Preface

While this book is hardly unique in approaching questions about literature and culture by means of an inquiry into the comic, it does not conceive of that project in the usual ways. As a consequence, readers may at first find the unfolding of the book somewhat obscure. The Introduction begins with a tendentious survey of humor studies and some notes toward a theory of “comic transaction,” then turns to consider, on no less summary and abstract a level, the paradoxes of “community” and the role of communitarian logics in securing the stability and intelligibility of the social field in modern times. From this point on, the book consists largely of historical and literary-critical analysis, working chronologically through six relatively well known but not necessarily “comic” twentieth-century British novels and the varying cultural contexts of their production. I am hopeful that the linkages between and among the different parts and chapters will become clear enough to any careful reader of the entire book from beginning to end. But in anticipation of readers who skip from this preface to a later moment in the discussion I will briefly sketch here what I am trying to accomplish.

To begin with, despite my initial emphases on humor studies and on the theory of community, my primary objective is not to make contributions in these areas but to contribute something to our understanding of the politics of literature in twentieth-century Britain. In pursuing this objective, however, I have found it necessary to formulate an approach to literary politics which brings both humor and community into play. It is an approach in terms of *work* done on a *field*, where the work invariably takes a *witty* form—is, in fact, coextensive with what Freud called “joke-work”—and the field is that of a social imaginary organized according to the logic of “community,” which is to say, a field on which all social and political thought must be cast in the terms of communitarian discourse. The starting point for my readings in the modern British novel, in other words, is the recognition that a literary text is a political event inasmuch as its underlying function is to engage with the problematic of community—and hence the very logic of the modern social imaginary—in a series of witty operations. Or, to put this more provocatively, the reason literature is important, socially and politically, is because it is

always making jokes. And one way or another, what its jokes are “about” is community.

Like humor and laughter, “community” is approached here in a spirit of analysis and critique, not of celebration. Those who would wish to see community once again waved as properly and uniquely the banner of an emergent left opposition, or who imagine that the political catastrophes of this century can be accounted for by a *lack* of powerful communitarian ideas and initiatives, will be disappointed. But so, too, will those who might hope to see community disposed of, supplanted by some new logic, some new politics that would lift us beyond the communitarian horizon. Community is a paradox whose logic informs, in both enabling and disabling ways, every system of political thought, every movement or bloc, every significant intervention that has occurred on the social field in modern memory. And part of the paradox is its continuing exigency in the face of manifest failure, the fact that our most radical and utopian hopes cannot be separated from the very structures of thought and feeling which have repeatedly unraveled and defeated them. My objective in this book is not directly to advance the ongoing theoretical discussion of this problematic, but to present a few microhistories of cultural struggle in twentieth-century Britain which might gain us some useful, some *strategic* knowledge about the functions and effects of communitarian thinking. Only with a better, more concrete understanding of the kinds of work, or joke-work, which have been done in and through the concept of community can we hope to clarify the problems we face in attempting to rethink it.

The six novels I focus on are not more thoroughly, or more profoundly, or even more amusingly bound up with the politics of community than are others I might have selected. But they do offer good opportunities for the exploration of the communitarian field on which literature, politics, and humor converge in twentieth-century Britain. Each novel addresses itself more or less explicitly to important strains of British communitarianism, to major communitarian strategies that have been called upon to manage difference and construct lines of identity and unity across the British social imaginary: liberal nationalism, radical anarchism, British fascism, social feminism, Leavisism, New Left culturism, postwar feminism, Powell/Thatcherite cultural racism, black British community activism, and others. Each novel, moreover, can be usefully articulated with the century’s major literary moments or categories—modernism, postmodernism, and post-colonialism—an articulation that makes it possible to rethink these in terms of the fundamental struggle over who or what constitutes the “community.”

And each novel demonstrates how thoroughly the literary text's engagement with this struggle, and hence how thoroughly the whole political dimension of literary practice, depends on ostensibly nonserious forms of symbolic exchange.

Although my discussion of these novels is less a series of close readings or new interpretations than an extended meditation on literary and cultural politics, I have tried to take into account and to contribute something to the debates that have shaped existing critical literature on the individual novels and their authors. I hope that participants in those debates will find my individual chapters useful. Nevertheless, *Comic Transactions* is a book, not a series of articles. It unfolds its main arguments across seven chapters, and performs detailed analysis of individual texts only as a way of assisting a broader and more polemical engagement with literary history and cultural politics in twentieth-century Britain. It is on this level that the book's real merits, and of course its equally real limitations, will make themselves evident.

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Philadelphia

JAMES F. ENGLISH

Comic Transactions