

“Social Realism” and the Forms of Fiction

D. M. E. ROSKIES

One of the most promising and in many ways most gratifying intellectual developments on the west over the past decade or so has been the emergence of a materialist aesthetics worthy of respect and admiration. Where previously the feebleness of ‘reflectionism’, mechanically coupling **textual facts** with contextual ones, had held away, we have had in the formulations of a number of critics in the Anglo-American tradition something far more sophisticated and desirable: a structural critique of literary forces and relations of productions aiming at a semiological knowledge of a text’s self-constitution.¹ The epistemological problem: is art refraction, invention, transfoamation? The political problem, inseparable from the first: what is the relation between producer, product, and audience, between poetry and propaganda? The related problem of aesthetic value: how far is ‘value, in contradiction or internally bound up with historical progressiveness (however one cares to define this quality)? Such questions are beginning to be investigated with considerable exactitude and freshness, and with that tenacious attention to literary form and ideology characteristic of the Hegelian heritage at its most fruitful. Of course not everyone will deem these issues important: indeed to many people the attempt to talk about art in such terms seems so much humbug, yet another vulgar bid to ambush the writer’s project in the name of ‘relevance’. And as often as not in these unfriendly quatters the ammunition

for the assault so to speak, the item in the indictment to which the most opprobrium attaches, is the concept of Socialist Realism.

Small wonder: in a sense yet to be explained, the very notion is self-contradictory, just as the term itself is an oxymoron. None the less, to seize upon such anomalies as an excuse for dismissing as highly evolved and perspicacious a doctrine as Marxism would be quite wrong. For it is well to remind ourselves that Marxism as well as being a programme for action involves a certain way of seeing, a systematic and often very subtle discourse committed to elucidating a particular image of the human estate. All the same, if we are honest we must concede that the theory of Socialist Realism has been the Achilles heel of Marxist speculation about art, just as its practice has been the pitfall of the Marxist creative imagination (assuming we can speak with any confidence of the existence of something so definite, which isn't at all clear). And given the weakness of so much contemporary aesthetics, namely, the tendency to conduct a spectacular exchange around literature in which propositional 'correctness' is all and any purely literature points of reference are bonuses, it seems both sensible and courteous to start as we shall end, with the practice, with the actual literary tradition such as it is.

To talk of *the* tradition misleads perhaps by implying a condition of cultural homogeneity when in fact more than one national context is involved. Still, there are enough common features to warrant the usage. In the Soviet Union to begin with, what became known as Proletkult began under semi-official aegis after 1917, although writers like Gorky might have discovered in the rigorous utilitarianism of Belinsky and Plekhanov as earlier direct inspiration, had they sought it. Flourishing in earnest in the latter part of the 1920s and 1930s it achieved its epitome in A.A. Fadeyev's *The Nineteen* (1929), Gladkov's *Cement* (1930), and Boris Pilm'yal's novel of the first Five Year Plan, *The Volga Falls in to the Sea* (1932). (Dates given refer to the year of U.K. publication in English translation.) Earning the approval of *apparatchniki*, it incidentally provoked the dismay of Trotsky, shrewdest of critics, whose handsome demolition of its pretensions remains a treat to observe.³ The phenomenon, together with its Stalinist aftermath, has been exceedingly well documented and anatomised, most notably by Gleb Struve and E.D. Brown.⁴ It would however be an error to suppose that it is restricted in time and place to post-revolutionary Russia, more especially to the urgencies and enthusiasms of the NEP period. For rather different reasons, which are not far to seek, versions of it thrived in America too during the Depression years, and though at present quite extinct only began to become moribund towards the close of the 1940s.

Surprisingly in view of the absence of remunerative state encouragement, writers after the manner of Jack Conroy, Albert Matz and Robert Cantwell were prodigal of output, to the point where sheer number and diversity invite an internal classification according to school. Once again, the subject has not lacked for thorough attestation.⁵ What is perhaps rather less well known is the fact that the tradition (using the word for the moment to indicate a fundamental identity of species rather than any strict continuity on time) has had an outcropping into English literature proper: a fact being pointed out in candour at least as much because the present writer happens to be on home territory here as for the sake of filling out the historical record.⁶ At all events it will be apparent, I reckon, that parity of treatment across the national board is not absolutely necessary here for the purposes of generic evaluation and that such differences as do stand forth are quaint, the resemblances being what they are.

Where the tradition in England is distinguished from its American (though not from its Russian) counterpart is curiously, in point of longevity, and by the fact that writers were not in receipt of organisational or institutional backing to quite the same degree.⁷ The rollcall begins with James Welsh's *The Underworld* (1920) and *The Morlocks* (1923), both set in the Fifeshire coalfields, and Harold Heslop's *Gate of Strange Field* (1929), and continues in the 1930s with Heslop's *Least Cage Down* (1935); John Sommerfield's *Māy Day* (1937) and Lewis Jones' diptych *Cumardy; the Story of a Welsh Mining Village* (1937), and *We Live'* (1939) (dealing with the formation of the syndicalist South Wales Miners' Federation in the years immediately preceding the Great War. But it extends into the 1950s and 1960s to include a group of novels harking back, in choice of theme and physical setting, to the literary ambience of their predecessors. Here the titles to ocjure with are Dack Lindsay's "Novels of the British Way", *Betrayed Spring* (1953), *Rising Tide* (1953), and *The Moment of Choice* (1955); Len Doherty's *A Miner's Sons* (1955) and *The Man Beneath* (1957); Herbert Smith's *A Field of Folk* (1957), and *A Morning to Remember* (1962); Robert Bonnar's *Stewartie* (1964) and Brian Almond's *Gild the Brass Farthing* (1962), and Margot Heinemann's *The Adventures* (196). That the general reading public has never, to put it diplomatically, taken these writers to its bosom does not of course mean that they have not got their admirers. Now and then their work comes to the attention of the East Berlin - based *Zeitschrift für Anglistik und Amerikanistik*, which for obvious reasons has a vested interest in calling attention to left-wing writers, and no doubt they also have a small but regular following in Britain among subscribers to journals like *The Marxist Quarterly* and *Labour*

Monthly, where advance notice of their publication and the occasional review sometimes appears.⁸ Nevertheless, the fact that everyone else, including specialists, is unlikely to have heard of these novels let alone to have read them may serve (by Dr. Johnson's yardstick) as an apt enough comment on their intrinsic worth. Indeed, until quite recently academic opinion in England has seen fit to neglect their existence almost totally.⁹

It is a pretty sound instinct. With minor variations, the pivotal event common to all these novels (as indeed to their American and to a much lesser extent their Soviet counterparts) is a strike ruthlessly or deviously forced upon the employees of a shipyard, factory or mine. As it runs its course, a variety of figures are brought together, the callous and stubborn workers discovering the merit of trade unionism, the prejudiced ones the balm of solidarity, the misguided ones the wisdom of the communists, who, directly or unobtrusively, number among the leaders of the strike. The theme of education-through-struggle is pointed by recourse to repertoire of devices drawn from stock; the grandiose set-piece scenes involving angry marchers, the sentimental bestiary containing such figures as the muscular worker and his developed paramour and the wizened and indomitable strike-leader, veteran of countless battles with the owners and managers. Yet what is unaccepted about this theme is not so much the rigidity of its stylization as the manner of its emergence. For it forms part of a counter-plot, which gradually intercepts, overtakes, and eventually curtails the self-imposed need for the author to resolve the tensions, social and interpersonal, he initially purports to dramatise. And as the sub-schema hoves into view, the characters come to stand in trimly diagrammatic relation to one another, no longer (as at the outset) transacting their affairs with one another in ways that impress us as credibly verisimilar, but pirouetting to a decorum of extremes, becoming more or less, but not merely human, passing through the action as through a formal dance and being progressively stripped of all complexities in order that the dance may not be disturbed. Plot begins to exaggerate out into chiaroscuro juxtaposition, the prose to be enervated by copybook dialogue. An action begun as imitation as charade, with figures announcing their presence in ways we are supposed to accept as plastic and lifelike, atrophying into mannequin-"types", whose lineaments, we see, have been set in a mould kept ready in reserve. Thus, massively defaulting on promises they make to their readers to end as they do on crescendoes as this—

Jack had been right ! The fight would go on ... all men and women had been drawn in, each giving what he might toward a single end ...

Together they would win. He squared his shoulders .. "There's nowt we can't do so long we're together," he exulted aloud. "Nowt at all! The precious cornerstone is tried. We have but to build on it and the future is ours, forever!"¹⁰

—these novels have ensured their relegation to the decent secrecy of the remainder shelf.

To retrieve them from this limbo as indeed to linger upon their features in any detail would seem after such dismal preliminaries a thankless task. Yet they focus with fascinating precision the yoked set of problems broached at the outset of this essay, problems resolved with disconcerting neatness by Marxist critics in the seminar room (as distinct from the writer's worktable). The formula to which they are written belongs quite obviously to the conceptual universe of socialist realism as defined by its chief theoreticians, whose ideological pedigree is incidentally impeachable. These quite naturally take every care to make it plain that they frown on posterwork fabrications. Yet in their postulations (which if not dishonest are in certain respects heartbreakingly ingenuous), we shall find lines leading straight to the source of the very irregularities they so hotly decry. The creative thing mimes and in a sense is cued to the caritical thinking, both being instances of *Mauvaise foi*.

For they hold, with Ernst Fisher, for example, that such excesses ought not to be held in evidence against an aesthetic "perfectly valid in itself" because expressive of "the writer's fundamental agreement with the aims of the working class and the emerging socialist world".¹¹ Bent on the depiction of "society in its process of growth", it secedes from "the art of the capitalist world", - from "critical realism" - by certifying the conviction that "in our age the possibility of far-reaching objectivity is offered by taking sides with the working class". By disclosing "contradiction and conflict in the present", it shows "the birth of tomorrow out of today, with all the attendant problems". Thus, "anticipates the future. Not only what has preceded a particular historical moment, but also what will succeed it". This of course is a faithful reworking of Lukacs' definition of socialist realism as that which portrays "the forces working toward socialism *from the inside*", is "concerned to locate those human qualities which make for the creation of a new social order", and represents "human beings whose energies are devoted to the building of a different future".¹² with good reason to be anxious to avoid glossing Lenin's ukase to the effect that "Literature must become an essential part of the organized, unified Socialist party work", Fischer (more forcefully than Lukacs) tries to his credit to forestall the charge of prescription, appearing as a limiting

clause the rider that "new art does not come out of doctrines but out of works".¹³ But like Lukacs' his formulation sounds and is little different from those available in the *locus classicus*. It may be remembered, was latterly in the habit of calling for "a revolutionary romanticism . . . the purpose of which is . . . to promote a clearer view of the lofty objectives of the socialist future".¹⁴ And Zhdanov hold out for "a selection from the point of view of what is essential, from the point of view of guiding principles", the portrayal of "how Socialism is growing in deeds, in human beings".¹⁵ All this Fischer, following Lukacs, would doubtless have little hesitation in pronouncing self-evident or "true by definition".¹⁶ And his discussion is likewise couched in the optative case, turning similarly upon prolepsis: "the defeat of capitalism and the growth of a classless society".¹⁷

Now on the critical side, the assumptions serviced by these prayerful enunciations die a hard death; more than one attempt at a conclusive interment has been made.¹⁸ Nowhere to be sure are they voiced in the writings of Marx and Engels themselves: As R.W. Mathewson has shown, they take their rise from Lenin's conception of "partiinost", or party-mindedness, and generally need to be seen as congruent with his activist revision of Marx.¹⁹ What scholarship has laboured to uncover, however, lay analysis immediately queries, in the spirit (in this case) of the boy querying the Emperor's finery. Any deductive critical theory, it will surely be agreed, requires a measure of justifiable prior consent in its underlyings axioms. A part from its notoriously illiberal applications, this theory is both exceptional and exceptionable in that its axioms are totally immune from disproof or validation. In "reality" as an event that has not yet happened, is lying in store in the shape of a great bonanza, one either has faith or one has not. But what on earth shall we make of a theory in which judgements about palpable proximate data - the text the setting, the recoverable authorial intention, - all of which can at least be apprehended and correlated to a knowable degree of probability - are referred to "that hard-and-fast perspective of the future"²⁰ - which cannot be known at all, only piously asserted or just talismanically invoked? Assuredly a way of looking at literature that refuses to countenance elementary distinctions between "is", "ought" and "shall be", must come under suspicion as being less than capable of doing complete justice towards the objects of its inquiries.²¹ Those who lobby for its acceptance nevertheless raise (though they forbear to confront) an important issue, the implications of which are worth pondering. For (following Lukacs again) Fischer contends that "socialist art" (his euphemism) "clearly refers to an attitude not a style - and emphasizes the socialist outlook, not the realist method".²²

And he goes on to give the socialist writer, secure in his "outlook", carte blanche to emulate available "bourgeois art" on condition that he infuses it with "a positive social perspective". We are of course told that "new means of expression are needed to depict new realities". But these means, it turns out (argument here is circular), are in the event there for the taking in accredited methods of "bourgeois realism", which can promiscuously be "learned from" and invested opportunistically with "socialist content" according to need ! Loath though he is to condone any hiatus between "attitude" and "method" the two are suffered to remain in separation. And what exercises us here are the difficulties facing the novelist who, going about his craft in received ways while "taking sides with the working class and the emerging socialist world", takes the critic at his own eclectic word in a manner of speaking.

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The chief difficulty (if this doesn't sound too pompous) is that of assimilating the Marxist perspective to the protocol of the traditional novel. Being so compendious a form, "the traditional novel" is obviously no more submissive to generalizations about its subject and structure than is "the Marxist perspective". Still, we may perhaps be permitted some fairly brief and malleable ones about the nature of both. With the former we shall have to make some allowance for the precise balance the individual writer will be pleased or following custom be constrained to strike between a documentary fidelity to observed fact and outright fantasy. Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, Stendhal and Dickens - these are the authors held up by Fischer as the measure of worth and emulation. Considered as typologies of creation (apart, that is, from the circumstances of their cultural season), what have fictions such as theirs in common such as enables subsumption under a single head ?

The striking shared feature, I believe, is not any uniformity of style or local procedure, but the way in which many varied mannerisms, emerging from very different needs and preoccupations among the writers who resort to them, seem to connect. And of the kind of novel apotheosized in, for example, *Anna Karenina*, *Le Rouge et le Noir*, and *David Copperfield*, it can be said that a major part of its fascination is that it schemes to assemble a world more or less contiguous with one we know, in all its capriciousness, its seeming irresolution, its gradations of motive and perfection, hesitation and soruple. In its approach to character it may be said to crystallize and preserve a view of human intercourse corresponding to our sense of the way things actually are,

a view based on a valuation whether in the gut as it were or in the head of the unconditional and idiosyncratic personal response. In this respect, much of its authority and persuasiveness is bound up with the nominal liberty the novelist extends to his people to select or desist from a course of action; to arbitrate between legitimate claims upon him; to enjoy rights of struggle and occasional grace, even to the extent of taking over the driver's seat of the narrative sequence. As with character in other words, so (where the novelists Fischer sets up as models are concerned) with plot. Its chance logics, conferring order upon the unfashioned material, work to engage our interest, variously, in the scrutiny of motives, in the collusion of disparate events, in mystery established at the outset and subsequently brought to a head. They demand that we attend not just to what will happen next, but, more strenuously, to why just that result. As the "method" Fischer appears to be keen on, realism is more than "individual Romantic protest against bourgeois society"²³ and to deny that it is to yield to a temptingly easy simplification. As arguably more acceptable definition, perhaps (if definitions there must be), is that realism is a grammar of presentation obeying an inner initiative of its own as well as being demonstrably the expression of a class which has had the upper hand.²⁴ It is (and I hope the jargon may be forgiven) a mode of writing in which the expectations felt of narrative ask to be satisfied through an unpremeditated imitation of multifarious experience as we commonly know it to be at the level of ordinarily accessible daily life. Openended in direction, interested in maintaining options upon itself, its status as an imaginary act depends upon a referential expressiveness revealing itself in just that working discourse we call 'plot' and 'character'. The vigour with which it customarily sustains itself issues from what W.J. Harvey with admirable felicity, calls

A state of mind which has as its controlling centre an acknowledgement of the plenitude, diversity and individuality of human beings in society, together with the belief that such characteristics are ends in themselves. It delights in the multiplicity of existences and allows for a plurality of beliefs and values.²⁵

To be sure, any definition must be rough-and-ready, and 'Realism' has had too violent a history for anyone to expect his own definition to meet with complete agreement from anyone else. Nor, it seems important to emphasize once more, are literary conventions ever found embodied in a pure state; we always use them with a sense of approximation. The above use of the term is one which I believe to be most helpful in discussion, since it provides not a standard of judgement but an illuminating way of expressing a dissatis-

faction (or a satisfaction). And it is not, I think, misrepresenting the case to argue that the Marxist "state of mind" is dominated by presuppositions irreconcilably at jar with those of realism in the common understanding. Disseminating its meaning casuistically, Marxism in its classical adumbration at any rate proposes a valuation of experience in which the incessant combat of binary opposites assumes paramount importance. Its governing notions are corporative and necessitarian, its conception of the significance of human actions, both private and public, elliptical and metonymous. Quite irrelevant, of course, is Marxism's philosophical validity or otherwise. The question is its possible relation to that species of novel associated with the conviction which you and I are wont to hold that there is an empirically given world of rounded, self-directing persons, a world inhabited by - the words of one English critic of Fischer's persuasion - "real people, warts and all, absorbed in their lives and problems: "real conflicts, real failures".²⁶ And my contention is that it is impossible for that relation not to be fraught even, at times, to look very strained indeed.

Let me put it as follows: To insinuate and maintain a tension plausibly located in links of moral and psychological cause and effect, to deploy plot in the interests of effective dramatic encounter, to portray inconsistencies of feeling and equivocations of response - all this requires placing an unqualifiable premium on the principle of uncertainty and incompleteness, in default of which the fiction will perish stillborn. It requires, that is, a conception of truth as something neither all-white, not all-black, nor even black-and-white, but as something opalescent, hindering terminal judgement, with good and evil, the laudable and the despicable, too inseparably knotted to prevent one saying what the world is finally "about". And it requires a sense of freedom as something permanently flexible, irreducibly multiform, often genuinely doubtfully in application and upshot and upshot. For the novelist who regards himself as blessed with a "grasp of the main lines of human development and recognise laws", who knows "whence we have come and where we are going", who believes himself privy to "the hidden laws governing all human relationships",²⁷ freedom and truth are bound to be differently construed. The former is seen in providential teams: as the liberty of a class and of the individual representative there of to move albeit hesitantly along foreordained paths, whether in triumph or in defeat. And no more disparaging or presumptuous a judgement is intended in suggesting here that which is "true" is not whatever-the-case-may-be but which ultimately impedes or absolutely retards or subverts the elected purpose of men in whom vice or virtue is at the bottom more native possession than dear-bought achievement.

In short, it seems not unfair to assume that, operating as he does within a closed field of image and idea, the novelist after Fischer's heart will be least comfortable with a protagonist whose make-up is defined by the aberrant inflexions it embraces, the morality of whose actions is permanently open to serious question. His dealings with both, uneasy as they must be, are likely to be hazardous, with the novelist under considerable pressure to suspend and finally to revoke his license to evolve character and proliferate plot with a view to giving a sufficient impression of "real conflicts, real failures". Plot is liable to become not an action allowing for development and setback along multiple axes but a prejudiced progress along well-marked routes. And the conventional portrayal of character - where this involves a relationship between the reader and a person viewed as a discretely bound individual moving through a comprehensible timescape of growth and evolution - gets ruled out of court. For the novelist's teleology, though it admits of dilemmas of choice, though it allows for entanglements of loyalty, though it acknowledges the possibility of resolutions painfully arrived at or of impasses broken, does not at the end of the day recognize any real alternatives. Where "existence determines consciousness", where "the real relationship of human beings to each other" are considered to depend upon "supersensible, supra-psychological motives, which unknown even to themselves, govern their actions, thoughts and emotions",²⁸ here realism is not, I dare say cannot be, the main objective. The novelist is operating *ex umbris et imaginibus in veritatem* (from shadows and types to reality), to use Cardinal Newman's phrase; and indeed there is a parallel with the Catholic view of the phenomenal world, Graham Greene or Muriel Spark in particular coming to mind. The moral and imaginative touchstone is not on this or that decision but the ultimate deciding, the supra-mundane lineup of sides. And what works against this is estranged from significance in the over-all framework of the "laws" of history, and thus in the fictive microcosm in which the drama of choosing is enacted, in the field in which the laws of social existence operate. To overstate the matter - as we must if distinctions are to have any use - the idea of a Marxist fiction, emphasizing as it does the immanence of an ineffable order in human affairs, signifies pattern and limitation; the idea of a realistic narrative the game's generative grammar so to speak, leaving to the side the vexed question of who makes up the rules of the game, stresses choice, pattern and potentiality. In terms of novelistic structure and intellectual cogency neither of these, I hasten to add, is superior to the other and the novelist is of course quite free to choose between them. What he cannot do - or rather what he can do only at the risk of incoherence is to choose both.

Yet, sure enough, choose both is precisely what the novelists cited at the beginning of this essay do. So, in fact, do Gorky in *The Mother* (1907), Anton Makarenko in *Road to Life* (1937), Alexei Tolstoy in *The Road to Calvary* (1945), and Louis Aragon in his massive *Les Communistes* (1949-51) - to name four of the novelists acclaimed by Fischer and Lukacs for their "agreement with the aims of the working class and the emerging socialist world".²⁹ The peculiar untowardness of these novels (quite apart from the overt didacticism implicit in their heroic stereotypy) derives from an authorial desire to have one's cake and eat it too. It is the product of a loaded contest between on the one hand the desire to tell a specific story through a linear progression of events; and, on the other, the urge to tell The Story, a tale subject to local permutation with this or that individual, this or that imbroglio, figuring manifestly as and instance of a general case finding its particular embodiment. The result is a fictional *modus operandi* that alters the terms of the discourse shortly after its commencement and brings its effectiveness to an end.

In advance of the justification which follows shortly, these are but the merest notes. But first a caveat. It is no part of my argument to foreclose upon the notional prospect of a credible fiction raised upon Marxist tenets. All I wish to do here is to wonder out loud about its likelihood under conventional circumstances. Indeed, the preceding goes some way towards suggesting why "good" Marxist novels are deserving of the accolade. It may help for illustration to turn to an American novel readers are least likely to be unacquainted with John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939). Fischer and Lukacs assign it no place in their international pantheon. Yet all the ingredients of a Marxist "attitude" can be found in it. Consider it is the theme of exploitation, laid down in the depiction of the depredations of the banking syndicates bent on terminating the Oklahoma share-croppers' mortgages and on combining their steadings into mechanized plantations. There is the theme of victimisation, in the description of the Joads being driven into exile and equally in the account of their subsequent hurrowing, intimidated as they are by police marshals in the employ of the fruit-growers, fleeced by racketeering entrepreneurs and bamboozled by leeching politicians. There is the theme of "education" and "conversion", Tom Joad beginning in phlegmatic self-absorption, and ending 'jus' puttin' one foot in front a the other".³⁰ And, throughout, there is the Manichean warfare of contraries, the Joads (representing all the "Okies") pitted against the Shawness Land and Cattle Company (representative of all the land-hungry corporations); the California Farmers Association against the migrants unions, still immature when the book ends with the standard prophecy (figured in the title) of a final vengeful settling of scores.

Ideological melodrama, and of the mandatory kind? To some extent yes, especially when Tom Joad announces his attention to take up the burdens of labour organization in the speech rising to the purple of "wherever there's a cop beatin' up a guy, I'll be there" (p. 395). Here Steinbeck's imaginative nerve fails him, certainly. Yet the central tropes he manufactures are not only more acceptable than this, they are frequently radiant, often compelling, almost always possessed of a probity and an aplomb all their own. And this is largely because, while very much inspired by "clearly defined.. communist ideas", he decidedly does *not* seek "to do somehow what Tolstoy did, or Turgenev",³¹ although the reader might be forgiven for supposing that he does. On the whole he eschews all excursions into full-blooded mimesis, in plot and in characterization exploring - to use E.M. Forster's terms - the flatness to the virtual exclusion of the roundness. He formally asserts, and tries consistently to maintain, a claim to a quite different level of credibility from that lodged by a simulant realism. From the opening chapters (with their camera-eye disclosure of the turtle crossing the highway carrying and dispersing the seeds of life, sustaining shocks but moving unstoppably on) to the final beatific scene (Rose-of-Sharon suckling a starving stranger; she who cannot become a physical mother becoming a mother of all mankind) - he concentrates upon a single, fugally-patterned theme: the harrassed movement of a persecuted folk to a new territory, assembling as they travel into one mass, developing, as they cross frontiers, a code and an identity in response to their tribulations. The business of the book, both deep and superficial, is not the Joads themselves in their psychological growth or intricate moral interaction but the plurality of possible stories resembling theirs. The concern is with the hordes of people like them, becoming slowly aware of their condition, willing their survival, knowing that survival depends upon mutual aid and joint standing fast against "the mean thing" (p. 228). And through an extended series of rich anagogic associations, the author contrives a form whose central motifs unfold a grand design, seen *sub specie aeternitatis*. He makes fairly mercenary use of Biblical correspondences, ecological comparisons, and organic symbols, using them both within each of the novel's chapters and establish relationships between the chapters themselves. Delicately, he allows the novel's incidents - sacrificing nothing of their concrete particularity - to fall into undeclared alignments and concurrences bearing additional overtones of meaning. Thus, reading, we come to perceive the chapters ordering themselves into sequences: drought (chapters 1-10), journey (chapters 11-18), sojourn (chapters 19-30), corresponding respectively to the Exodus from Egypt with its plagues and pharaohs (the bankers), settlement in Canaan and the encounter with the hostile inhabitants of a Promised Land (the California

landowners). And within this emblematically resonant subtext, the Joad family, twelve in number, come to be seen now as the Israelites led by Aaron and Moses (Tom and Casey) delivering their flock from bondage; now as the apostles (led by Jesus and John); now as an archetypal tribe (enlarged by near-kin, the Wilsons and the Wainwrights, met along the way) through suffering and wandering constituting themselves into a single unit in the roadside encampments accommodating a populace on the move.

Steinbeck, you see, has an impatience with imitation, and calculatedly gives way to this impatience, since his real concern is with the inimitable. So whenever our attention is drawn to the familiar and the commonplace within the novel, it is invariably to show that they carry the imprint of the extraordinary. That is, they function in his work not to establish a recognisable world - although it goes without saying that the historical provenance of the fiction is unimpeachable - but demonstrably as part of an unfamiliar (or from another coin of vantage an all too familiar) design. And the thing to emphasize is what he wishes to say is implicit in, and fully commensurate with, the means he uses to say it. Hence the famed intercalation of inner bridging chapters, some (like the impressive fifteenth), generalizing through parabolic dialogue the conflicts between the sharecroppers and the land-agents come to remove them; others describing the nature of the new nomadic society being formed on the roads; others, employing free-wheeling sales-patter and Psalmic rhythm, simply choric in function. They serve to constrain a continual perception of quasi-universality in the contingency of the here-and-now: to make us see, from many tangents, the recurrent ubiquitous strife of contesting groups in the usual arena of mortal dissension. And it is precisely because at key stages in the compositional process we sense the author repeatedly conducting us to the same perception, creating images and emanations of one situation in another, that we come tacitly to credit him with writing from the "historical viewpoint" of "the working class", whose side he has chosen to "take". Viewpoint here, notice, isn't just a matter of declaring athletically for a "principle", of mounting the podium to utter yea or nay; but, as matter of narrative policy, of strophic intimation, grand "standing-for" and elaborated "seeing-as".

In sum, it's a matter of pitching the "socialist outlook" in a certain direction, and of allowing that bias to establish the terms of the whole narrative enterprise. No less than, for instance, Mikhail Sholokhov (in the portrayal of Davidov) in *Virgin Soil Upturned* (1935), Steinbeck is perfectly capable of writing in the realist mode while genuflecting before an icon of "human beings whose

energies are devoted to the building of a different future". Witness the placard-like Nolan, and the placard-like action generated around him, in *In Dubious Battle* (1936). In what is perhaps his best novel, we observe that he elects to deploy Marxism in reverse as it were: not as chiliastic prognostication but as a way of attuning himself and his readers to a vision of hitherto persistent and still ever-present antinomies between rich and poor, masters and men - a populist vision that as it happens is potently embodied in Marx's own vision of social conflict.³² And we can't fail to remark as well that he draws upon that vision to fortify and knit together a narrative that is at once genuinely fictive and is relatively novel. Fictive, in that it involves the sort of imagining which is pertinent, being that of seeing X as Y, where to see X (the struggles of one family with their persecutors) as Y ("the class struggle") is not to believe X is Y, but to entertain the constantly unasserted thought of X as being Y. Relatively novel, in that the narrative itself has been planfully requisitioned from orders of storytelling eccentric to orthodox canons of mimetic representation.

If *The Grapes of Wrath* is the exception that proves the rule, so too are Sholokov's *Quiet Don Trilogy* (1935-40), Ignazio Silone's *Fontamara* (1931), and that superb novel that is only just beginning to receive the attention it deserves, Lewis Grassic Gibbon's *A Scots Quair* (1932-34).³³ There's no prior reason in fact to suppose that the thing can't be done. The point is that when done, in works like the aforementioned, what we are getting could not be further removed from the continental novels admired by Fischer and Lukacs, and from the novels, catalogued earlier, which extend the tradition into England. A broad indictment, then, and one which certainly can't be substantiated item for item in the present forum. As example is needed, and from the (personally) more accessible end of the charge-sheet, James Barke's *Major Operation* (1936) might well serve. It doesn't give prominence to factory or pit-politics. And it leaves off the common-or-garden formulae to portray at length "conflict and contradiction" as they affect a character from across the ramparts, so to speak. Just for these reasons, and because of relative ease of access *the novel* (having been recently re-issued) offers plenty of scope for commentary on the besetting vices of the species to which it belongs.

Laid in Glasgow of the 1930s, Barke's novel traces the varied careers of George Anderson, a coal agent *Nel mezzo giorno*, and Jock Mckelvie, shipyard worker and trade-union organizer. The dissimilarity between the two men develops into the central theme of the narrative, the lengthily reticulated parts of which succeed each other regularly in time while advancing co-axially towards a single centre. The somewhat raffish Anderson we follow through

the failure of his business and subsequent insolvency, his efforts to cope with his fears of impotence, the inconstancy of his harridan wife and the regardlessness of erstwhile friends; Mckelvie, through the daily round of metal-plating and shop-floor wrangling. The former, grappling with his personal difficulties, gradually composes a sorry picture. He is listless, prudish, naggingly indecisive, unsure of himself and of his capacity to fend off his former business associates, a sybaritic lot.

Of Mckelvie's nature, as revealed in work and deed, we are left from the outset in little doubt. Full of animal vitality, in pub, bed, and welding bay, with "an air of authority about him",³² he comes to seem the very apotheosis of gallantry, his absorption in the doekworkers' affairs an specific sign of a larger congenital penchant for magnanimous gesture. Anderson, by comparison, distracted by his financial woes, lapses into a dilettantish and self-absorbed existence, living meanly in furnished digs. A phase of sexual involution sets in, his melancholia aggravates a duodenal ulcer, and he fetches up in a hospital ward. In this same ward Jock chances to arrive laid low with a rupture caused by his tireless exertions. Lying each abed, they strike up conversation, and the collapse of his affairs, sheer fret, and dismay at the pass his life has come to, all dispose Anderson to heed with growing fascination Jock's quenchless perorations on the subject of the coming convulsion. Wrestling from Anderson the painful admission that his has been a fortunate fall, and administering a fearsome chastisement for the remission of duties long neglected, Jock tells the ruined coal-agent :

You've been pressed down into the ranks of the workingclass. We hold out a hand to you if you are willing to take it we offer you a place in the rans and a stiff fight when you're there we don't offer you an easy road, but we offer you a sure road (pp. 339-40)

The scales thus falling from his eyes with an audible clatter, Anderson comes round to admitting that "one thing anyway" he had learnt a lot about the working class ... they were in every way superior to his [own] class" (p. 36). Guided under McKelvie's sure hand "out of the endless maze of doubt and uncertainty (p. 354) and feeling "sure of himself for the first time", he entreats with his preceptor to be inducted into the fold while "there's still time not only to make a fight for myself but for the world that must come" (p. 363). The moral is obvious: the surgery on Anderson's mind has been a success: hesitantly he is treading the path of salvation, "proud", as he explains to his wife's lover (a former business associate) to be "an apostate, a renegade on the other side of the barricade now" (p. 392). So, destitute

upon his release from hospital and barely convalescent, he accepts a bed in McKelvie's home, husbanding his strength in preparation for the battle with the class "to which I no longer belong" (p. 363). But the vestiges of his former self still trouble him: he is imperfectly equipped to take up arms, fettered as he is by a host of self-doubts and mined from within by irrational fear. Feeling shackled by what McKelvie, with monomaniac earnestness, interprets as "the weaknesses and handicaps of his class" (p. 492), confused and ashamed and blaming himself for "his inability to grasp the significance of events" (p. 385), he resolves upon suicide, only to be frustrated in his decision by a supervening spiritual lessitude. The further period of penitential self-castigating in lonely bedsitters that follows is interrupted as, wandering aimlessly in the streets, he meets up with a mammoth procession all pennants and phalanxes, McKelvie at its head. Unprovoked, the police attack, battering down its figurehead; Anderson, rallying, leaps into the fray, and seizing the Red flag in an access of self-possession, plants himself above the prostrate leader, only to be himself trampled underfoot and killed. At his graveside McKelvie, the huzzas of comradespealing round, delivers the tribute, deploring his ineffectualness yet extolling his good intentions and powers of foresight . . . well, on this or on any other showing it will be obvious that *Major Operation* is a pretty excruciating affair. Yet it will also be apparent that the primary blame for its gaucheries is not collected by a starved imagination or by a congenitally debilitated technique. Surveying in copious detail the miscellany of daily living in the "Second City", the novelist acquits himself rather well. Nor, fundamentally, do its faults lie with the compulsive infatuation with *idee fixe* worrying enough as this is. A piece of operatically proportioned statuary, McKelvie in his humourless inflexibility presents few problems either for the novelist or for his readers. No ordinary human clay, this "read leader, . . . of splendid frame and constitution" (p. 45) is clearly in the novel by doctrinal fiat, as shown by the promptitude with which he is on hand to dispense with alarming ease grace abounding to the chief of sinners; and by the hortatory uplift of his monologues. The whole conception is the fruit of perfervid wishful thinking, not of recalled or observable actualities, and critics like Fischer really have no call to deplore such "propagandist idealizations"³⁵ if novelists like Barke merely loyally corporealize what they in the abstract recommend.

So much is plain, Yet Barke doesn't waste any more time than he needs on his paragon-figure. He merely winds him up and lets him trundle garrulously about, as if conceding that the character is ersatz and his whole presentation incredible. Instead he devotes the better part of his attention - and directs the reader's - to his answering study. And it is here we observe the more

basic incompatibility between "outlook" and "method" I spoke of earlier. It reveals itself in a hapless defection from an imaginative post that, once occupied, needs to be diligently manned lest the convincingness of the entire composition be irretrievably undone. For in Anderson's discomfiture, in his decline, fall and ostensible redemption, the novelist has granted himself permission to explore a theme of potential complexity and seriousness. He has thrown doors open upon an interesting subject: a man perplexed by intellectual uncertainty, bewildered by the need to rethink ideas previously taken for granted, suffering one debacle after another in the sphere of personal relationships and all the while labouring in agony to reconstruct a shattered self. And to be sure the subject is exploited: a studied attempt is indeed made to render believably the slides and erosions with the personality wrought by psychic travail, Anderson in diffident, groping debate his new-found friend; Anderson digesting in solitude his marital insufficiencies, "desperate for human company" (p. 408); lacking the self-confidence to respond to a sympathetic staff nurse's sexual overtures, and, thrown over, "wandering farther and farther into the futility of no-man's-land" (p. 416), while eking out a livelihood as a publican's assistant - all this, within the natural limits of the novelist's capabilities, is sympathetically done, Gissing-fashion. Here at least we appear to have the makings of an attempt to present a character with some allowance for psychological truth-to-life, to present him as possessed of an intricate inner existence of his own.

But it won't wash. The breibilising, short-circuited in mid-prassage, is doomed, the psychology, so painstakingly annotated in chapter after chapter, travestied by the author's over-riding intent. *Anderson acts spontaneously from a nature which, we are supposed to see, has developed under certain absolute imperatives.* It is, we are meant to understand, because he is ineluctably a "bourgeois" that he must suffer ignominy and endure mental distress; that, unlike the McKelvies of this world, he must be pusillanimous, neurasthenic, and luckless in the prosecution of his sexual affairs - and do penance for all this. And when, eventually, we are invited to accept as the rationale for his inability to stay thoughts of suicide the fact that

There had always been about him caution, reason, and a chinking from open and abandoned affection. And when he had come to make his contact with the working class, he found them suspicious and reserved. He realised clearly that he himself had acted with suspicion and reserve... This was Anderson's trouble. He took everything to himself. Sensitive to his own failings and shortcomings, he added to his burden the burden of shortcomings of others... He

