

Fiction as a Political Vehicle

Michael Wilding

Of the various sorts of evidence available for political, economic and social conditions, fiction is one of the most available and accessible. Fiction can be written or read for a variety of motives and purposes; but out of this variety there has always been the impetus of finding out what this or that environment, lifestyle or experience would be like, both historical and contemporary. When Daniel Defoe wrote The Life and Adventures of Robinson Crusoe (1719) and The Fortunes of the Famous Moll Flanders (1722) both novels purported to be true accounts of shipwreck, prostitution. But though Defoe based Robinson Crusoe on the true life experiences of Alexander Selkirk, the interest of the novel soon spread from the details of survival to the portrayal of the protestant, bourgeois colonizing consciousness. As Ian Watt wrote in The Rise of the Novel (1957, Penguin, 1963 p. 65)

Robinson Crusoe has been very appropriately used by many economic theorists as their illustration of homo economicus. Just as 'the body politic' was the symbol of the communal way of thought typical of previous societies, so 'economic man' symbolized the new outlook of individualism in its economic aspect.

Christopher Caudwell, one of the earliest English marxist literary critics gives classic expression to this reading of the novel.

Robinson Crusoe is a bourgeois epic, as significant in its way as Paradise Lost. Like it, it is an unconscious parable of the bourgeois position, as if Defoe had read Marx. Robinson Crusoe on his island, absolutely alone and completely free, yet calls into existence a bourgeois world. Even the exploited proletariat is there in the person of the ignorant, good-natured Man Friday, and as the bourgeois always dreams, there is no overt domination in their relationship - Friday is exploited in the best paternal manner. (Romance and Realism, Princeton University Press, 1970, 57-8).

There is, then, immediately a complication. What the fictional work purports to be evidence of, it may or may not be evidence of: it may be evidence of something else equally or more significant. From Ricardo, from Marx's comment in Capital (Moscow, 1974, I 81) to Pierre Macherey in A Theory of Literary Production (1966: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), Robinson Crusoe has been continually cited and interpreted and reinterpreted for its social and economic significance.

Literature is a transmitter of human consciousness, a record of data, and is as much a source of evidence as history or statistics. But like history and statistics, literature does not offer some pure, value-free, objective evidence. Literature in a class society embodies class values, despite attempts of bourgeois critics and academics to claim enduring absolutes of eternal aesthetic value. The modes of production of literature determine what can be said, how information can be conveyed, and determine too the exclusions; the works that are denied publication, or are obliterated from our history. The interpreting activity of the critic and educationalist is no less ideological.

A writer who deals with political and social and economic materials is dealing with materials about which he or she has a political stance. So the evidence the text presents is of the author's ideological presentation of the socio-political materials - not just or separately the socio-political materials themselves. The work on establishing the author's

ideological stance and class affiliations has rarely been done in the academic subject of English Literature; the conservative orientation of the 'discipline' has preferred to enshrine and espouse 'purely literary values'.

But some work has been done, and any use of literary materials for evidence in studies in political economy or history needs an awareness of this interpretative context.. The critical discussions may often seem remote from the original fictional texts. But those texts no longer exist in a hypothetical pre-critical purity. Robinson Crusoe, Macherey insists, 'is not simply an adventure story but the instrument of an inquiry, the theme around which an ideology has been progressively established' (241).

Immediately, then, 'interpretation' intervenes. It is not possible simply to offer a list of texts and say, these are works of literature that illustrate and illuminate socio-political-economic issues. Insofar as works do illustrate and illuminate such issues, they are part of an ongoing ideological debate, and they are enlisted as evidence for now this position, now that position, sometimes explicitly, sometimes covertly. It is not possible to return to a position of innocence, naivety with literary works; the comments of critics and historians have already reinterpreted and deconstructed the original texts; some of the interpretations are forgotten, others have been accepted in full or part by scholarly, academic and educational institutions and are taken as the actuality; that there was any reconstruction has been forgotten. To rail against this is futile, this is all part of literature; to try to fix the reading, the single, final and immutable reading of a text is absurd, to see the printed book as an object of finality, rather than as part of a communication process. To talk about, to discuss, to interpret, to argue about a literary work is part of the experience of the literary work. Literature is part of a consciousness battle - not only in what the writer writes, and the sources and influences that determine his writing, but in the uses and interpretations made of his writing by readers, critics, commentators. The interpretations themselves are part of the literary evidence. They mark ideological shifts. The realms of disinformation are of the nature of the battle. The critical disputes may seem as remote and absurd as the disputes Jonathan Swift records in Gulliver's Travels (1726) about whether high or low heels should be worn or whether eggs should be broken at the big or the little end; but these absurdities, it is important to realize, were Swift's rewriting of the very real political, social and economic conflicts of the English Revolution; the reduction of them to trivia was the ideology of the Augustan ruling elite, attempting to depoliticize the events of recent history, to discredit sectarian, radical commitment.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF A SELF-CONSCIOUS TRADITION

'The liberal superstition that in political and social questions there is such a thing as pure, unmanipulated truth seems to enjoy remarkable currency among the socialist left' Hans Magnus Enzensberger writes in 'Constituents of a Theory of the Media' (Raids and Reconstructions: Essays in Politics, Crime and Culture, Pluto, London, 1976, 26). But once the existence of manipulation is recognized, it is possible to proceed to use the literary materials as evidence. The novelist most admired by Marx and Engels was Balzac (Marx and Engels, On Literature and Art, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1976). And Balzac's Lost Illusions (1837-43; Penguin 1971) is an essential fictional study of nineteenth century literary production - encompassing the writer, publisher, critic, lobbyist, printer,

paper-maker, patron, financier and police, analysing the material base of bourgeois art, exploring the conspiracies and manipulations, involving 'every feature of the capitalization of literature' as George Lukacs wrote in his brilliant essay on the novel (in Studies in European Realism, Grosset & Dunlap, N.Y., 1964). 'Thus the ultimate integrating principle of this novel is the social process itself and its real subject is the advance and victory of capitalism. Lucien's personal catastrophe is the typical fate of the poet and of true poetic talent in the world of fully developed capitalism.' (*ibid* 53) To read Lost Illusions is part of a beginning to use literary evidence; it examines what literature is in the society of finance capitalism, it demystifies the concept of literature as pure 'art', understanding it as part of commodity production and of consciousness manipulation and control. Fifty years later Guy de Maupassant in Bel Ami (1885; Penguin 1975) examined the world of metropolitan journalism, of the newspaper established to aid its owner's financial speculations, of the political manipulations and lies, of the co-optation of the literati. And Jack London's autobiographical novel Martin Eden (1909; Penguin 1979), based on his working class childhood and early manhood in San Francisco and his encounters with bourgeois ideology and the literary machine, offers an American extension of these materials. These novels about the literary process in all its social and economic ramifications are basic to any use of literature as social evidence. The economic and social determinants of contemporary literary production are examined in two recent studies, Richard Kostelanetz's The End of Intelligent Writing (Sheed and Ward, N.Y., 1974; reissued as Literary Politics in America) and J.A. Sutherland's English oriented study, Fiction and the Fiction Industry (Athlone Press, 1978).

There are two useful surveys of the English novel written from a progressive socio-historical perspective, Arnold Kettle's An Introduction to the English Novel (Hutchinson University Library, 1951) and Raymond Williams' The English Novel From Dickens to Lawrence (Chatto & Windus, 1970; Paladin 1974). But the social background of English writers has not been much examined. Raymond Williams devotes a chapter of The Long Revolution (Chatto & Windus, 1961; Penguin 1965) to 'the social history of English writers.' Working class writers are proportionately few, and evidence of working class conditions presented in literature is mediated through generally bourgeois perceptions.

THE NATURALIST/REALIST TRADITION

Naturalism, the mode developed by Emile Zola and the writers associated with him in late nineteenth century France was a mode of supposedly objective scientific observation of sociological and economic conditions; its orientation, both in the background and life styles of its practitioners and in its intended readership, was middle class. Germinal (1885) dealt with the appalling conditions of the miners, La Terre (1887) with the peasantry.

In England the classic, authentic, less external representation of working class life is found in D.H. Lawrence's Sons and Lovers (1913), an autobiographical account of life in the mining district of the north-east midlands. His The Rainbow (1915) deals with the alienations of English middle-class life - gentlemen farmers, mine managers, teachers, army officers; its sequel Women in Love (1921) deals with the alienation of the upper-middle class intelligentsia, Bloomsbury and the mine-owners. Kangaroo (1923) has the DHL-based protagonist considering the rival claims in Australia of socialist and fascist ideologies. (All available in Penguin). Alan Sillitoe is the foremost English recorder of working class life in mid-century; Saturday Night and Sunday Morning (1958), his first novel, dealt with working class factory life, and the stories in The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner (1959) further explored this milieu from the authentic basis of lived experience. His Key to the Door (1961) offers a conspectus of English working-

class life from the depression through to the U.K. anti-communist war in Malaya in the 1950s. (All W.H. Allen; paperbacks in Pan.)

Both Raymond Williams in The Country and the City (Chatto & Windus 1973; Paladin 1975) and Jack Lindsay in Decay and Renewal (Wild & Woolley/Lawrence & Wishart, 1976) draw attention to a comparatively forgotten writer. Lewis Grassic Gibbon, whose trilogy A Scots Quair (written 1932-4) 'stands out clearly as one of the few crests of achievement in the English novel of the 30s: Its noble picture of the destruction of a peasantry gains with the years' (Lindsay 167). Another neglected work of the 30s, Walter Greenwood's Love on the Dole (1933) gives a first hand account of the depression in Manchester and Salford. And perhaps the most famous of all English novels of working class life is Robert Tressell's The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists (1914; Panther 1965). Nigel Gray has written a useful survey of the 50s and 60s material in The Silent Majority: A Study of the Working Class in Post-War British Fiction (Vision, 1973).

Realism and naturalism are the modes most favoured by historians for evidence. But realism and naturalism are only two of the available modes, and are no less arbitrary, formalized and 'unreal' than other modes. I have argued in Political Fictions (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980) that 'a dissatisfaction with realism can be seen throughout the fictional productions of this century. News from Nowhere, The Iron Heel, We, Brave New World, Animal Farm, Nineteen Eighty-four constitutes far more than a peripheral departure from a central 'realism'. The search in political fiction, as in all fiction, is for the appropriate, expressive form. From Morris's analysis of realism in News from Nowhere to Brecht's running argument with Lukacs, the limited nature of realism has been demonstrated. 'Realism' is a particular formalism - partial, historically based, class-determined. Its name claims a totality and finality that as a form it does not possess. It is but one mode among many, and no longer the mode which those progressive writers concerned with political and social issues would choose.'

IMAGINARY WORLDS

Portrayals of society in its political, social and economic aspects, it needs to be stressed, are not restricted to realism or naturalism. Utopias, anti-utopias, science fiction fantasies, modes more experimental than the dominant realism of the late nineteenth and twentieth century, have been particularly attractive to writers of a political, social vision. The future projections offered extensions of contemporary trends in industrial capitalism - as in the work of H.G. Wells; and they offered the negation of contemporary conditions in an attempt to indicate what a communist or socialist society could be like - as in the work of Bellamy or Morris. Importantly, these projected futures offer a critique of contemporary conditions; they are all fictions written in response to perceived crises in capitalism.

Bellamy and Morris have a further interest in that their works are evidence for the development and transmission of a radical consciousness. Their works were explicit and immensely popular propaganda for the labour movement; they were issued in cheap and accessible editions that were circulated throughout the movement and influenced generations of unionists, socialists and marxists with their concrete visions of a possible society to strive towards. Their works are not only accounts of future societies created in negation of existing conditions, but they were also political instruments that determined the later development of radical thought. They are not only 'evidence' but they were also active interventions.

Edward Bellamy's Looking Backward 2000 - 1887 (1887) describes Boston, Mass., in the year 2000 A.D. under highly efficient industrialized state

socialism. Bellamy's argument was that the monopolistic movement of late nineteenth century capitalism would result in an ultimate systematization into one total state monopoly, capitalism handing over 'absolutely without violence.' As a model for how a socialist society could operate with a basis of co-operation instead of competition, and as an argument for non-violent change, Looking Backward was an immensely influential book on the union and labour movements in the USA, UK and Australia - where it was serialized in the Brisbane Worker under William Lane's editorship from its first issue in March 1890. Bellamy wrote a sequel, continuing the narrative and adding further social detail, called Equality.

William Morris reviewed Looking Backward in The Commonweal, the paper of the Socialist League, 22 June 1889. Bellamy's

temperament may be called the unmixed modern one, unhistorical and unartistic, and it makes its owner (if a socialist) perfectly satisfied with modern civilisation, if only the injustices, miseries and waste of class society could be got rid of; which half change seems possible to him. The only ideal of life which such a man can see is that of the industrious professional middle-class man of today, purified from the crime of their complicity with the monopolist class, and become independent instead of being as they are now, parasitical.

The passage is quoted in A.L. Morton's 'Utopia Yesterday and Today' in his The Matter of Britain (Lawrence & Wishart, 1966). Morton has written a valuable historical survey, The English Utopia (Lawrence & Wishart, 1952; Seven Seas, 1968) ranging from medieval to modern times. He has also edited William Morris's Political Writings (Lawrence & Wishart/International/Seven Seas, 1973), a valuable collection of Morris's lectures on society, marxism and art, and he has edited Three Works by William Morris (Seven Seas, 1968) which reprints The Pilgrims of Hope (1886), A Dream of John Ball (1887) and News from Nowhere (1890).

Morris wrote News from Nowhere in recoil from Bellamy's future vision. Morris found Bellamy's regimented 'machine life' hideous, argued in his review that 'variety of life' was as much an aim of true communism as equality of condition, and wrote his alternative projection of communist England at a stage when the state has withered away and the basically agricultural society is self-managed by local groups. After the revolution, machines were abandoned on a large scale because they had been designed for commodity production rather than for use of creativity. Morris projects a society in which production for production's sake will have stopped. Jack Lindsay in William Morris: His Life and Works (Constable, 1975) explores Morris's social thinking.

If Marx was right, a genuinely new society can be born only when commodity-production ends, and with it division of labour, money, market-systems, and alienation in all its many shapes and forms - above all the alienation from nature. Morris is one of the extremely few thinkers who have tried to realise at all fully what such a situation implies. It certainly implies the end of all systems of production for production's sake (which repose finally on the need for capital to renew and multiply itself); it implies a situation where all poverty has indeed been abolished, but above all where men are able to understand just what they do need in order to live a truly satisfactory life as the good animals of an accepted earth. In the world where commodity production has ended, we have neither maximum production nor zero-growth; we have instead a society where people, freed from fear, are able to realise how little

they need in order to achieve fulfilment and happiness. These problems are now beginning to come up for us all, not as the philosophical problems they were from Marx and Morris, but as problems of necessity in a world where men seek to make an infinite use of finite sources of energy and productive materials.

Other important studies of Morris include E.P. Thompson's William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary (1955; 2nd edition, Merlin, London, 1977), which is discussed in Perry Anderson's Arguments Within English Marxism (Verso, London, 1980), and Paul Meier's William Morris: The Marxist Dreamer (1972; Harvester/Humanities Press, 1978).

In contradistinction to Looking Backward, News from Nowhere stresses that the change only came about through violent Revolution, projected from the Bloody Sunday incident (13 May 1886) when police and soldiers attacked a peaceful demonstration in Trafalgar Square, killing three demonstrators and wounding 200 more. The demonstration had been in protest of the killing of six demonstrators when police fired on a strike demonstration in Chicago.

The Chicago episode resonates through Jack London's The Iron Heel (1907); the novel ends with an abortive rising, stirred by agent provocateurs, of a Chicago commune, and its subsequent massacre in a projected future 1932. London postulated that the monopolies would fight to the end to resist socialism, and would institute an iron heel of repression for a further four centuries.

Out of the decay of self-seeking capitalism, it was held, would arise that flower of the ages, the Brotherhood of Man. Instead of which, appalling alike to us who look back and to those that lived at the time, capitalism, rotten-ripe, sent forth that monstrous offshoot, the Oligarchy.

Too late did the socialist movement of the early twentieth century divine the coming of the Oligarchy. Even as it was divined, the Oligarchy was there - a fact established in blood, a stupendous and awful reality. Nor even then, as the Everhard Manuscript well shows, was any permanence attributed to the Iron Heel.

The novel's socialist hero Ernest Everhard offers a marxist analysis of nineteenth and twentieth century capitalism in the U.S.A. The narrative - a manuscript written by his wife - describes the socialists' political campaign, their harrassment, framing, gaoling and subsequent underground war against the plutocracy up till 1932. The 'manuscript' is annotated from the perspective of the 26th century when capitalism having at last collapsed of its own contradictions has been succeeded by the Brotherhood of Man, a superefficient state socialist society.

London is generally remembered for his animal stories and tales of adventure in the Yukon and Pacific. The Iron Heel, unavailable for years, has been reissued by Journeyman Press, London (1974) and they have also reissued his reportage on English working class life in the East End of London, The People of the Abyss (1903; introduction by Jack Lindsay, 1977) and Revolution: Stories and Essays selected by Robert Barltrop (1979). Barltrop has written a life, Jack London: The Man, the Writer, the Rebel (Pluto, 1976) which covers the materials from a socialist perspective but concedes too much to the bourgeois literary critiques of London's writings.

London's time travel novel The Star Rover (1915; also known as The Jacket) and his novel of prehistoric man, Before Adam (1906) are informed with a marxist-darwinian social vision. Philip Foner has a useful selection of London's work together with a lengthy introduction, Jack London: American Rebel (1947; Citadel, N.Y., 1964). Foner is also author of Mark Twain: Social Critic (1958; International, NY, 1972).

IMAGINARY WORLDS: PROJECTION AND ANTI-UTOPIAS.

Within the genre of future projections, the anti-utopias or dystopias of H.G. Wells, Aldous Huxley and George Orwell are the best known. These are the writers whose work is on the educational syllabuses. Wells wrote a number of alternative scenarios for the development of society on the lines of monopoly capitalism and class struggle - notably The Time Machine (1895) and The Sleeper Wakes (1899). In The Days of the Comet (1906) offers a naturalistic account of working and lower-middle class life (the subject of Wells' naturalistic fictions in Kipps, 1905, Ann Veronica, 1909, and The History of Mr. Polly. 1910) in the days prior to an apocalyptic world war, and a future projection of a just society beyond it. Christopher Caudwell places Wells' class position and perspective in 'H.G. Wells: A Study in Utopianism' in his Studies in a Dying Culture (1938; in Studies and Further Studies in a Dying Culture Monthly Review Press, N.Y., 1971).

Most literature departments and many history and political science departments that use literary materials represent Aldous Huxley and George Orwell on their courses or reading lists. But both these writers, though often imagined to have liberal or even radical leanings, represent the ruling-class response of one-time imperial England.

Only someone who has never been a worker can portray 'workers' as 'workers' - as externally and distantly viewed indistinguishable stereotypes. The patrician perspective of Orwell and Huxley is embodied in the way they present societies composed of anonymous workers - the proles in Nineteen Eighty-Four, the deltas in Brave New World. People only look that way when envisioned from a different, alien class perspective. It comes from assuming that people who do hard and menial tasks can be characterised by those tasks and can be assumed to have no other qualities, no individuality; both Huxley and Orwell create futures in which the proles, the bred workforce, are seen and treated as animals or automata. This tells us something about the thinking of the mid-century English ruling-class literati. In both novels the thinking, questioning, protagonist comes from a class other than the workforce. These are bourgeois myths for a bourgeois readership.

Brave New World (1932) projects a totalitarian system of control based on commodity production and consumption and biological conditioning - test-tube babies bred as workers, technocrats etc; the society is maintained by drug control - soma - and breeding so there is no need for the Orwellian violence. As a critique of free-enterprise capitalism and as an indication of scientific methods of control, Brave New World had its impact. Island (1962) represents Huxley's later thoughts on the topic, here postulating a remote Pacific island community looking for a middle way between multi-national exploitation and communism - psychedelic mushrooms now a positive in the society rather than the negative soma of Brave New World. (N2O, laughing gas, seems to have been the consciousness changing force in Wells' In the Days of the Comet).

Nineteen Eighty-four (1949) follows - and indeed helped also to create more forcefully - the cold war line of its period. It projects a future England in which fascist totalitarianism and socialist totalitarianism are presented as identical; the ideology of the ruling Party, Big Brother's Party, is 'Ingsoc.' Orwell always denied he meant English socialism. But that was the meaning that was read and promoted. The novel projects an England of

perpetual commodity shortages, a society separated into Inner Party, Party members, and proles. The 1930s demoralized defeated working class, the London Blitz, and the austerity of post World War II England are here frozen into a permanent future condition. The theory of the society is expressed in excerpts from the imaginary book, Goldstein's Theory and Practice of Oligarchical Collectivism:

The primary aim of modern warfare (in accordance with the principles of doublethink, this aim is simultaneously recognized and not recognized by the directing brains of the Inner Party) is to use up the products of the machine without raising the general standard of living. Ever since the end of the nineteenth century, the problem of what to do with the surplus of consumption goods has been latent in industrial society. At present, when few human beings even have enough to eat this problem is obviously not urgent, and it might not have become so, even if no artificial processes of destruction had been at work. The world of today is a bare, hungry, dilapidated place compared with the world that existed before 1914, and still more so if compared with the imaginary future to which the people of that period looked forward.

Power now lies in the hands of the new class of bureaucrats, whose imperative is not money or culture or justice or anything at all but power. The proles are presented as brutalized with alcohol, uneducated, inert.

It is still possible to interpret Orwell's intention in this positively - as, for instance, Paul O'Flinn does in Them and Us in Literature (Pluto, 1975):

Orwell knew that the future was not inevitably socialist as Fabians used to believe. He knew with Engels that there's a choice - socialism or barbarism. At a time when the working class seemed stalled and revolutionary organisations didn't exist barbarism seemed likeliest, so he wrote to warn. It's still a valid warning. Either we build the socialism that Orwell believed in or they build the 1984 that Orwell was afraid of. (20).

But the portrayal of the proletariat has its other implications, as Raymond Williams points out in his excellent study Orwell (Fontana, 1971).

He projects an enormous apathy on all the oppressed: a created mood, if ever there was one. Eighty-five per cent of the population are seen as an apathetic mass, and proles, as a description of them, seems more than Party jargon. The Party sees them as 'natural inferiors...like animals', but how does Orwell see them? As a shouting, stupid crowd in the streets; drinking and gambling; 'like the ant, which can see small objects but not large ones'; 'people who have never learned to think.' It is the world of working people, before 1914, as seen by the prep-school boy' (78).

And Williams continues

It needs to be said, however bitterly, that if the tyranny of 1984 ever finally comes, one of the major elements of the ideological preparation will have been just this way of seeing 'the masses'. (79)

Orwell's fiction was an active intervention in the battle of consciousness.

By viewing the struggle as one between only a few people over the heads of an apathetic mass, Orwell created the conditions for defeat and despair. (79).

Much of Orwell's 'leftism' now looks like a pseudo-leftism, proclaiming a left-progressive orientation, yet in detail after serving the interests of reaction. His Burmese Days (1934) describes his early life as an Imperial policeman; he resigned, but later spent the World War II years broadcasting imperial propaganda to India. His accounts of working class conditions, Down and Out in London and Paris (1933) and The Road to Wigan Pier (1937) are inevitably imbued with this imperialist Etonian perspective. Homage to Catalonia (1938) attacked the communists in the Spanish Civil War from an 'anarchist' line. Animal Farm (1945) was an anti-communist, anti-Soviet Union fable. All are available in Penguin. Both Huxley and Orwell drew heavily on Eugene Zamyatin's novel We (1925), which in its turn drew on Wells and London. Set in the 26th century it projects not London's Brotherhood of Man but an oppressive, controlled, mathematically precise and organised future society, criticized from a romantic, anarchic standpoint; the first of the satires on the planned society of the soviet union.

FASCISM, ALIENATION AND IMPERIALISM

Evidence for social, political and economic conditions can be drawn not only from novels of working-class life or from radical future projections. These are basic sources since the political and economic data are part of their thematic concerns. Similarly a politically conscious conservative writer will present accessible political and economic evidence. Hence Marx's admiration for Balzac. From Morris, London, Bellamy to Wells, Zamyatin, Huxley and Orwell is a whole spectrum of political ideology. Jameson's study of Wyndham Lewis, Fables of Aggression offers some valuable social insights into Lewis's proto-fascism. The novels of Louis-Ferdinand Celine, beginning with Journey to the End of The Night (1932; New Directions 1960) and Death on the Installment Plan (1936; New Directions 1971) are full of socio-economic observation, carrying through to his account of the collapsing third reich, seen from within, in later novels like North (1960; Bodley Head, 1973):

The real iron curtain is between the rich and the down-and-outers... between people of equal fortune ideas don't count... when you take a good look, your opulent Nazi, an inhabitant of the Kremlin, directors of Gnome et Rhone...they exchange wives, traipse around the same golf courses, buy and sell the same helicopters, and open the hunt together...'

In the U.S.A. the inheritor of much of the Celine tradition is William Burroughs whose Junkie (1953; Penguin 1977) is an acute exploration of the social role of heroin - its economic and its control functions; Burroughs' later fantasy works continue this exploration of alienation and control - (The Naked Lunch (1959; Corgi 1968), The Soft Machine (1961; Calder & Boyars, 1968) and Nova Express (1964; Panther 1968).

Imperialism and colonialism, though basic to England's economy, were displaced to a peripheral role in English literary production. The pantheon of accepted 'literary' texts of Dickens and George Eliot, Thackeray, Meredith, Hardy and James do not deal directly with the experience. It was left to the adventure story writers like Rider Haggard and particularly to the boy's adventure stories of G.A. Henty. But Rudyard Kipling brought up in India, offers the major literary record of the Indian imperial episode. And Joseph Conrad, a Pole who took on English nationality, wrote in Heart of Darkness (1899) the most powerful account of imperialist exploitation in the late nineteenth century Congo; though a conservative writer - Nostromo (1902) offers a conservative overview of political and economic revolutionary change in South America - Heart of Darkness provides in its material evidence as radical a critique of imperialism as Mark Twain's equally important attack on Belgian colonial policy in King Leopold's Soliloquy (1905).

Jonah Raskin's The Mythology of Imperialism (Random House, 1971; Delta 1973) is an important account of the writings of Joyce Cary, Conrad, E.M. Forster, Kipling and D.H. Lawrence in this area. Lucien Goldmann's Towards a Sociology of the Novel (1964; Tavistock, 1975) offers a structural study of the novels of Andre Malraux dealing with western imperialism and revolutionary change in China.

AN AUSTRALIAN TRADITION

Australian literature as an academic subject has generally followed the depoliticized, desocialized close-reading approach of English studies. The historian Russell Ward used the folk ballads as the basis for tracing the historical origins and development of The Australian Legend (Oxford U.P., 1958) and he has edited an anthology, The Penguin Book of Australian Ballads (1964). Humphrey McQueen's A New Britannia: an argument concerning the social origins of Australian radicalism and nationalism (Penguin, 1970) which took issue with Ward, used the literary figures Bernard O'Dowd, A.H. Adams, Henry Lawson, Banjo Paterson, Christopher Brennan, C.J. Dennis and William Lane as basic to his argument.

Lane's novel set at the time of the maritime and shearers' strikes in the early 1890's, The Workingman's Paradise (1892; Sydney University Press, 1980) is a vivid, first-hand account of the beginnings of the labour movement and the women's movement in Australia. The story of the radicalization of a Queensland shearer, it offers some of the earliest and most memorable pictures of Sydney's slums, the radical speakers in the Domain, the unemployed and homeless sleeping out, and Paddy's market. The street market was a central episode in novels of working class life, as P.J. Keating shows in The Working Classes in Victorian Fiction (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971). He traces the set piece back to Charles Kingsley's Alton Locke (1850), a novel Lane excerpted in The Worker and included in The Worker book exchange - a library of socialist literature made available to Australian unionists in the early 1890s. The literary titles comprised Looking Backward, Kingsley's Alton Locke and Yeast (1851), Olive Schreinder's Story of an African Farm (1883) George Bernard Shaw's An Unsocial Socialist (1883) and Ignatius Donnelly's Caesar's Column (1889).

Amongst those affected by Lane's radical propagandizing was Henry Lawson - Hilton Barton argues for a major influence in 'Lawson, Lane and "Mateship"' (Communist Review, 244 April 1962). Contemporary critical orthodoxy has been for the new left to deny the radicalism of Lane and Lawson, and to argue Lawson was so racist and nationalist as to be fascist; while the conservatives have dropped Lawson's explicitly social and political work from notice. Not only is much never anthologized, but what does appear follows the conventional enough critical practice of using the later, revised texts of a story or poem, rather than the text of first publication. Much of Lawson's work was written for radical and union papers - including Lane's Worker - and the texts were altered when collected in later editions. Lawson may have wanted to remove what became a dated topicality, or may have wanted to tone down his radicalism in the climate of political repression that followed the defeat of the 1890's strikes; or it may be that some publishers' editor made the emendations, changing lines, cutting stanzas. The reader looking at the text for its socio-economic-political meanings would need to know the original published version; indeed, to be aware of both texts to see the political and cultural changes. Colin Roderick's edition of the poetry (Angus and Robertson, 3 vols. 1967-9) notes the originals as variants, so the original readings are accessible - but the anthologies are generally obscure on these matters. In parallel with this textual depoliticization, there has also been a direction of attention away from the socio-political, indeed the establishment of a polarization between the political (which meant radical) and the aesthetic. G.A. Wilkes' essay 'The Eighteen Nineties' (in Grahame Johnston ed., Australian Literary Criticism, Oxford U.P., 1962) gives classic expression to this position which finds the strength of Lawson and Joseph Furphy's

Such is Life (1903) not in their political, radically committed aspects but in what 'transcends' their age and environment. John Docker has looked at some of the socio-political implications of academic orthodoxies on the 1890s in two pieces in New Literature Review, 6 - 'University Teaching of Australian Literature' and 'The Politics of Criticism: Leon Cantrell and the Gloom Thesis' in part provoked by Cantrell's useful anthology The 1890s (University of Queensland Press, 1977).

Both the radicals and the nationalists claimed Lawson and Furphy as the originators of their Australian tradition, founders of the realist tradition in Australian fiction. Jean Devaney, Katherine Susannah Prichard and Vance Palmer were seen as the inheritors, and Jack Lindsay's essays on Prichard, Palmer, Barbara Baynton, Alan Marshall and Frank Hardy in Decay and Renewal offer a good introduction to the social realist line of Australian writing. David Walker has offered a more critical account of the limitations of the social democratic assumptions of Palmer, Louis Esson and Furnley Maurice in Dream and Disillusion (A.N.U. press, 1976).

Another novel regularly cited for its recording of social conditions in lower class Sydney is Louis Stone's Jonah (1911), and Christina Stead's Seven Poor Men of Sydney (1934) is a powerful account of poverty and politics in the first quarter of the century. Stead's For Love Alone (1944) also offers valuable social materials on 1920s Sydney, House of All Nations (1938) deals with Parisian banking in the 1930s, and Cotter's England (1967) deals with English working class life and politics in the 1950s. All are now available from Angus & Robertson.

There has been a growing attempt to examine the ideological formations of Australian cultural positions in John Docker's Australian Cultural Elites (Angus & Robertson, 1974), Tim Rowse's Australian Liberalism and National Character (Kibble, 1978) and Ian Reid's Fiction and the Great Depression in Australia and New Zealand (Arnold, 1979). Jack Beasley's Red Letter Days (Australasian Book Society, 1979) offers an inside account of the ABS and the realist writers movements in relation to Alan Marshall, Frank Hardy, Judah Waten, Mary Gilmore, Les Haylen and Gavin Casey. Beasley's monograph Socialism and the Novel: a Study of Australian Literature (1957) is a pioneering work with a useful checklist of 'Australian Literature of Significance.'

FUN

Finally, it is important to point out, 'high art' literature is not the only or necessarily the best source of literary evidence for political, social or economic materials. Stephen Knight's Form and Ideology in Crime Fiction (Macmillan, 1980) discusses Edgar Allan Poe, Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories, Agatha Christie, Raymond Chandler and Ed McBain, exploring the socio-political meaning of their chosen forms. And Frank Kofsky's Lenny Bruce: the Comedian as Social Critic and Secular Moralist (Monad/Pathfinder, 1974) offers a socio-political reading of the great satirist, whose work has been edited by John Cohen in The Essential Lenny Bruce (Panther 1975).

Happy reading.

Copyright of Full Text rests with the original copyright owner and, except as permitted under the Copyright Act 1968, copying this copyright material is prohibited without the permission of the owner or its exclusive licensee or agent or by way of a license from Copyright Agency Limited. For information about such licences contact Copyright Agency Limited on (02) 93947600 (ph) or (02) 93947601 (fax)