers such as Julian Barnes and Ian McEwan.

Essentially, *Dead Babies* is an example of what *Crash* had made possible; it is a representative example of how a new wave of English novelists had begun to explore the artistic potential of the pornographic imagination, and how they had used it to stake out their own unique perspectives on contemporary

78 Qtd. in Diedrick, "J. G. Ballard's 'Inner Space'…," 193.

79 *The Pregnant Widow*, in fact, is in some sense a return to and reworking of *Dead Babies*. The novel opens on a group of university students spending a summer together at an Italian castle in 1970 during the peak of the Sexual Revolution, and goes on to explore the repercussions of the events of that summer upon the later lives of the characters.

80 McEwan, for instance, had published his debut novel *The Cement Garden* in 1978. *The Cement Garden* is the story of four young siblings who are left home alone and are shut off from the outside world following the deaths of their parents, a situation punctuated by strange and unsettling behavior which culminates in an explicitly narrated act of sexual intercourse between brother and sister. See Ian McEwan, *The Cement Garden* (New York: Vintage, 1994). Speaking in an interview during the early years of his career, McEwan had attempted to describe the reasons behind the explicit and unsettling nature of his work, and in so doing had managed to identify the experimental mood of the period, and had managed too to articulate the artistic aims and motivations driving the two writers whose novels have so far been the focus of the present study. McEwan explained: "The formal experimentation of the late sixties and early seventies came to nothing largely because the stuff was inaccessible and too often unrewarding — no pleasure in the text. And there can surely be no more mileage to be had from demonstrating yet again through self-enclosed 'fictions' that reality is words and words are lies. There is no need to be strangled by that particular loop — the artifice of fiction can be taken for granted. Experimentation in its broadest and most viable sense should have less to do with formal factors like busting up syntax and scrambling your page order, and more to do with content — the representation of states of mind and the society that forms them," qtd. in Andrzej Gasiorek, *Post-War British Fiction: Realism and After* (London: Edward Arnold, 1995), 180.
reality and find their own artistic voices. Amis, like his characters in *Dead Babies*, is a child of the Sexual Revolution, the inheritor of social and sexual freedoms that were rapidly changing the conditions and experience of English society. But, unlike his characters, Amis is able to give form to and make sense of this disorienting process of cultural upheaval because he is also a child of a different revolution, a revolution in realism and novelistic content called for in America by Susan Sontag and taken up in England by J. G. Ballard. Thus, while Amis maintains little to no hope in *Dead Babies* for the plight of his affectless and amoral generation, it is this highly individual work of fiction itself that, in the end, provides hope of another kind—that is, hope for the future of the English novel and its ability to range over, as well as offer insight into, “a wider scale of experience” than had heretofore been possible within the constricting limits of traditional postwar realism.81

81 The quote is from William James as quoted by Sontag in “The Pornographic Imagination.” Sontag writes, “Pornography, considered as an artistic or art-producing form of human imagination, is an expression of what William James called ‘morbid-mindedness.’ But James was surely right when he gave as part of the definition of morbid-mindedness that it ranged over a ‘wider scale of experience’ than healthy-mindedness,” 71.
Chapter Three.

Novel Occupants: 
Alan Hollinghurst’s The Swimming-Pool Library

I.

Raised to admire the building traditions of his native Cotswolds and educated in the Jacobean country houses of rural England, novelist Alan Hollinghurst has long maintained a profound and knowledgeable appreciation for architecture.¹ This will come as no surprise to those familiar with his writing; an abiding interest in the architectural field remains everywhere apparent throughout his body of work. In fact, believing his role as author to be not unlike that of a “proxy architect,” Hollinghurst has produced five novels to date that are — if the reader will allow the comparison — sturdy constructions from a master builder of the house of fiction, a master builder whose narratives unfold in physical settings that are themselves as deftly crafted and as richly detailed as anything described in Pevsner.² Populating these novels and these settings, moreover, are his equally architecturally literate and predominantly gay protagonists, the first and foremost among them (and the primary object of inquiry of the present chapter) being William Beckwith, narrator of The Swimming-Pool Library (1988). Will, a future peer and former member of the research staff for the Cubitt Dictionary of Architecture, refers throughout his narration to his own lifelong fascination for what is perhaps his second favorite subject after sex. At one point he even boasts to the reader that “the orders, the dome, the portico, the


² “I’ve always loved buildings and sort of responded to them and been very interested in them. I think one of my pleasures, there’s a sort of proxy way of being an architect if you like, that I do invent, construct houses in my books. That’s sort of the nearest I get to do the real thing,” Alan Hollinghurst, interview by Lorraine Hahn, TalkAsia, CNN, 7 May 2005.
straight lines and the curved, [mean] more to me than they do to some.” But Hollinghurst is quick to demonstrate that such design elements sometimes mean far less to Will than he realizes, as when Will is faced with the prospect of a drunken night of sexual license at his local dance club, where, soon enough, “the influence of the orders, the dome, the portico, could scarcely be discerned” (6). The repetition with variation of what at first appears to be an unimportant phrase instead alludes here to nothing less than the central conflict of the novel. Like Hollinghurst, Will possesses a learned appreciation for the aesthetic qualities of the physical spaces through which he passes. Unlike his author, however, the narrator also possesses a blindspot, causing him to overlook the complex power relations and social and political histories inscribed within these spaces. Indeed, because of his persistent pursuit of pleasure, Will occasionally fails to recognize those more intangible features of the urban landscape that both directly and indirectly “influence” his experience as a gay man living in London during the early 1980s. And so it is in the ensuing depiction of Will’s journey through the British capital toward a deeper understanding of himself and his surroundings that Hollinghurst, in turn, reveals himself to be more than a mere architecture enthusiast. Here in *The Swimming-Pool Library* Hollinghurst proves to be, above all, an author uniquely suited to addressing the complicated yet critical role place and space have played in both staging and determining the modern lives and subcultures of English homosexuals. What is more, *The Swimming-Pool Library* proves to be a novelistic structure sturdy and capable enough to house this controversial and long underrepresented subject matter.

In part, then, the present chapter sets out to read Will Beckwith’s journey through the novel’s vast topography of spatial imagery, motif, and metaphor as Hollinghurst’s broader representation of the ways in which gay

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1 Alan Hollinghurst, *The Swimming-Pool Library* (New York: Vintage, 1989), 7. All direct references to *The Swimming-Pool Library* will hereafter be indicated parenthetically within the body of the text.
men throughout the 20th century have occupied and appropriated, and thus defined and become defined by, the public and private spaces of London. In particular, I want to argue that Hollinghurst graphically depicts the sexual and social encounters of his protagonist against the backdrop of the meticulously rendered, deceptively liberated setting of 80s London in order to dramatize and anatomize both the various freedoms afforded to as well as the many dangers facing gay subculture across the wider cultural and historical landscape of modern England. For, as we shall see, *The Swimming-Pool Library* is a novel that uses the penetrating insight of fiction to strip away the stately facades of the capital city to reveal the hidden histories and uncatalogued depths of the London gay scene lying just beneath its surface, shining a light as its author does on the discreetly tucked away, subterranean, and abandoned public spaces daringly annexed by gay men for the private pursuits of a gay male community. And in bringing to light these clandestine pursuits so Hollinghurst also brings to light the vast systems of surveillance and structures of heterosexist oppression which have made the freedoms enjoyed within such spaces so tenuous and against which, as the novel warns, men like Will must remain vigilant. It is these sites of ceaseless contestation between a subculture attempting to carve out pockets of privacy and intimacy beyond the reach of legal and moral authority, and a dominant culture bent on suppressing such endeavors – as well as the inevitable effects that this kind of conflict has wrought upon the lives of gay men in general – that I intend to make a central focus of the present chapter.

But not the only focus. That is, in light of the preceding arguments, I would also like to propose toward the end of this chapter that *The Swimming-Pool Library* itself must be read as a unique space of its own and that the very use of fiction by Hollinghurst, the very seizing of the realist novel to house the provocative content of modern gay life, in some ways reflects and
even enacts at the level of form the novel’s central theme of the queer occupation of space. Making this possible, I contend, is Hollinghurst’s use of the conventions of pornography to construct his narrative. Indeed, in as much as spatial dynamics are an important part of this novel and this discussion, equally important is the pornographic subject and style employed by Hollinghurst to depict, with as much fidelity as he applies to his physical descriptions of setting, the very acts of sexual intercourse that occur between Will Beckwith and other male characters. I want to argue, therefore, that in *The Swimming-Pool Library* Alan Hollinghurst is experimenting with the content of the English novel by endowing it with, for what is essentially the first time, a pornographic and sustained account of gay sex and the urban gay lifestyle, and in so doing is refreshing the increasingly tired and narrow concept of postwar realism, as well as expanding the possibilities of both gay fiction and the English novel form. By introducing explicit and realistic representations of homoerotic desire within the space of his debut novel, in other words, Hollinghurst provides exposure to that which has so often remained repressed and obscured in fiction and in society, having ostensibly adapted a traditional mode of artistic representation in order to enter the subject of English male homosexuality into the precincts of a broader cultural discourse. To paraphrase queer theorist Alan Sinfield, art in its many incarnations acts as a critical site that can and must be appropriated by gay artists for the survival of a gay community largely restricted from expressing itself publicly or even privately.¹ *The Swimming-Pool Library*, as we shall see, follows this idea quite closely, enabling as it does its “proxy architect” author to fashion out of traditional and non-traditional literary forms an artistic space wherein the history and experience of a uniquely urban and

English gay subculture is at last laid bare to an evenhanded, unflinching, and long overdue fictional portrayal.

II.

Before we can begin to understand The Swimming-Pool Library on the terms laid out above, however, it is essential that we first consider the novel within the larger cultural and historical context out of which it emerges. Up until the second half of the twentieth century, the answer to the question of where homosexuality fit into British society was a simple one: nowhere. Queer activity of any sort had long been outlawed in every corner of the empire. Following a spike in the number of arrests of British male homosexuals in the 1950s, however, popular opinion slowly began to turn toward support for decriminalizing homosexuality.\(^5\) Change would eventually come to England and Wales in the form of the 1967 Sexual Offences Act, but the supposed freedoms provided by this landmark legislation would also prove to be deeply problematic. What gay men had been given was essentially a new law that allowed for homosexual desire to be expressed without risk of punishment so long as it involved only two participants in a private residence where no third party would be present.\(^6\) Unfortunately, such an arrangement offered

\(^5\) Lord Nantwich, a fictional victim of these purges in The Swimming-Pool Library, notes in his diary upon his release from prison: “even the decorous British, with their distrust of the life of instinct, their pleasure in conformity, are saying that enough is enough. Some of them, even, are saying that a man’s private life is his own affair, and that the law must be changed” (297). This spirit of the times would lead to the formation of a government panel known as the Wolfenden Committee, which subsequently resulted in the Wolfenden Report of 1957, calling for an alteration in existing laws against homosexual activity. See Wolfenden Report: Report of the Committee on Homosexual Offences and Prostitution (New York: Stein and Day, 1963) and Patrick Higgins, Heterosexual Dictatorship (London: Fourth Estate, 1996).

\(^6\) “Notwithstanding any statutory or commonlaw provision, a homosexual act in private shall not be an offence provided that the parties consent thereto and have attained the age of sixteen years [...] An act which would otherwise be treated for the purposes of this act as being done in private shall not be so treated if done when more than two persons take part or are present; or in a lavatory to which the public have or are permitted to have access, whether on payment or otherwise. [...] Premises shall be treated for purposes of sections 33 to 35 of the Act of 1956 as a brothel if people resort to it for the purpose of lewd homosexual practices in circumstances in which resort thereto for lewd heterosexual practices would have led to its being treated as a brothel for the purposes of those sections,” Sexual Offences Act 1967 (London: Her Majesty’s Stationary Office, 1967).
little in the way of change for the vast majority of the gay population. Men who engaged in relations with multiple partners, cruised for sex in public areas (often because sex in the private space of the home was not a viable option), or even just had sex in the bedroom of an apartment with another person present in the next room continued to be in violation of the law.\footnote{Matthew Cook, “From Gay Reform to Gaydar, 1967-2000,” in A Gay History of Britain: Love and Sex Between Men Since the Middle Ages, ed. Matthew Cook (Oxford: Greenwood, 2007), 176-7. As Cook argues, this ironically conservative piece of legislation sought to hold homosexuality to a standard of “middle-class respectability [and] discretion.” That is to say that gay desire could now theoretically be expressed without risk of punishment so long as it involved only two men, remained well out of public view, and generally conformed to established heteronormative patterns of “coupledom and domesticity.”}

Thus, the 1967 Sexual Offences Act turned out to be less a means for British society to protect homosexuals than a means for British society to better protect itself against homosexuals. In fact, as many theorists have argued, decriminalizing sexual contact between two men in private did not grant unfettered liberties so much as it granted a heterosexist state the flexibility to more narrowly define privacy on its own terms and to guard even more fiercely against queer deviations in public. According to historian Jeffrey Weeks, what decriminalization ultimately provided was “a framework for potentially extending rather than reducing the detailed regulation of sexual behavior either by new forms of legal surveillance of the public sphere, or by refined moves of intervention […] into the private.”\footnote{Jeffrey Weeks, Sexuality and Its Discontents (London: Routledge, 1985), 55.} Moreover, this intervention into the private domain, according to geographer David Bell, had the potential “to begin a process of reducing or even erasing the private as a site of pleasure [altogether]” – in essence, making it almost impossible for homosexuals to express themselves anywhere without being subject to the public scrutiny of some form of legal or moral authority.\footnote{David Bell, “Perverse Dynamics, Sexual Citizenship and the Transformation of Intimacy” in Mapping Desire: Geographies of Sexualities, ed. David Bell and Gill Valentine (London: Routledge, 1995), 313.}

This is not to say, of course, that conditions for some did not improve under the Sexual Offenses Act, or that the latent threats of the Act were
manifest immediately. After all, the 1960s and 1970s represented an era of growing sexual freedoms and more liberal attitudes, an era that saw the Sexual Revolution in full swing and a permissive society coming to life under the rule of successive Labour governments. Throughout the 70s, in fact, a culture of protest in the form of the Gay Liberation movement began to raise the public profile of homosexuals. Gay men were coming out into the open all over Britain to make their presence known and to push for equal rights and greater freedom under the law.\(^{10}\) What is more, far from being defeated by the Sexual Offenses Act and its indirect efforts to curtail illegal homosexual activities, urban gay subculture managed instead to flourish during this period of looser controls and wider acceptance— the increasing rise in popularity of underground sites such as gay bathhouses and all-male discos in major cities, for example, being just one result of the evolving spirit of permissiveness.

However, never would the inherent dangers of the historic 1967 legislation become more fully realized than it was in the Thatcher years. By the 1980s, the political climate had changed dramatically; the call by incoming Tory Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher for a return to “Victorian values” would inevitably spawn a growing conservative backlash against a gay population perceived as being not only too ungrateful for what had already been given to it, but also too increasingly visible in the public sphere and, with the appearance of AIDS in 1981, too blatantly promiscuous for the health, morals, and laws of polite society to tolerate.\(^{11}\) The “homosexual problem” needed to be solved all over again, and the implicit threats of the Sexual Offenses Act with its promise of increased public surveillance and

\(^{10}\) On the subject of Gay Liberation in England, see Cook, 180-8.

\(^{11}\) For Margaret Thatcher, one of the aims of the Conservative Party during the 80s was to “question those who claim an inalienable right to be gay,” Cook, 204. The rise in local laws aimed against homosexuals, the defunding of LGBTQ programs and initiatives, and the rise in the culture of gay bashing during this time were all in accord with the mood of the time; in fact, by “1983, 62 percent of people disapproved of gay relationships — already an increase on the figures for the late 1970s [...]. By 1985, the figure was 69 percent, and in 1987 it had reached 74 percent,” Cook, 205.
refined moves of intervention into the private would finally need to be enforced. The response proved quick and thorough. By the end of the decade, arrests of gay men in private homes and public venues on charges of everything from sodomy to procurement had risen to their highest numbers in history. Because of the gains it had made as a result of Gay Liberation, and due to its association with the liberal excesses of the Sexual Revolution and the burgeoning AIDS epidemic, homosexuality under the Thatcher government had been made to suffer from a renewed effort by the state to keep the lifestyles and activities of gay men tightly regulated and fixed at the margins. In other words, the 1967 Sexual Offences Act had ostensibly afforded its strictest interpreters greater convenience in controlling where and how homosexuality itself could exist. This meant that, for homosexuals, no place or space would ever be quite safe; the private had become much less private, the public much more dangerous. Consequently, the public and the private spheres both became critical sites of struggle between gay men and the British state throughout the 1980s, a struggle over territories of personal expression that would transpire most regularly and most famously within urban centers all across England, especially in London.

And so it is against precisely this backdrop that the events of The Swimming-Pool Library unfold, the novel’s present at once occupying the narrow temporal space of a single London summer in 1983, yet at the same time tasked with serving as a symbolic point of confluence for the many complex social and political histories and forces outlined above. Published in 1988 and set at the moment of transition from the waning days of the sexual and social freedoms of the 1970s to the dawning of a new age of persecution of homosexuals in the 1980s, Hollinghurst’s novel follows its youthful, aristocratic narrator as he abandons himself to satisfying his every desire

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12 Ibid., 206.

with little idea of just how endangered the way of life which he and his
generation have taken for granted has become. Will Beckwith begins the novel
by expressing his confidence in the fact that this summer of 1983 will mark
the glorious culmination of his 25 years. “I was riding high on sex and self-
esteem,” he confesses to the reader, “it was my time, my belle epoque (6). In
its early stages, Will’s narration overlooks the threats posed by a world
renewed in its hostility to homosexuality in favor of complete immersion in
the overripe decadence of the urban gay scene. And, for a while, The
Swimming-Pool Library indulges its protagonist in this, doubling as the novel
occasionally does as a kind of nostalgic chronicle of a bygone era and its
irretrievable pleasures. For, on one level, Will’s narrative is meant to
serve the larger purpose of documenting and preserving the details of a
deceptively idyllic but now vanished moment in the history of English gay
subculture, a moment in which seemingly limitless sexual and social
possibilities were accessible to gay men in the carved out spaces of an urban
landscape thought to be well beyond the reach of or, at the very least,
hidden from conventional morality and the law.

As Will introduces us to the sites of pleasure and community which
constitute his particular experience of London, therefore, the graphic sex
and social interactions that he depicts as taking place within these spaces
at first appear liberating and affirmative, a testament (both his and
Hollinghurst’s) to the persistence and vibrancy of gay life in the city
during this period. One such space to which we are introduced is Will’s local
gym in the basement of The Corinthian Club. Described as having been designed
by the architect Sir Frank Orme and standing on Great Russell Street as a
monument to the “civic grandeur” that has come with fulfilling its Victorian
mission to serve “Men of All Nations,” The Corinthian Club is a symbol of
old, official London that, as we quickly learn, has been appropriated for
purposes much different from those for which it was built (12). Behind its
façade of “niches and pilasters [...] cartouches and volutes,” down its inner staircase whose handrails “[tingle] with static electricity,” is located what Will enthusiastically identifies as “the weights room and the dowdy magnificence of the pool [...], a gloomy and functional underworld full of life, purpose and sexuality” (13). This basement area, with its dark, secluded location and charged atmosphere, is essentially a cruising ground that plays host to the furtive liaisons of many of the Club’s members.14 Our narrator, for instance, boasts of the fact that “[m]ore than once [he] had ended up in a bedroom of the hotel above with a man [he] had smiled at in the showers” (13). And the significance of this transformation of the gym from its original function as a place for fraternal bonding and exercise to a convenient subterranean site for forging illicit sexual bonds is perhaps most effectively dramatized in Will’s description of the gym’s changing physical appearance over the years. Of the pool area in particular he writes:

The lighting of this dingy, dignified underground bath is not in keeping with its decor. Originally, old photographs show, branched neo-classical lampadaries spread a broad glare over the water, whilst at the corners shell-shaped cups threw an orangey glow upwards on to the grandiose mouldings of the ceiling. [...] In the recent past, however, coinciding with the outlay on a few tins of brown gloss paint, and the filling in of some of the cracks which continuous small subsidence and shifting of the ground brought about, the pool lighting had been redesigned. Away with the wholesome brightness of Sir Frank’s original conception, and in with a suggestive gloom, blond pools of light contrasting with surrounding shadow (15).

14 Will observes, “This naked mingling, which formed a ritualistic heart to the life of the club, produced its own improper incitements to ideal liaisons, and the polyandrous happenings which could not survive into the world of jackets and ties, cycle-clips and duffel-coats. And how difficult social distinctions are in the shower” (20).
Here the physical environment of this subterranean pool area appears to have been subtly transformed over time through "small subsidence and shifting of the ground," an echo of the shifting social landscape of the gym itself and the gradual undermining of the structure and foundation of The Corinthian Club as a civic institution. The alteration in lighting, moreover, renders invisible the interior architectural details which continue the neo-classical styling of the building's more public face; the casting into shadow of original fixtures such as "lampadaries" and "the grandiose mouldings of the ceiling," that is, represents a symbolic obscuring of the official position of municipal service historically maintained by the Club within the local community. Indeed, the "wholesome brightness" with its connotations of visible physical and moral well-being has been dispersed by a "suggestive gloom," as if to suggest that the presence of a now largely homosexual clientele has itself created within the Club an atmosphere of darkness under the cover of which these members have been conducting their various deviant, unwholesome affairs. These changes in lighting and decor, therefore, are the novel's way of dramatizing the subversive process by which gay Londoners have seized upon hidden away public spaces of the dominant straight culture and, out of them, have created relatively safe havens of sexual expression shielded from the dangerous, exposing glare of the outside world. And, though at first glance dingy and gloomy, the gym is ultimately a lively space of urban gay life deserving of the appreciation and allegiance of Will and his kind. In the end, what Hollinghurst achieves in this introductory survey

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15 This subversive process of appropriating physical urban space is actually described by geographer Lawrence Knopp in his study of gay life in major world cities: "What is [...] common in London, as a source of gay male identity and a feature of gay male identity politics, is the phenomenon of gay men challenging and appropriating, through both their actions and their self-representations, everyday spaces and places for specifically and openly transgressive purposes. Frequently these include attempts to convert or (defend) certain public spaces as sites for various forms of nontraditional sexual behavior. Other attempts are made simply to expose and subvert the dominant sexualizations of public and semipublic places such as streets, parks, and clubs, as well as the more abstract spaces of popular culture," Knopp, 162.
of The Corry (as it is affectionately known among its regulars)\textsuperscript{16} is a peeling back of the exterior of a venerable city institution to reveal and, in some respect, celebrate the existence of a thriving and defiant gay subculture that has surreptitiously and successfully taken up residence within its very walls.

Many of the same physical aspects and dynamics of the gym at The Corry continue to recur throughout The Swimming-Pool Library in the numerous other cruising sites frequented by Will. Rife with repeating yet illuminating imagery, these settings allow Hollinghurst not only to paint a broad, continuous picture of the underground sexual zeitgeist of early 80s London, but they also allow him to explore in critical detail the nature of Will’s own relationship to and regard for this particular milieu and its various venues of social and sexual engagement. One such venue is introduced when the narrator, on the hunt for sexual release, avails himself of the sure and easy pleasures offered by the punters at The Brutus, a local porn theater and sex shop (56). Like the gym at The Corry, The Brutus is situated within the depths of a historical building, in “the basement of one of those Soho houses which […] maintain their beautiful Caroline fenestration, […] (the piano nobile elegant above the squalid, jolly sous sol)” (56). Also like the gym at The Corry, the cinema at The Brutus is located in a “gloomy […] cellar room” that plays host to the “doing [of] things best covered by darkness” (58). The walls of the cinema are even described as “damp-stained” (58), a subtle nod to the humid atmosphere of the pool area at The Corinthian Club (13), as well as an echo of the “dimly lit, faintly damp” (233) spaces of The Shaft, a favored disco of Will’s in an “airless, electrifying cellar in the West End” that he visits later in the novel (225). Indeed, The Shaft, continuing the narrative succession of darkened, subterranean settings,\textsuperscript{17} further develops this imagery of dampness, moisture, and water which seems to appear regularly

\textsuperscript{16} This nickname seems another example of the colonization of the Corinthian Club by its gay clientele. “The Corry” suggests a campy familiarity and sense of affectionate ownership.  
\textsuperscript{17} The novel was originally going to be set entirely in underground spaces.
in Will’s descriptions of his preferred haunts. In describing the scene at The Shaft one night, for example, Will notes that the “heavy hotness of the day, which had begun to drain from the streets, was redoubled in the thickly crowded club” (230) and that as a result the sweaty, ecstatic dancers were creating an “atmosphere [that] was more and more liquid” (233). This liquid atmosphere takes on yet another form later in the evening when Will looks out upon the men on the dance floor through the glass of a large aquarium in the back of the club. “Through this entranced, slowing medium,” he observes, “the dancers could be seen spinning, rocking and bouncing, freakishly fast and disconnected” (234). Here as elsewhere the novel is establishing a connection between the experience of descending into the underground spaces of urban gay subculture and the experience of immersing oneself in water, the metaphor being tied in closely with something Will discloses while doing laps in the pool at The Corry: “No discipline made me feel more free, or contained me and delighted me within its own element so much as swimming” (224). For the narrator, the element of water represents an ultimate space of freedom, satisfaction, and security, a fluid and freeform space where one can do things physically that one cannot normally do elsewhere, where one can feel “contained” by a private world set apart, and where the ability to gain access to and thrive within this foreign element is dependent upon possession of a special skill (in this case, swimming). It is no wonder, then, that water imagery comes to take its place alongside images of darkness and the subterranean in the novel’s physical descriptions of Will’s cruising grounds. For, through his unique knowledge of the underground spaces of the city, his personal experience with the cruising scene, and his good looks and sexual prowess Will is able to similarly navigate with ease and surety – like an expert swimmer – the secret sea of limitless pleasures flowing beneath the London landscape. And like the dancing men he sees through the aquarium, who are like fish free in their own element and contained in a separate world all
their own, Will immerses himself in what he believes to be the sexual liberties and privacy promised by the dark, liquid atmosphere and sunken damp-stained walls of places like The Corry, The Brutus, and The Shaft. Through this particular imagery and the incredible detailing of these particular sites, therefore, Hollinghurst at once conveys the carefree, hedonistic scene of underground London in the summer of 1983, as well as the attitude of blind confidence and invincibility that this scene inevitably inspires in Will Beckwith and the generation of gay men he is meant in this novel to represent.

As Charles Nantwich reminds us, however, any body of water can turn dangerous in an instant for even the most skilled swimmer. Nantwich, an elderly peer whom Will befriends, is a former victim of the infamous government crackdown on homosexuals in the 1950s, having once been imprisoned and publicly humiliated for soliciting sex in the popular cruising ground of a public toilet. This traumatic experience he compares, quite fittingly, to “being flung, chained, into water” (291) and to being faced with “a cramp when swimming – a sudden challenge in a friendly environment, threatening where before it had only sustained” (245). The recurrence of water and swimming imagery is, of course, no coincidence; for, as it turns out, the very same dynamic described by Nantwich of his ordeal during the 50s also applies to the social and sexual environment of 80s London that Will initially finds so friendly and sustaining. That is to say, Hollinghurst is not merely interested in using the form of the English realist novel to provide an account of what, through the eyes of his privileged and priapic narrator, appears to be an idyllic, consequence-free milieu of easy and

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18 Water, swimming, and darkness also appear linked to Will’s conception of youthful innocence and an idealized vision of male homosexuality. The swimming-pool library of the title is, after all, the name given to the pool at Will’s old boarding school, where he and his friends would “slip away from the dorms and go with exaggerated refinement of stealth to the pool. In the changing-room serious, hot No 6 were smoked, and soap, lathered in the cold, starlit water, eased the violence of cocks up young bums. […] Friendly hands felt for the flies. There was never, or rarely, any kissing – no cloying, adult impurity in the lubricious innocence of what we did” (164-5). This swimming-pool library represents a now lost idyll of freedom that Will and other men in this novel attempt to relive in the cruising grounds of their adulthood.
endless erotic pleasures. Rather, the more pressing objective of The Swimming-Pool Library is to expose to close scrutiny the histories of repression associated with, as well as the present-day dangers currently facing, English gay subculture, histories and dangers which the novel depicts as being present in a variety of ways within the many physical spaces inhabited by this subculture. What the novel intends for Will and the reader to realize is that these spaces are fluid and unstable and, like the element of water, are sites of both enjoyment and peril. More specifically, Hollinghurst sets out to demonstrate through the sex scenes and settings of his novel that the freedoms experienced within the underground gay scene of 80s London are as tenuous as they ever were; that the promise of privacy and protection from moral and legal forces remains, as queer geographer William Leap has argued, a naive illusion; and that, despite or perhaps because of the 1967 Sexual Offenses Act, these forces continue to be deployed by a dominant straight culture renewed in its desire to exert control over the public and private lives of its homosexual subjects. In essence, just as The Swimming-Pool Library serves to shine a light on the illicit activities taking place in the darkened depths beneath the urban landscape of official London, so it also brings to light the systems of oppression and surveillance that have themselves burrowed deep within the very precincts of this subterranean world and have, like a cramp when swimming, posed a sudden challenge in a once seemingly friendly environment.

These systems of oppression and surveillance, and their subsequent effects on the lives of gay men, manifest themselves throughout the novel in a number

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19 In fact, Hollinghurst depicts in this novel exactly what William Leap has discovered in his work on urban queer space. Leap writes, “The possibility of intrusion by police, the threat of attack by queerbashers, the ‘false security’ of the bedroom, toilet stall, or bathhouse membership, the pervasive presence of regulatory authority – all of these realities reframe the meanings of ‘private’ and ‘privacy’ as they apply to sites of sexual practice. In such setting, and through various means, people may claim ‘protect(ion) from unwanted access by others’ [...], or attempt to establish ‘control over the access that other have to one’ [...], but those efforts are always subject to the intrusion, supervision, and/or disruption of others. In this sense, all sites of sexual practice are public locations, and any claims to privacy which unfold there are fictional claims,” William L. Leap, “Introduction” in Public Sex/Gay Space, ed. William L. Leap (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 10-11.
of ways, the stories of Charles Nantwich’s imprisonment and the arrest decades later of Will’s close friend James under similar circumstances being two of the most salient examples. Upon meeting Nantwich, Will is asked by the old peer whether he would consider helping him write his memoirs. Before he agrees to do so Will is given access to Nantwich’s diaries. As Will progresses through the diaries, at first only reading them for their “dirty bits” (112), he gradually begins to see in Charles’s formative erotic experiences at school and later as a young man in post-war London parallels with his own experience. From a parkland folly outside of Winchester that served as a popular cruising spot for students, to a recognizable Soho bar scene, Will acknowledges that Charles’s personal account of his early days, “despite its period, spoke for me too right down to the very details of places and customs” (150). The revelation of shared spaces and experiences decades removed establishes an important sense of historical continuity linking Charles’s life in pre-Gay Liberation England to the deceptively liberated modern lifestyle led by the young narrator.  

This detail does not only serve to recognize an uninterrupted continuum of pleasure and community enjoyed by English homosexuals through the years, however. Rather, it is also meant to begin casting doubt on any simple notion that the constant challenges to the existence of this pleasure and community in Charles’s time are, as Will’s brother-in-law confidently asserts (and as Will himself believes for much of the novel), a thing of the past, “another world entirely (310). Such a narrow assessment of contemporary English cultural attitudes toward homosexuality eventually crumbles in the face of the even greater revelations later in the novel of Charles’s arrest for solicitation

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20 The sexual underground of the postwar period bears some resemblance to the one inhabited in the early 80s by Will. Charles’s vivid depictions are in line with many such descriptions included in studies of the postwar London gay scene. See in particular Matt Houlbrook, Queer London (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2005), 208-18.

21 Will often aestheticizes Charles’s difficulties and the struggles of earlier generations of gay men. He says of this tendency of his, “[It] was an irresistible elegiac need for the tendernesses of an England long past” (143).
in a London toilet in 1954 and then of a similar event in the novel’s present involving James Brook, a medical doctor and close friend to Will Beckwith. Like Nantwich, who had been entrapped by an undercover cop posing as a “lovely boy [on the prowl] in an old Gents” (294), James is enticed by a regular at The Corry named Colin only to learn after making a pass at him that Colin is a “pretty policeman” intent on enforcing the law (260). The stark similarities between the two arrests are Hollinghurst’s way of highlighting the fact that James’s is not an isolated incident but is instead only the latest example of a long-standing program of persecution against homosexuals, a program that has apparently once again become a threatening presence within those spaces which young men like James and Will have long believed were free from the struggles plaguing an earlier era. That Colin the policeman has infiltrated the seeming inviolable sanctity of The Corry, for instance, suggests just how vulnerable every site of underground gay subculture is to the influence of legal and moral authority and, by extension, just how unreliable the narrator has been in capturing and understanding the true nature of his surroundings. By using the arrests of Nantwich and James to draw distinct parallels between the infamous purge years of the 1950s and the summer of 1983, therefore, the novel is emphasizing the historical gravity of the situation facing homosexuals in an increasingly conservative England under Thatcher, attempting as it does to raise awareness – in both the narrator and the reader – of the resumption of a war on sexual perversion that seems, in essence, never to have ended. As a newly enlightened Will eventually points out to his brother-in-law, “[The persecution of gays in the 1950s is] really not another world, Gavin, it’s going on in London now almost every day (310).

22 For instance, both Charles and James hold positions of prominence in society that can be threatened by the scandal of arrest (peer and physician, respectively); both note the formal tone of their arresting officer’s use of the word “sir” to address them; and both of their arresting policemen are aroused during the sting.
While these revelations bring to Will’s attention the most glaring threats posed to the urban gay community, however, Will remains in the dark as to just how deeply these mechanisms of power and law have penetrated his subculture (and his subconscious), as well as just how complicit he and other gay men have been in perpetuating their effects. But Hollinghurst is not in the dark on such matters, nor does he intend for his reader to be. Consumed by the outsized narcissism that comes with youth and beauty and a distracting obsession with sex, Will is a flawed narrator in possession of a critical blind spot which often causes him to overlook the many social and political complexities of and dangers present within the world around him. Symbolic echoes of that blind spot recur throughout the novel. For instance, we get a literal picture of it in Will’s description of a Mapplethorpe-like photo he once posed for in which his visible semi-nude body is set off against the blindfolded effect of a “shadow across [his] eyes” (5). Another example comes when Will casually admits to having a suspended driver’s license because, while driving home drunk one night, he had attempted “to overtake […] a little old car that was trundling past me, invisible in either of my mirrors…” (55). The novel, therefore, requires that the reader exercise a greater level of awareness than Will and read past his blind spot in order to confront what Hollinghurst is ultimately portraying as the insidious, underlying forces of a dominant culture that infiltrates and polices not only the actual physical sites of gay subculture, but also the very bodies and minds, the practices and interactions, of the men who frequent them. Not merely content with exposing the specter of incarceration and humiliation haunting spaces like The Corry and other cruising grounds, in other words, *The Swimming-Pool Library* also means to explore the more subtle, more imperceptible process by which, to use the words of Alan Sinfield, “subordinated groups make their culture in the space seized from, or made
available by, the dominant [and then] replay its motifs in distinctive forms, ...
reinforcing dominant arrangements.”

One such example of this replaying and reinforcing of dominant culture within the practices and precincts of gay subculture involves the alternating attractions that characters in the novel, especially Will, feel toward positions of dominance and submission. The theme of dominating or being dominated, often violently, crops up again and again throughout the novel, the dynamic between aggressor and victim being an essential part of almost every sexual encounter. Early on, for instance, Will discloses a disturbing side to his libidinous appetites when he recounts one particular interlude with his much younger, black working-class boyfriend Arthur: “[I] tackled him onto the carpet, and after a few seconds’ brutal fumbling fucked him cruelly. He let out little compacted shouts of pain, but I snarled at him to shut up and with fine submission he bit them back” (37). Here we see Will deriving pleasure from, as well as reproducing, something akin to the role of a colonial oppressor within the space of his very own home. This is made explicit when he says afterward of his lover, “I saw him becoming more and more my slave and my toy (38). But Will is not the only white, privileged character guilty of this sort of exploitation of men from other races and other classes. We learn that Charles, for example, was at one point an actual colonial administrator in Africa who lusted after the native men under his jurisdiction. He is also, as it turns out, responsible for producing pornographic films involving black and blue-collar staff members from his private gentleman’s club (218-20). As Hollinghurst once explained in an interview, “One of the things [The Swimming-Pool Library] deals with is this old truism that gayness enables people to make contacts across barriers of class and race because gays are drawn together by sex. This is all fine and

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23 Sinfield, 111.
dandy except that it is also a liberty that can be exploited or corrupted."  
Consciously and unconsciously, Will and Charles do just that. And as the scene with Arthur in particular demonstrates, the dominant arrangements of racial and class hierarchies present within English society still manage to penetrate and play out within even the most private, most seemingly liberated spaces of urban gay subculture.

What is also interesting, not to mention incredibly suggestive, is the fact that the sex scene with Arthur and other scenes like it seem to bear a striking resemblance to those moments in the novel when certain incarnations of the dominant straight culture are themselves violently exerting power and control over gay men, particularly white, privileged gay men like Will and Charles. When Will openly admires and then is severely beaten by a group of homophobic skinheads, for instance, the description of his attack echoes the scene with Arthur, with Will this time assuming the role of the submissive participant: “The two of them pushed me down till I was almost kneeling in subjection, my legs twisted under me. Very carelessly, as if getting into bed [...] the boy on the bin slid forward” (203). Another incident described in a similar manner is Charles Nantwich’s arrest: “beginning or meaning to cry out, [...] I slam full length to the ground, my arm is jerked behind my back, the boy is astride over me, and the man in the coat says: ‘We are police officers. You are under arrest’” (295). Of course, both of these scenes mimic scenes of rough sex, the phrases “as if getting into bed” and “the boy is

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26 The scene is even further sexualized when one considers Will’s explicit attraction to these skinheads and skinheads in general, which he reveals prior to his attack, “At the end of this alley a group of skinheads were playing around, kicking beercans against the wall and kneeling each other in spasmodic mock-fights. One of them, slobbish, with moronic sideburns, and braces hoisting his jeans up around a fat ass and a fat dick, was very good” (199). And, “They were a challenge, skinheads, and made me feel shifty as they stood about the streets and shopping precincts, magnetising the attention they aimed to repel. Cretinously simplified to booted feet, bum and bullet head, they had some, if not all, of the things one was looking for” (201).
astride over me” emphasizing the intimate, almost erotic sentiment with which Will and Charles regard their otherwise traumatic encounters. What we have here, then, is evidence of the sexualization of oppression itself in the form of Will and Charles becoming equal parts horrified and aroused by the prospect of submitting to power and authority far greater than their own. Power, in other words, whether exerting it or submitting to it, is portrayed in the novel as being an intense force of attraction for gay men who, within a broader social and cultural context, ultimately wield very little. This is why aggressive relationships of dominance and submission are constantly re-staged in sexual encounters throughout the narrative; at one point Will even finds himself in a hotel room with an Argentine man who suggests reenacting in bed the colonial aggressions of the recent Falklands War (320). This is also why the law in particular proves to be an object of such fascination and masochistic desire for Will. One example of this is Will’s inability to resist seducing Colin the handsome and closeted undercover policeman at The Corry who later decides capriciously to arrest James (110). Another example is his enjoyment of a trashy novel entitled Goldie whose eponymous protagonist is a promiscuous gay cop (314). Of the trashy novel Will admits, “I resented its professional neatness and its priapic attempts to win me over. The trouble was that, as attempts, they were half-successful: something in me was pained and removed; but something else, subliterate, responded to the book’s bald graffiti. ‘Fuck me again, Goldie,’ the slender, pleading Juan Bautista would cry; and I thought, ‘Yeah, give it to him! Give it to him good ‘n’ hard!’” (314). This something subliterate in Will is a kind of conditioned response, implanted by dominant culture and drawn out by the figures of these physically appealing policemen, to a law that is at once terrifying in the constant danger it poses to the existence of homosexuality.

27 I read Will’s attack and Charles’s arrest as similar in the sense that skinheads, though not representative of the official authority or legal power of the state, are still symbolic of power and authority in the form of a far right moralist, anti-gay code of the streets—an unofficial if still related manifestation of the broader, all-pervasive English culture of heterosexist dominance and persecution of homosexuals.
and yet irresistible in the dizzying, unattainable sense of power that it embodies. In fact this process in which oppressive legal and moral forces act as a kind of magnet for the illicit homoerotic desires of the novel’s protagonist recalls a similar process described by Michel Foucault in *The History of Sexuality*. “Power,” Foucault writes, “operate[s] as a mechanism of attraction; it [draws] out those peculiarities over which it [keeps] watch. Pleasure spread[s] to the power that harrie[s] it; power anchor[s] the pleasure it uncover[s].”\(^{28}\) Surely, there is no better description of how the dynamic between sex and power plays out in *The Swimming-Pool Library*. Foucault explains further: “it is through the isolation, intensification, and consolidation of peripheral sexualities that the relations of power to sex and pleasure [branch] out and [multiply], [measure] the body, and [penetrate] modes of conduct.”\(^{29}\) And indeed, as we have seen, the mechanisms of heterosexual English power have penetrated so deeply into the modes of conduct of gay men that their very own sexual attractions have been co-opted and transformed into self-oppressing impulses which have ultimately rendered an already isolated, peripheral subculture docile and susceptible to any and all forms of interventions by the dominant culture. This, as a result, leaves buried deep within the space of the urban gay psyche a troubling tendency toward self destruction, as Will indirectly acknowledges while watching a nature program on TV in which a hidden, subterranean colony of termites is destroyed by an anteater: “I felt a thrill at the violent intrusion [...] of something so strange and intricate” (57). That thrill, it would seem, also applies to the violent intrusions of the strange and intricate underworld that Will himself inhabits. What Hollinghurst underlines time and again, therefore, is that gay men constantly run the risk of being actively complicit in their own oppression. And once they submit to this oppression


\(^{29}\) Foucault, 48.
through sexual desire, as Will does through sado-masochist sex play with culturally disenfranchised partners and through the various pleasures he derives from his contact with skinheads and policemen, they begin to undermine the possibility of ever maintaining a truly stable, equal, and independent subcultural community.\footnote{In point of fact, Will's complicity in the oppression of English gay subculture runs even deeper than most. His grandfather Sir Denis Beckwith, as Charles Nantwich's diaries reveal, was one of the lead government officials responsible for ordering the crackdown on homosexuals in the 1950s (304-5). Thus, Will's entire lavish lifestyle (from his apartment, which his grandfather financed, to the money he uses on his nights out cruising for men) has essentially been bankrolled by the wealth and prestige his grandfather earned as the official scourge of homosexual vice in mid-century England. While this ironic detail underscores how much a part of the English Establishment Will is without realizing it, it also acts as a heavy-handed symbol of just how inextricably tied English gay subculture is to that Establishment. Here is Hollinghurst's most telling example of how gay subculture is controlled and regulated in the most systematic and insidious ways, and how Will's community of English homosexuals is, as Foucault says of all subordinated groups attempting to resist domination and oppression, "never in a position of exteriority in relation to power," Foucault, 96. As I argue later in this chapter, however, the space of art in the form of works such as The Swimming-Pool Library acts as an important site for both examining these forms of domination and staging a resistance to it. For further, illuminating critical engagements with this theme of complicity and what this means for the stability of gay community, identity, and history, see J. Stephen Murphy, "Past Irony: Trauma and the Historical Turn in Fragments and The Swimming-Pool Library," Literature and History 13, no. 1 (Spring 2004), 68-9, and Kaye Mitchell, "Alan Hollinghurst and Homosexual Identity," in British Fiction Today, ed. Philip Tew and Rod Mengham (London: Continuum, 2006), 49-50.}

In fact, by the end of the novel it would appear that maintaining such a community beset by both internal and external pressures from the dominant straight culture is indeed impossible. For, as is apparent, Will Beckwith does not possess objectivity or inclination enough to recognize — and thus, resist — his involvement in perpetuating the mechanisms of regulation and domination that have so deeply penetrated the spaces of his subculture and his subconscious. What is more, Will’s inability to identify and elude these mechanisms is also the result of his too narrow pursuit of pleasure, youth, and beauty in a subculture where such superficiality acts as a blinder against the harsh reality of the many challenges facing gay men. This is not to say that our protagonist never reaches a certain level of enlightenment; he does discover in the latter stages of the novel that his “time, [his] belle époque” is anything but what he thought it would be. After he reads through Charles’s diaries, becomes a victim of homophobic violence, and learns of James’s entrapment by Colin, Will is shaken out of his idyll of homoerotic bliss long enough to realize that the security and freedom he has
taken for granted in this post-Gay Liberation world of discos, gyms, and porn theaters is under threat. As Hollinghurst often reminds us, however, Will’s lesson is not a lasting one. When he finds out that the undercover cop whom he had once slept with has arrested James, for instance, Will contemplates visiting revenge upon Colin by outing him to the authorities. He also thinks about doing something similar to an older man with whom, he discovers, his own underage boyfriend has been having an affair. Of course, such a response, such a thirst for exercising power over other homosexuals through the medium of the law, plays right into the hands of the oppressor, risking exposure and betrayal of all concerned, as well as the disruption of the fragile unity of the subcultural community. Whether Will goes through with turning in these men remains an unresolved plot point, but that he has the inclination to do so, even after having read in Charles’s diaries about the ruinous and humiliating effects that interventions of the law have had on the lives of homosexuals in the past, suggests that Will has failed to grow as a character. He continues instead to value the satisfaction of his own desires over the good of his subordinated social group. Nowhere is this more apparent than on the last page of the novel where Will, returned to his usual routine at The Corry, is faced with a choice of symbolic resonance:

There were several old boys, one or two perhaps even of Charles’s age, and doubtless all with their own story, strange and yet oddly comparable, to tell. And going into the showers I saw a suntanned young lad in pale blue trunks that I rather liked the look of (326).

On the one hand, Will is given the opportunity to engage with these “old boys” and listen to their stories; the men represent what Charles has

And Will is not the only character who places his own desires over the good of his community. James, for instance, helps Will search for an incriminating photo of Colin. And Charles is described late in the novel as “a dangerous man, a fixer and favouritiser” (287) who willfully overlooks the demeaning nature of his pornographic exploitation films, and is as drawn to youth and beauty at any expense as Will is, if not more so.
represented throughout much of the novel: a reminder of a not so distant past that persists into the present day, and a wealth of perspective and experience that could prove useful to the likes of Will and his contemporaries in light of the hardships they have only just begun to suffer. On the other hand, Will is presented with the more physically appealing option of the “suntanned young lad” who represents all of the most superficial things to which Will had committed himself at the beginning of *The Swimming-Pool Library*. And while some critics view this ending as ambiguous and Will’s choice unclear, I would argue that Will’s decision to pursue the latter of these two options is quite clear. For example, the phrase “going into the showers” in that final sentence seems at first to be a description of what the “suntanned young lad” is doing, but because of the way the sentence is structured it is possible that the action applies instead to that of the narrator. The narrator, that is, may already be in the process of going into the showers and pursuing his next conquest before he even realizes he is doing so, before he even finishes the sentence. The ambiguity of the action may also indicate that Will sees himself and the boy as being one and the same, this close identification thus signaling Will’s final preference for youth over age, pleasure over pain, beauty over wisdom. Moreover, the fact that the sentence ends on an awkward note with a preposition – a curious grammatical error for such a cultured and articulate narrator – further suggests that Will has lost control of his narrative and his faculties, has in essence already become overwhelmed by his desire for the boy. And yet, the reader must be aware by now, even if Will is not, that succumbing so easily to such desire can be dangerous. Thus, the conclusion is not without suspense of a sort, for it is entirely possible that Will could be walking into the same kind of police sting that ensnared James and Charles, or even worse, the young man in pale blue swim trunks could be one of the early carriers of the deadly virus beginning to kill off homosexuals
in the summer of 1983 of which Will’s entire narration omits mention. Either way, Will’s willful, blind movement toward an uncertain future is as disappointing as it is disturbing. Will is ultimately a slave to his whims and desires, and the novel closes with the pessimistic sense that Will and the men of his generation, possessed of a superficial sensibility and a debilitating historical and cultural blind spot that they seem unwilling and unable to overcome, are together on a path to individual and collective ruin. In a sense, then, the novel comes full circle. In returning to The Corry, Will is literally and figuratively right back where he started.32

But the same cannot be said of the reader. That Will puts himself in peril at the close of the novel by choosing to revert to a state of blissful ignorance is a final reminder of just how vital it is that such ignorance be dispelled, how imperative that the realities of being a gay man in modern London be confronted. And it is, in fact, the dispelling of this kind of ignorance and the providing of a means of confronting these realities for its broad audience of readers that is of highest priority in The Swimming-Pool Library. As I have shown throughout this section, the novel manages – despite or perhaps because of its unreliable narrator – to expose in realistic (often graphic) detail the lives of and adversities faced by gay men in the British capital during the watershed decades of the 1950s and the early 1980s. In revealing through vividly rendered sexual and spatial imagery the tentative freedoms as well as the bitter histories and implicit and explicit dangers inscribed within the many spaces of the underground world of gay London, therefore, Hollinghurst ensures that, by the end of the novel, the reader of The Swimming-Pool Library possesses a far greater awareness of what is at stake for urban gay subculture than does his otherwise distracted protagonist. For the ultimate virtue of this novel lies in the boldness and openness with which it presents critical issues and themes relating to

32 Many critics and reviewers read Will’s return to his promiscuous ways as an example of the novel’s political and moral ambivalence. See Mitchell, 48. My argument suggests that Will’s return to his old ways is pivotal to understanding the novel’s clear political and moral stance.
homosexuality in England, a boldness and openness that had, until 1988, been largely absent from the traditional English realist novel. Indeed, it is in the very raising of these complex issues within this very literary form that The Swimming-Pool Library takes the monumental step of drawing a once taboo subject into the light of day, into a new and wider realm of cultural and artistic discourse, and places it under the long overdue scrutiny of the novelist’s penetrating gaze. In fact, Hollinghurst’s ambitious goal for his debut novel, the role he intends for it to play in expanding the consciousness of its audience, and his sense of its unique place in the history of English literature are all neatly articulated in one seemingly insignificant scene. It is the scene, referred to briefly above, where Will steps into the storefront of The Brutus and notices that, instead of porn, the TV monitor behind the attendant is showing something else entirely:

it was a nature programme, and contained some virtuoso footage shot inside a termite colony. First we saw the long, questing snout of the ant-eater outside, and then its brutal, razor-sharp claws cutting their way in. Back inside, perched by a fibre-optic miracle at a junction of tunnels which looked like the triforium of some Gaudi church, we saw the freakishly extensible tongue of the ant-eater come flicking towards us, cleaning the fleeing termites off the wall. It was one of the most astonishing pieces of film I had ever seen (57).

Here we have The Swimming-Pool Library in allegorical miniature, a metafictional comment on not only the form and content of the work of art, but also the experience of viewing it. The underground colony of termites, of course, represents the underground gay scene in London, while the anteater stands in as the large, menacing entity of dominant heterosexist English culture. The most significant image in the passage, however, is the camera.
Just as this camera offers a fresh perspective on the plight of a little understood species of insect, so Hollinghurst is using the instrument of realist fiction and pornographic convention to provide his readers with a new way of seeing, in startling clarity and minute detail, a hidden world that some did not even know existed and others – like Will Beckwith – have not yet come to fully understand. That Will fails to see the parallel between the struggles of these exposed creatures and the plight of the underground community of which he is a part is typical of him as a narrator and as a young, vain, pleasure-obsessed member of his post-Gay Liberation generation. But through the bold-faced symbolism of the above passage the author makes it impossible for the reader to ignore the larger thematic significance of this parallel. Also difficult to overlook is the parallel Hollinghurst means to draw between the innovation in the technology of visual narrative represented by the miniaturized camera and the innovation in English literary narrative represented by the novel itself. With this novel, Hollinghurst holds a brightly lit mirror up to (or, in this case, projects a glaring televised image of) gay subculture and the society which marginalizes and disciplines it, exposing both for the first time through the medium of English fiction to close observation and probing critical analysis. Like the fibre-optic miracle of the video camera, therefore, The Swimming-Pool Library brings new content and a new point of view to a familiar form. The result is a wholly unique narrative, graphic and pornographic in its treatment of taboo and underrepresented topics, that continuously prompts (and trains) its reader to see past the surface of its first-person narration, and to reflect on and engage with the hidden realities of gay life in London which, as its author emphasizes repeatedly, must remain hidden and overlooked no longer.
III.

At the end of the last section, I suggested that The Swimming-Pool Library occupies a unique space in the history of English fiction, particularly for its combining of elements of realist and pornographic narrative in order to tell a story about homosexuality in a way that had never quite been attempted before by an English writer. I want in this final section to conclude this chapter by elaborating on these claims. This brief coda, more specifically, will relate the issues and themes discussed in the previous section to the broader context of the novel’s formal and artistic achievements as a watershed work of fiction that, like the other seminal texts examined in this study, ultimately helped to redefine and revitalize the outmoded form and content of the traditional novel in England.

Before we consider the specifics of the novel’s experimentation with novelistic form and content, however, I want first to situate the novel within its literary historical moment and provide a sense of what the appearance of this work represented to the literary landscape at the time of its publication in Britain in 1988. To do this, we must take note not only of the novel’s critical reception, but also its relationship to past traditions of English gay fiction. Of the former, the critical reaction to Hollinghurst’s debut was emphatic and unequivocal. The Guardian, for instance, gushed that it was “the first major novel in Britain to put gay life in its modern place and context.”\(^3\) American novelist Edmund White echoed this sentiment, declaring The Swimming-Pool Library “classic English prose […], surely the best book about gay life yet written by an English author.”\(^4\) White added, “I can think of no other book that is at once so literary and so highly sexed, with the exception of Lolita and Genet’s Our Lady of the


Flowers.” Here it would appear that White viewed the book as something of a twofold success, as a pioneering work of gay literature, but also as a major development in the classic English novel—much as Lolita was for the American novel and Our Lady of the Flowers was for the French. English writer Philip Hensher also recognized the dual innovation of the work. Recalling in an interview his first encounter with The Swimming-Pool Library as a young man, Hensher confessed, “I remember coming down from university to London to buy it as soon as possible. It was extremely important to my generation: before that, you couldn’t imagine a gay novel about gay life appealing to anyone else.” This is to say that both Hensher and White had clearly recognized the boldness with which Hollinghurst infuses the niche, controversial topic of homosexuality into the broader traditions of the mainstream English novel, welding (as Catherine Stimpson put it) “the standard conventions of fiction to a tale of modern transgressions.” What is more, that Hensher and others could not imagine another novel like The Swimming Pool Library is because there was, in fact, no historical precedent for it. While there were indeed gay writers writing about gay themes in England in the early and mid 20th century, British laws censoring representations of sexual acts in literature and prohibiting homosexual acts generally made openly broaching gay life a risky prospect for a work and its author. This was especially true before the lifting of censorship laws in 1958 and the relaxing of laws against homosexuality in 1967. But even after the passing of these legal milestones authors remained fairly circumspect and literary fiction remained barren of any overt, detailed portrayals of the

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35 Ibid.


It is no surprise then that, with a mixture of excitement and relief, critics immediately hailed *The Swimming-Pool Library* as the arrival of something truly groundbreaking.

And indeed Hollinghurst intended for it to be, as we see from the fact that the novel is, at every turn, self-conscious about its unique place within literary history and its relation to those gay writers whose work had come before it. Of those writers, Hollinghurst’s narrative contends with two in particular, Ronald Firbank and E. M. Forster. Firbank, the writer of campy, fantastical novellas about the misadventures of the upper classes, for instance, symbolizes in *The Swimming-Pool Library* the legacy of Wildean circumspection in gay literature. His World War I era fiction, that is, hides its homosexuality in subtext and coded imagery meant to be recognizable only to certain circles of gay readers. Reading Firbank’s novella *Valmouth*, Will observes, “The characters were flighty and extravagant in the extreme [...]. Much of the talk was a kind of highly inflected nonsense, but it gave the unnerving impression that on deeper acquaintance it would all turn out to be packed with fleeting and covert meaning” (64). In the novella, one character informs another that the secret of the longevity of her people is “discretion,” and so too is discretion the operating principle of *Valmouth* and the method by which it advocates its underground readership ensure its survival (64). While Will and his friend James admire the work of Ronald

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38 Arguably, one notable exception to this is Angus Wilson who some critics consider an earlier pioneer in uniting the gay novel and the grand tradition of the realist novel. For instance, in her introduction to a recent edition of Wilson’s *Anglo-Saxon Attitudes*, Jane Smiley posits that Wilson “was the first respectable English novelist to bring the connections between the public bourgeois world of art, family, government, and property and the clandestine homosexual world of desire and danger together in a Great Tradition novel—showing by his tone and style they were all one world and thereby conferring respectability on what had previously been risque,” *Anglo-Saxon Attitudes* (New York: New York Review Books, 2005), ix. I would argue, however, that while Wilson’s realist fiction does engage more openly with the topic of homosexuality than do most other works of the period (the 1950s and 60s), Wilson ultimately tames the subject of homosexuality into respectability in order to appeal to, or at least not offend, a bourgeois readership. Therefore, when it comes to the details of homosexual relationships and eroticism and the realities of gay London subculture, Wilson elides much. Rather, as I argue later in this section, it is the implementation of conventions of pornography in the realist novel that allows Alan Hollinghurst to truly open up the subject of homosexuality in English fiction and subvert mainstream assumptions about what actually constitutes realism and the proper content of the English novel; for his aim is not to “confer respectability” upon gay life or make it seem less “risque,” but rather to offer up an unsparking portrait of gay life for what it really is and in an artistic medium whose reigning bourgeois standards and principles were long overdue for serious revision.
Firbank, however, the novel seems to propose that its reliance on elaborate strategies of artistic concealment of homosexuality is no longer necessary or appropriate for modern gay fiction, and may even be dangerous. This is never more apparent than when Will suffers his beating at the hands of a homophobic street gang. Having been carrying a "beautiful new copy of [Firbank's] The Flower Beneath the Foot," he watches helplessly during the attack as a "boot slammed down on it, buckling the binding, and then again and again, grinding the pages into the warmsmelling spilt rubbish, scuffing to pulp the lachrymose saint on the wrapper" (204). Here Firbank's covert gay novel, its style of decadent aestheticism represented by its beautiful, pristine physical condition and its furtive subject matter hidden within the symbol of the suffering saint on its cover, provides no practical benefit to Will, unable as it is to prepare him for or exert any influence over a real world where gay men must inevitably face brutal, overwhelming forces of oppression. The destruction of the book, which places such high value on secrecy and discretion, may also be read as an ironic symbol of just how perilous it could be to rely on the protection of secrecy and discretion, how much more easily a dominant straight culture can control and inflict damage upon a hidden gay subculture that most do not even know exists. Thus, despite the high regard in which Will and his cohorts hold it, Firbank's work ultimately embodies the type of outmoded gay fiction against which Hollinghurst's novel strives to define itself.39

Providing a contrast to this is the work of E. M. Forster, who acts in the novel as a kind of literary historical counterweight to Ronald Firbank, and whose call for a less disguised treatment of homosexuality in art serves at one point as a key topic of conversation among Hollinghurst's characters.

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39 This point is in contrast to J. Stephen Murphy's argument that The Swimming-Pool Library recovers rather than rejects the Firbankian approach to gay fiction. See Murphy, 70-1. Murphy's argument may seem very much in line with Hollinghurst's own claims of admiration for Firbank and his work. I think, however, that Hollinghurst's admiration for the ironic concealments of Firbankian fiction and his own artistic mission of pushing gay literature into a new and long overdue era of openness are not mutually exclusive.
During the intermission of the Benjamin Britten opera *Billy Budd*, Will complains to his grandfather Sir Denis Beckwith and his friend James about the "deflected sexuality of the opera [...] that was, but wasn’t, gay [...]. [Britten’s] sort of coming out with it and not coming out with it at the same time" (140). Sir Denis, having once met E. M. Forster, explains that "that was very much Forster’s line [...]. He wanted [*Billy Budd*] to be much more... open, and sexy" (140-1). Sir Denis’s description is in accord with critic J. Stephen Murphy’s description of Forster as an advocate for "a more open, sexier style of homosexuality, one that need not rely on strategies of concealment or camp effeminacy."40 His is a platform, then, that serves as something of an inspiration for *The Swimming-Pool Library*. In fact, in his 1983 review of a collection of Forster’s letters, Hollinghurst expounds at length on Forster’s philosophy of self-fulfillment and openness in fiction, his portrayal of masculine solidarity and the rejection of bourgeois respectability in novels such as *Howard’s End* and *The Longest Journey*, and argues that these thematic preoccupations helped to pave the way for a more honest, more realistic novelistic portrayal of homosexuality.41 Yet, aside from the posthumously published *Maurice*, the historical reality is that none of these novels actually deals explicitly with homosexuality; inevitably, even Forster felt limited in how far he could go in broaching the subject of gay life in his novels.42 Nevertheless, *The Swimming-Pool Library* consciously sets itself up as a fulfillment of the vision Forster could not see through himself and thus becomes, by extension, the embodiment of the kind of high literary, open and sexy gay fiction that had been a long time coming to the English literary landscape.

40 Murphy, 69.
41 Murphy, 70.
42 Biographer Wendy Moffat refers to Forster’s dissatisfaction with the “masquerade” of his own reliance on “marriage plot fiction” but his equally compelling fear that publishing *Maurice* in his lifetime “would have outing him.” Qtd in. Andrew Levy, “Why Did Much-Loved Author E. M. Forster Stop Writing 46 Years Before he Died,” *Daily Mail*, 7 June 2010.
Hollinghurst fulfills this vision and creates this new kind of fiction by making the simple yet radical decision to depict gay sex graphically and realistically within the space of the traditional English realist novel, and in turn treats the modern reality of homosexuality for the first time as a viable, serious object of novelistic inquiry. For, as we have seen in only a small sampling from the last section of this chapter, the novel abounds with scenes of intense erotic encounters between gay men. And, as we have also seen, such sexual explicitness is not mere gratuitousness, but often serves a greater purpose. For instance, it brings the underrepresented subject of gay subculture into wider cultural discourse by providing realistic detail of a world heretofore unrecorded by the English novel. Graphic sex also functions throughout as a critical trope that helps advance and develop the novel’s central themes. On his use of sex in The Swimming-Pool Library, Hollinghurst has even claimed, “The idea of [...] permeating everything in sexual emotion and excitement seemed to be a way of getting at the truth.” This is not to say, however, that Hollinghurst believes that sex is the only pursuit and goal of gay subculture, or the only means by which one can understand it. But

43 This is not to say, of course, that by 1988 England was without novelists who were themselves crafting a new kind of fiction by experimenting with graphic representations of sex. The previous chapters of this study, after all, explore in great detail the work of two writers in particular who brought about this very innovation in the English novel. And indeed Hollinghurst had taken note of these advances being made in novelistic portrayals of sex and had understood the reasons for their growing prevalence. As he said in an interview, “[Writers of my generation are] all wondering where authority can be found, where values can be derived from. The preponderance of sexual subject matter in the last twenty years, the way novels are almost obliged to have a lot of sex in them, is partly to do with that. The body and sexual life take on an unconstrained urgency because that is where people are looking for value and significance, not to some handed-down code of values. […] The disintegration of such systems is liberating, but at the same time, people retain a desire to believe and found their lives in things that have deep meaning, move them deeply, or give them feelings that transcend. Sexual life has become one of those things,” Galligan, 10. But for the likes of Ballard and Amis, homosexuality was never a central focus of their work, the homosexual body never a source from which to derive meaning, value, or significance. Thus, it remained for Hollinghurst to adapt the principles of this avant-garde movement and expand its boundaries to include the deeper truths of the gay experience. However, without any actual examples to follow among gay or straight writers in his chosen artistic medium, Hollinghurst turned to another art form for guidance. Hollinghurst was inspired in particular by the photographer Robert Mapplethorpe for producing work that corrected a similar absence of the homosexual in the visual art of photography. What he admired most was how Mapplethorpe revealed through his very explicit, very provocative photography a gay world that “he had inhabited himself but which [hadn’t] been represented in art before,” Galligan, 11. The Swimming-Pool Library, therefore, is Hollinghurst’s attempt to do the same for contemporary London gay subculture through the form of the English novel, and is the reason why I place him among the pioneering contemporary novelists discussed in this study.

the fact that sexual preference is one of the main criteria by which society chooses to assign and define identity – especially homosexual identity – seems to suggest that without a full and true representation of gay sex there cannot be a full and true representation of gay life. Hollinghurst understands this, which is why The Swimming-Pool Library eschews Firbankian concealment and moves beyond Forsterian self censorship toward the realization of a narrative rife with unabashed yet meaningful sexual imagery. This is also why Hollinghurst makes pornography a key thematic and structural element of his narrative. At the end of that scene where Will is standing in the storefront of The Brutus, watching a nature program about a termite colony on TV, the attendant taps a button and “[transforms] the picture into [...] American college boys sticking their cocks up each other’s assholes” (57). The dissolving of the symbolic image of the termite colony into a raw image of gay sex is an indirect way of acknowledging how important pornography is to this novel and how central gay sex is to the author’s overall artistic vision. Pornography is, after all, a fitting complement to the subject of homosexuality. It is as marginalized a literary genre as homosexuality is a social identity. And in that shared affinity it stands as an ideal medium for conveying in the clearest, most graphic terms possible the experience of living a life considered unsavory and taboo, located at the margins of society, and defined by illicit sexual behavior. As Susan Sontag writes, the lowbrow subgenre of pornography is itself an outcast in the world of art because it invariably takes on “the extreme states of human feeling and consciousness,” particularly that form of “human sexuality [that] belongs [...]” among the extreme rather than the ordinary experiences of

As I argued at the end of the last section, the entire scene involving the termite colony, the anteater, and the miniaturized camera doubles as a kind of metafictional allegory of the novel’s own thematic preoccupations and formal innovations.

There are few more extreme states of human feeling and consciousness than homosexuality, a lifestyle and identity always already culturally designated as Other, as deviant, as remote from the normal. In the conventions of the pornographic, therefore, Hollinghurst finds a form compatible with and conducive to representing his subject matter. “The pornographic imagination,” concludes Sontag in her essay of the same name, “has [...] access to some truth. This truth – about sensibility, about sex, about individual personality, about despair, about limits – can be shared when it projects itself into art.” The Swimming-Pool Library is thus one such example of a work of art that, in this case, draws its truth and inspiration from “the pornographic imagination” in order to portray in naked, faithful detail the extreme nature of the sexual and social realities of urban gay subculture.

In making use of the conventions of pornography to provide this particular fictional portrayal, however, Hollinghurst as a novelist deviates from both the standards of the dominant literary genre of realism as well as the traditions of the English realist novel itself. As critics and reviewers have pointed out, Hollinghurst’s debut work of fiction is a work whose provocative content contrasts sharply with its conventional form, its unprecedented treatment of homosexuality a jarring presence within the traditional structure of a realist novel. Indeed, Hollinghurst himself has admitted to his attraction to the realist mode, and to being “formally [...] a conventional kind of writer,” one that is “stimulated in many ways by the restraints.” Like any exemplary work of realism, therefore, The Swimming-Pool Library, to borrow David Lodge’s definition, “holds history, romance and allegory together in precarious synthesis, making a bridge between the world

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47 Ibid., 57.
48 Ibid., 70-1.
49 Galligan, “Beneath...,” 5.
of discrete facts (history) and the patterned economized world of art and the imagination (allegory and romance). It imbues its vivid portrait of an early 80s London landscape with resonant symbolism and metaphor, its plot linear and elegantly structured, its complex themes all “controlled and expressed through the realistic rendering of particular experience” – in this case, the particular experience of its narrator Will Beckwith. Where *The Swimming-Pool Library* diverges from accepted definitions of realism, however, is of course in its graphic rendering of the extremity of that particular experience – that is, in its inclusion of pornography, one artistic subgenre among many that, according to Lodge, has no place in the realist novel. Pornography, for Lodge, is “a debased form [of] subliterature, in which the arousal and gratification of very basic fictional appetites [...] are only loosely controlled by the disciplines of realism,” and in which “regressive and perverse fantasies are [...] indulged.” In essence, then, proponents of realism as the official mode of the English novel not only possessed an antipathy toward the artistic genre of pornography, but also apparently considered any explicit, meticulously detailed depiction of sex (especially any extreme forms of sex) to be a deviation from realism and, by extension, the real and normal world of everyday experience. Following this line of thinking to its logical conclusion, therefore, such a limited definition of what constitutes the proper content of the realist novel must also exclude from a full and honest novelistic representation the figure of the homosexual, defined as he is by his very relationship to extreme or “non-normative” forms of sex and sexuality. The identity and lifestyle of homosexuality, in other words, was incompatible with the standards of realism

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51 Ibid.
52 The other subgenres are science fiction and the thriller, Lodge, 102.
53 Ibid.
54 Ibid., 104.
set forth by postwar critics and authors like David Lodge. But Hollinghurst manages to subvert these accepted standards. As Sontag theorized, elements of the pornographic are essential tools for breaking down barriers that stand in the way of understanding the most extreme manifestations of human experience, and with homosexuality being culturally defined as one of those experiences, it follows that Hollinghurst would need to draw on these elements to paint an accurate, revealing, and realistic picture of the contemporary underground urban gay subculture that serves as his primary thematic preoccupation. He accomplishes this through his deployment of graphic sexual imagery in *The Swimming-Pool Library*, and in doing so, he both challenges outmoded, heterosexist conventions of what constitutes realism as well as widens the existing scope of the English novel to include the increasingly relevant and urgent issue of marginalized sexual identities. For, according to Andrzej Gasiorek (quoting Bakhtin):

> [The] novel is neither associated with any particular social group nor defined by any given form. It is characterized by its fluidity, for its features belong to no ‘system of fixed generic characteristics’. Moreover, because it is associated with ‘low’ parodic-travestying literatures that ridicule ‘high’ culture and undermine the language of hegemonic groups, it becomes a transgressive, anti-canonic form that discloses society’s stratified and conflictual nature.\(^{55}\)

With *The Swimming-Pool Library*, Hollinghurst takes advantage of this fluidity, this spirit of transgression, and uses the low literature of pornography, particularly gay pornography, as a means of travestying the narrowly defined conception of realism that had held hegemony over the novel form in England after World War II. Taking a familiar artistic

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structure and then combining elements of pornographic and realist narrative in order to construct a new type of fiction capable of “engaging with a historically changing social reality,” Hollinghurst becomes, with his fictional debut, another in a select avant garde of writers to experiment with graphic representations of sex, consequently redefining what is acceptable and what is possible within the hallowed form of the English novel. While Ballard and Amis had their own reasons for experimenting with novelistic content in this way, however, for Hollinghurst the reasons involve nothing short of the preservation and survival of his own community and his ability to write openly and honestly about it. Hollinghurst’s strategic use of pornography boldly thrusts homosexuality red in tooth and claw into a tradition of literary fiction where before it had been forced to conceal itself. And what his novel proves in the end is that, although the English homosexual has lived in the shadows of straight culture and has existed at the extremes of what that culture considers normal, his experience can no longer be considered by the English novelist, gay or straight, as any less authentic or any less worthy of being treated as one “particular experience” among the many such experiences which constitute the broader contemporary reality of 20th century England.

In conclusion, the best way to sum up the relevance and larger significance of The Swimming-Pool Library is to consider it less as occupying a unique space in literary history, and more as representing a unique space of its own, one that is essentially the very first openly and exclusively gay space in British literature. As we have seen throughout this chapter, Alan Hollinghurst uses physical descriptions of both sex and urban space to dramatize the thriving and threatened underground gay scene in London during

56 Ibid.

57 As Hollinghurst has said of his debut, “In my first novel I had a very conscious intention of writing unapologetically, from a gay point of view [...] that seemed to be something novel and interesting, which had never been done in British literary fiction.” Qtd. in Bearn.
the momentous summer of 1983. And by claiming the traditional form of the English novel as the venue for staging this provocative content, Hollinghurst echoes the process by which the very characters he is depicting appropriate certain physical spaces to house their own provocative behavior. That is, the ways in which his characters annex portions of the public sphere for the purpose of creating semi-private havens of erotic expression can be read as a metaphor for what is actually taking place in the novel on a metafictional level, at the level of form, namely, the appropriation by a gay author of a mainstream literary genre. While his characters occupy the shadowy depths of civic institutions like The Corinthian Club in order to forge clandestine communities and find outlet for desires that require shielding from a hostile world, however, Hollinghurst occupies the institution of the English novel with his sexually charged narrative in order to do just the opposite: to shed light and provide a fresh perspective on the customs and rituals of this persecuted, poorly understood underground community. Simply put, the single most important, most subversive act of appropriation by a gay man of a public space in The Swimming-Pool Library is Alan Hollinghurst’s own appropriation of the artistic space of the English novel to accommodate the telling of a new kind of story, one told from a gay point of view, written by a gay author, populated by gay sex, and involving exclusively gay themes. Alan Sinfield, in arguing for the social, political, and artistic necessity of gay artists to take control of the official narrative of homosexuality, conceives of art in spatial terms as a “place where our subculture and its myths are constituted and where they may be questioned and developed,” as well as a place for “calling into question the prevailing power arrangements” that threaten that subculture. Hollinghurst, a self-proclaimed proxy architect,

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58 Lawrence Knopp argues that gay men’s “attempts to convert (or defend) certain public spaces as sites for various forms of nontraditional sexual behavior” is an example of a “cultural politics of resistance,” Knopp, 162-3. I would argue that the same applies to what Hollinghurst is doing in The Swimming-Pool Library.

59 Sinfield 146, 149.
conceives of his novel in similar terms. Within its finely crafted, expertly constructed yet conventional novelistic structure, *The Swimming-Pool Library* plays host to a provocative, at times pornographic, content that allows its author to expose to critical observation and analysis — through the wide open windows of the house of fiction, if you will — both a marginalized urban gay subculture and the mechanisms of heterosexist oppression deployed against it. And in the process, Hollinghurst manages to redefine the conventions of the English realist novel by including for the first time within its hallowed precincts all of the realities of the modern gay experience.
Conclusion.

When Susan Sontag wrote "The Pornographic Imagination" in 1967, she complained that "nowhere in the Anglo-American community of letters [had she] seen it argued that some pornographic books are interesting and important works of art." Her argument in part was that, for the literary establishment in Britain and America, pornography was always already outside the realm of serious literature, its commonly accepted primary aim of inducing sexual arousal in the reader being enough to distinguish it from the many, more complex intentions and high-minded, noble pursuits of "genuine" art. Pornography seemed more a social concern than an artistic one for Anglo-American critics, and, with its air of cultural disrepute, was considered a low form of entertainment whose concern with the pleasure and pleasuring of the self made it unworthy of any close critical scrutiny. This prevailing consensus, Sontag argued, made it difficult for the English language literary canon – particularly the British canon – to produce or assimilate any texts that included detailed, sustained, and obscene portrayals of sex.¹

Then, however, came J. G. Ballard’s Crash and other watershed novels of the 1970s and 80s such as Martin Amis’s Dead Babies and Alan Hollinghurst’s The Swimming-Pool Library. The appearance of such novels demanded a reevaluation of the artistic relevance of pornography and a reconsideration of its relationship to art and the English novel form. These three novels each in their own way used the pornographic, not to sexually stimulate their

¹ So pervasive was this thinking, in fact, that writers of substance can be said to have produced few if any truly pornographic novels during the postwar period in England. In fact, when David Lodge looks for examples of pornographic literature with pretensions to high art in "The Novelist at the Crossroads," he turns to exclusively American books (the anonymously authored Candy and Gore Vidal’s Myra Breckinridge), and even then these novels are considered only parodies of the pornographic subgenre, “The Novelist at the Crossroads” in The Novelist Today, ed. Malcolm Bradbury (Glasgow: Fontana, 1977), 104.
readers, but rather to arouse them to a heightened intellectual and emotional awareness of contemporary society, as well as to an awareness of realities and experiences that had long been culturally marginalized, and thus had long remained outside the scope of the "serious" novel. What is more, these writers had transformed pornography from a seedy onanistic recreation to an artistically fertile and dynamic literary genre which offered creative possibilities that allowed for innovation of the novel's form and content, and which essentially facilitated the late 20th century re-birth of realism, experimentation, and the English novel itself. The controversial labors of the likes of Ballard, Amis, and Hollinghurst, that is, allowed the novel — ever the evolving and malleable form, according to Bakhtin — to incorporate or "novelize" the subgenre of pornography, installing explicit depictions of sex as a broadly fictional, and not simply pornographic, narrative and thematic convention.

And yet, the current critical literature does not reflect any significant acknowledgement of these major developments. While the community of English letters has certainly become more liberal in its opinions of the artistic merit of pornography since the publication of Sontag's essay, critics continue to be either unwilling or unable to recognize the profound influence pornography has had on contemporary fiction, and have not yet set the proper historical and theoretical context for understanding and appreciating the unique achievements of works such as Crash, Dead Babies, and The Swimming-Pool Library. This is not to say that critics have failed to credit these novels as important works of literature, or that the handling of sexual matters in these novels has gone unnoticed.\(^2\) Each novel's engagement with sexuality and the pornographic, however, is often only the focus of individual studies of the specific novels themselves, or part of larger studies that focus solely on the work of the individual authors, with few

\(^2\) Just by looking at the critical sources with which I contend in my three chapters, one can see that Ballard's Crash has attracted considerable attention for its preoccupation with pornography, as have both Amis's and Hollinghurst's novels.
points of connection or influence being established between the authors or their novels. What is more, when these novels are included in surveys of postwar and contemporary English fiction, their treatment of sex and porn is frequently subordinated to their treatment of other subjects and to their application of other literary modes which fit more easily into conventional critical narratives about the novel’s development in the late 20th century. Ballard’s fiction, for example, tends to be read in terms of 1960s radical experimentalism, surrealism, science fiction and the dystopian literary traditions; critics appear to be most comfortable painting Amis as a satirist, a grotesque realist, a postmodern metafictional trickster; and Hollinghurst’s novels are treated as much for their interest in history, politics, race, and Henry James, as they are for their interest in homosexual desire and gay identity. Viewed alone or in a wider context, therefore, these three novels continue to remain unrecognized as the core of a larger, cohesive artistic movement of literary pornographers whose aesthetic and ideological innovations have been crucial to the overall development of English novelistic practice in the contemporary period.

These three novels have yet to be recognized in this way, that is, until now – but more work remains to be done. In this dissertation, I have attempted to make a case for the significance of my chosen texts based on the terms of Susan Sontag’s theories of the pornographic imagination, and in light of the postwar crises involving the “death” of the English novel and its subsequent and problematic resurrection through 1950s realism and 1960s formal experimentation. I have, in essence, attempted to use these novels to revise accepted critical narratives about how the novel in England transitioned from its postwar to its contemporary form, and how it was adapted to reflect the era of postmodernity, social permissiveness, and late capitalism. But in introducing a vital new critical narrative that begins with the novelist as pornographer striding confidently beyond the mid-century
crossroads that had come to define the English literary landscape, I have provided merely the outline of a much greater narrative that it would take a whole library of critical studies to fully flesh out, and of which the present volume is only the humble first entry. This is because, despite their achievements in transgressing the limits of novelistic representation, and in cultivating an influential strain of pornographic realism, Crash, Dead Babies, and The Swimming-Pool Library still represent only a small – albeit significant – part of the broader trend toward the pornographic in contemporary English fiction that began in the 1970s.

Future studies, therefore, must aim to explore the rest of the bodies of work of these three pioneering authors, as well as examine the fiction of other writers experimenting with the pornographic during the same period and, ultimately, trace the influences of such work on more recent novels. For instance, in furthering the inquiries I have begun here, I can foresee an expanded version of the present study including a consideration of the early novels of Ian McEwan and Angela Carter. The brief but graphic scenes of incest and sado-masochism in McEwan’s The Cement Garden (1978) and The Comfort of Strangers (1981), respectively, may in fact be read as suggestive examples of their author putting into practice his own call in 1977 for a revolution in novelistic content and for a grimmer, more perverse realism to suit the mood of the era; his novels, that is, offer the prospect, not only of being comfortably assimilated within the conceptual framework laid out in this dissertation, but also of further enriching it. Conversely, challenging and complicating this framework would no doubt be the baroque and fantastical sexual displays of Carter’s The Infernal Desire Machines of Dr. Hoffman (1972) and The Passion of New Eve (1977). Written in the same decade as Carter’s pro-pornography polemic The Sadeian Woman (1979), the two novels eschew realistic representation and draw instead on fantasy, fairy tale,

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1 See Introduction.
romance, and feminist theory, suggesting an alternate interpretation of and use for the pornographic as well as raising important questions about the gendered assumptions of pornography itself and the role of women in and as purveyors of serious erotic literature. Moreover, any effort to build upon the foundations laid down in this study would also require an investigation of Ballard, Amis, and Hollinghurst’s engagement with sexual matters beyond the novels analyzed in the previous three chapters. Questions to guide such an investigation would ask why, for example, Ballard decided to abandon deviant sexuality as a central theme of his novels after Crash. Yet why and how had he continued to use the pornographic style he introduced in Crash to explore the moral and social perversities which form the focus of his later novels? Why, alternatively, has Amis never stopped addressing the subject of sex, never stopped obsessively toying with the narrative conventions of pornography, and how has this obsession changed or remained the same from Dead Babies to Money (1984) to Yellow Dog (2003)? And what can we learn from the fact that gay sex, while still very much present, has become increasingly deemphasized as a subject in Alan Hollinghurst’s latest novels, particularly in The Stranger’s Child (2013) where sex between men is related more through euphemism than through hardcore pornographic prose? Finally, what connections are we to draw between the work of these three writers (as well as that of McEwan and Carter) and the work of other, younger contemporary English novelists? After all, the importance and preponderance of stark portrayals of sex – especially sex of a taboo nature – in contemporary writing seem to owe much to the efforts of this oft-overlooked avant-garde. What, then, might we discover by applying the conceptual framework elaborated here to further critical inquiry into the role graphic sex plays in the postcolonial literature of Timothy Mo, Hanif Kureishi, and Zadie Smith, or in the lesbian fictions of Jeanette Winterson and Sarah Waters – to give just a few relevant examples? It has partly been the aim of my dissertation, in other words, to
set in motion the process of addressing these and other important questions raised by the complex yet unheralded relationship that has been forged between pornography and the English novel over the past five decades.

With the 40th anniversary of the publication of *Crash* having recently come and gone, however, we are that much further removed from a watershed event in English literary history whose lasting effects readers, writers, and critics alike seem to have too easily taken for granted. I began this study by mentioning the increasingly persistent sentiment, symbolized by Auberon Waugh’s Bad Sex Award, that sex in English fiction has exhausted its originality and innovative power. And one need only glance at the titles of recent newspaper articles to get a measure of the current state of things: “Sex Disappears from the British Novel as Authors Run Scared of Ridicule,” “Let’s Not Talk About Sex – Why Passion Is Waning in British Books,” “Bad Sex Please, We’re British: Can Fictive Sex Ever Have Artistic Merit?” This impulse to publicly fret over sex’s disappearance as a fictional subject and its exhaustion as a fictional convention mirrors the very worries about the exhaustion of the English novel form itself after World War II, and mirrors too the concerns so often expressed in the postwar decades over the relevance of traditional realism and formal experimentalism. The anxiety over this new “impasse” in the development of the novel suggests an acknowledgement of just how integral a part sex has been to contemporary fiction without, however, necessarily accounting for how and why it had become so important in the first place. Whether sex still has the ability to unsettle sensibilities and transform consciousness, offer fresh perspectives, and represent and provide insight into the reality of the 21st century experience are, indeed, all essential questions that need to be asked. But to confront the present and the future of sex in English fiction, one must first understand its past; and I think that, just as Susan Sontag had found the critical establishment of the 50s and 60s lacking, so the recent critical literature has not quite done
enough to establish the proper historical and theoretical context for understanding the kind of impact that writing openly and graphically about sex has had on the English novel. The common assumption continues to be that the modern history of sex and the novel begins with the Chatterley decision in 1960. And yet, as this dissertation has gone to great lengths to emphasize, the truly revolutionary moment for sex in literary fiction—and for literary fiction in general—did not come until later, ushered in as it was by the exertion of the pornographic imaginations of J. G. Ballard, Martin Amis, and Alan Hollinghurst. These writers looked to the language, imagery, and narrative techniques of the subgenre of pornography in particular in order, not only to portray sex, but also to engage with, revise, and update reigning conventions of novelistic representation. In novels such as Crash, Dead Babies, and The Swimming-Pool Library, in other words, sex and the pornographic became the means by which their authors could freely explore the nature of the explicit and the taboo and, consequently, push the limits of fictional content and expression, and reevaluate narrow conceptions of realism and experimentation. In fact, I would contend that the shock engendered by such novels was as much for their extreme depictions of sexual behavior as it was for the audacious ways in which their authors created forms of fiction the likes of which had never been seen before. The Pornographer at the Crossroads, therefore, has very much been about revisiting and comprehending a pivotal period in literary history. And, in analyzing from that period three representative examples of groundbreaking authors who used pornography to chart a new course for the novel, I hope that in this dissertation I too have begun to chart a new course in contemporary criticism. That is, I hope that in The Pornographer at the Crossroads I have contributed something valuable to what has been, until now, our impoverished understanding of the instrumental role graphic representations of sex and other such pornographic conventions have played in determining the shape and
substance of the English novel at the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st centuries.
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