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# A Nation Turns Inward

## The Setting of Economic and Artistic Postwar Britain

But while they speed the pace of legislation  
With sleepless ardour and unmatched devotion,  
The lower strata of the population  
Appear to have imbibed a soothing potion;  
Faced with the mighty tasks of restoration  
The teeming millions seem devoid of motion,  
Indifferent to the bracing opportunity  
Of selfless service to the whole community.

It is as if the Government were making  
Their maiden journey in the train of State,  
The streamlined engine built for record-breaking,  
Steaming regardless at a breakneck rate,  
Supposing all the while that they were taking  
Full complement of passengers and freight,  
But puffing on in solitary splendor,  
Uncoupled from the carriages and tender.

—from “Let the Cowards Flinch,” published in  
*The New Statesman* by Sagittarius  
(pseudonym for Olga Katzin), October 1947



THE WAR'S END BROUGHT JUBILATION and relief. But it also brought new cultural and economic monsters for Britain: postmodernism and the end of empire.

The elements of prewar modernism—Freud, Darwin, relativity, fragmented sense of self, an obsession with the capacities of language, and the introduction into the marketplace of new technologies such as airplanes and radios—had transformed Western and world culture. The new postwar period was shaped by its own preoccupations and technologies, which included everything from the atomic bomb and antibiotics to computers and the search for a solution to the mystery of heredity in the structure of DNA. This time the fate of the planet was at stake, not just vagaries of economic or psychological structures. This was a new age and a new world where cause-and-effect were practically simultaneous. For the theorist/geographer David Harvey, the struggle between utopian visions and dystopian realities of the mid-twentieth century was due to what he calls the “Space-Time Compression,” brought on, invariably, by capitalism and its push for faster modes of production and transportation:

I use the word “Compression” because a strong case can be made that the history of capitalism has been characterized by a sped-up pace of life, while also overcoming the spacial barriers so that the world seems to collapse inward on us. As space appears to shrink to a “global village” of telecommunications and “spaceship earth” of economic ecological interdependencies, and as time-horizons shorten to the point where “the present” is all there is (the world of the schizophrenic), so we have to learn how to cope with an overwhelming sense of compression of our spacial and temporal worlds.<sup>1</sup>

Under the influence of what is now labeled High Modernism or Postmodernism, this newly sped-up world collapsed the imperial boundaries Britain had long sustained into a messy global conflation. Or as Jameson put it,

Taken together, all of these perhaps constitute what is increasingly called postmodernism. The case for its existence depends on the hypothesis of some radical break or *coupure*, generally traced back to the end of the 1950s or the early 1960s. As the word itself suggests, this break is most often related to notions of the waning or extinction of the hundred-year-old modern movement (or to its ideological or aesthetic repudiation). Thus, abstract expressionism in painting, existentialism in philosophy, the final forms of representation in the novel, the

films of the great *auteurs*, or the modernist school of poetry (as institutionalized and canonized in the works of Wallace Stevens): all these are now seen as the final, extraordinary flowering of a high modernist impulse which is spent and exhausted with them.<sup>2</sup>

So, the arts, too, began to shift to capture this unwieldy new historical and cultural paradigm, and within them would be seen new aesthetic preferences: for more outrageous and farcical structures, for fragments over wholes (including the idea of the joke without a punchline), for an incessant reliance on irony and pastiche, and for a distrust of catharsis, closure, and even critical analysis of its own relentless force. What it is called matters less than its 24/7 psychotic pop-culture dominance.

Today it is simply known as hegemony, but before 1939, England had a long history of cultural imperialism.<sup>3</sup> To take but one example, the forcing of the English language onto cultures that came under the spreading empire as the English establishment attempted to eliminate all non-English languages within the “British Isles” cohort (Welsh, Irish, and Scottish Gaelic) by outlawing them or otherwise marginalizing their practitioners.<sup>4</sup> By the nineteenth century, the British imperial system extended around the globe. It was a legacy that vexed postwar Britain.

Besides a tattered empire, postwar Britain also faced a financial catastrophe that was its most immediate reality. In 1945, after six years of war, to those in tune to economics or politics, British hegemony was mortally impaired, even if their cultural dominance appeared, especially to the British themselves, to continue unabated. “England as a great power is done for,” sighed Evelyn Waugh into his diary in 1946. “The loss of possessions, the claim of the English proletariat to be a privileged race, sloth and envy, must produce increasing poverty . . . until only a proletariat and bureaucracy survive.”<sup>5</sup> Paul Addison adds that,

When the Marxist left and radical Right emerged in the 1970s there was one point on which they were agreed: that many seeds of decline were planted in the immediate postwar years. According to the Marxist left, this was because socialism and the class struggle were betrayed. According to the radical Right, it was because free market forces had been stultified by the Welfare State and the managed economy.<sup>6</sup>

Whichever view is correct, and it is probably some combination of the two, the new Attlee government, and politicians in general, wanted to maintain the image of Rule Britannia, even as the nation felt its decline more and more each day.

Led by the United States, the victorious Allies formed the United Nations in 1945, and the 1947 American Marshall Plan (or the European Recovery Plan, as it was known overseas) was another calculated strategy to sustain America's newly gained upper hand at Britain's expense.<sup>7</sup> The plan offered billions in aid to countries that maintained (mostly) democratic governments and (mostly) political allegiance to the United States to prevent them from drifting into the communist orbit. Many nations insisted on reinforcing or reviving their distinct cultural identities, complaining that in fashion, advertising, and mass media, among other areas, Europe was becoming a colony of the States. The domination of American film offers a good example of how the United States prevailed culturally and financially in these years. The lending of Marshall Plan funds was carefully tied to acceptance of the Motion Picture Export Association of America's (known as the Blum-Byrnes agreement) terms of American film as the best form of propagandic defense against communist and fascist tendencies. Also, the major European filmmaking countries began to re-establish their industries, using American film and culture as influence for their styles. Godard would categorize the postwar climate as "Coca Cola and Marx." He wasn't far off: the two products that were nonnegotiablely attached to the Blum-Byrnes/Marshall Plan funds were Coca Cola and American movies; no two products would be more effective in spreading American-style democracy, the thinking went.<sup>8</sup> And this demand was also made on America's closest ally, Britain.

But after victory, Britain and her people were too caught up in the triumph and the utopian ideals of the coming New Jerusalem to notice such incursions. In Britain, it would be the postwar satirists who would have to point out the truth to them, laughingly.

### The Paradox of the New Jerusalem

Even though he hoped to continue a Coalition government, at least until the war in the East was over, Churchill called a national election for July 5, 1945; the results were not released until July 26, 1945, and Clement Attlee won in a Labour romp.<sup>9</sup> It was the first general election in over ten years and the first noncoalition government in over five.

A number of shifts factored in to the move toward Labour. Martin Pugh writes,

Between the outbreak of war in September 1939 and the general election of July 1945 political fortunes in Britain changed drastically in favour of the Labour Party . . . The result was essentially a defeat for the Conservative Party rather than Churchill; for the Conservatives were labeled the "Guilty Men"

whose pursuit of appeasement had left the country unprepared for war . . . Moreover, the Labour Party could no longer be written off as dangerous or unfit to govern as in the 1930s. Its (Labour's) leading figures, particularly Attlee, Morrison and Bevin, had served with distinction in the wartime coalition since 1940 . . . in short the mood of 1945 was very close to what one historian has called "Mr. Attlee's Consensus."<sup>10</sup>

Not only was there a rejection of the Conservative stance that many felt led to war in the first place, but there was also a new generation who had been born after World War I and came of voting age during the Depression. In other words, an entirely new electorate:

In addition the electorate had changed considerably since the last election in 1935. As many as one in five electors were voting for the first time, and of these 61 per cent are estimated to have supported the Labour Party—a reflection, no doubt, of their education during the depression and the rule of National Governments.<sup>11</sup>

And Ross McKibbin notes:

The second, in many ways the most attractive explanation, simply does away with the problem of "conversion" (did people change their political allegiances during the war?) by arguing that Labour's victory was the delayed effect of generational and demographic change. It suggests that those who voted Conservative in 1935 mostly continued to do so, [but] by 1945 Labour was supported by a new cohort of voters who were politically socialized by the interwar years . . . In other words, a high proportion of those voting in 1945 reached political maturity after the Labour Party had become the second party of state.<sup>12</sup>

Further, it might have been the newly implemented mandatory educations in the armed forces that turned the younger cohort toward Labour:

A once popular version of the "wartime-change" explanation of the Labour victory was the radicalization of the armed forces; an assumption that there was something about military experience which radicalized men and women in ways life did not do for those still on the civvy street.<sup>13</sup>

For all its ills, war throws disparate groups together. And disparate groups learn about the world much faster and to accept human differences much better, which is hardly “radicalization.” However, what was more surprising was that Labour had even moved past the Liberal Party in stature and influence for the first time in its history.

By the Second World War Labour had emerged as the standard-bearer of the key elements in radical Victorian politics: it incorporated Gladstonian tradition in foreign affairs; it was a party of causes; it maintained libertarian principles; and it propagated improvement through social reform.<sup>14</sup>

By the end of the 1930s, Labour had secured much more support from the middle classes, especially in regions such as the Midlands, Yorkshire, Manchester and Liverpool, East Anglia, Scotland, and, not least of all, the many soldiers from all over Britain who were now stationed or chose to permanently live in London. Churchill lost not because Britain wasn’t thankful; he lost because of these undeniable mitigating factors.



Figure 1.2. Clement Attlee, 1950. Architect of postwar England’s New Jerusalem. Photofest.

Additionally, and probably most importantly, he lost because of what Labour had been promising since even before the war, in which the working masses were pledged a newly prosperous and “accountable-to-all” Britain. This would be England’s New Jerusalem.<sup>15</sup>

Whereas 1940–45 in France demonstrated the bankruptcy of France’s institutional culture and intensity of her internal divisions, in Britain it signaled the vindication, almost the apotheosis, of the institutional and national consensus that the victory of the Labour Party in the general election of 1945 seemed to many foreign observers an almost revolutionary event. In reality it marked the strength of the institutional consensus in Britain at the same time as it created a new set of policy priorities that would become the guiding maps of the postwar order. . . .”<sup>16</sup>

Britain faced a paradox: the people wanted to “get back to normalcy” as the war wound down, but also to “*Never Again!*” (Attlee’s renowned platform in 1945) return to how things were before the war in the era of the Great Depression and almost zero social services for the masses who had helped keep Britain intact. Attlee’s high-wire act had to span this double-bind throughout his years in office, from 1945 to 1951.<sup>17</sup>

The “New Jerusalem” Welfare State was the result of William Beveridge’s white paper issued in the winter of 1942–43, which identified five “Giant Evils” in society: SQUALOR, IGNORANCE, WANT, IDLENESS, and DISEASE (they always appeared in CAPS), and a series of changes were put in place to deal with them.<sup>18</sup> “The Beveridge Report” sold more than 100,000 copies in its first month alone, astonishing numbers for a very poor population of only forty-six million in 1943–44; but people wanted to know what their future might look like in a new Britain that would finally take care of *all* her own, no longer just the privileged few.

The eventual magisterial account [by Ministry of Health head Richard Titmuss], *Problems of Social Policy* (1950), would make canonical the interpretation that there had indeed been a sea-change in the British outlook—first as the mass evacuation of women and children from the main cities brought the social classes into a far closer understanding than there had ever been before, then as the months of stark and dangerous isolation after Dunkirk created an impatient, almost aggressive mood decrying privilege and demanding “fair shares” for all. Between them [Titmuss’s assessment, who

began it in 1942, and Beverage's report], according to the Titmuss version, these two circumstances led to a widespread desire for major social and other reforms of a universalist, egalitarian nature.<sup>19</sup>

The report revealed that the government had at last recognized the responsibility to care for its people "from the cradle to the grave" (or, as some preferred, "from the womb to the tomb"). The proposed changes promised a government commitment to health (DISEASE)—in 1948 the National Health Service was created; education (IGNORANCE)—from 1944 the Butler Act raised the school-leaving age to fifteen and guaranteed education for all; employment (IDLENESS)—guaranteed "full" work; housing (SQUALOR)—Labour passed the Town and Country Planning Act in 1947; and social security (WANT) for the elderly and infirm—the National Insurance Act of 1911 was greatly expanded in 1946 (The National Health Service Act).<sup>20</sup>

These may have seemed like new ideas to voters in 1945, but Pugh also suggests that thoughts about managing the economy in good times and bad had begun in fact after World War I.

In the immediate aftermath of 1918 even socialists often regarded wartime controls as a unique experiment rather than as a pointer to future strategy. . . . However, by 1923, in the face of mounting unemployment, the ILP was in retreat from guild socialism, and began to concentrate upon the techniques for managing the economy. The ILP's [Independent Labour Party] Socialist programme of 1923 displayed an underconsumptionist approach in the emphasis it laid upon raising and stabilizing the demand for products of industry by a more equal distribution of incomes. Indeed the ILP had already begun to study Keynesian ideas to some effect: it identified a scientific credit policy as the means of moderating the fluctuations in the economy; and unemployment was ascribed basically to inadequate purchasing power which was itself a consequence of insufficiency of bank loans. Thus, state management of banks and credit seemed to the ILP crucial for economic planning; and the extension of control over other industries was similarly seen in the light of what each would contribute to costs, prices, production levels and so forth.<sup>21</sup>

Managed economies were clearly now possible after the visibly successful fiscal stewardship by America and Britain during the war.





Figure 1.3. William Beveridge, c. 1950s. Eradicator of England's five "Giant Evils."

In any case, the New Jerusalem was an ambitious plan and a noble gift to the heroic nation, but, there was one problem: the continuing belief that Britain could still afford to maintain a worldwide empire. After the high cost of the fight with the Axes, including the huge debt in loans owed to the United States, and the impossibly exorbitant cost of sustaining overseas territories that no longer brought wealth back to the island nation, there were less than zero resources left to pay for the New Jerusalem.

Even before 1945, the British Empire had begun its transformation into a Commonwealth. The (white) colonies of Canada (1867), Australia (1901), New Zealand (1907), and the newly created Union of South Africa (1910) became federated self-governing Dominions.<sup>22</sup> After the war, Britain's heavy war debts created a climate within both the public and policy elites that was increasingly doubtful of the continued benefits of the remaining imperial possessions.<sup>23</sup> The Indian Independence Act of 1947 was the biggest pillar to fall, as it partitioned the colony into two newly free nations, India and Pakistan, creating its own set of political quandaries and challenges, but it wasn't the only one. The skeptical British historian Correlli Barnett has explained away this decline as the British simply ignoring what it took to maintain dominance in world industry:

Britain has been a nation blinded by pride (of being a world power) to the signs of decay at the technological roots of its strength . . . a (clear demonstration of how) a nation will cling to the political and economic faiths of the past.<sup>24</sup>

Britain may have been blinded by past glories, but despite the march toward state-sponsored support for all its citizens, and even with the new Labour change of government, the British people and its political classes were still very cautious about implementing the new schemes immediately, and it took every bit of the six years Labour was in power to fully do so.

To argue that taking a Scandinavian course, and settling for a prosperous, inward-looking northern existence, was a runner in 1945–51 is to succumb to another set of delusions. The whole weight of British history and recent experience was against that—not to mention urgent necessities and inescapable responsibilities with which the Attlee Government was confronted.<sup>25</sup>

These would include sticky situations in the Middle East (most notably what to do about Palestine and the possible creation of the Israeli state), the currency dilemma, and, by 1950, Korea. The British still thought that they were entitled to some postwar spoils, but they weren't.

However misguided it may appear now, they thought they had won. Unlike General de Gaulle, Attlee and Bevin found vacant seats waiting for them at Potsdam. Britain was one of the victor states occupying the territory of her former enemies; a Permanent Member of the Security Council with the power of veto; still head of a large empire with widespread possessions; well ahead of any other state except the two superpowers in military, industrial and technological resources. Her interests and responsibilities were worldwide, at least as wide as those of either Russia or America. For her to abandon these, or even seriously reduce them, at short notice was out of the question. Apart from its effect abroad, it would have been a blow to national morale that no newly elected government could be expected to strike after a war from which Britain [after all] had emerged victorious.<sup>26</sup>

This was the basic paradox facing postwar Britain: it wanted to be a twentieth-century northern European welfare state and at the same time a nineteenth-century global power. (Pugh even suggests that the real visionary of England's decline had been Conservative leader Stanley Baldwin (Earl of Bewdley), who was thinking such thoughts even before he became Prime Minister in the mid-1930s.)<sup>27</sup> The end of empire resulted in postwar Britain living through an anxious and uncertain time where fundamental economic difficulties and social dissatisfactions overtook so much of the early postwar hope, whose own "new" order would become persistent and unrelenting austerity.

### Austerity Britain

Britain's biggest problem was its currency and trade imbalance, an economic cataclysm not waiting to happen, but happening *now*; it was the most sobering meaning of the term "aftermath."<sup>28</sup> From 1947 to 1949, the United Kingdom had an international trade deficit of almost £300 million. This doesn't sound like very much to us today, but for the late '40s, and for an empire that was used to being a worldwide creditor, it was seemingly intractable.<sup>29</sup> Two-thirds of Britain's prewar international trading partners were in rubble or had turned to the United States, many of its patents had been sold off to pay for the war, and its military, especially its mighty navy, was decimated. But the biggest shock to their system was the instant canceling of Lend-Lease (the program put into place in early 1941 by FDR that had allowed him to "rent" materiel goods to Britain without violating the Congressional ban on sending aid to either side of any international conflict) by Roosevelt's successor Harry Truman on August 25, 1945.<sup>30</sup>

We were, in short, morally magnificent but economically bankrupt, as became brutally apparent eight days after the cease-fire in the Far East when President Truman severed the economic lifeline of Lend-Lease without warning. Lend-Lease, "the most unsordid act in the history of any nation" as Churchill called it, was negotiated in the early months of 1941, well before the United States had entered the war. "Unsordid," the beginning may have been, but the end of Lend-Lease was undeniably brutal. . . . Material already in transit would have to be paid for straight-away and an audit would have to be drawn up of all unconsumed Lend-Lease items in Britain. "Thus," as Sir Alec Cairncross starkly recalled, "what had provided the

United Kingdom with roughly two-thirds of the funds needed to finance a total external deficit of £10,000 million over six years was withdrawn unilaterally without prior negotiation.”<sup>31</sup>

It was an instantaneous blow that would resonate for an entire decade, if not more—at the very least, until Attlee and his ministers agreed on devaluing sterling in 1949.<sup>32</sup> The contrast of the GDP before and after the war paints the “hard numbers” picture: if it had been growing by 4.64 percent in 1939 (and that was still in The Great Depression), by 1949 it was only .102 percent, and still just 1.6 percent in 1955.<sup>33</sup> Literally all resources were expended on paying down the foreign debt, and keeping the pound down to sell goods for export.

And to make matters worse, the United States then insisted that sterling (a major worldwide currency before the war) be fully convertible to dollars by 1947. So,

Britain embarked upon a postwar export drive, which was only possible at a price of a fairly hard life for most people. One sign of the times was the frequent use of billboard hoardings encouraging the British worker to ‘work or want,’ a message which the average British worker was only too aware of, and yet did not want to hear, after so many years of hardship and deprivation. The stringencies of postwar food rationing were all too obvious at the time, as was the acute shortage of housing, clothing, furniture, and in fact, consumer items of any type.<sup>34</sup>

Consumer items? Even if your average Briton could afford a new gadget or “consumer item,” Britain could only look, not have.

For example, in 1946, people who were eager to see new designs and the new use of materials developed during the war applied to less belligerent ends queued for hours to get into the “Britain Can Make It” exhibit at the Victoria and Albert Museum. It was a sign of the times that most of the consumer items on display at the V & A were stamped “EXPORT ONLY,” so that the popular press quickly renamed the show “Britain Can’t Have It.” There were many stories in the press at the time about the day-to-day grind of having to face shortages of all kinds. The Christmases of 1945 and 1946, for example, were marred by the absences of anything very much to serve as presents.<sup>35</sup>

Bare cupboards and empty stockings were to be Britain's spoils of war; on top of that, 1946 and 1947 would be two of the coldest winters in British history.<sup>36</sup>

The renowned *Annals* historian Fernand Braudel has observed, "Towns are like electric transformers. They increase tension, accelerate the rhythm of exchange and constantly recharge human life."<sup>37</sup> If this is true, then life in London during and at the end of the war was intensified tenfold; and by the end of the decade, though the government was in better shape financially, average people in the street still did not feel it themselves.

"What do you consider to be the main inconveniences of present day living conditions?" *Mass-Observation* asked its regular, largely middle-class panel in autumn 1948. The male replies tended toward terseness—Lack of Homes, Food Rationing, High Cost of Living, Insufficiency of Commodities causing Queueing, Crowded Travelling conditions, Expenses of Family Holidays' was an engineer's top six—but the female responses were more expansive. "1. High cost of living," declared a housewife. "This means a constant struggle to keep the household going and there is very little left over for the 'extras' that make life." 2. Cutting-off electric power in the morning (usually just before 8 o'clock). 3. Shortage of some foods, particularly butter, meat and sugar . . . [*M-O* next asked, "Had attitudes changed toward clothing, etc.?"] "Yes," replied one jaundiced housewife. "I used to look upon 'making do' and renovating as a national duty and make a game of it. Now it is just a tiresome necessity."<sup>38</sup>

The pictures of "miserable Britain" were implanted in minds around the world by these stark observations found in newspapers and magazines in the postwar years. But even more vividly, the postwar satirists also helped shape and cement those images with their barbed and sapient portraits.

### The Art Scene

The received wisdom of the late 1940s was that, after the "People's War," the landslide victory of the Labour Party in the General Election of 1945, and the establishment of a welfare state, a newly democratized British society was set to rid itself of inequalities and class divisions for good. But instead, without the common cause of winning the war, Britain

reverted to the peacetime Darwinian class-based conflagrations, and in the arts, too, the growing other classes now demanded their fair share.

Indeed the Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts was created (albeit, voluntarily) in 1940 (which would become the permanent Arts Council by 1943, whose first chairman was John Maynard Keynes), and it brought various performers and musicians to factory towns during the war years to supply culture around the country. It was a big hit, and its budget grew every year, especially after its most successful sponsoring of Spanish paintings in the freezing, heat-starved winter of 1946–47 when thousands lined up to view the exhibition. And so,

As Paul Addison wrote, “the temporary wartime bridge between the arts and the masses was in fact crumbling.” [It would no longer be temporary; art-going would become a permanent norm after the war]. Inevitably the arts based themselves after 1945 on a regular constituency of enthusiasts.<sup>39</sup>

Many budding Brits who grew up in the postwar period and benefitted from the 1944 Education Act felt that the old prewar upper classes still maintained their privileged position as they commanded the social and cultural high ground; these newly educated young strivers were determined to challenge that. The Arts Council helped level the field, but this is also where and why the postwar satirists would announce their own presence on the scene independently as they thrived on this contrast between the glittering pretense of mass culture and the shabby reality of a class-bound educational system. In the literary world, for example, Kingsley Amis, who did National Service in the peacetime army, gave his *Lucky Jim* protagonist Jim Dixon a university post at a time when provincial colleges were mostly third-rate Oxbridge wannabes. As David Lodge describes:

In 1954 it was acclaimed as marking the arrival of a new literary generation, the writers of the 1950s, sometimes referred to as the “Movement” or “The Angry Young Men.” These were two distinct but overlapping categories. The Movement was a school of poetry, of which Philip Larkin was the acknowledged leader, and to which Amis himself belonged, along with other academics like John Wain, Donald Davie and D.J. Enright . . . They consciously set themselves to displace the declamatory, surrealistic, densely metaphorical poetry of Dylan Thomas and his associates with verse that was well-informed, comprehensible, dry, witty, colloquial and down-to-earth.<sup>40</sup>

The Angry Young Men, a journalistic term originally coined in an article in *The Spectator*, grouped together a number of authors and/or their fictional heroes of the 1950s who were vigorously pissed off with life in contemporary Britain. They would include John Osborne/Jimmy Porter (*Look Back in Anger*, 1956; *The Entertainer*, 1957), Alan Sillitoe/Arthur Seaton (*Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, 1959; *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner*, 1959), John Braine/Joe Lampton (*Room at the Top*, 1957) and Kingsley Amis's Jim Dixon.<sup>41</sup> At the same time, as Lodge explains above, The Movement was less a school of poetry than a motley group of language-soaked exceptionally literate outsiders with like-minded sensibilities rebelling against posh posturings and "high language," who sought to use street idioms and slang to replace the turgid old boys' stodgy verbiage.<sup>42</sup> For them (or in reality), it was an updating of Wordsworth's romantic manifesto celebrating the more authentic language of the common man; but for postwar Britain, it was a highly charged conceit.



Figure 1.4. Kingsley Amis, c. 1950s. Anti-Establishment street-speaking snark. Photofest.

Although these writers “arrived” in the mid- to late 1950s (*Lucky Jim* was published in 1954), their education and careers had begun in the late '30s, but then had been inevitably interrupted or in some cases delayed by the war, making their formative years really the later '40s. In *Jim*, though no dates are specifically mentioned in the text, Amis's satire is clearly a novel about the late '40s and the shadows of the war, and certainly cannot be set later than 1951 since a Labour government is still in power.<sup>43</sup> The grounding of the novel itself, too, is clearly that of socialist, “austerity” Britain, “when a young university lecturer might plausibly possess only three pairs of trousers, live in a lodging house, surrendering his ration book to his landlady, not even dream of owning a car, and keep anxious count of his cigarette consumption, not on health grounds, but on financial ones.”<sup>44</sup> John Osborne (1929–1994), Alan Sillitoe (1928–2010), and John Braine (1922–1986) had similar mid-1950s publications with similar late-1940s contexts. This was Britain's new Silent Generation artistic contribution.

### The Silent Generation

If good news was almost ubiquitous from the advancements of the Allied militaries from late 1942, right up until the end of the war (barring the blip of the Battle of the Bulge), after the initial high of the win, a psychological depression took over both Britain's (even as the economic one continued) and America's subcultures (where the economic one had ended): Churchill hollered about impermeable iron curtains; ominous atom bombs were detonated on remote atolls and Russian wastelands; and American (and British) commie hunters made daily headlines shouting their (often unfounded or unproven) accusations.

The 1950s are thought of as such a wonderful prosperous time in both the United States and the United Kingdom (certainly Reagan and Thatcher would paint them that way), while the noirish late '40s, filled with such hard times and incessant anxiety, so often get overlooked.<sup>45</sup> This is unfortunate, for the arts were going through a great Renaissance in both republics. In the United States, even an artist such as Jackson Pollock was already doing his splatterings while the war was still being fought (he created *Mural* for Peggy Guggenheim in 1943, long before his move with Lee Kraisner to the Long Island Springs locale—a village adjacent to East Hampton—in November of 1945), with its mythical “epiphanic moments” about the magic wand of “the drip,” and was almost completely finished with his Zen-impulsed mizzles by 1951 (the same year the Ealing satires would be winding down, and the Goons



just gearing up). The critic Manny Farber was already on to the jittery affect of Pollock's painting, writing in *The New Republic* in 1945, "the paint is jabbed on, splattered, painted in lava-like thicknesses and textures, scrabbled, made to look like smoke, bleeding, fire, and painted in great sweeping continuous lines."<sup>46</sup> Action was the new generation's word of the day—Action Painting, Action Writing, *action, action, action* at all costs, including for the government to take action and individuals to take action in their own lives. Just as the line and the brushstroke begged to be free, so too did the English language, and the new (Silent Generation) artists would attempt this for them. And in England the new satirists rose to the task, siring their greatest and most important work at the latter end of the shadowy 1940s.

In the United Kingdom and the United States, the late 1940s are *the* great years for these satirical masterworks, not the 1950s Restoration of Churchill's glorious return or the beaming war-hero Eisenhower's vistas of 1950s television, Technicolor, Elvis, and *Playboy* magazine. The mid- to late 1940s was the more precise period that influenced and formed such amazing personalities who came of age at that moment, members of the cohort known as the Silent Generation (born somewhere between 1924 and 1943, give or take a year or two): in music with John Lennon (1940)/Paul McCartney (1942), Mick Jagger/Keith Richards (both 1943), Ray Davies (1944), and Jimmy Page (1944); letters with John Osborne (1929), Alan Sillitoe (1928), Philip Larkin (1922), Kingsley Amis (1922), and John Braine (1922); and the groundbreaking drollery of Spike Milligan (an honorary Silent, 1918), Peter Sellers (1925), and Tony Richardson (1928) in the UK. Meanwhile, a similar phenomenon was brewing in the States with the Silents of Miles Davis (1926), John Coltrane (1926), Elvis Presley (1934), the Everly Brothers (1937, '39), and Bob Dylan (1941) in its popular music, and Lenny Bruce (1925), Mel Brooks (1926), Mort Sahl (1927), Mike Nichols (1931) and Elaine May (1932), Woody Allen (1935), George Carlin (1937), and Richard Pryor (1940) in the new radical comedy in the United States; along with the new generation of "angry" young English actors such as Albert Finney (1936), Vanessa (1937) and Lynn (1943) Redgrave, Malcolm McDowell (1943), and Alan Bates (1944), and the new American "Method" actors Montgomery Clift (1920), Marlon Brando (1924), Paul Newman (1925), Marilyn Monroe (1926), James Dean (1931), and Jack Nicholson (1937). In other words, those artists who gave the Silent Generation its not-so-silent voice.

Generations are writ with "real-world-events," narratives creating tropes and characteristics that lend themselves to studies in mass

psychology and behavior. These Silents grew up being first conscious of the Great Depression, then the long traumatic years of World War II, the 1950s “culture of conformity,” the 1960s revolutionary tumult, and the 1970s malaise. In both America and Europe, many of their fathers fought in the war and, if they survived, often wanted to restart their lives anew—new education/new job (the GI Bill/the new European policy and promise of “full employment”), new wife/new house in the suburbs (1946 still holds the record for most divorces in American history/a rebuilt subsidized Western European welfare state)—almost to the point of ignoring those children born in the late 1920s to early 1940s, during the horrible years. In fact, many worked to forget them, as they wanted to forget the Depression, leaving heavy psychic scars. The arts, and especially the cinema, both mirrored the Silents’ lonely situation and provided a means of addressing it.

Because of the postwar 1940s and ’50s Red Scare, the Silents in both the United Kingdom and the United States had to be secretively inventive in their protests, disguising their anger by speaking in code: painting abandoned representation for abstract expression; in acting they used their “Anger” and “Method,” turning inward to articulate these cultural frustrations; in theater, allegories were the strategy of choice (*The Browning Version* (1948); *Separate Tables* (1955); *The Love of Four Colonels* (1951); *Crucible* (1953); *Streetcar* (1947); *Waterfront* (1954—based on the “Crimes on the Waterfront” investigative journalist series from 1947 by Malcolm Johnson); music literally became silent (John Cage’s 4’33”) or wildly unwieldy—bebop, jazz solos, rock and roll scat (“Bebop a lulu”/“Womp-bomp-a-loom-op-a-womp-bam-boom!”) and British Skiffle; poetry and the novel spoke in tongues or hyperbolic run-on asymmetrical non-iambic verse; and criticism shifted inward, too, with the “close reading” and anti-contextual turn (from I.A. Richards and Charles Kay Ogden to F.R. Leavis and Cleanth Brooks). Much of this would have been absorbed by the other Silents who had also lived through these hardscrabble, harrowing experiences (most of the Ealing artists were too young to have fought in the war, and Spike Milligan, Harry Secombe, and Michael Bentine in the Goons were only slightly older than Sellers). The British (and American) Silents were definitely not so guarded, or so silent.<sup>47</sup> Obviously, a key trait all these Silent artists have in common is a stubborn and fierce independence, but also a reaction to their late 1940s circumstances. Code, but also satire, became their wall of psychic defense.

And so, for Amis, the original inspiration for his antipathy was a glimpse of what was then University College, Leicester, in 1948, when he was visiting Philip Larkin who was a librarian there:

Jim is ill-at-ease and out of place in the university because he does not at heart subscribe to its social and cultural values, preferring pop music to Mozart, pubs to drawing rooms, non-academic company to academic. . . . When he loses his university job, however, Jim resignedly prepares to take up school teaching (at his own school), as if there were no alternative. A huge portion of the first generation humanities graduates in the 1940s and 50s went into educational careers not because they had a vocational call; but because entry to the other liberal professions—administrative civil service, the foreign service, law, publishing, etc.—was still controlled by the public-school-Oxbridge-old-boy network. They were the ideal readers of *Lucky Jim*.<sup>48</sup>

Much has been made of how these Angry Young Men and Movement poets critiqued and deconstructed British life under the new postwar realities of the Welfare State. But they were of the 1950s and it was years *before*, in the late '40s, that the artists explored here, the satirists of Ealing and the Goons, had long been making their commentaries on new Britain, using the more immediately accessible, “hot” popular culture mediums of film, radio, and print.<sup>49</sup> It may have been a bleak and terrible time, but the arts became a new addiction to this new generation, and in a population of just forty-six million, more than thirty million continually went to the pictures each week, newspaper competition and circulation increased threefold, and radios were always on in English homes.<sup>50</sup> It was a thriving time for old media, and the satirists would conquer all three.

Even in the fashion-world changes were happening head-spinningly fast. Indeed, it was the arrival in February of 1947 of Parisian swirling skirts with their “Renoirish curves and flounces . . . below waist and bustle which brought the phrases ‘Tizer’ and the ‘New Look’ into common usage in Britain,” as Harry Hopkins put it, even borrowing that title for his evocation of early postwar British life.

At what was basically merely a return to traditional feminine lines was indeed a remarkable tribute to the grip which the puritan discipline of Austerity and Fair Shares had gained in our island life. The chorus of disapproval grew as it became known that the new fashion required thirty or forty metres of material, not to mention new corsets, still firmly classified by the Board of Trade as “luxury garments.” . . . The Government was rumoured to be considering legislating against the new skirt length.<sup>51</sup>

But, some bureaucrats supported the New Look shift in attitude.

In the meantime Sir Stafford Cripps, made an appeal for moderation, receiving emphatic support from Miss Mabel Ridealgh, MP for North Ilford. "The New Look," declared Miss Ridealgh, "was too reminiscent of the caged-bird attitude. I hope fashion dictators will realize the new outlook of women and give the death blow to any attempt at curtailing women's freedom."<sup>52</sup>

Needless to say, the shock of 1947 became the fashion of 1948, even if it had a suspiciously French tilt. This was just the moment the English satires were being forged, a genre requiring some clarification.

### Satire and the New Film Setting

In the arts, "genre" traditionally divides into various kinds or "types" (e.g., literature, film, music, painting, sculpture, performance, etc.) according to criteria particular to that form. Literary variations split between poetry and prose; poetry might thus branch off into epic, lyric, and dramatic, while prose might be cleaved into fiction and nonfiction. Obviously, these can be further partitioned *ad libitum*.<sup>53</sup>

Satire, then, is both a literary and/or artistic technique that attempts to ridicule its subject as a means of provoking change or preventing it. In either case, its ultimate goal is the same as rhetoric itself, to "persuade" its audience to a certain point of view by exposing the object of attention it is attacking as weak and irrational, or maybe even dangerously damaging to the health of the community at large. James Sutherland explains:

What distinguishes the satirist from most other creative artists is the extent to which he is dependent on the agreement or approval of his readers. If he is to achieve this catharsis for himself, he must compel his readers to agree with him; he must "persuade" them to accept his judgment of good and bad, right and wrong; he must somehow inoculate them with his own virus. In actual practice, a minority of his readers probably already agree with him; the great majority are either quite indifferent and must be aroused, or they are actively hostile and must be converted.<sup>54</sup>

Satire is the most effective form of persuasion (no wonder the great British nineteenth-century satirist Jane Austen named her narrative study