Introduction: The Middle is Everywhere

The mid-century novelist has often been regarded as occupying an ambiguous intermediary period, lost somewhere in the no-man’s-land between modernism and postmodernism. David Lodge sees the mid-century novelist standing with his peers ‘at a crossroads’ (22) while Malcolm Bradbury sees him huddled in the ‘ruins’ (Modern 267) of a collapsed civilization, awaiting, but not contributing to, the establishment of the next. They are in the middle, and middleness is middling. The middle, however, is where decisions are pondered, where deliberation is done, before a stance is finally taken. The mid-century novelist can, to some degree, be correctly understood as occupying a period of reflection rather than decision, of humility rather than confidence. The question is whether this should be seen as contributing to their lack of definition, or as a definitive quality in itself.

The dismissive views of Bradbury and Lodge have received some critical nuance in recent years, although there remains little agreement on how to characterize the writing of the mid-century, or even how, exactly, to define where the era begins and ends. Part of the difficulty extends from the fact that the mid-century novel is usually defined negatively; it appears as the gap between modernism and postmodernism, and its edges shift as critics relocate the borders of the two dominant movements. In recent years, there has been a growing critical focus on ‘late modernism’ that seeks to extend the borders of modernism to at least the end of the Second World War.¹ This tendency has spread into many literary surveys of the second half of the twentieth century, such as Brian W. Shaffer’s Companion to the British and Irish Novel, which similarly understands modernism to have persisted until
1945, albeit in a rather desiccated form in the latter decades. Some surveys, including Dominic Head’s *Modern British Fiction* and Steven Connor’s *The English Novel in History*, begin their studies neatly in 1950, but, in these cases, the literature of the two decades following the Second World War is treated in far less detail than the novels of the 1970s and 1980s; this carries the common implication that the ‘real’ literature of the second half of the twentieth century did not appear until several decades after the war, with the era’s early literature stuck in what Head calls ‘the post-war wilderness’ (14). Other surveys, including Randall Stevenson’s *The Last of England? 1960–2000*, elide the post-war years altogether, concentrating instead on the boom of postmodern literature. The mid-century novel is not properly modernist or postmodernist; therefore, it must be, at best, a literature of regrouping and readjustment, or, at worst, lost in the wilderness.

Recently, a movement in criticism has arisen that attempts to treat the mid-century novel as a unique entity, distinct from modernism and postmodernism. Kristen Bluemel, in her introduction to the influential collection *Intermodernism: Literary Culture in Mid-Twentieth-Century Britain* (2009), argues for the utility of considering the fiction of the interwar, wartime, and immediate post-war periods as ‘intermodernism,’ a label she justifies by arguing that the writers of the period were united by a common ideology rooted in working- and middle-class political radicalism, rather than just temporal coincidence. Marina MacKay and Lyndsey Stonebridge, in their collection *British Fiction After Modernism: The Novel at Mid-Century* (2007), also approach the mid-century novel as mostly independent of both modernism and postmodernism, but they set the dates of the era slightly later, extending from the post-war years through to the late 1960s and early 1970s. Both of these collections have provided a crucial lens through which to approach twentieth-century literature, and have successfully complicated the derogatory ‘two movements’ paradigm that has contributed to the critical oversight towards this literature. However, much of the scholarship in these collections on the mid-century novel is primarily concerned with situating the literature of the period in its political and social climate; it is placed in relation to the end of imperialism, the diminishing sense of nationalism, re-engagement with problems of social inequality, the rise of non-literary media, questions of the writer’s political duties and obligations, and so on. Consideration of the philosophical, spiritual, and,