Forecasts of the Past:

Globalisation, History and Contemporary Realism

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ABSTRACT

This thesis takes issue with Fredric Jameson’s suggestion that contemporary science fiction is sending back “more reliable information [about current political and economic organisation] than an exhausted realism” and it develops an alternative Marxist defense of contemporary realist fiction. Can realism's techniques adequately represent the complexity of contemporary political organization? The thesis presents readings of key realist texts — by Pat Barker, Maurice Gee, Kerstin Hensel, James Kelman and David Peace — testing their potential to produce the knowledge of history, industrial politics and the metropolis traditionally central to literary realism’s concerns.

Globalisation is one of the terms used to attempt to define contemporary social and political organization, and Jameson’s sense of realism’s exhaustion is closely connected to his wider analysis of the possibilities for representation in this era. The emergence of globalisation – as both a shift in economic organization and as a problem to be confronted by the Left – has led to a revival of critical theory concerned with those totalising themes earlier decades viewed with suspicion. Marxian analyses, in political economy, philosophy and international relations, are enjoying renewed attention, and the shift – by Jameson amongst others – in critical terminology from postmodernism to globalisation suggests new priorities and areas of urgency for the scholarly and political field. I read realist literary production in the light of this shift because the traditional concerns and representational ambitions of realism – to produce the industrial novel, the historical novel, and the novel of the metropolitan experience – focus on areas of social life that globalisation theory suggests are the most transformed in the current era. Testing what sort of information realism produces about these areas, this thesis argues, can illuminate both our understanding of realism and our sense of the cognitive and political possibilities present in the current era.
DECLARATION

This is to certify that

(i) the thesis comprises only my original work towards the PhD except where indicated in the Preface,
(ii) due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other material used, □
(iii) the thesis is less than 100,000 words in length.

Dougal McNeill
PREFACE

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Thanks are due to the staff of the Baillieu Library, in particular its Interlibrary Loans Service, and the administrative and support staff of the School of Culture and Communication for their assistance throughout various stages of this project’s life.

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Language shows clearly that memory is not an instrument for exploring the past but its theatre. It is the medium of past experiences as the ground is the medium in which dead cities lie interred. He who seeks to approach his own buried past must conduct himself like a man digging. This confers the tone and bearing of genuine reminiscences. He must not be afraid to turn again and again to the same matter; to scatter it as one scatters earth, to turn it over as one turns over soil. For the matter itself is only a deposit, a stratum, which yields only to the most meticulous examination what constitutes the real treasure hidden within the earth: the images, severed from all earlier associations that stand – like precious fragments or torsos in a collector’s gallery – in the prosaic room of our later understanding.

Walter Benjamin, “A Berlin Chronicle” (1932)
Chapter One
Introduction

Only Connect? Globalisation and the Problem of Realism

When the problem of connecting isolated phenomena has become a problem of categories, by the same dialectical process every problem of categories becomes transformed into a historical problem. Though it should be stressed: it is transformed into a problem of universal history which now appears...simultaneously as a problem of method and a problem of our knowledge of the present.

Lukács, History and Class Consciousness

It is now time to reconnect.

David Harvey, Spaces of Hope

Thirty years ago, writing some “Reflections in Conclusion” to the publication of a selection of the polemical debates between Adorno, Benjamin, Bloch, Brecht and Lukács, Fredric Jameson issued a remarkable programmatic call for the formation of a new realist project. Reviewing the debates within the Marxisms of the 1930s, Jameson noted all manner of political and aesthetic concerns reemerging in the then-contemporary moment of the 1970s. “Nowhere has this ‘return of the repressed’ been more dramatic,” he writes, “than in the aesthetic conflict between ‘Realism’ and ‘Modernism’, whose navigation and renegotiation is still unavoidable for us today, even though we may feel that each position is in some sense right and yet that neither is any longer wholly acceptable.” Whereas modernism’s great innovations for “making strange” and coming to terms with the shocks of monopoly capitalism had once disrupted and dismayed its readers, “there is some final question,” now, Jameson went on, as to

whether the ultimate renewal of modernism, the final dialectical subversion of the now automatized conventions of an aesthetics of perceptual revolution, might not simply be...realism itself! For when modernism and its accompanying techniques of “estrangement”

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have become the dominant style whereby the consumer is reconciled with capitalism, the habit of fragmentation itself needs to be “estranged” and corrected by a more totalising way of viewing phenomena.⁴

Whatever the difficulties involved in imagining this new realism’s appearance, Jameson suggests, our ability to conceive of it is connected to a need and a gap in our historical sense:

The fundamental contradiction is between history itself and the conceptual apparatus which, seeking to grasp its realities, only succeeds in reproducing their discord within itself in the form of an enigma for thought, an aporia. It is to this aporia that we must hold, which contains within its structure the crux of a history beyond which we have not yet passed. It cannot of course tell us what our conception of realism ought to be; yet its study makes it impossible for us not to feel the obligation to invent one.⁵

The tasks and functions of this new realism, furthermore, are clear:

To resist the power of reification in consumer society and to reinvent that category of totality which, systematically undermined by the existential fragmentations on all levels of life and social organisation today, can alone project structural relations between classes.⁶

And then, just as suddenly as this audacious and daring programmatic intervention had inserted itself, without warning, into Jameson’s writings, it disappeared from view. These brief, inconclusive but intensely suggestive sketches for a contemporary realism stood alone in Jameson’s work as the challenges of periodising the postmodern, re-evaluating the utopian demand and assessing and responding to the various challenges to Marxism issued through the 1980s drew him elsewhere. Realism as an object of criticism or moment for theorising remained, of course, but the clear organising call of “Reflections in Conclusion” stood alone until, twenty-five years after Aesthetics and Politics, the programmatic energy re-emerged. In the middle of a discussion of the fortunes of the various modernisms, A Singular Modernity all of a sudden offers its reader the following astonishing aside:

⁴ “Reflections”, p. 211. Ellipsis in original.
⁵ “Reflections”, p. 213.
⁶ “Reflections”, p. 212.
each realism is also by definition new: and aims at conquering a whole new area of content for
its representation…(and this is why, throughout and beyond the age of modernism, there are
still new and vibrant realisms to be heard and to be recognized, in parts of the world and areas
of the social totality into which representation has not yet penetrated). That is to say not only
that each new realism arises out of dissatisfaction with the limits of the realisms that preceded
it, but also and more fundamentally that realism itself in general shares precisely that dynamic
of innovation we ascribed to modernism as its uniquely distinguishing feature.  

The resumption of such immediately strategic and programmatic analysis by one of
the foremost Marxists writing today, a resumption underlined by Archaeologies of the
Future’s clear sense of its audience as the “whole new generation of the post-
globalisation left,” 8 points to a new life and immediacy for the problems of realism.
Whether this new realism, one that can “alone project social relations amongst
classes” is accessible today, is active today, and how it may have rearranged itself in
the era of globalisation and full postmodernity, is the organising question this thesis
sets itself.

The Return of Totality: from Postmodernism to Globalisation

There are signals that an intellectual turn to realism is upon us. The last few years
have seen major studies of realism by significant theorists – Peter Brooker and Pam
Morris among them – and critics, and Matthew Beaumont’s excellent collection
Adventures in Realism (2007) offered many of the debate’s key figures a chance to
restate and reflect on their contributions. Brooker attributes this renewal of interest to
something like the life-cycle of forms themselves 9, but it may be more productive to
wonder if deep changes in the organisation of contemporary capitalism structure the
sort of questioning we see re-emerge around us.

123. See also the brief but enormously suggestive remarks on the future of an “existential realism”
sketch in the final paragraphs of his “Note on Literary Realism in Conclusion” to Matthew
8 Fredric Jameson, Archaeologies of the Future: the Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions
9 “Realism tends to reassert its claims after long periods of time when it has been out of fashion. Hence
we may say that realism is both a period concept…and also one continuing tendency of the
imagination. The history of the novel often appears to take the form of successive generations claiming
their work is ‘more real’ than that of their predecessors.” Peter Brooks, Realist Visions (New Haven:
If, in necessary short-hand, left cultural politics of the 1980s and 1990s were characterised by the “war against the totality” (Lytard), the critique of received vision and totalising analysis – finding literary form in the advocacy of “historiographic metafiction” by Hutcheon and political form in the strategic fragmentation of identity politics – the first decade of this century has been marked by a re-appraisal of totalising thought. This re-appraisal has been occasioned by two decidedly “total” shifts in the global political scene: globalisation and the “war on terror.”

The “war on terror” – as a result of which, according to Bill Brown, 9/11 “has already attained an autonomous periodising force”\(^\text{10}\) – and the enormous expansion of international trade and finance known as globalisation\(^\text{11}\) have stimulated a new generation of left scholarship and activism hostile to the fragmentation of a decade ago. At the level of organisation or activist politics this stimulation has resulted in movements determined to address their opponents in the language of systems and totalities, whether in the form of the “corporations” of the anti-capitalist movement or U.S. power itself in the global movement against the war on Iraq.\(^\text{12}\) This turn in strategic or organising focus finds its intellectual expression in the revival in recent years of a scholarly interest in imperialism – a “total” term if ever there was one – and a resurgence of research working in the traditions of historical materialism.\(^\text{13}\)

Whereas, just five years ago, a critic sympathetic to the tradition could announce that “Marxism is at the nadir of its fortunes” and that “the postmodern is the horizon

\(^{\text{10}}\) Bill Brown, “The Dark Wood of Postmodernity (Space, Faith, Allegory)”, *PMLA*, vol. 120, no. 3, Spring 2005, p. 735.


\(^{\text{12}}\) See Verity Burgmann’s valuable “Archaeologies of Anti-Capitalist Utopianism”, *Arena Journal*, 25/26, 2006 and, for the anti-war movement in Britain, Lindsey German (ed.), *Stop the War* (London: Bookmarks, 2004).

within which every radical politics develops today,”¹⁴ now, when, as Amitava Kumar
describes it, globalisation “is becoming one of the central terms of cultural
understanding and contestation,”¹⁵ we are witnessing the development of a new
audience for a newly confident Marxist political economy of globalisation.¹⁶
Globalisation and the war on terror, whatever their human impact and cost, stimulated
an intellectual “return of the totality”: it seems fitting, then, to see what role realism –
the form associated above all with total visions – has in this current situation.

This renewal of analysis demands, naturally, its own negative movement, and the last
few years have seen a critical rejection of the postmodernism and identity politics
that, in an earlier decade, acted as the inspiration for many of realism’s critics.
Journalist Naomi Klein criticises the politics of the local and the image as a
distraction from the immensity of the challenges of the contemporary moment,
suggesting that in the 1980s “we were too busy analysing the pictures being projected
on the wall to notice that the wall itself had been sold.”¹⁷ We have become
accustomed to thinking of poststructuralism and the fragment as concerns of the left,
but a new social criticism indicts these approaches as complicit with neoliberal
preparations for globalisation. In their exhaustive study of what they call “the renewal
of social criticism” in France, Luc Boltanski and Eve Chapiello launch a critique of
the earlier cultural leftist position:

much better in effect, from the standpoint of unlimited accumulation, that the question be
suppressed, that people convince themselves that everything can no longer be anything but a
simulacrum, that “true” authenticity is henceforth excluded from the world, or that the
aspiration to the “authentic” is only an illusion.¹⁸

¹⁵ “Introduction” to Amitava Kumar (ed.), World Bank Literature (Minneapolis: University of
¹⁶ Again the field is vast but compare Mark Rupert and Hazel Smith (eds.), Historical Materialism and
Globalisation (London: Routledge, 2002), David Harvey, Spaces of Hope and Alex Callinicos, An
Anti-Capitalist Manifesto (Cambridge: Polity, 2003). For some of the impact this has had in literary
studies see Stan Smith (ed.), Globalisation and its Discontents (Cambridge: The English Association,
2006).
¹⁸ Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, The New Spirit of Capitalism, trans. Gregory Elliott (London:
In a widely circulated position paper, Argentine philosopher Nestor Kohan deploys Marx’s concept of “commodity fetishism” to help explain the situation in which, paradoxically, while the academic philosophical literature of the last three decades of the twentieth century was dominated by the fetishism of the fragment, capitalism was moving in exactly the opposite direction as far as the economic, political and military order were concerned.¹⁹

In this new global context – in which the New York Times can run a headline announcing “American Empire: Get Used to It”²⁰ – a number of the original theorists and advocates of postmodernism have announced its decline. David Harvey, author of the pioneering Condition of Postmodernity, calls the term “unhelpful” for mapping contemporary politics while Linda Hutcheon believes that “the postmodern moment has passed” and that “postmodernism needs a new label of its own.”²¹ Over-hasty obituaries are, of course, as dangerous as uncritical acceptance but, whatever else we may say, globalisation has stripped from the periodising debates of the last decades the immediate political intensity they once had.²² In literary studies, where “the term ‘postmodernism’ has received the widest usage and provided the most intense debate,”²³ a number of recent studies demonstrate an impatience with what Philip Tew calls “postmodernism’s obsessions with textualising critique” and aim for a revived consciousness of class and content-based analysis.²⁴

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²⁰ Quoted in Harvey, The New Imperialism, p. 6.
²² “The very scale of the triumph of liberal capitalism after the end of the Cold War and the attempt via international financial and institutions such as the IMF and the World Bank to universalize the neo-liberal economic package known as the Washington Consensus made how – and whether – to live with capitalism an increasingly urgent issue. This change in the agenda became politically visible at the very end of the decade, when the Seattle protests signaled the emergence of the international movement for another globalisation, but there were also in the intellectual world important signals that the great querelle of the moderns and post-moderns was no longer at the cutting edge of theoretical debate.” Alex Callinicos, The Resources of Critique (Cambridge: Polity, 2006), p. 51.
²³ Tim Woods, Beginning Postmodernism (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), p. 49. See also Simon Malpas’ comment that “in recent years the postmodern has seemed less omnipresent, and yet the concepts, ideas and categories deployed by its exponents are still crucial to many of the key debates in contemporary culture.” The Postmodern (New York: Routledge, 2005), p. 6.
Where, if at all, in this shifting intellectual and political climate, might there be a space for realism?

**Between things ended and things begun**

Like Whitman’s society waiting unformed, realism is the missing component in the post-globalisation revival of Marxism. The twenty-first-century regeneration of Marxism has, up until now, been confined mainly to the areas of international relations, political economy and analysis of the state. With a few notable exceptions, literary studies has been one of the disciplines the least marked by these changing intellectual currents.

Of the many blockages and barriers standing in the way of the development of a full understanding of contemporary realism, the political are the easiest to see. For the six decades between the counter-revolution in Russia, the rise of Stalinism and the fall of the Berlin Wall, realism and modernism were, in all but a few instances, close to unworkable concepts. As Michael Denning argues,

> the two leading transnational aesthetic terms – realism and modernism – were so embedded in the cultural Cold War that they became mere honorifics, with little actual meaning. In the communist world, favored writers were proclaimed realists; in the capitalist world, they were deemed modernists. The discoveries that apparent modernists were actually realist – think of the cases of Brecht and Picasso – and the reverse claim that classic social realists were actually modernists (as in contemporary reinterpretations of Lu Xun) have regularly been part of the ideological battle conducted through these terms.²⁵

It may be only now, with the detritus and dead weight of Stalinism lifted from the workers’ movement internationally, that a Marxist analysis of realism can be revived. But if the external political context impeded realism’s discussion, there are also explanations internal to the intellectual history of Marxism to account for the scarcity of analysis in these last years. The Althusserian turn of the 1970s – which, for many a thinker, became, following Hindess and Hirst, the post-Althusserian and then the post-Marxist moment altogether – trained a whole generation in hostility to or, at the very

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least, suspicion of the “classic realist text” in ways which determined research programmes for the decades to come.26

This present study is an extended engagement with Jameson’s speculation on realism and an attempt to test, through close readings of representative progressive realist texts, the possibilities and limitations of the form in the current historical juncture. This suspicion of the “classic realist text” is real and important, with consequences still felt today – in ways we shall see in a moment – but the greatest impediment to a renewal of realism in the globalised era has been, perhaps paradoxically, precisely the sense of the return of the totality itself. “Realism,” Jameson argues, “is dependent on the possibility of access to the forces of change in a given moment of history”27 and, in some of his works at least, globalisation feels like a moment when this access is denied. Now, Jameson has suggested, it is science fiction that is “sending back more reliable information about the contemporary world than an exhausted realism.”28

Jameson’s suggestion that realism may be exhausted is based on long and careful reflection on both the form and the moment, and is not to be refuted or adopted through superficial or glancing analysis. Before I outline what sort of approach is needed to Jameson’s work, though, we need to work out what this sort of objection is not. A related argument against realism’s possibilities has been advanced around the theme of trauma, where realism fails in the face of the immensity of the Holocaust – a position associated with the work of Elie Wiesel – and its sheer horror and barbarity. Hayden White’s Figural Realism worries at precisely these representational limits and goes on to argue that

The kinds of antinarrative nonstories produced by literary modernism offer the only prospect for adequate representations of the kind of “unnatural” events – including the Holocaust – that mark our era and distinguish it absolutely from all of the history that has come before it.29

This contention – that some events are too awful, too “hot” for representational handling by the familiar forms of realism – is a quite complex ethical and political dilemma and deserves a study of its own. I do not reject White’s argument here – and it seems to offer some explanatory frame for the weirdly anti-realist cartoon Auschwitz of Spiegelmann’s *Maus* – but suggest instead that we bracket it as a quite separate concern. Jameson’s own speculation concerns not extremes of experience but realism’s basic possibilities and access to representation in this mode of production.

“In postmodernity,” Jameson has argued, “representation is not conceived as a dilemma but as an impossibility”30 for reasons connected to the accessibility of the forces and relations of production that are globalisation. Jameson sees this as a radically new order, one characterised by “the displacement of old-fashioned industrial labour by the new cybernetic kind”31 and “the cybernetic possibilities that enable post-Fordism along with financial speculation and generate the extraordinary new wealth that constitutes the power of the postmodern business establishment.”32 Realism falters or fails in this world, Jameson at times suggests, because it cannot produce reliable information of it and because, for reasons we shall explore later in this chapter, it is no longer in a position to produce the sort of aesthetic experiences the “Reflections in Conclusion” announced as necessary.

This thesis is at once an extended reading of contemporary realist practice and a development of Jameson’s theory of realism. I aim to use Jameson’s Marxism in order to test in what ways contemporary realist practice operates under globalisation. My aim here is to establish whether it is indeed “exhausted” in the present moment and, if it is not, to work out how we might use realist practice to establish the sorts of tasks realism is still capable of performing.

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30 Archaeologies of the Future, p. 212.
The rest of this introduction will sketch Jameson’s theory of realism; place this theory within the context of his periodising scheme; consider some Marxist objections to the very desirability of a contemporary realism; outline the Marxism I intend to bring to bear on my particular texts; offer a working definition of realism and outline the chapters that are to follow. My work here is not some attempt to “disprove” Jameson’s theoretical project – a task as difficult as it would be self-defeating – but is, rather, to expand on and develop those spaces his own work has opened up. In the undeveloped programmatic demands of the “Reflections in Conclusion” and a host of other brilliantly suggestive asides, Jameson may not have articulated a Marxist approach to contemporary realism but he has provided us with the materials with which to do so. This thesis attempts a sympathetic yet critical construction out of this very material, and aims to test this construction against actual realist practice.33

Jameson’s Account of Realism

In his introduction to Marxist Literary Theory, Terry Eagleton outlines the four traditional regions of Marxist criticism:

1) **Anthropological** criticism, born out of the Second International Marxism typified in the work of Plekhanov, and raising fundamental questions about the social function and evolution of art and the aesthetic function;

2) **Political** criticism, registering the shock of October and the insights of the Bolsheviks while managing, in the tradition of a Trotsky or a Brecht, to raise activist, interventionist questions of criticism: how are literary works to assist in rethinking new forms of subjectivity?

3) **Ideological** criticism, of the kind pioneered by the Frankfurt School and what Anderson has labeled “Western Marxism”, born out of the experience of defeat and attuned to the ideological implications of form,

33 This is also, to my knowledge, the first Marxist study beyond article-length focussed primarily on Jameson’s account of realism. The only comparable works produced to date are Carolyn Lesjak’s “History, Narrative and Realism: Jameson’s Search for a Method” in Caren Irr and Ian Buchanan (eds.), On Jameson: from Postmodernism to Globalism (Albany: SUNY, 2006) and my own provisional rehearsal of the current argument. “Reading the Maps: Realism, Science Fiction and Utopian Strategies”, Arena Journal, 25/26, 2006.

34 The classic account is Perry Anderson, Considerations on Western Marxism (London: NLB, 1976).
analyzing the workings of ideology and material conditions in the 
structures of texts and, finally;

4) Economic criticism associated with bodies of knowledge as diverse as 
those developed by Raymond Williams and Walter Benjamin, and centred 
on questions of modes of cultural production, reception and control.35

The full scope of reference and versatility in Jameson’s Marxism is commonly 
accepted and celebrated, but what Eagleton’s fourfold division of the field underlines 
is the remarkable range and adventurousness of Jameson’s account of realism. In a 
series of interventions over the last thirty years Jameson has attempted to construct a 
reading of realism that is simultaneously anthropological, political, ideological and 
economic, one that explains its historical emergence, aesthetic and epistemological 
powers, political uses, limitations and potential for renewal and, finally, its place as a 
cultural dominant corresponding to a particular period and mode of production.

If the possibilities of realism have been a career-long concern for Jameson, it is no 
surprise that he has returned time and again to the inspiration, example and 
provocation of Georg Lukács. What is Lukács’ body of work, after all, but the most 
sustained attempt at a general theory of the relationship between historical forces, 
totality and literary form historical materialism has yet produced? Lukács, for whom 
genre is “the essential unit of literary discourse,”36 is an essential point of reference 
for any Marxist theory of realism. Positioning his work within the Hegelian-Marxist 
tradition of which Lukács is the most famous exponent, Jameson draws from his work 
a sense of the novel’s potential and formation, a sense that will inform his further 
 writings on realism.

Lukács’ work, for Jameson, “may be seen as a continuous and lifelong meditation on 
narrative, on its basic structures, its relationship to the reality it expresses, and its 
epistemological value when compared with other, more abstract and philosophical 
modes of understanding.”37 Jameson takes from Lukács a commitment to the idea that

37 Jameson, Marxism and Form, p. 163.
the structures of narrative may, in certain periods, offer political knowledge of “the
differentiated and epically complete variety of life,”38 in other words, of the totality
that is the not immediately accessible nature of the system itself. This capability is
connected to realism in two ways. In a weak sense, realism, Jameson argues of
Lukács’ work, “merely designates the empirical existence of a concrete body of works
to be explored.”39 But the fact that, in Lukács’ account, this body of work, the
achievements of historical or “classical” realism, has managed to “have been able to
‘reflect’ social reality in its most concrete historicity”40 gives it a particular charge
and importance. For the writer who “strives to represent reality as it truly is”, Lukács
contends, “the question of totality plays a decisive role.”41 This ability to reflect
concrete, historical reality as a totality grants realism and, by extension, the novel
itself,

ethical significance. The ultimate goal of human life is Utopia, that is, a world in which
meaning and life are once more indivisible, in which men [sic] and the world are at one. But
such language is abstract, and Utopia is not an idea but a vision. It is therefore not abstract
thought, but concrete narration itself that is the proving ground for all Utopian activity, and
the great novelists offer a concrete demonstration of the problems of Utopia in the formal
organisation of their styles and intrigues themselves, whereas the Utopian philosophers only
offer a pallid and abstract dream, an insubstantial wish-fulfillment.42

This passage is an example of how Jameson manages to at once position himself
within Lukács’ own account and move beyond it. “For Jameson”, Christopher Wise
argues, “Lukács’ work is valuable insofar as Lukács has explored the relationship
between narrative and totality, especially in an effort to arrive at such a recovery of
meaningful social existence”43 and, by evoking Utopia (“a transparent synonym for

38 Georg Lukács, “Idea and Form in Literature” (1936) in E. San Juan Jnr. (ed.), Marxism and Human
39 Marxism and Form, p. 191.
40 Ibid. Jameson goes on to comment: “that he [Lukács] will later shift, more questionably, from
description to prescription and attack modern writers in the name of some a priori model of realism
does not invalidate this starting point.”
41 “Realism in the Balance” Aesthetics and Politics, p. 33.
117.
socialism itself”

Jameson provides a third term with which to figure realism’s achievement: its politically suggestive task of fusing aesthetic and epistemological insights. Realist narrative, in the language of Marxism and Form, manages to rise to the level of the concrete: it offers us an acting-out of the utopian in a way philosophy cannot achieve and, at the same time, provides us with information about our own world.

All this begs the overwhelming question, though: how is it that realist prose can become charged with such potential? Jameson’s discussions oscillate between two conflicting interpretations. In most of his writing he sees realism as a period in literary history in which the bourgeoisie, in its revolutionary phase committed to expanding its vision of the world, is temporarily able to generate narratives which represent the social whole but which, for us, fallen into the reified world of late capitalism, are no longer achievable. In other moods, however, his works hint at and gesture towards ways in which strong realism might yet be possible in the contemporary situation. To understand why, we need to examine Jameson’s account of the achievement of historical realism.

**From Aesthetics to Epistemology**

Nineteenth-century realism – fiction associated with the names of Balzac, Scott, Dickens, Eliot, Gissing and others – is, for Jameson as for most Marxist critics, the product of those revolutionary surges and events marking the emergence of the bourgeoisie as the undisputed centre of class power and is, in the process, itself marked by this emergence. Historical realism lays claim to “cognitive as well as aesthetic status” and “presupposes a form of aesthetic experience which yet lays claim to a binding relationship to the real itself…to those realms of knowledge and praxis which had been traditionally differentiated from the realm of the aesthetic.”

It is, in other words, a marvelously transgressive form, enlarging the realm of the aesthetic and offering connections to the social totality: it is “a narrative discourse which unites

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the experience of daily life with a properly cognitive mapping and a well-nigh ‘scientific’ approach.”  

Accompanying this thematic innovation is, in historical realism, an intense *formal* radicalism:

> These first great realisms are characterized by a fundamental and exhilarating heterogeneity in their raw materials and by a corresponding versatility in their narrative apparatuses…a generic confinement to the existent has a paradoxically liberating effect on the registers of the text, and releases a set of heterogeneous historical perspectives – the past for Scott, the future for Balzac, the process of commodification for Dreiser – normally felt to be inconsistent with a focus on the historical past.

What at first glance seems restrictive (Zola, after all, declared once that “the writer’s whole effort is directed towards obliterating the imaginary with the real”)

produces, in Jameson’s account, a widening of aesthetic horizons, an expansion of form and, as his claim for a “properly cognitive mapping” – so often another way of writing class consciousness in Jameson’s works – makes clear, in the process of this the chance for a genuinely totalising portrayal of the novels’ contemporary situation.

In *The Political Unconscious* realism is seen as *both* an aesthetic and an epistemological achievement: its “versatility” of “narrative apparatuses” is a product of the creative energy of the bourgeoisie in its revolutionary phase. To overthrow the existing order, to improve its productive capacities and to transform itself into a class fit to rule, the bourgeoisie, in its revolutionary phase, must, in the classical Marxist account, be transgressive, expansive, scientific and committed to accurate representations of the world it wishes to occupy. Marx, in the *Communist Manifesto*, is full of praise for the bourgeoisie’s creative potential:

> in place of the old local and national seclusion and self-sufficiency, we have intercourse in every direction, universal inter-dependence of nations. And as in material, so also in intellectual production. The intellectual creations of individual nations become common

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47 Ibid., p. 90.
property. National one-sidedness and narrow-mindedness become more and more impossible, and from the numerous national and local literatures, there arises a world literature.\textsuperscript{49}

This is the context, then, which produces that fusion of “the experience of daily life with a properly cognitive mapping” and gifts us all the works of the nineteenth-century realists. But realism has further powers. As well as opening up a whole new area of social life for representation and comprehension it is a form capable, at this moment in its history, of producing subject positions for its readership which in turn give them a sense of the new historical role of the individual. The railway scene in \textit{Dombey and Son}, Maggie Tulliver’s destruction, Margaret Hale facing the striking workers: these climactic moments of classic realism are as much about developing properly bourgeois forms of subjectivity as they are about explaining the raw material of the world itself. “Realism and its specific narrative forms”, have the task, for Jameson, to

\begin{quote}
construct their new world by \textit{programming} their readers; by training them in new habits and practices, which amount to whole new subject-positions in a new kind of space; producing new kinds of action…Meanwhile – and this is a decisive feature of all realisms since the emblematic appearance of the \textit{Quijote} itself – realism must also deprogram the illusory narratives and stereotypes of the older mode of production; it must cancel while producing, and at an outer limit, must even seek obsessively to cancel itself as a fiction in the first place.\textsuperscript{50}
\end{quote}

Realism is cast here as part of a broader ideological struggle against older feudal forms of thought and perspective, as “a component in a vaster historical process that can be identified as none other than the \textit{capitalist} (or the \textit{bourgeois}) cultural revolution itself.”\textsuperscript{51}

And yet, obviously enough, placing realism as a historical form corresponding to capitalism’s liberal, dynamic and revolutionary phase is a move which contains within it a built-in explanation of the form’s demise. “Realism”, as Sean Homer explains in summarising Jameson’s view, “is a historically specific rather than an eternal formal possibility. Just as the social and historical conditions must exist in the first place for


\textsuperscript{50} \textit{Signatures of the Visible} (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 166.

\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., p. 164. Emphasis in original.
realism to emerge, once those conditions have passed realism is no longer an aesthetic possibility…[it is] no longer capable of adequately ‘representing’ the real world.”

The problem here is historical agency, and realism is “dependent on the possibility of access to the forces of change in a given moment of history.” Once the bourgeoisie has passed over from its revolutionary to its reactionary role in the historical process – once, in the shorthand of historical materialism, we are through the moment of 1848 – then its capacity for access to clear pictures of social totality ceases and the reifying rot of the sheerly ideological sets in.

Jameson is alive to this “gradual reification of realism in late capitalism” and is, of course, far from being one of those vulgar Lukácieans who repeat the instructions Brecht parodies as “be like Balzac – only up to date!” His writings over the last twenty years register a strategic uncertainty about the place of realism in any Marxist aesthetic project. As well as Jameson’s speculations about realism’s exhaustion in the First World and impossibility in the Third, he hovers and shifts between categorising realism as a period, a moment in literary history, and setting it as a goal and method, a programmatic statement. Jameson posits two fates for realism after its revolutionary moment has passed: as an objective kind of falsehood and as an actual impossibility.

The first of these positions stays fairly close to conventional Marxist Ideologiekritik, and is not so important for my purposes here. What is significant, though, is the manner in which Jameson cleaves the aesthetic from the epistemological in these accounts. Once the bourgeoisie has lost its ability to see the totality and must rely on partial consciousness and sheer ideology, realism takes on complicated new properties. It is now

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53 *Marxism and Form*, p. 204.
54 *The Political Unconscious*, p. 91.
56 The key text here is his “Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism”, *Social Text*, Fall 1986.
57 And so by *A Singular Modernity* (London: Verso, 2002) p. 124, for example, he can write that “modernism is an aesthetic category and realism is an epistemological one: the truth claim of the latter is irreconcilable with the former.”
the most complex epistemological instrument yet devised for recording the truth of social
reality, and also, at the same time… a lie in the very form itself, the prototype of aesthetic
false consciousness, the appearance that bourgeois ideology takes on in the realm of narrative
literature.\textsuperscript{58}

It is possible, following this logic, to accept the essential falseness of realism, its
distorted, ideological presentation of the world, as precisely that which provides a
moment of clarity for being \textit{objectively} false, a true picture of the distorted world
described in the pages of \textit{Capital}. If “the peculiar object of realism (and its situation
of production) is…the historically specific capitalist mode of production”\textsuperscript{59} then it
gains, for Marxism, an ongoing use of a \textit{symptomatic} nature: so \textit{this} is how they see
the workings of their system! And, naturally, such partial, distorted pictures of reality
take on the power of a social force once they inform historical actors. Another
commentator, from a perspective quite unsympathetic to Jameson, suggests some of
the logic behind this when he points out that “narratives are not inventions of the
mind but political and ideological practices as much a part of the material texture of
reality as bombs and factories, wars and revolutions.”\textsuperscript{60} Literary realism can be
redeployed as part of the by-now familiar Marxist negative hermeneutic, unraveling
the false logic of capitalism hidden in the text.

But Jameson is too dynamic a thinker to remain content with the project of producing
endless unmaskings of the bourgeois false consciousness motivating realist writing
and, as well as registering these moments, he suggests deeper, systemic reasons why
realism may no longer be possible. It is not just, for Jameson, that the bourgeois
themselves have changed: so have the workings of the system itself. Realism is
exhausted, he suggests, because it can no longer represent the world we live in. It is
not so much superseded or abolished but, as James Wood put it recently, “exhausted
and overworked” in the face of its raw material, the world.\textsuperscript{61}

\textsuperscript{58} “Beyond the Cave: Demystifying the Ideology of Modernism” (1975) in \textit{The Ideologies of Theory},
vol. 2, p. 123.
\textsuperscript{59} \textit{Signatures of the Visible}, p. 163.
\textsuperscript{61} Wood was discussing what he calls the “hysterical realism” of De Lillo, Easton Ellis and Pynchon.
Quoted in Steven Conte, “Hyperrealism and the Novel” (unpublished PhD thesis, University of
In his key “Postmodernism” essay, Jameson suggests that the era of multinational capital is unrepresentable or, at the very least, that the era of depthlessness, weakened historicity, intensities and technology is not easily representable in the earlier manner of the steam engine or the turbine era.\(^{62}\) Where once the system was an object accessible aesthetically it is now, through its sheer scale, diffusion, technological proliferation and decentring, removed from view. Realism, in the “Postmodernism” essay, is a literary-historical moment, when, Jameson claims, the “cultural periodization of the stages of realism, modernism and postmodernism is both inspired and confirmed by Mandel’s tripartite scheme.”\(^ {63}\) These comments are restated in Jameson’s recent announcement that realism is exhausted or, earlier, in his claim that only paranoid visions of intrigue at the highest level could pass themselves off as totalising narratives of the world system: “conspiracy theory [literature] (and its garish narrative manifestations) must be seen as a degraded attempt – through the figuration of advanced technology – to think the impossible totality of the contemporary world system.”\(^ {64}\) The strategically vague notion of an “impossible” totality is something we shall return to later. This periodic\(^ {64}\) urge in Jameson is what we could label the negative moment in his dialectic of realism: a continued series of acts of mourning for the shattered whole, the lost moment when the aesthetic could once offer knowledge.

The chaotic, decentred world of full postmodernity – or, in more recent writings, globalisation – presents Jameson with the bleak prospect that totalising aesthetic representation of the kind so central to the Lukácsian project may in fact now be nothing more than an empty and unfulfilled desire. In 1990 he wrote that:

> The truth of our social life as a whole…is increasingly irreconcilable with the possibilities for aesthetic expression or articulation available to us; a situation about which it can be asserted that if we can make a work of art from our experience, if we can give experience the form of a story that can be told, then it is no longer true, even as individual experience; and if we can

\(^{62}\) “Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism”, \textit{NLR}, I: 146, Jul – Aug, 1984, pp. 58, 79.
\(^{64}\) “Postmodernism”, p. 80.
grasp the truth about our world as a totality, then we may find it some purely conceptual expression but we will no longer be able to maintain an imaginative relationship to it.\textsuperscript{65}

Neither Hegel’s famous dictum (“Das Wahre ist das Ganze”) nor Adorno’s inversion of it\textsuperscript{66} hold true in this vision, and it is difficult to imagine or remember a more melancholy and sobering paragraph. The world itself has been unmasked as sheer construction and illusion, as the random chaos and simulacra of postmodernity and globalisation as “external reality organizes itself into a problem” and “what threatens our belief in realism today, and yet perhaps stimulates newer and even more desperate forms of realism, is our widespread conviction…about the ‘constructedness’ of reality as such.”\textsuperscript{67} The world is now, to indulge in a little plumpes Denken, just too weird (and, if computers are a part of this, too wired) for words, and aesthetic totalisation has broken down.

A contradiction emerges here. If the world itself can no longer be thought of in ways that are available to us now, then Marxism itself, the idea of an eventual self-knowledge in the proletariat, is nothing more than an exhausted fancy and must be abandoned. But if, as some of Jameson’s writings suggest, there are possible new realisms to be found under the mode of production at work today then the contradiction becomes productive, and a new reading of the postmodernism thesis becomes possible. The assumption many commentators on Jameson’s article seem to share is that if his periodising scheme is correct, then the space for other forms and approaches is gone and so, in turn, they stake their own case on a refutation of the periodising scheme. But – to anticipate an argument I shall elaborate below – Jameson’s model here concerns itself with the cultural logic of a certain moment, and this is never presented as a denial of other possibilities. Realism is not the cultural logic of late capitalism, this much is certain; but, in the fissures and cracks of the

\textsuperscript{65} Signatures of the Visible, p. 54. This is by no means an isolated statement. Compare: “the truth of our social life as a whole…is increasingly irreconcilable with the aesthetic quality of language or of individual expression…if we can grasp the truth about our world or totality, as something transcending mere individual experience, we can no longer make it accessible in narrative or literary form.” Beyond the Cave”, p. 131.

\textsuperscript{66} “the whole is the false”, Minima Moralia (London: NLB, 1974), p. 50.

\textsuperscript{67} Fredric Jameson, “‘If I Find One Good City I Will Spare the Man’: Realism and Utopia in Kim Stanley Robinson’s Mars Trilogy” in Patrick Parrinder (ed.), Learning from Other Worlds (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2000), pp. 213, 214.
totality Jameson constructs, he leaves a space open for it as an embattled, residual-emergent, “minor” oppositional form.\textsuperscript{68}

Declaring the end of the innings with such finality is incompatible with an ongoing commitment to the dialectic and historical materialism and, in Jameson’s work, these requiems for realism, these negative moments at which realism is the unattainable goal already bequeathed to once-knowable History, are almost always accompanied by their contradiction. When Jameson discusses realism as an historical moment – the passed over from the past – he also suggests, in fragmentary meditations of extraordinary suggestiveness, some ways in which realism can be conceived as a political necessity and as a programmatic goal.

\textbf{Afterlife and Renewal}

Jameson’s first call for realism’s renewal is in \textit{Aesthetics and Politics}, where realism becomes modernism’s ultimate confirmation and negation. Viewed from this angle, Lukács and Brecht have more in common than we might first think, arguing as they do about the techniques of the nineteenth century. A reinvention of realism in the age of the Internet and 9/11, Jameson suggests, will draw on the traditions of the past but will at the same time be something new to be refigured and recognised with the productive value of a shock.\textsuperscript{69}

If realism is at once a spent historical moment, a programmatic necessity and a no longer wholly acceptable option, we feel the obligation to represent what sort of renewal is it possible to imagine?

There are two after-lives of realism that suggest themselves immediately. If Science Fiction really is sending back “more reliable” information then this, in a weak sense,

\textsuperscript{68} This is why Simon During’s eloquent “Postmodernism or Postcolonialism Today”, \textit{Landfall} 39: 3 (September 1985) feels at once politically persuasive and misconceived. On During’s critique see Ian Buchanan, \textit{Fredric Jameson: Live Theory} (London: Continuum, 2006).

\textsuperscript{69} This conjuncture of internet technologies and modern imperialism is suggested to me by a particularly effective recent work of realism, Monica Ali’s \textit{Brick Lane} (London: Doubleday, 2003) which is, among other things, a meditation on the relationships between computer technologies of communication, globalisation and the Islamic world.
suggests realism’s continuing power. As Todorov argued so many years ago, the fantastic is “inextricably linked to realism as its repressed, excluded or occult other.”

One of the messages to be de-coded is then surely this very repression, the existence of a realism denied and replaced within science fiction and cyberpunk. Another after-life is, of course, that of equally “exhausted” modernism, where realism continues another parasitic existence. All modernist works, Jameson has argued, “are actually simply cancelled realistic ones” because their discontinuity, montage and meddling with time and space paradoxically intensify our obsession with and search for regular, ordered narratives and perspectives. Indeed, certain narrative devices, such as the first chapter of Under the Volcano or Benjy’s chapter in The Sound and the Fury, themselves gesture towards this obsession. Following this perspective, modernism will “reveal a starting point in that conventional real world, a realist core as it were, which the various telltale modernist deformations and ‘unrealistic’ distortions, sublimations or gross caricatures, take as their pretext and their raw material, and without which their alleged ‘obscurity’ and ‘incomprehensibility’ would not be possible.”

But pointing out that there is a little hunchback of realism sitting inside and controlling the moves of the puppet called modernism hardly inspires much confidence in the form’s ability to renew itself in the way the “Reflections in Conclusion” demand, and there is more to realism in Jameson’s account than just this sort of ghostly after-life. His terms of praise for cyberpunk – recall its ability to produce “more reliable” information – ought to be suggestive here. Cyberpunk, Jameson suggests, carries out the “historically original literary vocation of a mapping of the new geopolitical Imaginary” and one of its practitioners, Bruce Sterling, “almost expresses the truth of emergent globalisation.” Cyberpunk has “real epistemological value” and “provides a first crude inventory of the new world.

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72 A Singular Modernity, p. 120.
system”\textsuperscript{75} and Jameson even goes so far as to describe Gibson’s \textit{Pattern Recognition} as suspended “between Science Fiction and realism.”\textsuperscript{76} These quotes should make obvious the realist \textit{aesthetics} informing Jameson’s support for Science Fiction. The strongly Lukácsian tone of his writing on Gibson and Sterling – its evocation of mapping, “real epistemological value”, inventories and “reliable” information – suggest not that realism is exhausted but that, rather, realism has mutated into Science Fiction proper as the only usefully totalising form of globalisation.

Has realism really been \textit{aufgehoben} and woken up to discover itself among the cyberpunks? Jameson has certainly moved from his previous position of “think[ing] the impossible totality” as the only task left for the contemporary novelist. His recent writings, and their shift from a rhetoric of postmodernity to a rhetoric of globalisation, offer new ways of approaching the problem.

These new, vibrant realisms are almost, by definition, undefinable. They appear in “punctual moments in a generally stylized and modernized cultural climate” to allow us to “occasionally learn again, by experience, what genuine realism ‘really’ is.”\textsuperscript{77} The tasks of the older realisms – deprogramming other classes’ ideologies, positioning readers into new subject positions, breaking down the reifying logic of the world system, offering reliable information – pass over as the responsibilities of what new vibrant realisms there might be but, by default, these mean the form must remain marginal and only just capable of existence. Because, if \textit{Marxism and Form} is right in claiming that realism is reliant on its having access to the forces and agents of change, it is also at the same time a \textit{political} intervention in developing these agents themselves. Where the bourgeoisie can no longer view its own world as a totality and remains caught in a reified and fractured perspective,\textsuperscript{78} those forces with the \textit{potential} to bring about historical change – in the tradition of classical Marxism, the working class – also have the potential to produce totalising, scientific thought about the world.

\textsuperscript{75} Ibid., p. 107. \textit{Archaeologies}, p. 385.
\textsuperscript{76} Ibid., p. 112. \textit{Archaeologies}, p. 390.
\textsuperscript{77} \textit{Signatures of the Visible}, p. 174.
\textsuperscript{78} A position which leads some critics to see realism as completely and permanently discredited from it having kept the company of such dubious and reified forms of language. See, for example, George Harley, \textit{Textual Politics and the Language Poets} (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), pp. 53 – 75.
situation. For Lukács and, following him, for Jameson, the fact that the working class is the central productive class in capitalism grants it the opportunity to gain a complete, scientific understanding of this system, and a chance to use this understanding to transform the world. Realism, following this logic, plays a role in the realm of literary forms analogous to that of the revolutionary party in the realm of the political: it attempts to develop this consciousness out of existing conditions and resources, maintain opposition within the current order and cultivate totalising knowledge amongst those with access to the forces of change. In the same way that capitalism creates its own grave-diggers by creating a working class, it is possible to think of the very reification and regimes of representation dominant today as producing a space where new realisms might emerge. In “The Existence of Italy”, Jameson’s most extended consideration of realism’s role and possibilities to date, the combination of marginality and potential is presented in this way:

> Perhaps the new “oppositional” realism can better be conceived…as the appropriation from within of a representational language long since in place and ossified. But such “minor” aesthetics – such symbolic “restricted codes”, now constitutively and by their very structure forfeit any grand progress on towards the status of a new hegemonic discourse…they can never, by definition, become the dominant of a radically new situation or a radically new cultural sphere.

This built-in marginality and limited, minor status is, far from being realism’s drawback, posed by Jameson as its very strength. Because, just in the same way that the Marxist works actively for something (socialism) which will immediately render her own work redundant, oppositional and possible realisms that resist reification can never be aesthetically hegemonic because they exist precisely to counter what is currently dominant. If Lukács and Marx are, contra Althusser, right when they maintain that there would be no ideology under socialism then, in the same sense, a non-bourgeois realism as the cultural logic of a particular period exposes itself as a contradiction in terms. Jameson suggests possible revivals of realism as an oppositional, decoding, totalising form, not as a cultural dominant to come. Texts,

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79 The myth that Lukács claims the proletariat can gain access to this knowledge automatically ought to be impossible for anyone to maintain after the discovery of his *Defense of History and Class Consciousness*, trans. Esther Leslie (London: Verso, 2002).

following this activist stance, may pass in and out of realism. What was once
totalising may in time congeal into the ideological, and the life of the form depends
also on its potential readership and effects. Realism’s possibilities are presented here
as coinciding with the ability of oppositional forces’ capabilities to carve out for
themselves spaces of resistance within the existing order, and this goes some way to
explaining why Jameson feels we cannot know in advance what our definitions for
new realisms might be. As Terry Eagleton explains, “a text may well ‘potentialise’
realism, but it can never coincide with it; to speak in this way of ‘text’ and ‘realism’ is
in an important sense a category mistake. Texts are no more than the enabling or
disabling occasions for realist activity.”81 If it is possible to imagine new and vibrant
realisms emerging it is also, and because of this, possible to imagine them failing in
their political and aesthetic tasks.

The previous paragraphs gesture towards fairly orthodox summaries of the political
and epistemological case the Lukács of History and Class Consciousness and Lenin
makes for reification and the conditions of revolt: the real issue today is that almost
no-one actually believes this argument. This is one of the main reasons why
Jameson’s own position on realism is so ambiguous. His works hover around the
question of agency in a way that leaves it unclear whether realism is spent or still
possible. When he writes that realism “in this sense is a historical phenomenon, rather
than an eternal formal possibility, and has it in it to come to an end, as well as to
emerge”82 he is gesturing as much towards the fate of class politics and position in
contemporary capitalism as he is towards any local aesthetic argument. As Terry
Eagleton remarks, “the problem of a ‘Marxist aesthetics’ is above all the problem of a
Marxist politics”83 and any defense of realism must locate itself in the broader debate
within historical materialism about capitalism today. When Jameson writes that “it
seems to be easier for us to imagine the thoroughgoing deterioration of the earth and
of nature than the breakdown of late capitalism”84 he records an anxiety about debates
around agency and structure as much as one around historical imagination.

82 Signatures of the Visible, p. 185.
83 Walter Benjamin, p. 93.
This is not to implicate Jameson with the worst excesses of the rhetoric associated with what we seem now to be calling “post-Marxism” (“which is to say”, Jameson remarks, the thinking of “a renegade and a turn-coat”). Philip Goldstein’s claim that “the Western working class has turned conservative” - which would come as something of a surprise to the millions of French workers and students who defeated the CPE in 2006 - or Stuart Sim’s ridiculous assertion that there has been “a decline in importance, both socially and politically, of the working class” are reminders of the adage that “a host of recent ‘post-Marxisms’ document the truth of the assertion that attempts to ‘go beyond’ Marxism typically end up by re-inventing older pre-Marxist positions.”

But the problem remains: can the classical Marxist tradition be maintained in the face of twenty-first century globalisation? This is really another way of asking if realism is possible as a literary form. Jameson is too committed both to the Marxist project and to the dialectic to ever answer with an absolute negative but, equally, he hovers uncertainly around possible affirmative positions. This is the ambiguity of A Singular Modernity’s defense of realism: “throughout and beyond the age of modernism, there are still new and vibrant realisms to be heard and to be recognized, in parts of the world and areas of the social totality into which representation has not yet penetrated.” Where are these areas? Is such realism possible in the First World? The Third? More importantly, what areas of the social totality today have not yet been penetrated by representation in this world where, we are supposed to believe, “aesthetic production today has become integrated into commodity production generally”? Jameson implies here that areas of experience – nature and the unconscious most notably – colonised by (capitalist, reified) representation are immovably caught to this position. How does this fit with his equally strong sense that

85 The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern (London: Verso, 1998), p. 34.
87 Post-Marxism: an Intellectual History (New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 5. This particular claim is one no serious empirical scholarship can sustain. In fact – and these figures impact on the arguments about globalisation I advance below – it is only in recent years that the proletariat has, for the first time, comprised the majority of the world’s population. See Chris Harman, “The Workers of the World”, International Socialism 2: 96, Autumn 2002. For Australian context see Rick Kuhn (ed.), Class and Struggle in Australia (Sydney: Pearson, 2005).
88 “Reflections in Conclusion”, p. 196.
89 A Singular Modernity, p. 123.
90 “Postmodernism”, p. 56.
“capitalism also produces differences or differentiation as a function of its own internal logic”\textsuperscript{91} and that through the forces of this world, in the words of the \textit{Manifesto}, “all fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify” and that “all that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his, real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind”\textsuperscript{92}

Marx and Engels in the \textit{Manifesto} draw our attention to the necessary expansion and energy of the system’s dynamic and suggest, against Jameson, that representation must not only penetrate but must also occupy and re-occupy. To digress briefly from purely literary matters, think here of the enormous shifts in advertising as consumerist design and production was transformed to accommodate and incorporate not only technological advances but also the challenges of forces as diverse as women’s liberation and decolonisation: if Revlon produced a perfume in the 1970s marketed as the “Activist” this registered both incorporation and challenge. Representations certainly occupy areas of the social life but they are in turn ejected and overturned by newer capitalist representations at the same time as, from the other side, they come under assault, or even just plain cynicism, from those whose lives they strain to depict. Not only must representation re-occupy its positions, but perhaps Brecht’s remarks on oppositional forms (“methods become exhausted; stimuli no longer work”)\textsuperscript{93} apply with as much force to the reification of capitalism itself. What if the ever-increasing sophistication and display of capitalism’s simulacra and narratives spur its subjects on to demand newer forms and more complex realisms as a response?

This, at any rate, helps explain Marx’s own rather positive reaction to the development of consumerism. He claims that “the search for means to spur workers on to consumption, to give wares new charms, to inspire them with new needs by constant chatter, etc ... is precisely this side of the relation of capital to labour which is an essential civilizing moment, and on which the historical justification, but also the

\textsuperscript{91} The Cultural Turn, p. 44.
\textsuperscript{92} MECW 6: 487.
\textsuperscript{93} “On Popularity and Realism” in Aesthetics and Politics, p. 82.
contemporary power, of capital rests.”  

Jameson’s account of what potential realism might still have is alive to the contemporary power of capitalism but strangely and sadly silent on its contradictions.

Jameson assumes in some moods that “no society has ever been so standardized as this one” while still attempting to hold on to some sense that variety and accessible totality are somewhere, somehow possible. There is a strategic vagueness in his work on this very question of realism’s possibility, neatly captured in this passage:

> the historical novel can no longer set out to represent the historical past, it can only “represent” our ideas and stereotypes about that past…If there is any realism left here, therefore, it is a “realism” which is meant to derive from the shock of grasping that confinement, and of slowly becoming aware of a new and original historical situation in which we are condemned to seek History by way of our own pop images and simulacra of that history, which remains forever out of reach.

The strange periodising logic of the piece – when was it ever the case that representation and experience were anything other than ideas and not the raw stuff of History itself? – underscores its determined fudging of the key strategic issue at hand: what forms are possible for the current world? If “realism” is not the same as realism and representation is different from “representation” then are we encountering an objectively false picture of the world, as with Jameson’s description of bourgeois realisms discussed above, or an outright impossibility? Will an analysis of realism and its worlds involve “talking as much about fantasies and anxieties as about the thing itself” or involve a defense of ways that new and vibrant realisms can develop cognitive mapping of the actual relations at work in the world? Jameson’s analysis of realism is caught in a stalled dialectic between these two positions; he sets the stage for a defense of realism his own work rehearses but never performs.

I have framed these sets of aporias or half-answers in Jameson’s work as rhetorical questions to draw attention to the way that these outlines of how realism is still

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95 *The Seeds of Time*, p. 17.
96 “Postmodernism”, p. 71.
possible and desirable are, almost in the same breath as Jameson refutes them, sketched by his works themselves. Almost every work of Jameson’s in the last thirty years contains an aside, a footnote or a digression on realism. And these localized disagreements about contemporary realisms and their possibilities turn out, on closer inspection, to be symptomatic of and replacements for a whole broader series of debates within historical materialism about the nature of the current mode of production. Realism, and the forms of narrative appropriate today, take on a special significance in this debate because “all thinking today is also, whatever else it is, an attempt to think the world system as such. All the more true will this be for narrative figurations, whose very structure encourages a soaking up of whatever ideas in the air are left and are a fantasy solution to all the anxieties that rush to fill our current vacuum.”98 Realism, modernism, cyberpunk: all these are symptoms of the world order and can be read as such but must also, in the same instance, be registered as interventions in their own right, comments on the situation of which they are themselves peculiar products. It is impossible here to separate the strategic (what books serve our political purposes?) from the analytical (what is the cultural dominant of our day?). “Political utterance”, Francis Mulhern reminds us, “is always injunction, regardless of its medium, occasion or genre. It urges, dictates.”99 Claiming realism is possible becomes, in a political sense, the same as claiming it is desirable, and the debate spills out into the terrain of periodising and the nature of modes of production.

If this is not quite mind clothing itself, it is analysis on a different level to that we could operate to examine the change from the printing press to the computer, and this pressure forces on us the question of cultural dominants and cultural periods. Jameson’s theory of realism is part of his broader theoretical project of mapping the cultural changes from realism to modernism and postmodernism and globalisation. Any Marxist defense of contemporary literary realist practice, then, must take up Jameson’s challenge in three ways; it must demonstrate that it is still possible to get “reliable information” about the “geopolitical Imaginary” from this form; and, crucially, it must demonstrate an ability to offer both the properly negative assessment of this realism’s strategies and conventions and, at the same time, sketch a redemptive hermeneutic of the sort Jameson provides for Science Fiction, establishing, in other

words, the use of contemporary realism and the point of still reading it at all. Jameson’s own energies have been directed elsewhere but, as this outline has shown, his work provides one of the best starting-places for this reconstruction of realism.

What then, in summary, are the strengths of Jameson’s theory of realism? His works are an enormous advance for historical materialism in five ways: he develops Lukács’ original conception of realism through discarding its reductive and idealist commitment to a particular instance of realist practice and, instead, traces it on the level of narrative; he provides an account of the aesthetically innovative and epistemologically ambitious project of emergent realisms; he outlines the ways in which any progressive new realisms might emerge and, finally, he produces what is, to date, the most thoroughgoing and rigorous example of the periodising account of realism as part of the realism-modernism-postmodernism progression.

There is an additional advantage in basing any concrete reconstruction of a Marxist account of realism on the base provided by Jameson’s pioneering research. His own work provides a framework within which to assess the terms and conditions of this reconstruction itself. “Dialectical criticism”, Ian Buchanan writes, “sets itself apart from other kinds of criticism by the determinate way in which it develops a critique of its own concepts and categories at the same time as it develops them.” Jameson makes demands, then, not just on realism but on theories of realism:

Any theory of realism…must also explicitly designate and account for situations in which realism no longer exists, is no longer historically or formally possible; or, on the other hand takes on unexpected and transgressive forms.

My methodology here, then, follows that set out by Buchanan as “reading Jameson dogmatically”: in other words, I take his works as my starting point and attempt to apply their political perspectives and possibilities to my objects of study. I take his writings on realism the way he himself studied Adorno, “synchronously, as part of a

100 Fredric Jameson: Live Theory, p. 6.
102 Ian Buchanan, “Reading Jameson Dogmatically”, Historical Materialism, 10: 3, 2002. Thus when Philip Goldstein announces that “no one would call Fredric Jameson, for example, a blind dogmatist” (Post-Marxist Theory: an Introduction, Albany: SUNY, 2005, p. 8), he is delivering an unintentional political insult.
single unfolding system.” This system has determinate ends, identified by Carolyn Lesjak as “holding open the possibility, dim as it may seem, of alternative histories.”

Realisms in the Contemporary Moment

An extended study of realist production in the era of globalisation justifies itself in other ways, too. Jameson’s “Postmodernism” has initiated a whole field of studies and, in recent years, a valuable literature has developed complementing it with more specific and localised particular readings of postmodernist fiction or the fiction of modernity. What is needed now, I hope to show in what follows, is some closer attention to other areas of aesthetic production in this current space. A focus on realism at least has the advantage of keeping the wider periodising scheme in view, something recent attempts to see whether it was Jameson or Hutcheon who got postmodernism “right” miss altogether.

There is a related objection I want to anticipate here: asking particular questions of contemporary realist practice does not logically imply any challenge to the idea of postmodernism as the “cultural logic of late capitalism.” If vibrant realism is still at work we could figure it as a Deleuzian “minor” literature, always in a state of becoming against some large hegemonic aesthetic norm or as emerging in an as-yet under-theorised space somewhere in between Williams’ “residual” and “emergent.”

104 “History, Narrative and Realism” in Irr and Buchanan (eds.), On Jameson, p. 40. My approach is in obvious contrast and opposition to those studies that see Jameson’s style as the prime motivation for studies of his work. So Steven Hemling, The Success and Failure of Fredric Jameson: Writing, the Sublime and the Dialectic of Critique (Albany: SUNY, 2001) and Clint Burnham, The Jamesonian Unconscious: the Aesthetics of Marxist Theory (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995) are, for all their local merits, largely wasted opportunities.
Readers may encounter realism only occasionally and as a little-chosen and often-overlooked option among many others – as Steven Connor reminds us, “reading does not take place all at once and under clearly delimited conditions”\(^\text{108}\) – and this may be the only opportunity it gets to make its case. My own feeling is that these are determinate questions that require the analysis of concrete conditions and situations in order to be fully answered – and so must wait to be embedded in the discussions of the novels below – but here we ought to register that a reading of realism is not the same as a claim for its dominance.

Anyway, the construction of postmodernism as a period with the ensuing totalising force it gained required a process of selection all of its own. Postmodernist theory, as David Bennett argues, “depends upon the taxonomical privileging of one ensemble of cultural practices – identified as the distinctive or definitive one – over a plurality of others.”\(^\text{109}\) Spending some time with this “plurality of others”, and interrogating their conditions of possibility, may turn out to be a way of more fully understanding the cultural dominant negating them. It would, however, be disingenuous to present this project in the language of positivism and value-free selection, and choosing realist works as objects of study is always already an act of advocacy and represents, in some basic form, the demand for a counter-tradition. Raymond Williams is clear here:

> If we are to break out of the non-historical fixity of post-modernism, then we must seek out and counterpose an alternate tradition taken from the neglected works left in the wide margin of the century, a tradition which may address itself not to this by now exploitable because quite inhuman rewriting of the past but, for all our sakes, to a modern future in which community may be imagined again.\(^\text{110}\)

This thesis is conceived as a contribution to knowledge through the imaginative re-connection of such a tradition, and I bring Jameson’s realism-modernism-postmodernism scheme to bear here primarily for its usefulness. Instead of staking out a position for or against Jameson, I find his work here useful as a stimulation and companion to a reading of realism that may then be carried out with his texts acting as

“moments and figures, tropes, syntactical paradigms of our relationship to the real itself.” Jameson’s ongoing relevance lies, as Brecht’s great poem has it, in the ways that he “makes demands” (“Mühe machen”) on his readers to generate productive strategies and theoretical positions of their own. A metacommentary on Marxist theory in the era of globalisation would need to incorporate into Jameson’s own scheme a quite vast area of polemical enquiry: both globalisation and postmodernism are what Gallie terms “essentially contested concepts”, where both their explanatory and normative forms are the focus of debate. My own project here is a more limited operation and, while acknowledging at times the impact of these competing periodising schemes, Jameson’s model gives this thesis its bearings.

For all these evasions, though, there is no avoiding the fact that the illusion of a theory-free close reading is one we’ve all long since abandoned, and one I don’t propose to revive here. This thesis does not aim to resolve the periodising debate within Marxism but acknowledges that, by operating within the realist spaces opened by Jameson’s work, an implicit theoretical case is being made. In what follows I travel between close reading and more external history – a division the best recent scholarship seems determined to undo anyhow – in the hope that the two may better illuminate one another. No reading of realism can be really satisfactory if it pretends that its object of study is realism alone. This is not only because Terry Eagleton is

111 Marxism and Form, p. 374.
116 See here Adorno: “If artworks are answers to their own questions, they themselves thereby truly become questions…Art perceived strictly aesthetically is art aesthetically misperceived. Only when
right that the question of the uses of theory is “in the first place a political rather than an intellectual one.” But also, in the organising structure of this thesis’ arguments, I hope to test one of the foundations of Marxism. As History and Class Consciousness argues,

[Marxism] simultaneously raises and reduces all specialisations to the level of aspects in a dialectical process. This is not to deny the process of abstraction and hence the isolation of the elements and concepts in the special disciplines and whole areas of study is of the very essence of science. But what is decisive is whether this process of isolation is a means towards undermining the whole and whether it is integrated within the context it presupposes and requires, or whether the abstract knowledge of an isolated fragment retains its ‘autonomy’ and becomes an end in itself. In the last analysis Marxism does not acknowledge the existence of independent sciences of law, economics or history, etc: there is nothing but a single, unified – dialectical and historical – science of the evolution of society as a totality.

So what follows starts with close reading – and takes close reading seriously as a method “of the very essence” of literary studies – but does not end there or, rather, ends there and somewhere else again, as both a variation on Geistsgeschichte and explication de texte.

Whatever the wider arguments around its status as a cultural dominant or form, there are good reasons to consider the novel as ideally suited for the sort of research which hopes to draw aesthetic and social questions in to one another. Not only have debates around postmodernism revolved around narrative fiction but the form itself is one with a wide and deep reach into cultural and economic life. Whatever its varied fortunes, literary reading remains a mass phenomenon, and the combination of (relatively) cheap paperbacks, the expansion of higher education and the rise of “crossover” genres – think of Ian Rankin’s decidedly “literary” crime fiction – has blurred the boundaries between “high” and “low” forms in a way that gives aesthetic art’s other is used as a primary layer in the experience of art does it become possible to sublimate this layer, to dissolve the thematic bonds, without the autonomy of the artwork becoming a matter of indifference. Art is autonomous and it is not; without what is heterogenous to it, its autonomy eludes it.” Aesthetic Theory, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (1970; London: Althone, 1997), p. 6.

117 The Significance of Theory, p. 32.
118 Georg Lukács, History and Class Consciousness, p. 28.
debates a wider purchase and resonance. The novel”, as Dominic Head describes it, “is the major literary mode at the end of the twentieth century [and beyond – DSM] and yet [it is] one that is ordinary,” a combination that fits Marxism’s concerns nicely. When we add to these figures the quite extraordinary explosion of reading groups and book clubs the world over in these last years we get some sense of the novel as a major commercial reality being talked about and worried over – being, in other words, felt as a lived component of a whole range of lives – in ways that set it up as a useful site to ask social and political questions.

**Rejecting Reflectionism**

If the Cold War was one of the great inhibiting blocks preventing the study of realism, the problem of reflection is another. Realism and mimesis have dogged one another for decades now to the detriment of both. Indeed, so great has the weight of this confused relation been, Auerbach felt it threatened the viability of his great study and, had he attempted a history of realism, “hopeless discussion” would have ruined him.

For the record, I am not a proponent or sympathizer of the reflectionist theory of literature, one element of vulgar Marxism we all ought to have forgotten long ago. The issue of representation and mimesis itself is a real one, having a quite complex and serious genealogy with implications all of its own, but this is a challenge all art, all literary form has to face, and has no particular or specifically realist problematic or solution. As Terry Lovell pointed out many years ago, there is no necessary connection between a commitment to philosophical realism and realist literature and,

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for all we know, Donald Davidson may be a fan of the wildest of cyberpunk without this unsettling his philosophical positions.\textsuperscript{124}

Realism here is figured as a variation on Raymond Williams’ definition of art as an “organisation of experience” that acts as “an extension of our capacity for organisation: a vital faculty which allows particular areas of reality to be described and communicated.”\textsuperscript{125} The Gordian knot some see behind description and communication can be cut if we follow John Brenkman’s reminder that “the novel was never a mirror…novels do not reproduce reality; they refer to it, with deep awareness of its elusiveness.”\textsuperscript{126} These comments could apply to novels of any genre, though, and Lilian Furst provides an extra dimension necessary for realism with her concept of the “relational model”:

The realist novel creates a “relational model” to reality. Such a “relational model”, however faithful it may appear to be, is not to be confused with a mimetic copy. The relational model, while faithful in its overall proportions, retains the freedom to invent at will, provided it observes the bounds of possibility.\textsuperscript{127}

Each chapter of this thesis worries away at determinate and concrete representational problems, then, of a specific historical and political nature, but the problem of representation as one gesturing to a wider philosophical dilemma is mentioned here for the first and last time.

Williams’ definition of art as the organisation of experience has the additional advantage of keeping our focus on the targets of realism, the reader and on their active role in the aesthetic process. The role of the reader, or what Furst calls the “joint venture of pretense on the part of the narrator and readers” which is at the heart of the


\textsuperscript{125} Raymond Williams, \textit{The Long Revolution} (London: Chatto and Windus, 1961), pp. 31, 34.


realist enterprise, is central to Jameson’s own presentation of realism’s *programming* and forging of determinate readers.

What Is Realism?

I am not only socialist, but even more democrat and republican, in a word supporter of the whole revolution, and above all a realist, that is to say sincere friend of the real truth.

Courbet

If Jameson offers the historical frame and the reflectionist model marks this study’s outer limits, the problem of definition remains. Courbet’s “sincere friend of the real truth” offers one set of intentions but then produces as many problems as it might solve. These problems point, though, to one of the constitutive features of realism since it first emerged in English: definition and advocacy of realism are well-nigh inseparable. So one answer to the question, “what is realism?” is that it is what is advanced in the following chapters. This needs more work, naturally, and one aspect the best definitions of realism share is their provisionality, their sense of it as a project and what Furst calls a “precarious enterprise” in creating the conditions of realism. I follow Brecht in seeing realism as a particular relationship between plausibility and failure, in which, as Jameson glosses Brecht, “realism is not a purely artistic and formal category, but rather governs the relationship of the work of art to reality itself, characterizing a particular stance towards it.” Here is Brecht’s stance:

In art there is the fact of failure, and the fact of partial success. Our metaphysicians must understand this. Works of art can fail so easily; it is so difficult for them to succeed. One man will fall silent because of lack of feeling; another, because his emotion chokes him…Defeats should be acknowledged; but one should not conclude from them that there should be no more struggles.

Realism as a *struggle* with the unruly material of the social world, then; to this we can add a sense of the challenge a potential failure brings. J. M. Coetzee has one of his

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129 Quoted in Grant, *Realism*, p. 21.

130 *All is True*, p. 24.

131 “Reflections in Conclusion”, p. 205.

narrators define realism as “first of all the problem of opening, namely, how to get from where we are, which is nowhere, to the far bank.” To this we might add Pavel’s condition of possibility (where “the truth and falsity of a literary text and of its details is based upon the notion of possibility (and not only logical possibility) with respect to the actual world”) and find a definite yet broad enough definition of realism with which to get to work.

This definition remains necessary but insufficient, however, unless we add to it a sense of realism as a genre about which arguments can be explored and developed. As Jameson suggests, “terms are useful when they open up fields of conflict and discussion, when they make differentiations possible, when they open up problems…they are much less useful when they are used as badges of positions or as labels.”

As for the contamination of definition by advocacy and evaluation, the best measure here seems to be to accept the inevitable and then to try and make its organising presence as visible as can be. It is, nowadays, uncontroversial to accept that genres are not “permanent classes but families subject to change.” Advocacy plays its part in these changes, and most serious scholars agree that realism is not a static but a progressive term. That this advocacy has been historically associated with the left is probably because, as Moyra Haslett argues, “realism is the form in which the interaction between literature and society appears to be most obvious” and so

134 Thomas G. Pavel, Fictional Worlds (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1986), pp. 46 – 47. This stands in stark contrast to Lars Ole Sauerberg’s bizarre claim that “it is a major convention of realism to pose as reality” (Fact Into Fiction: Documentary Realism in the Contemporary Novel, Houndmills: Macmillan, 1991, p. 6).
137 “realism is not static but progressive. Its history is largely a dialectical one. That is, it moves from parody of a discredited literary mode (thesis – antithesis) to a new imagination of the real…which might be described as a synthesis. This synthesis, however, quickly is perceived as conventional itself and thus subject to further parody.” George Levine, The Realistic Imagination (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 33, n. 32.
transformations of the one may speak to transformations in the other. My own expansion and advocacy of the terms of realism rely on the productive inspiration of Raymond Williams – with whom we will spend more time in a moment – but, before I can outline the chapters that are to follow, we need to first register two further objections. These are positions within Marxism that suggest, not so much that realism is now impossible but, rather, that it is undesirable.

“The Most Spectacular Signs of Fabrication”

Jameson builds on Lukács’ outline of realism to show how, as part of the bourgeoisie’s global triumph, the “classic realist text” took on the forms that it did and set itself the tasks that it did. Other thinkers, drawing on the Althusserian tradition, have started from this same history to fashion Marxist critiques of realism. But, before we examine these, we need to acknowledge an objection to realism, which cannot be countered apart from through the readings that follow.

This objection is associated above all with the work of Adorno. The condition of late capitalism, for Adorno, makes “real” realism either impossible or a sham. “Today the impossibility of realism is not to be concluded on inner-aesthetic grounds”, he writes in Aesthetic Theory, “but equally on the basis of the historical constellation of art and reality.” Where realism appears it is little better than a lie, an inauthentic sham:

the reactionary nature of any realist aesthetic today is inseparable from this commodity character. Tending to reinforce, affirmatively, the phenomenal surface of society, realism dismisses any attempt to penetrate that surface as a romantic endeavour…Film is faced with the dilemma of finding a procedure which neither lapses into arts-and-crafts nor slips into a mere documentary mode.

139 Aesthetic Theory, p. 322.
Realism, for Adorno, can do little more than reinforce the phenomenal surface of society because of the impossibility of finding any position or class grouping free from the grips of the “fully administered world.”¹⁴¹ Jean-François Lyotard argues in a similar fashion that realism, whose only definition is that it intends to avoid the question of reality implicated in that of art, always stands somewhere between academicism and kitsch. When power assumes the name of a party, realism and its neoclassical complement triumph over the experimental _avant-garde_ by slandering and banning it – that is, provided with “correct” images, the “correct” narrative, the “correct” forms which the party requests, selects and propagates can find a public to desire them as the appropriate remedy for the anxiety and depression that public experiences.¹⁴²

It is possible to object to the theoretical positions informing these attacks – and, on my reading of the evidence, Adorno’s conception of capitalism as a “fully administered world” seems unsustainable – but my feeling is that the only real way to answer these objections is empirically. In other words, the proof of the pudding is in the eating, and we can establish whether Adorno is right and whether realism has a “reactionary nature” only through concrete reconstructions of particular realist experiences. The real target behind Adorno and Lyotard’s remarks is not, after all, an ensemble of literary practices but a view of their social moments and the political strategy these moments demand. Realism can’t refute these charges any way other than through enacting its own alternative, in ways the following chapters attempt to chart.

The other objection to realism in the Marxist tradition – one associated with the names of Colin MacCabe and Catherine Belsey – is, in the light of the research that has gone after it, easier to deal with. Drawing on Althusser’s developments in the theory of ideology and on a particular reading of Roland Barthes, this strain of criticism rejected what they called the “classic realist text” for its malicious naïveté and complicity with the status quo. According to thinkers influenced by this approach, “the classic realist text…[is] characterized by the attempt to manipulate its recipients

into a particular attitude of naïve compliance and illusory mastery.”

“Realist modes of writing”, for Tony Bennett, “encourage the reader to read through the formal artistic devices” and “generate the illusion that they are transcriptions of reality, forms in which the real appears to ‘write itself.’”

This position is at its most articulate in Colin MacCabe’s innovative and influential *James Joyce and the Revolution of the Word*. In a famous discussion of George Eliot, MacCabe insists that in realism “we are persuaded that language and form have disappeared.” *Middlemarch* claims, in this account, that its narrative prose can “grant direct access to a final reality [and this] guarantees the claim of the novelist to represent the invariable features of humanity.” “To transform the novel into pure communication”, MacCabe continues,

> is to transform the world into a self-evident reality where, in order to discover truth, we have only to use our eyes. This complete refusal to interrogate the forms of the investigation, the belief in language’s transparency, is evident on those occasions (frequent enough) when George Eliot reflects on that form.

This dire situation has political implications today:

> classic realism, however, exists in the present. To break with it is a contemporary struggle in which we must attend to those images from the past which are summoned in response to the dangers of conformism.

A similar Althusserian critique of realism was popularised in Catherine Belsey’s *Critical Practice* in 1980. These denunciations find their political occasion in the quarrels of the late 1970s but, intellectually, they are not that far a departure from Barthes’ own polemics against a realism he used as a stalking-horse for his own proper target, the PCF:

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146 Ibid., p. 27.
no mode of writing was more artificial than that which set out to give the most accurate
description of Nature…the writing of realism is far from being neutral, it is on the contrary
loaded with the most spectacular signs of fabrication.

There are a number of problems with MacCabe’s position. Firstly and, from the
perspective of a liberatory, democratic or ruptural politics, alarmingly, MacCabe
attributes to the classic realist text a power over its readers it seems none but
enlightened critics are able to resist: what is intended as a critique of the system ends
up, paradoxically, reinforcing our sense of its power. Secondly, MacCabe’s
presentation of the nineteenth century novel has not been sustained by the research
that has come after his own. Many critics, following David Lodge’s initial response,
have convincingly shown just how self-aware the nineteenth-century novel is, how
aware of its limits it is, how anxious it is about truth and communication. Faced with
this weight of scholarly evidence, it is hard to classify MacCabe’s *Middlemarch* as
anything other than a misreading. MacCabe’s critique of reference in the novel,
following this, is misplaced. As Harry E. Shaw argues,

The notion that access to the referent could only mean “transparent” reference is radically
misconceived…A more plausible connection between philosophical problems concerning
reference and the claims of realist fiction would involve the possibility of producing
knowledge about the world through linguistic mediation, which begins with reference but
hardly ends there.

This confusion stems in part from a misreading of Brecht, where thinkers associated
with *Screen* grasped his position as being that certain representational modes always
had conservative effects. This conflation led them to prematurely collapse formal

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147 Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero*, trans Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (1954; London:
148 Something picked up with great glee by conservative advocates of realism. See Raymond Tallis, *In
Plato…” and Other Postmodernist Myths (Houndmills: Palgrave, 1997).
149 See David Lodge, “*Middlemarch* and the Classic Realist Text”, *After Bakhtin: Essays on Fiction
and Criticism* (London: Routledge, 1990), George Levine, *The Realistic Imagination*, Sandy Petrey,
Cobley, *Narrative*, pp. 92 – 107 provides some context for the MacCabe/Lodge controversy.
68 – 69.
radicalism into socialist or political radicalism. A selective reading of Barthes’ critique of realism – which, in the French context, was much more obviously an attack on the Stalinism and conservatism of the PCF – added to this conception of realism. Behind all these debates is, of course, the legacy of Stalinism and socialist realism. Peter Bürger speaks for a whole generation of Marxists when he says that “our modernist view, that realism is no longer a possible aesthetic, and that we have to abandon realism, was also a critical or polemical move against what happened in the socialist countries where realism was an official doctrine.”

In their own context these debates have a local validity, and across this distance of time it is now possible to examine programmatic interventions that have now been tested by a record of practice, and by the practice of those very realists MacCabe labeled reactionary.

My third objection to MacCabe rests on this outcome: whatever the merits of his reading of *Middlemarch*, MacCabe’s *programmatic* interventions against (then) contemporary realism seem impossible to sustain. MacCabe’s criticism of the films of Ken Loach as formally reactionary must now surely be put in the context of Loach’s own development and the impact of his work. While the formally radical works MacCabe demanded have largely gone unmade, Loach’s films draw such intense condemnation from conservative critics, and are such integral components of the cultural life of the British trade union and socialist left, that any reading of his realism as conservative or complacent is impossible to sustain.

MacCabe’s *James Joyce* advocates a politics that are no longer his own, bases itself on a reading of “classic realist texts” seriously undermined by more recent scholarship and rejects models of film practice that have, in the last twenty years, produced results

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152 But see *Writing Degree Zero*, pp. 56 – 61, where Barthes’ more directly political targets are obvious.
153 Lukács *After Communism*, p. 55.
154 See Deborah Knight, “Naturalism, Narration and Critical Perspective: Ken Loach and the Experimental Method” in George McKnight (ed.), *Agent of Challenge and Defiance: the Films of Ken Loach* (Trowbridge: Flicks, 1997) for a fuller discussion of the *Screen/Loach* controversy, and for a considered defense of Loach’s work.
quite contrary to the ones he imputes to them and yet, despite all this, the Screen debates have, in many a history or summary of Marxist literary criticism, been positioned as the last word on realism. After the long, defensive decades of the 1980s and 1990s, when Marxism spent most of its time responding to other theoretical challenges or positions, we may now be in a position to take our leave of MacCabe and the negative hermeneutics of realism: it is time for the resumption of unfinished business.

**Which Marxism?**

Methodologically and in its structuring political assumptions, this thesis works within what Isaac Deutscher called the “classical Marxist tradition.” Politically the “classical” tradition distinguishes itself from both the reformism of the Second International and the Stalinism of the Third after its degeneration and seeks, instead, to build its work on the central insights of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Luxemburg, Trotsky and Gramsci. Specific political analyses relevant to this thesis flowing from this association are, most importantly, a rejection of the idea that the Stalinist Eastern Bloc was some form of “really existing socialism” and had an association with the Marxist project.

Political positions, which can be worn like badges or held as placards, are one thing; spaces of aesthetic theory another. One complicated legacy this thesis registers the presence of, but also dissents from, is that of Lukács. Each of the chapters that follows takes up a problem Lukács grappled with. In chapter two the question of the “type” is read against David Peace’s *GB84*; modernist “deformation” and Kelman’s *How Late it Was, How Late* are considered in chapter three; in chapter four the historical novel and Pat Barker’s *Regeneration* are examined together; and chapter five concludes by reading Maurice Gee’s *Plumb* trilogy for its presentation of the individual. After thinking with him for many years now, Lukács’ problems are of more use to me than his solutions. Lukács and his work inform this thesis and provide moments and spaces where I develop my own arguments. His work does not, however, structure my own.

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155 Deutscher developed the term in his *Trotsky* trilogy. For a recent treatment see Paul Blackledge, *Reflections on the Marxist Theory of History* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006).
Positively, Lukács offers an enormous challenge through the sheer ambition and scale of his own account of realism, but he cannot act as a model for my thinking here. There is, firstly, the problem of what to do with his own work: whatever fertile view of nineteenth-century European fiction he may have, it is one for which we have few examples in English and, besides, seems hardly to speak to twenty-first-century practice.\(^{156}\) When this model, which, as Brecht recognized, was built out of just a few bourgeois novels of one moment, is taken from its own context it ends up feeling like what Silvia Federici describes as a “cultural tribunal whose task is to decide whether a given norm has or has not been respected.”\(^{157}\) The fear of any judgement Lukács seems to then provoke in some defenders of modernism is not my worry: there are fictions that fail, and forms inadequate to their tasks. I can think of no other way of viewing Roberto Benigni’s *Life is Beautiful* than in these terms of rejection and disgust. But, from a theoretical and historical view, the opposition to what *is* cannot rest on what *was*. It is not, as Mikhail Lifshitz writes, “in the rejection of the centrifugal forces of actuality, but rather in the full development of these contradictions and antagonisms”\(^{158}\) that historical materialism develops. There is plenty of contradiction and antagonism in the novels studied here, and they are contradictions Marxism needs to explore.

A much more serious barrier preventing Lukács being anything more than a starting point for a classical Marxist approach is not aesthetic but political. When I read his claim that “the defeat of Expressionism was a product of the maturity of the revolutionary masses” or that being a writer means “being a son of the people” and that Thomas Mann “is representative in the sense that he symbolizes all that is best in the German bourgeoisie…[with] firm roots in the German national character” in contrast to a Germany that was “a drunken people hurling itself nihilistically into the abyss of fascism” these grotesque traces of Stalinism and the Popular Front reveal his theory’s organising logic.\(^{159}\) “Lukács’ later career”, Eagleton argues, “represents a sustained, internally consistent attempt to reconcile Stalinism and bourgeois


\(^{157}\) “Notes on Lukács’s Aesthetics”, *Telos*, no. 11, Spring 1972, p. 149.


humanism…The greatest, as generally judged, Marxist aesthetician of the century, then, is not the answer; he is part of the problem.”

Lukács was part of the classical Marxist tradition for the briefest of periods and, after 1926, his writings are an extension of Stalinism into the realm of the aesthetic. His use of realism to champion a Hegelian Versöhnung with the reality of Stalinism is a legacy we must reject.

Lukács is valuable as a mapper of a field Marxists need to explore but his own guides to that field are part of a political project classical Marxism stands in opposition to. The Lukács of the revolutionary years – of History and Class Consciousness and of his Lenin – is a methodological guide throughout the rest of this work, but the Lukács of Stalinism, of the realist novel for the Popular Front, appears only as an obstacle, a set of challenges to be preserved in their transformation and practical negation.

For methodological and political inspiration in Marxism, then, I draw here not on Lukács but on the vital work of Raymond Williams. Jameson’s work provides the historical and explanatory frame: Williams’s, with its deliberate mixture of the critical and the observations of a practitioner, has offered me a model for how to think about judgement and how, in this judgement, to think about which demands we ought to make of realism.

The great appeal of Williams’s work is its openness, a combination of “wise passiveness” in the face of the experience of a work and, as part of this, knowledge of when to act and when to draw limits. Realism for Williams is a dynamic form, in which “any new realism will be different from the tradition” but also one that seeks as its objects “the dynamic reality” of a changing social world. The central problem

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160 Walter Benjamin, pp. 83, 84. See also Isaac Deutscher: “[Lukács] elevated the Popular Front from the level of tactics to that of ideology: he projected its principle into philosophy, literary history and aesthetic criticism.” “Georg Lukács and ‘Critical Realism’” (1968), Marxism in Our Time, ed. Tamara Deutscher (London: Jonathan Cape, 1972), p. 291.


162 My inclusion of Williams within the Marxist tradition – against those who see his “cultural materialism” as some repudiation of historical materialism – is supported by Paul Jones’ useful critical reconstruction of Raymond Williams’s Sociology of Culture (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), chapter 2.

writers face, he suggests, “is still that of finding forms for a working class fiction of fully developed class relations.”164 Voice and a stress on the authenticity of lived experience, community and work are essential components of this but, without “class relations”, are ultimately insufficient. “Every aspect of personal life is radically affected by the quality of the general life, yet the general life is seen at its most important in completely personal terms.”165 Williams’s stress on the centrality of class relations to this informs my reading of all the novels considered here, and is worth quoting at some length:

Given the generations of neglect, there is more than enough room for hundreds of working class novels which are still, in effect, regional novels: of a district, of an industry, of an enclosed class. But the central creative problem is still that of finding forms for a working class fiction of fully developed class relations. The problem has in some ways become more objectively difficult. Further tendencies in monopoly capitalism have removed to an even greater distance the decisive individuals and functions and institutions by which most working class life is formed. To realize such relations substantially – as distinct from the alternative modes of projection and extrapolation, as characteristically now in science fiction – is then especially difficult…

But there is still great need for those words, rooted in region or in class, which can at once achieve that close living substance…and yet seek the substance of those finer-drawn, often occulted, relations and relationships which in their pressures and interventions at once challenge, threaten, change and yet, in the intricacies of history, contribute to the formation of that class or region in self-realization and in struggle…The formal and technical problems for the novelist are very severe, but if we are looking for a direction…this is our best road, or, more probably, our best set of connecting paths. Historically, in any case, regions and classes are only fully constituted when they fully declare themselves. There is still much for novelists to contribute to those decisive declarations.166

Relating place and class, class experience and class relations: in Peace’s reconstruction of the Miners’ Strike, Kelman’s Glasgow, Barker’s alternate history and Gee’s uneasy reflections, we get some sense of the ways in which contemporary realism is meeting this challenge. In addition to our rough definition of realism advanced above, Williams suggests a fourth requirement for more political realisms

165 The Long Revolution, p. 278.
which, “in addition to the defining characteristics of the socially extended, the contemporary and the secular…is the consciously interpretive in relation to a particular political viewpoint.”

My final guiding inspiration from Williams’s work is not so much theoretical or directional but to do with a certain stance and attitude:

We live in a society which is in a sense rotten with criticism, in which the very frustrations of cultural production turn people from production to criticism, to the analysis of the works of others. It is precisely because these makers are contemporaries engaged in active production, that what we need is not criticism but analysis, and analysis which has to be more than analysis of what they have done: analysis of historical method, analysis of a developing dramatic form and its variations, but then I hope in a spirit of learning, by the complex seeing of analysis rather than by the abstractions of critical classifications, ways in which we can ourselves alter consciousness, including our own consciousness, ways in which we can ourselves produce, ways in which indeed if we share the general values which realism has intended and represented, we can ourselves clarify and develop it.

This passage stands as my guiding principle: within the spaces Jameson’s theory provides I aim, “in a spirit of learning” to read these “active productions” of our contemporaries and “what they have done.” There are failures and limitations enough in each of the novels I analyse here but these, while never denied or concealed, are not my primary focus.

Williams’s writings suggest to me the importance of Marxism’s maintaining an open engagement with other democratic traditions. It is a commonplace now to malign liberal humanism, but Marx himself built his own political models as completions of the liberal project: we could do the same in literary studies. Harry Shaw has suggested that too long a suspicion has dulled our reading of texts and argues that, instead of ritual evocations of Benjamin’s reading against the grain or slavish adherence to the text, we learn to read through the grain of a text. Wayne Booth’s The Company We

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167 “A Defense of Realism”, p. 239.
168 Ibid.
169 It is in light of passages like this that I find Julian Markels’ claim (The Marxian Imagination New York: Monthly Review Press, 2003, p. 13) that Williams treats the literary text as always unconscious extraordinary and bizarre.
170 Narrating Reality, p. xiii.
*Keep*, with its model of coduction – communal comparison of experience, the ethical experience of literature – offers another suggestion of how the insights of realism can reproduce themselves in political spheres.\(^{171}\) Other Marxists have used this openness to the experience of consumption to warn that too exclusive a focus on symptomatic and diagnostic readings can downplay other “critical cognitions of the world.”\(^ {172}\) Ato Quayson has developed the concept of calibrations to incorporate some of these insights into Marxism, suggesting that the social “is always an object produced out of an interrogation and thus has to be *read for*” by the reading practice of “calibrations: a form of close reading of literature with what lies beyond it as a way of understanding structures of transformation, process and contradiction that inform both literature and society.”\(^ {173}\) Each of these approaches helps structure my reading patterns in the following chapters.

**Chapter Outlines**

I have chosen novels for analysis that seem to me both successful instances of realism in their own right and, at the same time, representative of some of the problems realism faces in the age of globalisation. My five main “groupings” of texts were all produced during the main decades of what is generally accepted as the era of globalisation, although not all take as their subject matter contemporary or immediate events.

In chapter two I read David Peace’s *GB84* (2004) against some of the problems both of the historical novel in general and the industrial novel in particular. Peace’s attempt to represent the Miners’ Strike of 1984-85 in a way that is at once *engagé* and aware of the need to represent the mining bosses and the Conservative government is a

\(^{171}\) “Are we to believe that every reader in every epoch most needs one kind of shock, or even a shock at all, and that there are no other ethical effects that for some readers in some circumstances might be more valuable?” (68), “once we start thinking about actual responses to particular works by diverse readers, we are inevitably caught up in inquiry about what kinds of experience, in a given polis, are beneficial or harmful.” (70). Wayne C. Booth, *The Company We Keep: an Ethics of Fiction* (Berkley: University of California Press, 1988).


\(^{173}\) Ato Quayson, *Calibrations: Reading for the Social* (Minneapolis: University of Minneasota Press, 2003), pp. xxxi, xi.
contemporary example of what Williams calls “working class fiction of fully developed class relations” and is thus of central importance for a study of contemporary realism. The strike novel has a long history as a realism of a special type, and one with a whole host of related political and methodological problems. Chapter two locates GB84 within this wider context.

Chapter three reads two novels of the 1990s – James Kelman’s How Late it Was, How Late (1994) and Kerstin Hensel’s Tanz am Kanal (1993) – as realist attempts to resolve representational dilemmas posed by the neoliberal city and its emptying out of public spaces and social roles. Comparing these contemporary realist productions with an older “classic realist text” of the metropolis (Our Mutual Friend) and a modernist response to the built environment (Mrs Dalloway), chapter three uses Kelman and Hensel to develop some of Jameson’s insights about the place of the city in postmodernity, and to examine how these two authors produce readers newly capable of negotiating the spaces of Glasgow and Leipzig in politically coherent and useful ways.

Pat Barker’s Regeneration trilogy – Regeneration (1991), The Eye in the Door (1993) and The Ghost Road (1995) – is read in chapter four against Lukács’ and Jameson’s writing on the realist historical novel to investigate what innovations the contemporary realist historical novel might produce in the political environment of postmodernism. Barker’s trilogy is read here for its attempts to deliver reliable information of a politically charged historical moment to an era characterized, Jameson suggests, by a weakened sense of historicity. In producing this reading, I also consider the political importance of Barker’s deconstruction of the imaginative boundary between home life and war front.

Regeneration’s popularity gives it an additional interest and reach. Barker’s “conventionally” realist style and her socially progressive subject matter of class and sexuality sets her up as an implicit rebuke to those who associate realism with the reactionary. Pam Morris’ rhetorical question – “despite its radical themes and import, must we write off Barker’s work as cognitively and aesthetically conservative and
hence complicit with existing structures of power?" – acted as a stimulant here. I don’t think we can, but unpacking the connections between her narrative form and these radical themes is no straightforward task, as chapter four attempts to show. Barker’s work is important in a study like this as an example of that enormous growth of interest in historical forms and narratives that, in some senses, cuts against a sense of this era as one weak in its historical awareness. Steven Connor observes that

If there has been a waning of confidence in the power of history, at the same time the prodigious explosion of means of representation and reproduction in this period has produced a surfeit of narrative effect and affect, with the multiplication of historical linkages, and chains of connection and causality, and an almost relentless narrativisation in the areas of economics, politics, and science…in a sense it has become impossible to reflect one’s situation other than historically.

The Regeneration trilogy at once participates in and registers this shift.

In chapter five I turn from European realisms to the Plumb trilogy of New Zealand novelist Maurice Gee – Plumb (1978), Meg (1981) and Sole Survivor (1983) – and read this trilogy as an early version of the realism of the age of globalisation. Gee’s works are read to investigate whether modern realism is capable of the sorts of epically complete integrations of historical experience and contemporary political life Lukács suggests its nineteenth-century ancestors are capable of producing. Gee throws up other challenges for a Marxist reading, too: if, as Jameson suggests, “social collectivity” is the “crucial centre of any truly progressive and innovative political response to globalisation,” then Gee’s narratives of individual lives and individual reflection present themselves as political problems. Chapter five considers some of the ways we might read this individualist realism for its collective and political potentials. Nancy Armstrong suggests that it may be impossible to produce novels that aren’t based on the individualized logic of bourgeois subjectivity: in chapter four I ask the quite different question of whether we can read this sort of production in a fashion open to collective and class-based insights.

175 The English Novel in History, p. 135.
176 “Globalisation and Political Strategy”, p. 68.
177 “I cannot quite believe that any novel can reach in and modify the ideological core of the genre and still remain a novel…[that core is] the presupposition that novels think like individuals about the
This selection is, of course, motivated by what I hope to discover, and Williams is right when he argues that “any important tradition is selective…in the precise sense that we take the meanings…that we feel and discover we need.” Each of these novels involves a treatment of subject matter, and a reception history, useful for a study of contemporary realism.

Firstly, all of these books were, with the partial exception of *How Late it Was, How Late*, very popular on their initial publication and thus allow us to bypass any number of tedious debates and distinctions between high and low forms. Maurice Gee is, according to Penguin NZ, New Zealand’s biggest-selling author. Barker and Kelman both won Booker Prizes – albeit in vastly different settings and with radically different receptions – and *Regeneration* has been made into a moderately commercially successful feature film. In addition to this, *Regeneration* is on a number of school curricula in the UK, USA and Australia, and is regularly taught as part of VCE literature in Victoria. These are, in other words, readily available, widely read and reasonably influential examples of realism, and thus suggest themselves as good tests for the form’s current life.

Reading from the late 1970s through to 2004 or, in other words, across the decades of globalisation, is an obvious enough way of trying to get some historical range and a sense of development in my study. In choosing works from more than one nation I hope to set these texts into conversation with one another and with some of our received ideas of the political significance of the national and space itself. There are two English writers considered here (Barker, Peace), one German (Hensel), one New Zealander (Gee) and one Scot (Kelman). This is hardly a picture of the whole world’s literary production but draws on different enough situations to give each novel some difficulties of fulfilling oneself as an individual under specific cultural historical conditions…new varieties of the novel cannot help taking up the project of universalizing the individual subject: that, simply put, is what novels do.” Nancy Armstrong, *How Novels Think: the Limits of British Individualism from 1790 – 1900* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), p. 10.

distance and perspective. Marxist strategy in globalisation stands in a complex relation to the nation as an organising unit. As David Harvey argues:

withdrawing to the nation state as the exclusive strategic site of class organisation and struggle is to court failure (as well as to flirt with nationalism and all that entails). This does not mean the nation state has become irrelevant – indeed it has become more relevant than ever. But the choice and spatial scale is not “either/or” but “both/and” even though the latter entails confronting serious contradictions.\footnote{Spaces of Hope, p. 51.}

Nationalism (“and all that entails”) has, in Gee scholarship at least, produced a resolute refusal to consider this important author outside of the quite limiting and distorting frame of an exclusively or narrowly “New Zealand reading.” But, equally, if globalisation is a global process it is one felt and lived locally: organising these chapters around determinate national experiences is a way of extending the reach of our consideration of realism’s potential. This has theoretical implications, too:

it has become commonplace to assume that whilst modernity is about new forms of experience of time, “postmodernity” marks a revolution in spatial relations. But this is too simple. The two dimensions are inextricably bound together. Changes in the experience of space always also involve changes in the experience of time and vice versa.\footnote{Peter Osborne, The Politics of Time: Modernity and Avant-Garde (London: Verso, 1995), p. 15.}

Some geographical range of evidence allows us a better chance of recording these different lived experiences of the organisation of space as they emerge.

Two absence of texts from the so-called “Third World” – are obvious and deliberate: these particular histories demand analysis of concrete political contexts I am in no position to offer and, outside of this again, there is the specific and important question of linguistic competency.\footnote{See here the renewed attention Jameson’s (in)famous national allegory essay has received: Neil Lazarus, “Fredric Jameson on ‘Third World Literature’: a Qualified Defense” in Sean Homer and Douglas Kellner (eds.), Fredric Jameson: a Critical Reader (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2004) and Ian Buchanan, “National Allegory Today: a Return to Jameson” in Irr and Buchanan, On Jameson.} We read those texts of other nations that fit our scheme of where in the global order they ought to be – which is why, for instance, Murakami and Yoshimoto’s postmodern Japan is translated and available in a way that Yu and Miyabe’s realist one is not – and to intervene in these debates requires the staging of a whole historical and political reconstruction of a kind a study of realism like the
following would be swamped by. What I have instead pursued are examples of texts produced in zones stranded somewhere between the absolute hegemony and privilege of the US and the deprivation of the “Third World.” Kelman’s Scotland, Hensel’s ex-East Germany and Gee’s New Zealand are all areas of the world system at once out of the oppressed zone and yet, at the same time, markedly different both from each other and from the culturally and politically dominant world of the United States. What sort of realism these sorts of areas produce can in turn complicate received versions of the political order.

Finally, these texts have been selected as somewhere to start. A Marxist literary study can employ close reading only as an ever-provisional first move that aims toward a wider field. As History and Class Consciousness suggests

The intelligibility of objects develops in proportion as we grasp their function in the totality to which they belong. This is why only the dialectical conception of totality can enable us to understand reality as a social process.\textsuperscript{183}

It’s no insult to these authors, then, to say that their texts are nothing more than a few instances of a greater social process. What they may also contain is suggested in one of Jameson’s asides on the process of cognitive mapping:

It seems to me now that people feel in a much more obscure and confused way that presence of a whole multinational reality in their individual lives. You can imagine this coming through both in the form of tourism and in the form of inflation, loss of jobs and so on and so forth. The question would then be what traces that obscure or unconscious feeling leaves on the form itself. I would say that the interest in cognitive mapping is not to propose it but to claim that we are doing it already and then find out how in the various national situations this dim awareness of the shaping presence of larger work-systemic forces is registered.\textsuperscript{184}

These are some of the questions the following chapters pursue.

\textsuperscript{183} History and Class Consciousness, p. 13. Emphasis in original.

\textsuperscript{184} Lukács After Communism, p. 84.
Chapter Two
Methodological Problems in the Strike Novel: the Case of GB84

And now, while the trees stand watching, still
The unequal battle rages there.
The killing beast that cannot kill
Swells and swells in his fury till
You’d almost think it was despair.

Edwin Muir, “The Combat”185

The strike as an event poses problems for both the realist author and their critic. As the key indicator of economic class power and, since Luxemburg at least, political potentiality, the strike figures as at once the most typical – in the Lukácsian sense – of events and as the most uncommon and unusual. Presented too much as the determinate outcome of what are always a unique combination of contingencies, all of a sudden the strike seems a freak occasion, comparable to natural phenomena or genetic accidents, and the representation loses any force it might have had to shock with comments on present predicaments. But, presented too much as a typical outcome of the everyday, the strike loses its essential strangeness and sense of rupture, and the result is the propagandistic inauthenticity of the Zhdanovist. These dilemmas, stark enough for the historian, become more pronounced in the strike novel when the realist has to confront the challenges of allegory. If a novel needs to be written about the strike or struggle at hand this implies that, on its own, the sheer force of history is inadequate. Allegory is suggested here,

in the withdrawal of its self-sufficiency of meaning from a given representation. That withdrawal can be marked by a radical insufficiency of the representation itself; gaps, enigmatic emblems…it takes the form of a small wedge or window alongside a representation that can continue to mean itself and seem coherent…there is always the whiff and suspicion of mimetic operations, the nagging sense that these spectacles also initiate, and thereby stand for, something else.186

What the strike novel gains aesthetically, then, it seems bound to lose in any claim it might stake for historical power. When the strike as subject matter is marked by a “radical insufficiency of representation” and its representation threatens constantly to veer off in other directions and in to other meanings and areas, how can politically coherent representations be stabilised? If the strike has meaning and significance in itself as part of a wider non-aesthetic narrative of class struggle – as an indicator of capitalist crisis, as a turning point in a particular campaign, as a strategic event, and so on – then further representation in turn threatens to undermine this initial claim.

Of course, if representation is potentially damaging, the very fact of what I have just labelled the strike’s “significance in itself” for class struggle threatens the strike novel from exactly the opposite direction. If the strike can stand as an event without the dressing of aesthetic approaches, then the allegorical or wider-ranging content of necessity let loose through the techniques of prose fiction seem gratuitous, and the project of representation itself redundant. If a strike takes on this role it can point to itself and, without further commentary or evocation, leave matters there. The strike novel, much like the historical play,

is peculiarly allegorical and anti-allegorical all at once, for it certainly posits a reality and a historical referent outside itself of which it claims, with greater or milder insistence, to be an enlightening and thereby interpretive representation: at the same time the sheer fact of historical existence seems to square this circle, and to close off the process, by suggesting that if the representation does minimally mean something else – namely the historical event – then that is all it means, and nothing is to be added in the way of supplementary interpretations.187

If the subject matter and its meaning form a seamless whole there is no space for a critical intervention: like reading the slogan off an NUM branch banner, the strike of a particular novel is its own meaning. There is an added difficulty in the strike as subject-matter. If, in its highest moments, the strike is a series of dramatic events – the battle at Saltley gates in 1974 or Orgreave in 1984 – in most of its manifestations it is made up of a nothingness, a non-activity most unproductive of narrative forms. A strike involves not working, and a prolonged strike involves not working for a very

187 Ibid., p. 123.
long time. For every hour on the picket line there is one spent in front of the television and, if a novel aspires to realism, it must somehow strive to represent both. If some lives were transformed in 1984 – 85 very many others were ruined, and some were merely spaced out in endless hours of inactivity, boredom and stasis. How to express this trivia and tedium without as an aesthetic object becoming trivial and tedious? How to capture some sense of boredom without becoming boring or, more dangerously, allowing every reader’s intimate familiarity with boredom obscure from them the novelty and excitement of the strike’s real challenges and innovations? These are some of the methodological problems of the strike novel.

This challenge – in which the novel needs to sign some sort of self-denying ordinance to refuse its own status as a novel in order to achieve the desired aesthetic effect which is its novelty – is at the same time a methodological problem for the critic or interpreter. While other artistic forms invite the labour of political excavation and reconstruction (I think here of those debates surrounding the political “meaning” of Shostakovich’s 11\(^{th}\) symphony)\(^{188}\), the novel announces its own historical and ideological raw material with such bluntness that criticism can seem redundant. It requires no great feat of reading, whether against the grain or otherwise, to uncover both the events motivating a book and its political attitude towards them. Criticism, in this context, runs the risk of listing one damned book after another.

Despite, or, perhaps, because of these problems, there is still work to be done around the strike novel in the tradition of realism as it appears today. There is, first of all, our familiar task of metacommentary, asking a question “about the gratuitousness of any historical representation: why this one, why now, what is the point of exhibiting this particular historical episode out of the innumerable anecdotes of the past?”\(^{189}\) The most obvious answer for \textit{GB84} – that its date of initial publication, 2004, coincided with the 20\(^{th}\) anniversary of the beginning of the Miners’ Strike – is also obviously inadequate, because this strike is recognised by all sides as a decisive turning point in the history of post-war Britain. For Tory as much as for Trotskyist 1984 – 85 is the year of Thatcher’s regime which defines everything that follows on from it. \textit{GB84} is


\(^{189}\) \textit{Brecht and Method}, p. 123.
worth interrogating for this fact alone: an event of such historical significance as the strike will continue to send off ideological and aesthetic sparks long after its own moment has passed, and these can in turn comment on our contemporary situation. There is, following these observations, a strategic question as well. If they are to stay true to the historical record, strike novels will almost inevitably be records of failure, but that failure itself needs contextualised and commented upon. Is such an outcome inevitable, or can a novel contain within itself alternate paths history could have pursued? Not all strikes, naturally, end in defeat. It is perhaps surprising – and ideologically revealing – that novels which recount significant working class victories, such as the miners’ stunning successes in 1972 and 1974, are rather thin on the shelves. Which moments in labour history novels cluster around is a question that would repay further study.

But GB84 has significance beyond being a marker or indicator of a wider political process. As an attempt to confront the strike itself as its raw material, to depict all sides of the conflict and to aim for representation of the conflict and the mass movements it evokes as its own subject matter, GB84 is a perfect test case for the contemporary potential of realism as a form. In pushing realism to its representational limits – aiming at nothing less than that “social whole”– GB84 sets new tasks for the strike novel and for realism itself. In this chapter I want to consider how it achieves this representation by examining what seem to me the three most successful and interesting aspects of Peace’s approach: his formal attempts to register the experience of the miners themselves; his use of variations on the conventions of the “hard boiled” crime genre to give Verfremdungseffekte of our set approaches to the key figures of the strike, and thus in turn to draw us closer to the historical process as it played out; his use of wider aesthetic innovations to write a contemporary historical and realist novel and, finally, the sense of alternate endings and lines of flight for the strike which his novel suggests and which, in turn, give it a political potential of its own.

Antecedents

It is, of course, not as if Peace is the first British novelist to feel the pressure of the strike and its impact on social life. But responses to the strike have, perhaps because of its very enormity and transformative power, been muted and oblique in
contemporary fiction. Like its predecessor – the 1926 General Strike and, for the miners, nine month lock-out – treatments of the strike in fiction have been “strangely indirect, at times almost marginal.”

Approached indirectly, the miners’ strike is everywhere in contemporary British writing. In novels as diverse as Margaret Drabble’s *The Radiant Way* or Raymond Williams’ *Loyalties*, the strike figures as a symbol or reminder of personal and social changes – in both of these cases the painful ambiguity of class mobility in a more widely declining Britain – but rarely surfaces as an event in itself. In *The Radiant Way* the strike is used metonymically as a trope for all of post-war Britain, as the leading characters register their growing disillusion with their class fraction’s brand of Bennite left-reformism or social democracy; when Alix watches from a bus window and sees her husband Brian out with a bucket and “Coal not Dole” stickers, she is reduced to tears by the full hopelessness of the situation.

Although more rare than the indirect or metonymical use such as Drabble’s, works which confront the strike directly sublimate its destabilising and subversive collective and social force into more familiar stories of either personal consequences and family history, or use the strike and the quite unique narrative possibilities it offers – besieged but collected communities, family privations and so on – to trampoline off into other areas of discovery, most typically that of a newly found “personal expression.” Martyn Waites’ Northern-noir *Born Under Punches* is at least an attempt to convey some sense of the conflict of the strike but this, in turn, is directed towards a modern-day, strangely context-less story of drugs and village unemployment where the strike appears as a formal motivating device for various personal histories but never figures as itself History. Where works do attempt to represent the sheer force of social change and struggle at work the ideological pressures demanding utopian

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191 Although there is some excellent feminist scholarship on Drabble, the recurrent theme of class itself in her works is strangely neglected. See Liden Lin, “Spatial Narratives and Postfeminist Fiction: Margaret Drabble’s *The Radiant Way*, *English Studies*, vol. 86, no. 1, 2005. Joseph Brooker suggests another useful point of comparison: where *The Radiant Way* struggles to maintain its narrative unity in the face of such disparate social forces, *GB84* simply abandons the attempt. “Orgreave Revisited: David Peace’s *GB84* and the Return to the 1980s”, *Radical Philosophy*, no. 133, Sept-Oct 2005, p. 43.

compensations and breaches with realism in otherwise realist texts often prove too great. Roger Granelli’s symbolic and literal mangling of his policeman anti-hero at the conclusion of *Dark Edge*, and Gwen Grant’s unconvincing insertion of erotic resolutions to conclude *The Revolutionary’s Daughter*, are two of the most striking examples of this approach. Adding to these formal or narrative constraints, the greatly reduced circumstances of class struggle in the 1980s mean most authors have been unable to attempt representations of narratives of the strike outside of individualistic and personalised, domestic narrative solutions clearly inadequate for their social, class-wide subject matter. Grant’s novel, aimed after all at young adults, uses the strike as a motivating device in its narrative of divorce, and Granelli’s reduces the contradictory, contested experience of the strike to the ancient story of sibling rivalry and, in its ending with hints of *Jane Eyre*, erotic and aggressive repression. Each of these novels is marked by a peculiar sense of ideological and personal paralysis as if, despite the historical evidence, in changing everything the strike reinforced only how nothing ever changes. Grant and Granelli return obsessively to the oppressive physical awfulness of mining and mining villages. William O’Rourke’s *Notts* returns with careful detail to instances of sexism, racism and conservatism in mining communities.193

Up until *GB84*, then, all of the imaginative approaches to the strike have been marked by a curious reticence towards its collective aspects or, if they do however coyly incorporate this, by attempts to use the strike as a substitute or motivator for personal transformations. All approaches share this curious binary approach, where the strike is either plot or background, either collective experience or personal memory but never both.194

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194 These comments apply only to “literary” fiction. In the realm of genre, pulp or popular fiction, Janet MacLeod Trotter’s romance *Never Stand Alone* (Bath: Paragon, 1997) is a highly ambitious attempt to produce a narrative which stands alone as a recreation of the strike and, allegorically, comments on the disastrous impact of the weakening of traditions of solidarity and politics throughout the 1970s. Utilizing the conventions of the romance genre – the family feud, extramarital temptation, conflicting loyalties – Trotter has written a class-conscious version of *North and South* where, instead of acting as intermediary, Carol Shannon, the pit manager’s daughter, becomes a class traitor by marrying Mick Todd, a union militant, and goes on to play a leading role organizing solidarity throughout the strike. As well as lingering over neglected but vital collective aspects of this struggle, *Never Stands Alone*
GB84 illustrates the ongoing usefulness of realist fiction by incorporating the material from these three areas – personal history, collective loss, personal transformation – into the unfilled and unused fourth possibility: collective transformation as subject matter and theme. Peace, a writer known until GB84 for his crime fiction, writes a realistic reconstruction or evocation of the strike with a realism which is only possible, he suggests, through his own “alienation” from the material. Resident for many years in Japan, in researching the strike Peace was forced to rely on material – such as The Times or pop music from the 1980s - quite foreign to his political or artistic sympathies. This detail is not so much a piece of reductive biographism as it is a reminder of the multiple alienations at work in the novel, from authorial ideology to source material as much as from reader to form or historical moment. In the very artlessness of his writing style, in his failure to name key figures or to provide rounded characterisations of major players Peace’s illustrates how public figures in political struggles can be depicted, as Brecht describes in his Me-Ti as “living in the third person”, how they ceased to be real individuals and, in a media and political struggle, became eerie abstractions of themselves. It takes Peace’s double-alienations to draw us back from these and to the actual forces and personalities at hand, with their associated choices.

The sheer thematic ambition of GB84 is startling. In an approach which, as Terry Eagleton suggests, “combines the maximum flexibility with the maximum...
realism, “the novel attempts nothing less than a recreation of the strike as a complete event. This is an attempt at totality few defenders of realism imagine still possible and “Peace’s formal radicalism”, as Joseph Brooker argues, “lies partly in a fanatically unimaginative refusal to toy with his meticulously rendered chronology. Too many dates, too much diaristic information threaten to broach the border between fiction and fact, novel and documentary – and this disturbance of the aesthetic is just the effect of Peace’s temporal framing.” This, combined with Peace’s relentless chronology and recreation of the empirically verifiable, a recreation so obsessive it at times reads like a parody of the realism it then enacts (he includes, for example, weather forecasts, pop chart hits and sporting results in his narrative) add to the sense of GB84 being what his author describes as a novel where, “with the exception of those persons appearing as well-known personalities under their own names, albeit often in occult circumstances, all other characters are a fiction in a novel based upon fact.”

This sense of ambition, of a novel recreating its subject matter day by day and week by week – the novel is arranged into fifty-three chapters organised by week, mapping the strike exactly – expresses itself through four perspectives: those of two rank-and-file miners, a secret agent and former police officer involved in “counter-subversion” work against the NUM and, in what is a thinly disguised portrait of the alleged MI5 agent Robert Windsor, the NUM’s chief executive, Terry Winters. These four perspectives are all representations of the process by which the strike is lived through by its participants. The book’s organising focus is not so much on “direct” reportage of key events (the battle at Orgreave, meetings between the Coal Board and the NUM and so on), although this does occur on occasion, as it is on characters’ reflections on events as they live through them. The novel’s concern is overwhelmingly with the process by which Britain’s working class was re-organised and atomised, how, through a combination of direct physical force and demoralisation, the setting was

200 For examples of pop music see David Peace, GB84 (London: Faber, 2004), pp. 100, 176, 400, 420. In the world of sports, Torvill and Dean make a welcome non-appearance on p. 60.
201 Ibid., n.p.
prepared for a new and more efficient method of exploitation. Here, *GB84* vindicates Julian Markels’ claim that “the representation of class requires the abstracting power of imagination…[to write about class] is to write what becomes intelligible and coherent only through its understanding of class as a process of expropriation.”²⁰² It takes the occasional narrative confusion and incoherence of *GB84* to gain this sort of intelligibility.

**Departures**

If these techniques are deployed in *GB84* to provide a detailed sense of history and act as V-effects to shake readers from what could be reified or tired assumptions about the strike, Peace’s novel at the same time suggests new tactical possibilities or approaches for the realist historical novel. *GB84* follows Lukács’ model of the historical novel closely, but departs from it in one key respect by presenting major historical figures as central to key chapters.

The historical novel, for Lukács, is “an artistically faithful image of a concrete historical epoch” in which history is presented “as a process…as the concrete precondition of the present.”²⁰³ “What matters”, in this process, “is not the retelling of great historical events, but the poetic awakening of the people who figured in those events.”²⁰⁴ This sense of history, with novels evoking a felt and lived relationship with determinate events in our past, has definite political effects:

without a felt relationship to the present, a portrayal of history is impossible. But this relationship, in the case of really great historical art, does not consist in alluding to contemporary events…but in bringing the past to life as the prehistory of the present, in giving poetic life to those historical social and human forces which, in the course of a long evolution, have made our present-day life what it is and as we experience it.²⁰⁵

²⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 44.
²⁰⁵ Ibid., p. 57. Emphasis in original.
Whether he is familiar with the debates in Marxist literary theory or not, Peace has written a novel that – although I doubt Lukács would recognise his realism in it! – follows the Lukácsian ambition almost exactly. *GB84*’s one departure from Lukács’ schema concerns the place of “great” or major political figures. Character, in the truly historical novel, is for Lukács defined by *typicality*, the quality by which the contradictions and forces at work in the age express themselves in a personality. “The great historical personality”, he argues,

is the representation of an important and significant movement embracing large sections of the people. He [sic] is great because his personal passion and personal aim coincide with this great historical movement, because he concentrates within himself its positive and negative sides, because he gives to these popular strivings their clearest expression, because he is their standard bearer in good and in evil.206

For these very reasons, Lukács argues, the central figures must be peripheral to the action of history as it develops:

They can never be central figures of the action. For the being of the age can only appear as a broad and many sided picture if the everyday life of the people, the joys and sorrows, crises and confusions of average human beings are portrayed. The important leading figure, who embodies an historical movement, necessarily does so at a certain level of abstraction.207

These claims of Lukács’ have endured more than seventy years of criticism within the Western Marxist tradition for their idealism, historical limitations and prescriptive reductiveness. That theoretical debate is a well-worn one I do not wish to revisit here: what is radical in *GB84* are the advances, *in practice*, Peace offers for the Lukácsian model. The idea of a “typical” figure embodying all these characteristics might be conceivable in an era of capitalist advance and expansion such as that of the era when the “classic” realist texts Lukács so admired were being produced, the text seems to suggest, but it loses its plausibility in an era of capitalist crisis and decay when the sheer size, multiple zones and complexity of the system itself overwhelm both readers and characters.208 More importantly, the patterns of mass strike in their organising

206 Ibid., p. 38.
207 Ibid., p. 40.
208 It needs to be stressed that this is an essentially empirical argument about the nature of globalised or late capitalism today – over the exact nature of realism’s subject matter - and is not to be confused with
logic preclude the idea of a “typical” figure embodying all the moment’s contradictions. The contradictions of a strike are contradictions of varying class fractions – the rank and file, union militants, the bureaucracy – and work out in the tension between organised leadership and union membership.\(^{209}\) The mechanics of the strike, its mass character and organisation, more than any theoretical blind-spot, render Lukács’ programme unworkable. Peace, in a deft move, radicalises Lukács’ original model not by opposing it but by democratising and collectivising its focus. His two miners are “typical” in some of the Lukácsian senses, displaying the qualities of determination, solidarity, courage, despair, confusion and collapse which were all so evident throughout the long struggle. But, alongside the collectivising of the figure of typicality, Peace guts the prominent or leading figures in the struggle of any sense of individuality and, in placing them so centrally in the narrative, underscores how reliant they are on the forces arranged beneath them. Thatcher and Scargill are, outside of the miners’ monologues, never named directly and are instead referred to as the Prime Minister and the President. They are figures instead of actors or characters and, in contrast to popular media presentations which present the strike as a battle between two uncompromising personalities, the historical drive from below – both striking rank and file miners and far-right operatives and low-level schemers – is restored.

These departures, although they break the letter of Lukács’ narrow and normative definitions of historical realism, underline how closely \(GB84\), for all its formal innovation, is allied to the spirit of the classical realist project. It is important, in Lukácsian terms, as a work which achieves “a form which can render the conflicts of [its] time at their fullest range within the given historical reality.”\(^{210}\) The most startling instance of this full range is in Peace’s presentation of the miners.

\(^{209}\) An illustration of this tension, only alluded to in \(GB84\), is the NUM leadership’s failure on three separate occasions in 1982 – 3 to win national strike ballots. See Alex Callinicos and Mike Simons, \(The Great Strike: the Miners’ Strike of 1984 – 5 and its Lessons\) (London: SWP, 1985) p. 42. These are, of course, methodological problems for the strike novel; problems of leadership and the role of the individual in strikes themselves have a quite different dynamic. For some insight into Scargill’s strategy as a leader see his “The New Unionism”, \(New Left Review I: 92, July-August 1975.\)

“The Enemies Within”: GB84’s Miners

If the strike’s constant threat to slide into allegory poses methodological problems for the author, one tactic – pursued, amongst others, by Dark Edge and at least flirted with by Williams in Loyalties – is an aesthetic variation on syndicalism, where the “real” voices of the rank and file provide both strategic and experiential grounding for the narrative. The figure of the intellectual and de-classed outsider, typically a journalist, who breaks the close solidarity of the village and who, as unwelcome but ambiguously supportive interlocutor, forces this solidarity’s articulation, is thus a common figure in strike fiction for both narrative and ideological purposes. In their outsider figures, Loyalties, Dark Edge, Never Stand Alone and Born Under Punches all echo the main character of what must be the genetic model of all strike fiction, Etienne Lantier in Zola’s Germinal. Although it is undeniable that working-class experiences and modes of expression remain suppressed in much fiction produced today, this approach is strategically flawed. Firstly, it confuses ontology with politics; while there may be a class with greater economic power in front of the bar, there is nothing more real to a pint supped in Salford than a pinot noir in Notting Hill. Politically, however, replacing one “voice” from the strike with another can lead only to wish-fulfilment and fantasy. The rank and file did not win the strike and their experience must, if it is to record a recognisable history, be one of defeat and loss. How, then, to portray this in a way which still restores a sense of struggle?

GB84’s answer is to run the voices of the miners as a sort of continuous loop through the main narrative, echoing events occurring within the chapters but never coinciding with or commenting on them. The monologues, as Brooker suggests, “underwrite the rest of the novel,”211 providing instances of sheer reportage and recording to anchor the high-speed, convoluted course of the plot in the chapters themselves. Martin and Peter are “typical” of the mass of strikers; loyal to the union, trained in class-

211 “Orgreave Revisited”, p. 47.
consciousness and traditions of solidarity, but also prone to doubts and moments of despair. A number of the experiences they recount come directly from oral histories of the strike and, in writing their experiences in the rhythm and idiom of Yorkshire English, Peace gives their monologues the qualities of testimony or directly recorded fact.\textsuperscript{212} Adding to this sense of authentic or lived detail are the illustrations separating each section of the novel, where photographs of the strike form the background to titles which draw heavily from pop music of the time: these two borrowings from the record underscore the novel’s documentary feel.\textsuperscript{213}

Their monologues are tightly organised. The novel is divided into five sections; Martin’s thoughts run through sections one, three and five and Pete’s through sections two and four. The monologues appear thirteen times in each section, apart from in the final section where Martin’s appear twice, once as the closing sentence of the novel. Martin’s thoughts are arranged temporally, according to the number of days in the strike, from “Monday morning” to “day 364.” Pete’s thoughts, which are more stable and more in tune with the rhythms of the struggle itself, are arranged spatially, with certain key places (downstairs, the Panel, Miners’ Welfare), highlighted in the text in bold typeface.

In addition to this precise organisation, the monologues at first glance seem quite independent of the rest of the text. They are arranged in two columns of a different typeface on the verso of each chapter’s first page and run on from each other directly, so the reader needs to flip back and forth between chapters to follow their action. These aspects of presentation and style are not secondary: they are what makes Peace’s text realist. The text forces its reader to slow down, forces them to keep pace with each twist and turn in the tactics of the strike, and forces them to follow the daily life and impact of the strike and the government’s response. The text is, especially for an audience grown accustomed to the speed and rapid jumps of television and the newer technologies, a deliberately paced and plodding affair. It is – much to the


\textsuperscript{213} Many of the photographs are recognisable in Roger Huddle, Angela Phillips, Mike Simons and John Sturrock, \textit{Blood, Sweat and Tears: Photographs from the Great Miners’ Strike 1984 – 85} (London: ArtWorker Books, 1985).
disadvantage of critics or students searching for examples – impossible to skim through *GB84*, and the text enacts the kind of slow, painstaking process of waiting and wondering which so much of the strike itself was. “The attritional, repetitive routine of the strike”, writes Andy Beckett, “is draining just to read about” and this repetitiveness is part of the novel’s realist ambition. The monologues return, just like the lives of strikers themselves, time and again to a few key moments: picket pay, the envelopes announcing picketing sites, police harassment, money troubles and pub political discussions.

But these instances are not examples of what Lukács would denigrate as mere Naturalism or “the cult of facts [which] is a miserable surrogate for this intimacy with the people’s lives.” Martin and Pete are typical representatives of the way the strike worked itself out in miners’ lives. Pete, a “delegate from Thurcroft Strike Committee” stays politically active through the strike, has a politically involved and supportive family and argues consistently against returning to work. Martin’s marriage dissolves under the strain of poverty; he finds other work through the strike, pickets only intermittently and is tempted to scab. Between them they offer an array of the experience and feeling of the time. Peace isn’t afraid to include the raw stuff of political debates themselves within this. Here is Pete’s account just after the battle of Orgreave:

Unity is strength – strength Comrade. Aye, Johnny nodded. And blind loyalty is sheer fucking stupidity. Lads in Notts under more pressure than us. That’s where we should fucking be. Even if we did close Orgreave, wouldn’t mean anything. We won’t win without Nottingham. We can’t – Johnny, Johnny – Nottinghamshire and power stations. That’s where we should be. Not hitting same place every bloody day. Just plain daft, that…My eyes closed – I’d had world on my back for thirty years. Thirty years I’d carried it. We all had.

Running through these moments of documentary realism are italicised asides, voices off and quotations which score the miners’ accounts with occasional moments of utopian or imaginary alternatives. What start off as fairly obvious asides (“you threw

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217 Ibid.
us in a pit...you showered us with soil”)\textsuperscript{218} become more and more obscure, suggestive of pre-Norman England, imagery of apocalypse and of spirits and ghosts of the dead (“\textit{Under the ground, we brood. We hwisprian. We onscillan. Under the ground, we scream.}”)\textsuperscript{219} Peace has labelled his novel an “occult” history of the strike, a word he uses to indicate hidden and repressed layers of history and experience.\textsuperscript{220} These asides and fragmentary, unsourced quotations suggest that the strike is just the latest instance in a whole subterranean, buried and repressed sequence of alternate history buried under the “enormous condescension of posterity.” There are references to contemporary debates, such as Hobsbawm’s controversial thesis on “the long march of labour halted,”\textsuperscript{221} but the gathering force of these quotations suggest that Martin and Pete’s monologues can be read as part of an ongoing tradition of solidarity and struggle. After the miners have voted to return to work Martin records this experience and, significantly, its asides are, unlike in the rest of the text, not italicised:

\begin{quote}
Makes me feel proud. Makes me feel sad – To see us all here now...That’s when I see them – not just the eight hundred stood with me out here on our Pit Lane. The support groups and all those that helped us – Not just them. But all the others – From far below. Beneath my feet – They whisper. They echo – They moan...The Dead. The Union of the Dead...Shoulder to shoulder. United. Marching as one – Under their banners and their badges.\textsuperscript{222}
\end{quote}

The ambiguity of this piece saves it from sentimentality: a “union of the dead” can be a dead union, the spent force marching back to work broken and useless in what some commentators call “post-industrial” Britain. But, at the same time, a union of the dead can be an encounter that achieves unity with tradition and victories from the past and in turn builds on them.

This sense of ambiguity, and the underlying low hum of miners’ voice recurring throughout the text, marks a real advance in the arsenal of realist practice available to practitioners of the strike novel. But Peace’s more unusual, and uneven, technical

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\textsuperscript{218} Ibid., p. 86. \\
\textsuperscript{219} Ibid., p. 110. \\
\textsuperscript{220} “Interview: David Peace”, Bookmunch. Available online: www.bookmunch.co.uk/view.php?id=1341 Accessed 3\textsuperscript{rd} April 2006. \\
\textsuperscript{222} Peace, \textit{GB84}, p. 452.
\end{flushleft}
advances are to be found in his depiction of the strike’s soldiers on the other side: the agents of capital and the state.

The Prime Minister, the Chairman and the Rest

If Peace allows his miners a narrative where they can evoke a whole sense of community and struggle, the constricted prose with which the strike’s opponents’ narratives are constructed sometimes suggests the film-script as much as it does the realist novel. Comparisons between James Ellroy and Peace are common, but Peace, while clearly inspired and influenced by Ellroy’s work, never allows his writing to detract from clear presentation of the plot and its development. The narrative possibilities “hard boiled” and American crime fiction allow Peace have political implications too. The restless, shifting mode of narration allows him room to implicate a far greater swathe of the social world in the novel’s various crimes and conspiracies. With GB84, we are a good distance from the sort of British detective fiction dissected with such skill by Franco Moretti, who suggests that this genre “exists expressly to dispel the doubt that guilt might be impersonal, and therefore collective and social.” 223 Sparse, repetitive directions are interspersed with hammy clichés:

Neil Fontaine leaves the Jew to his hangover and his hallucinations –
Neil Fontaine has his own struggles. His own battles. His own war –
Neil Fontaine drives out of Sheffield. He turns off at the first motorway services. He watches the café. He waits. He stubs out his cigarette. He gets out of the Mercedes. He walks across the car park. He goes up the stairs into the restaurant. 224

The text continues like this for hundreds and hundreds of pages. Three plot-lines run parallel in the chapters separating the miners’ monologues; eccentric millionaire Stephen Sweet (“the Jew”) organises “working miners’ committees” and other plans to undermine the strike and to engineer a return to work; his driver Neil Fontaine is involved in espionage work, intimidation and violence in a series of conspiracies.

224 GB84, p. 47.
which involve both the MI5 and far-right groups connected with disaffected military officers and the National Front. The final plot-line is *GB84’s* one moment of narrative ambiguity: the NUM’s Chief Executive Terry Winter and his various financial schemes (including a disastrous visit to Libya and Colonel Gaddafi)²²⁵ are chronicled in a way which leaves their motivation open to doubt. In *GB84* Winter is shown to be having an affair with Diane Morris, a secret service operative, and is at the very least compromised in his activities. Winters’ historical model – Robert Windsor – is considered by many in the British labour movement to have been an MI5 agent, and Brian Crozier, a conservative journalist with links to MI5, claims there were two sources on the NUM’s executive in contact with the force.²²⁶ In keeping the exact nature of Winter’s work uncertain – he is accused of betrayal by other characters on a number of occasions – Peace not only adds to a sense of narrative uncertainty but also keeps true to historical certainty; Windsor was either malignant or simply incompetent, but we do not have enough evidence to offer comforting fictions either way.

The chapters require more imaginative effort than the monologues, and it takes a greater strain on the novel’s part to evoke the machinations from above. The reasons for this are obvious: where there is a reasonable body of literature documenting miners’ experience and accounts of the strike, little work has been done on the strike’s negotiations which strays beyond the “clash of personalities” thesis or the conservative reduction of the strike’s causes and motivations to the personal ambition of Arthur Scargill.²²⁷ Part of *GB84’s* realist project involves a clearing away of these previous imaginative limits. The novel, in one sense, clears the discursive field to facilitate space for realisms to come. The realist’s goal, as Lukács describes it,

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Is to penetrate the laws governing objective reality and to uncover the deeper, hidden, mediated, not immediately perceptible network of relationships that go to make up society. Since these relationships do not lie on the surface, since the underlying laws only make themselves felt in very complex ways and are realized only unevenly, as trends, the labour of the realist is extraordinarily arduous, since it has both an artistic and an intellectual dimension.228

The metaphors of excavation and upturning in this passage capture Peace’s project perfectly. He gestures towards his own role as a chronicler of the hidden networks by providing a series of sources, both non-fiction works as well as novels and music, from which he drew the facts of the novel.229 Peace’s narrative style stresses the “network of relationships” maintaining class order and control through the strike: the chapters range across the country from Scotland to Sheffield and back to London. There are key points of return: meetings, secret encounters, time spent on trains, in cars, on the motorways. The chapters cover connections and interrelationships between the strike’s enemies, from right-wing criminals to senior business figures in direct contact with the Prime Minister. The sudden shifts – the chapters move from setting to setting sometimes without warning, and between figures from opposing sides – emphasize this sense of relationships below the surface and of connections deliberately kept occult in popular memories of the strike. Brooker calls Peace’s vision “paranoid”230 but this misses the dynamic at work. Where some modern novelists specialize in presenting paranoiac, conspiracy-ridden fantasies - Ian Wedde’s Symmes Hole proudly announces itself as such – Peace’s narrative is carefully plotted so that none of its fictional events ever stray beyond the realm of the conceivable or of the documented. GB84 is a realist fiction, but it goes to great lengths to remind its readers it does not depict a fictional world.231 As the distance between us and the events of 1984 grows, more of the wilder accusations of the time – such as the claim that there was a conspiracy within the secret service to undermine

230’ “Orgreave Revisited”, p. 50.
231 In this respect, Bob Fine and Robert Miller (eds.), Policing the Miners’ Strike (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1985), seems tame in comparison to the revelations which would emerge over the next twenty years. On the connection with operations in Northern Ireland, another recurring theme in GB84, see Murray Sayle, “Bloody Sunday Report”, London Review of Books, 11th July 2002.
Wilson as Prime Minister and to prepare for a military coup if necessary – now have historical respectability. 232

As well as reworking the familiar story of the strike as a narrative, GB84 attempts to uncover “the deeper, hidden, mediated, not immediately perceptible network of relationships that go to make up society” by performing V-effects on the raw historical material of the strike itself. The names of various key players have been changed but their roles kept the same. The effect is one where anyone familiar with the strike’s history can work out “who’s who” fairly quickly but is instead forced, through a shock, to figure them as agents of a process, mere individuals in a wider social struggle. Equally, when the text refers to the Prime Minister and the President the reader is refused the comfort of falling back into stereotypical memories of Thatcher and Scargill as media personalities: the strike’s subterranean and, Peace suggests, real energies and drives are what are fore-grounded in the chapters.

Most ambitiously, Peace incorporates within this wider alienation whole sections of the novel where the reader is forced to view the strike through the perspective of Neil Fontaine, paramilitary agent and thug. Fontaine refers to Stephen Sweet, his employer, throughout the novel as “the Jew”, and such clear anti-Semitism makes for uncomfortable reading. Sweet is a portrait of David Hart, an eccentric millionaire Tory, who Thatcher believed she “couldn’t have done without” through his efforts to defeat the strike. 233 Hart, “the victim of vicious anti-Semitic bullying as a schoolboy at Eton” 234 is in many ways a typical figure of Thatcherism and the neo-liberal reform movement in Britain more generally. Rejected by many in the Conservative party, and viewed with racist distaste by many of his own allies, Sweet dedicates himself to Thatcherism as an ideology of freedom and personal responsibility without himself ever gaining full access to Britain’s ruling class. Occasional narrative asides across the chapters intervene to stress these “occult” or hidden networks and relationships:

Dominic looks at Piers. Piers puts a finger to his lips. Piers winks at Dominic –

232 This claim was the subject of a recent BBC2 documentary, based on recently released interviews and archive sources. See www.wsws.org/articles/2006/apr2006/wil1-a19.shtml
233 Crozier, Free Agent, p. 244.
Dominic Reid went to school with Piers Harris. Piers is a member of the Newark Conservative Party. The Conservative Member of Parliament for Newark is married to the economics editor of *The Times*. *The Times* is often edited by the man who used to bully the little Sweet Stephen at Eton. Mercilessly. Because he was a Jew –

*This is the way the world works. This small, small world.*

Beyond this racist stance of Fontaine’s, however, the main V-effect employed by *GB84* is its resolute refusal to lower itself to the level of characterisation. The narrative is obsessively action-centred and characters appear with minimal agency. They are instructed to attend meetings, receive orders from other figures, hurry to missed events, rallies and delivery points. There is minimal description of motivation or psychological impulse and a constant, repetitive return to action and behaviour.

“The President had been bailed. Len and Dick gone to pick him up – Len and Dick to drive him straight here. Then the talks could restart.”

Peace, ironically, achieves his realism effects through a radical stripping away of personal richness and complexity in favour of the complexity of collectives and collective activity. It is, in this respect, perhaps the first strike novel where the strike itself and its attendant machinations appears as the main character, and the swirl of secondary characters surrounding it are kept subordinate to allow the action of collectives to play themselves out.

Some critics see in this a move away from realism on Peace’s part. Sukhdev Sandhu sees Peace as “more interested in evocation than explanation” and, for Joseph Brooker,

something of the realist novel’s mission to explain is thus [in *GB84*’s leaps and speed] lost, and this should not be blithely celebrated…The new historical novel risks substituting mimesis for understanding, imitative form for integrated analysis. In enacting incoherence, *GB84* eschews some of the labour of making things cohere.

In this worry Brooker establishes the central challenge to any reading of Peace as a realist. If he has managed to write a novel of collective experience, what sort of

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235 Peace, *GB84*, pp. 185 – 186. Emphasis in original
236 Ibid., p. 115.
238 “Orgreave Revisited”, p. 47.
readers – or what sort of realism effects in readers – does this in turn produce? Does GB84 offer “reliable information” of History and the social past in a way which fuses together effective political subjects or, as Brooker suggests, “in enacting incoherence” does Peace in turn produce readers who are themselves dissolved and politically incoherent?

The evidence of the novel’s immediate reception seems to favour Brooker’s judgement. The Daily Telegraph, London Review of Books and Guardian all printed reviews stressing the novel’s bleakness and lack of explanatory power, stressing how it was “horrible”, with a “doominess all of its own” and set out as an “epic novel rather than a heroic one.”239 Peace himself has, in interviews, gone to great lengths to stress the novel’s negativity and explanatory emptiness, telling Mike Marqusee that he “didn’t want the book to offer a sense of redemption because as a country we haven’t got it. And we don’t deserve it.”240

Brooker is certainly right that Peace’s novel is no easy read, and it requires a labour of effort to follow the book through, but he radically underestimates GB84’s broader explanatory coherence. His conception of the novel’s “mission to explain” and the reviewers’ sense of its depressing status miss the quite different project GB84 sets itself. In opening areas where the project of explanation can be pursued, and in rescuing the strike from the (quite false) historical sense gathered around it that it was some sort of “last gasp” of organised labour before the onset of post-industrial Britain, GB84, while not in itself providing exhaustive explanation of the strike’s trajectory, stays far closer to the initial realist project than Brooker acknowledges. There is, furthermore, a confusion of categories – common enough in left-wing literary comment – in both the reviews and in Peace’s own statements. There is no necessary connection between a novel offering a sense of redemption – a term which, surely, indicates the cessation of struggle rather than its resumption – or vague “inspiration” and one which produces cohered political subjects. After all, any representation that ignores or minimises the fact that what Paul Foot called “the longest mass strike in all

British, European or American history” went down to total defeat is bound to expose itself as a sham and aesthetic consolation. I want to suggest some ways in which GB84 manages to redeem the strike as an inspiration precisely by its fidelity to failure in a moment, but firstly it is important to establish the ways in which the novel makes explanation possible.

There are, to start with, the asides which mark the book’s key moments; I have quoted the ones related to Stephen Sweet as well Martin Daly’s revelation on the power of union traditions above. But, even without these direct interventions, Peace offers a history of the strike with explanatory power. By making the strike, an event dismissed many commentators across the spectrum of British politics as a doomed final instance of a finished politics, his organising concern in a full-length fictional treatment, Peace re-asserts its relevance for any understanding of contemporary politics.

Far from “enacting incoherence”, Peace’s bravura mimesis provides precisely the space for explanation Brooker desires. It does so by forcing the reader to go through the pace of the strike as it evolves and not, in some sort of inverse teleology, as the build up to an historically inevitable defeat. GB84 revisits each of those moments decisive in the strike’s eventual trajectory – the failure to close Orgreave, the widespread scabbing in Nottinghamshire, machinations at the TUC and in the “Triple Alliance” – at the pace with which they occurred in order for the alternate possibilities to reveal themselves to the reader. It is, more than twenty years on, easy to forget that the strike was, in Tory cabinet minister Norman Tebbit’s words, “a close run thing.”

Restoring this sense of contestation, against the massive weight of contemporary prejudice and media wisdom, could be seen as explanation enough.

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242 Cf Stuart Hall’s comment from the mid-1980s: “to invite people in the tightest of economic squeezes to come out on strike when coal stocks are at record levels is to act, frankly, with the political nous of the leaders of the Charge of the Light Brigade.” Quoted in Alex Callinicos, “The Politics of Marxism Today” International Socialism 2: 29, 1985, p. 139. Milne’s observation is shrewd: “there is no evidence for the widespread assumption that more accommodating NUM tactics during or after the 1984 – 5 strike…would have significantly slowed the rundown of the British coal industry.” The Enemies Within, p. 15.
243 Quoted in Milne, The Enemies Within, p. 15. For the strike’s ramifications in Downing Street and elsewhere see Hugo Young, One of Us: a Biography of Margaret Thatcher (London: Macmillan, 1989), pp. 364 – 375.
Besides, Brooker’s explanatory demands of GB84 seem aimed at a quite different target. When has the realist’s novel “mission to explain” ever veered more towards “integrated analysis” than “imitative form”? After all, what has the traditional distinction between literary and other forms of knowledge been, for Marxism at least, than that between the experience of a world and scientific knowledge of it? We don’t seek the same sort of explanations of the workings of the Victorian market and economy from David Copperfield as we do from Capital, and yet both, albeit at radically different levels of abstraction and with differing targets in their sights, aim at explanation of the social whole.

GB84’s “mission to explain” the strike is forced, through the dynamics of its subject matter, to spill over into other texts and settings. The strike is, both as narrative and in a wider political context, impossible to comprehend unless, in its representation, space is opened for both the traditions to which it is indebted and its social and industrial implications. Peace’s novel ends not with its final sentence but with a list of further texts described as “sources” where the reader can find the “fact” which is the novel’s grounding. If realism involves the creation of ideal readers or political subjects who can gain access to reliable knowledge of the social whole then this final gesture is significant. GB84 creates readers who, having lived through the weeks of the strike in the process of consuming the novel, venture out to other sources – both fictional and non-fictional – in order to gain a deeper understanding of the strike and its inner dynamics and processes. GB84, in other words, generates interrogative readers. This process bears a family resemblance to the sort of explanations and “programming” of readers carried out by a Dickens or a Balzac, but is, in the properly Brechtian sense, alienating. Peace’s explanation lies in, to put things unavoidably torturously, explaining the need to seek explanation: in forging an implied reader through the arduous labour of the chapters and then, as conclusion, emerging into a bibliography ranging from scholarly studies to left-wing pop music, GB84 has a second-order level of explanation. As well as re-creating the strike as a crucial and neglected event, the

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244 See Terry Eagleton, Marxism and Literary Criticism (London: Methuen, 1976), chapter 1.
245 GB84, p. 464.
text creates a reader who is forced into the questioning, interrogative pose systematically repressed in so much contemporary culture.\textsuperscript{246}

This explanatory straining at the narrative leash and constant referral back to a wider context of tradition for fuller context and explanation occurs within the main chapters as well. The key point of return is, naturally, *Germinal*:

The President loved Paris. *Revolutionary City*. Second only to sacred Leningrad. *Holy City*. The President loved the bread. The cheese. The good coffee. The red wine. The president carried Zola everywhere. *Germinal*. Terry had a copy too. He couldn’t get into it – Terry threw it across the hotel room. He hadn’t slept. He couldn’t.

The heavy and rather ham-fisted symbolism of this extract – where Winters’ far from atypical inability to appreciate Zola’s masterpiece stands as a reminder of his growing disassociation from and disillusionment with the strike – indicates how *GB84* relies for its explanatory powers on a whole tradition which spills beyond its own subject matter. The reasons for this are aesthetic as well as political.

The ways in which *GB84* draws so heavily on contemporary sources – overwhelmingly song titles and lyrics – draws attention to a motivating device behind the strike itself too large to encompass in a single novel: the re-composition and re-organisation of capital we now know as Thatcherism or neoliberalism. Where some texts mobilise the resources of parody and satire to draw out the implications of Thatcherism, the directly political or industrial novel needs to indicate this backdrop without allowing it overwhelm and collapse whatever narrative devices the text is utilising. The miners’ strike is inconceivable unless it is placed within the context of the wider Thatcherite assault on organised labour, and yet this assault is itself too large and unwieldy to stand alone as a representational target. Merely by detailing the strike’s progress in a way that evokes this wider context, then, Peace attempts an explanation in realist form much like that available through the utopia. For Jameson,

\textsuperscript{246} This is what Brecht called his pedagogics: “Once I’ve found what modes of behaviour are most useful to the human race I show them to people and underline them…This isn’t the same thing as committed art. At most pedagogics.” Quoted in my *The Many Lives of Galileo* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2005), p. 132.
the advantage of the utopia or science fiction occurs because “the social totality is always unrepresentable…but can sometimes be mapped and allow a small scale model to be constructed on which the fundamental tendencies and the lines of flight can more clearly be read.” In creating a subject of realism forced to work their way through the detail of a strike consigned to the status of nostalgia in popular culture, Peace provides a scale model of the wider dynamics of neo-liberalism and the reorganisation of capital world-wide.

There are, on a political scale, less surprising and more orthodox reasons why the strike novel is forever spilling out beyond its own raw material. If, as I indicated at the start of this chapter, the strike novel is forever in a relationship with failure and is marked by a radical uncertainty over its self-sufficient or aesthetic status, one solution to this dilemma lies not in denying the existence of failure but in emphasising it. If the strike of 1984 – 85 ended in defeat, GB84’s regular asides to other events and to the struggles conjured by Zola indicate that this defeat can be given explanatory power if placed as part of a wider tradition. It was Rosa Luxemburg who first articulated this peculiar methodology:

Revolution is the only form of "war" – and this is another peculiar law of history – in which the ultimate victory can be prepared only by a series of “defeats.”

What does the entire history of socialism and of all modern revolutions show us? The first spark of class struggle in Europe, the revolt of the silk weavers in Lyon in 1831, ended with a heavy defeat; the Chartist movement in Britain ended in defeat; the uprising of the Parisian proletariat in the June days of 1848 ended with a crushing defeat; and the Paris commune ended with a terrible defeat. The whole road of socialism – so far as revolutionary struggles are concerned – is paved with nothing but thunderous defeats. Yet, at the same time, history marches inexorably, step by step, toward final victory! Where would we be today without those “defeats,” from which we draw historical experience, understanding, power and idealism? Today, as we advance into the final battle of the proletarian class war, we stand on the foundation of those very defeats; and we cannot do without any of them, because each one contributes to our strength and understanding.


If, as I argue above, immediate “inspirational” qualities are not a precondition for effective political knowledge, Luxemburg’s criteria of “historical experience, understanding, power and idealism” sets rather more stringent definitions and demands. If most of this chapter has been concerned with the methodological problems the first two terms plague the strike novel with – and which GB84 at least partially overcomes – I want to conclude by suggesting some ways that this, the gloomiest and most defeat-obsessed of contemporary novels, produces readers capable of “power and idealism.” Its key here is memory.

“The Year is Zero”

My argument for GB84’s success as a realist work hinges on a different political axis to Brooker. Where he demands an explanatory power which is past-centred, contemporary realism, I want to suggest here, can have political value through a recreation of a sense of the past currently obscured and, in the process, produce memories which, when future-centred, suggest political possibilities for today. The novel’s final sentence points in two directions: “Awake! This is England, Your England – and the Year is Zero.” Year Zero is when everything has been defeated but also suggests, cautiously, the chance for new beginnings. GB84’s offers some sense of “power and idealism” for its reader not by manipulating this “year zero” effect to produce political fantasies and substitute utopias – the chief defect of all hitherto existing strike novels – but by a sober balance of the muted, minimal but enduring force class memory can contain. GB84’s main concern is, after all, the endurance of men and women making the choice to stand by their struggle as it collapses around them. What better illustration is there of the reality of human agency and of the real limits social structures place upon it? Or, as Roland Barthes puts it, “History is above all a choice and the limits of this choice.”

Because, for all of its failure, the strike has left a complicated legacy and impact amongst those who lived through it. As Andrew Richards summarises the findings of his exhaustive empirical research and oral history, “despite a post-strike legacy of

249 GB84, p. 462.
250 Ibid.
251 Barthes, Writing Degree Zero, p. 17.
division and defeat, the bonds of solidarity among miners remained resilient...the experience of struggle laid the basis for a changed and raised consciousness among miners themselves.”

There is a vast difference between a particular defeat and an inevitable, final loss and, in labouring to transform data like Richards’ into prose and the realism effects it entails, *GB84* carries out a work of political excavation. Memory, in this social or political sense, “has a built in utopian function” where “past memories will have a constitutive role in the forging of present and future perceptions.” In recording the miners’ strike in such epic fashion and, crucially, in weaving through his text references to older events and texts which can then be read off as a Luxemburgian tradition of defeats, Peace organises the material of the strike in such a way that it retains this utopian or organising function. Writing the miners’ strike now, at this particular juncture, acts, regardless of Peace’s own claim that the novel’s readers don’t deserve redemption, as a political intervention in the present which makes a case for 1984’s contemporary significance. *GB84* is, whatever the subjective intentions of its author, in its very existence, an argument for the ongoing relevance of class politics and class analysis. Daniel Bensaïd, during the course of a wider discussion of Benjamin, draws out the implications of this position:

> Every past is reborn in the present-becoming-past. Every present fades in the future-becoming-present. In the constellation of eras and events, the present indefinitely appeals to another present, in a discontinuous interplay of echoes and resonances.

The strike novel functions, if we accept the logic of this passage, as an insertion into a narrative continuity and political tradition it plays a role in at the same time refounding. Whatever the localised outcome, then, the broader project and methodological problem the strike novel sets itself is how, out of the determinate outcomes and material of a particular strike, to introduce the reader into this wider continuity. *GB84*’s parallel plots, reading lists, anonymous figures and conspiracies

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253 Vincent Geoghegan, “Remembering the Past” in Jamie Owen Daniel and Tom Moylan (eds.), *Not Yet! Reconsidering Ernst Bloch* (London: Verso, 1997), p. 17. See also his insightful observation that memory “is best conceived, not as a thing or place, but as a varied set of systems and practices” (Ibid., p. 15). Using this definition, *GB84* could be seen as offering its reader a model of how to construct memory itself in a politically efficacious fashion.

represent a renewal of the tradition’s formal possibilities and may, in their ambition, represent an opening move in its renewal. Because, for all the critics’ and Peace’s sense of the novel as gloomy and pessimistic we may be able, in conclusion, to uncover some clues or hidden openings through which more positive readings might be pursued. Peace opens the novel with an extract from Edwin Muir’s “The Labryinth”:

Oh these deceits are strong almost as life.
Last night I dreamt I was in the labyrinth,
And woke far on. I did not know the place.

The implications in GB84’s context is clear: conspiracy, corruption and sleaze dominate the political scene so thoroughly that it is impossible to extract a coherent or positive message. But Muir’s 1949 collection The Labryinth is as much concerned with resilience as despair, and nothing seems to capture the stoicism of the miners better than his “The Combat”, with which I introduced this chapter. To induce his desired mood, Peace is forced to radically distort the poem’s logical progression. The stanza immediately preceding his choice, the poem’s conclusion, runs:

That was the real world; I have touched it once,
And now shall know it always. But the lie,
The maze, the wild-wood waste of falsehood, roads
That run and run and never reach an end,
Embowered in error – I’d be prisoner there
But that my soul has birdwings to fly free.

The dominant experience here is survival and knowledge, not bewilderment. The poem presents the experience of the labryinth in the past tense, opening “[s]ince I emerged that day from the labryinth.” What follows are observations on lessons learnt through endurance and overcoming. Muir’s poem is, unlike what those who know it only from Peace’s quotation might expect, a poem of survival and a form of victory. There is more than one way to redeem a struggle.

But the search for hidden clues and happy endings is really the realm of another study altogether; our interest in *GB84* is in its willingness to offer reliable information, and in the problems of method it accumulates along the way. Documentation, after all, is one of the primary tasks in the realist project. It seems appropriate, then, to conclude this chapter by citing as evidence an example produced in the text itself:

Mary had scissors and glue out, cutting up bloody paper before anyone had had a chance to read thing. For her scrap-book, *True History of the Great Strike for Jobs*, that was what she called it. Filled three books now. Most of it were lies, said so herself. Bloody lies, she’d say as she cut stuff out. Tory bloody lies. But what she’d do was, under all lies she cut out, she’d then write truth of matter. Even had two of books signed by King Arthur himself – Just another way to pass time, I suppose.256

This passage stands as both description and enactment of the task *GB84* carries out with such ambition and aplomb.

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256 *GB84*, p. 350.
Chapter Three

“Edging Back into Awareness”: Realisms of the Globalised City

The city is a key representational stimulus and dilemma for any modern aesthetic project. Not only do we live in far greater numbers in far larger cities than in any other period in human history, the experience of the city structures both the organisation and the lived experience of contemporary capitalism. “The bourgeoisie”, in the lyrical phrases of the *Manifesto*, “has created enormous cities, has greatly increased the urban population as compared with the rural, and has thus rescued a considerable part of the population from the idiocy of rural life.”257 The “rush” of stimulation and chaos these enormous cities confront us with is, for Marshall Berman, a constitutive factor in modernity and modernism itself.258

James Kelman’s *How Late it Was, How Late* and Kerstin Hensel’s *Tanz am Kanal* confront their readers with realist representations of those aspects of urban life too often neglected by the ideologists of neoliberalism and, crucially, they both use these representations to suggest patterns of political resistance in the modern city. *How Late it Was, How Late* follows Sammy Samuels, an out-of-work builder’s labourer, as he struggles to rebuild his life following the devastating results of a blinding beating from the police. Sammy’s struggle for survival allows Kelman not only to document the experience of bureaucracy, dilapidated public services and state repression which is so much of contemporary urban working-class life, but also offers him ways to show a “representative” figure from that class beginning the process of re-learning his city in the face of disorientation and demoralisation. Hensel’s *Tanz am Kanal* carries out a similar project for the experience of the homeless. Gabriela von Haßlau, *Tanz am Kanal*’s narrator, spends the novel recounting her life story and, as well as introducing us to the experience of homelessness, recounts this story in order to find a way of asserting some sort of autonomy or power over the city life that so actively oppresses her.

257 *MECW* 6: 488.
Imagining the City

If city life is a foundational experience for narration it presents itself as a dilemma in the form of tradition. For well over a century now, the city has been at the centre of the great literary projects’ ambitions and representational approaches. From the classic realisms of the nineteenth century (Dickens’ London, Balzac’s Paris) to the high modernism of the twentieth century (Joyce’s Dublin, Döblin’s Berlin, Dos Passos’ Manhattan, Woolf’s and Eliot’s London), the city has presented itself as a representational test and opportunity for projects of cultural innovation and reach. What at first glance might seem like the inviting opportunity of tradition transforms itself into a dilemma, however, when we consider the status of the metropolis under the globalised phase of capitalism. The urban sprawl, the slum, the seemingly endless expansion of suburbs in the post-war period and, since the crisis years of the 1970s, the ever-present images of urban decline and structural collapse: the city and its images have expanded so much they threaten to disappear from view. “Where the world system today tends toward one enormous urban system”, Fredric Jameson suggests, “the very concept of the city itself loses its significance and no longer seems to offer any precisely delimited object of study, any specifically differentiated reality.” The expansive and depthless space of the globalised or postmodern city now “renders our older systems of perception of the city somewhat archaic and aimless, without offering another in their place” where we “do not yet possess the perceptual equipment to match this new hyperspace.” This perceptual lack is all the more damaging because, as Jameson argues elsewhere, “the ‘system’ of the postmodern…culminates in the experience of the space of the city itself.”

This mutation of the city has implications for the organisation of political thought, too. As a sort of eternal present or obliteration of the past, the city experience orders our cultural languages so, Jameson argues, they are now “dominated by categories of space rather than by categories of time.” This leads to an intellectual situation

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262 “Postmodernism”, p. 64.
where, as David Bennett summarises, there is “a conviction that not only modernity but ‘history’ itself has ‘ended’ - a corollary of which would seem to be that ‘space’ has displaced ‘time’ as the only intelligible category in which to construe social process.”

Where classic realism and high modernism used representations of the city to launch their wider historical studies of correct behaviour for realism (Pip’s London of *Great Expectations*) or epistemological investigation for modernism (Mrs Dalloway’s London), the contemporary novel faces a city experience resisting the recreation of a properly Historical or political moment.

“Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism” ends with a famous call for a “model of political culture appropriate to our own situation” which raises “spatial issues as its fundamental organising concern.”

Elsewhere Jameson makes his case more explicit, arguing that we understand the spatial peculiarities of post-modernism as symptoms and expressions of a new and historically original dilemma, one that involves our insertion as individual subjects into a multidimensional set of radically discontinuous realities, whose forms range from the still surviving spaces of bourgeois private life all the way to the unimaginable decentring of global capitalism itself...lived experience makes itself felt by the so-called death of the subject, or, more exactly, the fragmented and schizophrenic decentring, and dispersion of this last...I am talking about practical politics here: since the crisis of socialist internationalism, and the enormous strategic and tactical difficulties of coordinating local and grassroots or neighbourhood political actions with national or international ones, such urgent political dilemmas are all immediately functions of the enormously complex new international space I have in mind.

A strain of contemporary realist practice suggests some ways this political culture can be modelled, I will demonstrate here, through its development of a realist indirect discourse and variations on the stream of consciousness. James Kelman’s *How Late it Was, How Late* (1994) and Kerstin Hensel’s *Tanz am Kanal* (1994) are politically

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265 “Postmodernism”, p. 89.
significant works for the way in which they introduce modernist narrative techniques into realism and, in the process, negotiate representations of city life which offer the reader ways of both making sense of the city experience and connecting it to wider social, economic and political patterns and organisation. Kelman and Hensel have chosen as raw material cities whose historical and economic situations usefully complicate our received view of the metropolis: Glasgow and Leipzig are both of the so-called “First World” but are characterised by economic deprivation and inequalities. Both have histories that indicate something of the complexity of the city’s role in the nation as “an imagined political community” in the era of globalisation: Leipzig has recently emerged from a state (the DDR) that never succeeded in conceiving of itself as a nation, while Glasgow is the chief city of a nation (Scotland) with a strained and complex relationship to its purported state.

Kelman’s *How Late it Was, How Late* (1994) and Hensel’s *Tanz am Kanal* (1994) represent a whole area of urban deprivation, and of those tense class locations between working life and the misery and utter loss of the *lumpenproletariat*. Both take spatial issues as their “fundamental organising concern”: under attack from the forces of the state and the pressures of neo-liberalism, *How Late it Was, How Late*’s and *Tanz am Kanal*’s protagonists struggle to make sense of their urban environment and, under pressure, try to use this new sense to somehow make their way within it. Hensel’s Gabriela von Haßlau, a homeless (*Obdachlose*) victim of both Stalinist persecution and the dislocations of an allegedly “unified” Germany, narrates a story of bare survival, taking up the perspective of an outsider in order to represent the social order of Leipzig. Kelman’s Sammy Samuels is seized and beaten by the police and, suffering blindness as a result, needs to re-learn his Glasgow and find a way of coming to terms with his own life situation. More individualised than *GB84*, these novels record endurance instead of collective transformation.

The concept of realist stream-of-consciousness or free indirect discourse might at first seem wilfully paradoxical or confused but is, I argue here, a useful way for us to think through the dynamic of formal innovation present in contemporary realism, and is suggested to me by a reading of Lukács himself. Lukács, as I’ve had cause to observe

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a number of times across the course of this study, is infamous for his attacks on modernism’s form and content. Modernism, Lukács argues, “must deprive literature of a sense of perspective” with its “basically static approach to reality.”268 The mere “observation and description” of both naturalism and modernism is chastised by Lukács as “just a substitute for the dynamic coordination of life in the writer’s mind”269 that leads to the situation where

the hero [of modernism] is strictly confined within the limits of his [sic] own experience...there is not for him...any pre-existent reality beyond his own self, acting upon him or being acted upon by him...the hero is without personal history. He is “thrown-into-the-world”: meaningless, unfathomably. He does not develop through contact with the world; he neither forms nor is formed by it. The only “development” in this literature is the gradual revelation of the human condition. Man is now what he has always been and always will be.270

Everyone is familiar with this Lukács, and his decades-long struggle against the legacy of modernism, but I want here to launch off from some much less discussed moments of Lukács’ literary programme. Lukács’ normative criticism of the fact of modernism is (as I have argued in the introduction, above) an aspect of his work offering little for us to salvage today. But his outline of what a contemporary realism might look like is far more open than many critics today acknowledge. As a minimal demand “the possibility of realism”, Lukács contends, “is bound up with that minimal hope of a change for the better” but this minimal hope, if it is to be compelling, needs to register the crises of its time. “The major realists of our time,” he argues, “deliberately introduce elements of disintegration into their work – for instance, the subjectivity of time – and use them to portray the contemporary world more exactly.”271 New social material and challenges demand new techniques of representation, Lukács suggests, against his own occasional arguments for a move “forward to the nineteenth century,” and realism “is entitled to develop a new typology for each new phase in the evolution of a society. It displays the contradictions within society and within the individual in the context of a dialectical

270 The Meaning of Contemporary Realism, p. 21.
271 Ibid., pp. 68, 39.
unity.” The Meaning of Contemporary Realism contrasts the uses of monologue intérieur in Joyce and Thomas Mann to suggest that the difference between modernism and realism is not one of technique but of orientation: where Mann uses the approach as a “technical device” in pursuit of wider aims, Joyce’s monologue intérieur is “no mere stylistic device: it is itself the formative principle governing the narrative pattern and the presentation of character.” Interiority, for these moments in Lukács, need not be a retreat from the historical and the social if we remember that, as History and Class Consciousness argues, “the intelligibility of objects develops in proportion as we grasp their function in the totality to which they belong. This is why only the dialectical conception of totality can enable us to understand reality as a social process.” Monologue intérieur that provides its services to a text working towards positive social knowledge and the sort of historical connection made possible by the totality is of a very different order, these quotations suggest, to one content to remain at the level of the individual and isolated social withdrawal.

We need not agree with Lukács’ reading of specific modernist texts, or share his hostility to Joyce, in order to make use of these fragmentary and highly suggestive asides that are scattered through The Meaning of Contemporary Realism. What Lukács offers in these reflections is a way to think through the migration of innovations and techniques from one genre or generic “moment” – the age of high modernism, for instance – into quite different contexts and challenges. James Kelman and Kerstin Hensel strategically deploy some of the advances of modernism in their realist enterprises not only to better represent the experience of the city but, in this representation, to foreground questions too often marginalised and repressed. Whose city is this? To whom is the representation addressed? What class experience structures the life of the city? These are not often modernism’s questions but, to produce realist answers, Kelman and Hensel both draw on the resources of this earlier tradition.

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272 Ibid., p. 31. 
273 Ibid., p. 18. For Lukács’ contrast of Mann and Joyce see pp. 17 - 19 more generally. 
Reading these two novelists for their borrowings, then, illustrates some of the ways in which, as John Brenkman argues in his important essay, “novelistic innovation is not always a way of formal innovation. Novelists also resuscitate older forms…and infuse them with new intentions.”

If an earlier modernism negated realism’s confidence in its ability to act as a mirror to reality, then contemporary realism’s negation of this modernist negation produces not a return to older forms but new developments again: “realism and innovation are a double imperative in the contemporary novel.”

The innovation of the interior monologue is picked up by Kelman and Hensel because it solves particular representational dilemmas the city produces. As Franco Moretti argues,

>the [literary] selection process does not reward novelty as such (Jauss’s violation, or the “estrangement” of the Formalists), but novelty that is able to solve problems. Moving beyond the horizons of expectations of the period, in itself, is of little interest. Constructing a new perceptual and symbolic horizon: this is indeed a comprehensible undertaking, and one with a clear social value.

It is worth remembering here that, for Joyce, his innovation was one that aimed to produce a greater clarity and access to knowledge as much of the outside world as the mental. “The reader”, he claims of interior monologue, “finds himself [sic] established, from the first lines, in the thoughts of the principle personage, and the uninterrupted unrolling of that thought, replacing the usual form of narrative, conveys to us what this personage is doing and what is happening to him.”

In what follows, then, a realist stream of consciousness ought not, after this methodological detour, seem like an inconsistency or a mistake but is rather better figured as a contradiction resolved at the level of form.

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276 Ibid., p. 810.
How, though, would a realist interior monologue retain its distinctive realism and not, as might seem more obvious, find itself shifting into the camp of late modernism proper? For the moment I think that Lukács’ emphasis on outlook and perspective is sufficient to serve as a rough dividing line. The interior monologue of the classic moments of modernism sets itself essentially epistemological questions dedicated to unpacking the mystery of the “system of faces, against the big blooming buzzing confusion” of Lowry’s Consul in Mexico or the alienated and paranoid figures of Kafka or Musil. It’s not as if the question of knowledge never arises for Hensel or Kelman but, more importantly, the focus of their innovations is the social world and, more specifically, the political workings of the contemporary social world. It is by no means uncontroversial to include these two authors in the realist camp but, when we remember the work of the phenomenologists and reader-response theorists for whom realism itself “in effect”, as Villeneuve’s study has it, “means conferring a realist meaning on a text from the referential horizon provided by readers’ experience of the world” then we can for the moment bracket questions around the borders of these definitions and look at the realist work we can find in these particular texts.

There remains one final methodological observation before we can start applying this reconstructed Lukács to the texts at hand. I recorded earlier Jameson’s observation that the contemporary city seems to defy comprehension and that, as he puts it in another context, “in postmodernity representation is not conceived as a dilemma but as an impossibility.” Kelman and Hensel both attempt representations and are, as we shall see in a moment, strident in their insistence that authors attempt the creation of coherent narrative orders but, more significantly, the tendency in thought Jameson identifies needs to be examined as an ideological symptom and not as a challenge posed to the novel form itself. Novels, whatever their ideological commitments, and including those that deny the very possibility of representation, are representations

280 This, at any rate, is the narrative of modernism as a cultural logic presented both by Jameson and, with local variations, in Jean Baudrillard, Simulations, trans. Paul Foss, Paul Patton and Philip Beitchman (New York: Semiotext(e), 1983).
and arguments about the state of the world system, and need to be considered as such. As Brenkman argues when discussing Thomas Pynchon,

[what readers of Pynchon] claim to value, even identify with, is the Pynchonesque hero’s inability to secure a grasp of himself or of the sinister world that keeps undoing his search for meaning, identity, knowledge – and that is clearly the theme of the novels. But the enjoyment that his most avid readers exhibit demonstrates just the opposite: the novels furnish the initiate with a completely ordered view and encyclopaedic knowledge of the world of the novels themselves. 283

Of course, the proper initiate could easily reply that this is exactly what one would expect from an academic working for the Trystero, but either way Brenkman’s point stands. In what follows we need to consider not whether How Late it Was, How Late and Tanz am Kanal are representations of city life (this much is undeniable) but rather how successful they are, how reliable, how politically useful and compelling.

I suggested a little earlier that Kelman and Hensel provide ways for thinking through the kind of political action Jameson identifies in “Cognitive Mapping” as of such urgency today. In what follows I will structure my discussion of these two novels around their use of narrative voice and register to locate class-specific experiences of the city; their creation of characters who are both figures of resistance to the forces of oppression and surveillance at work in contemporary capitalism and, at the same time, victims of powerlessness and the paralysis of urban life; their representations of the “typically untypical” city in globalisation; and their suggestions about ways resistance in these cities can be ordered. Finally, I will consider some of the ways in which the historical situation of the mid-1990s, and the balance of class forces in Europe at the time, constrain and limit these novels’ representational choices and options. Both Kelman and Hensel offer us access to characters travelling through cities, and revisiting key places and events over a period of time, and this element of repetition may prove to be politically useful as it breaks down or challenges the division of space and time Jameson sees crippling so much political thought. I have to suggest that these books deconstruct this division, but do not want to accept this word’s inevitable philosophical baggage. Kevin Lynch, in his classic The Image of the City,

suggests other lines of flight when he writes of how “the city is a construction in space, but one of vast scale, a thing perceived only in the course of long spans of time…nothing is experienced by itself, but always in relation to its surroundings, the sequence of events leading up to it, the memory of past experience.”

Walk the streets long enough, in other words, and space transforms itself into time and the past: in the anxious mapping of How Late it Was, How Late and Tanz am Kanal we may see something of the way in which a rediscovery of the historical is to take place. I read these two novels alongside each other to draw out the quite striking parallels of approach and technique that, with the inevitably local variations of style and content, they bring to their respective material. Born of the same year, Tanz am Kanal and How Late it Was, How Late usefully mark realism’s horizons in the last decade of the twentieth century.

**Typicality in the Postmodern City**

The sense that the postmodern or globalised city renders representation impossible seems to stem from two not necessarily connected political views. Firstly, there is what we could label the argument from *vastness*, Jameson’s sense that we lack perceptual equipment to deal with the full scale and depthlessness of the new hyperspaces of the endless urban sprawl. I will examine Kelman’s and Hensel’s acknowledgement of, and attempt to work beyond, this bewilderment in a moment. But these two representations of the globalised city attack another widely-held, and allegedly “leftist”, derivative of the argument from vastness which focuses on the explosion of choice, style and eclecticism which is supposed to mark contemporary urban culture. Jean-François Lyotard made what is perhaps the most famous assertion of this case as part of his war against the totality:

> Eclecticism is the degree zero of contemporary general culture: one listens to reggae, watches a western, eats McDonald’s food for lunch and local cuisine for dinner, wears Paris perfume

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284 Kevin Lynch, *The Image of the City* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1960), p. 1. He suggests later we can learn from literature how to think through an urban area as “a sequence, or temporal pattern” (p. 113). Lynch’s work is surely one of the great unrecognised Utopias of the post-war boom.
in Tokyo and retro clothes in Hong Kong; knowledge is a matter for TV games. It is easy to find a public for eclectic works.\textsuperscript{285}

One wonders what class of city-dweller Lyotard assumes behind this neutral “one.” As Mike Davis’ painstaking research on U.S. urban life has demonstrated, the experience of city life for most working people has, over the last thirty years, been one of a constriction of choice and “lifestyle” options, not their Lyotardian expansion.\textsuperscript{286}

Davis’ empirical research and Lyotard’s assertion of a particularly ideologically framed view of city life help to situate the distinctive problems a contemporary realism of the city may face. Jameson’s account of modernism historicises the argument from vastness by positioning it alongside an account of imperialism, where the truth of the economic organisation of the great city is necessarily obscured to those experiencing it. “Daily life and existential experience in the metropolis, which is necessarily the very content of the national literature itself, can now no longer be grasped immanently,” he argues, “it no longer has its meaning, its deeper reason for being, within itself.” The crisis of realism this entails – “a gap between individual and phenomenological experience and structural intelligibility” – is provoked by the way imperialism means that mere representation of the city is never enough, when “scientific deductions on the basis of First World data, can [n]ever be enough to include this radical otherness of colonial life, colonial suffering and exploitation, let alone the structural connections between that and this, between daily life in the metropolis and the absent space of the colony.”\textsuperscript{287} This crisis of realism, though, suggests what Trotsky described once as the “privilege of backwardness.” Where the globalised or postmodern metropolis obscures its financial operations from view – where the glass of Canary Wharf, in its glaring reflections, prevents us peering in at the relations its buildings house – the rejected or de-industrialised city may offer the author new perspectives.

Glasgow, Leipzig, London

The obvious comparison here is between the deprivations of Kelman’s Glasgow and London, the centre of so many realist and modernist projects. My suspicion is that the politico-representational problems Jameson outlines are more perennial dilemmas for aesthetic production within the capitalist heartland than they are unique to the modernist moment. The world system complicating this relation changes in its phases – from the colonialism of the Victorians to the imperialism and monopoly capitalism of the modernists through to the globalisation of today – but these changes may each in turn produce their own complications. London, a city whose biographer introduces as resistant to totalising imagination or representation, is so often the mental map for modernist crisis (“unreal city!”) that it may helpfully complicate and “make strange” our view of contemporary realism’s inheritance. This passage, from Virginia Woolf, is justly celebrated:

Such fools we are, she thought, crossing Victoria Street. For Heaven only knows why one loves it so, how one sees it so, making it up, building it round one, tumbling it, creating it every moment afresh; but the veriest frumps, the most dejected of miseries sitting on doorsteps (drink their downfall) do the same; can’t be dealt with, she felt positive, by Acts of Parliament for that very reason: they love life. In people’s eyes, in the swing, tramp, and trudge; in the billow and the uproar; the carriages, motor cars, omnibuses, vans, sandwich men shuffling and swinging; brass bands; barrel organs; in the triumph and the jingle and the strange high singing of some aeroplane overhead was what she loved; life; London; this moment in June.

The aeroplane noise anticipates traumas to come but, for the most part, this evocation of the “triumph and jingle” of London is an example of what Robert Alter calls “the modernist literary art of celebration” and “urban pastoral,” quite different from the crisis of representation we’ve trained ourselves to expect. At times, indeed, Woolf’s London seems to betray a sort of premature-postmodernism, constructed as it is out of

288 “London is a labyrinth, half of stone and half of flesh. It cannot be conceived in its entirety but can be experienced only as a wilderness of alleys and passages, courts and thoroughfares.” Peter Ackroyd, London: the Biography (London: Chatto and Windus, 2000), p. 2.
290 “the urban experience [for Woolf], seen quite vividly in its abundant particularities, can provide the sense of invigoration, harmony with one’s surroundings, and enrapturing aesthetic revelation that is traditionally associated with the green world of the pastoral.” Robert Alter, Imagined Cities: Urban Experience in the Language of the Novel (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), pp. 105, 104.
buildings that “crush together in one wild confusion the styles of Greece, Egypt, Italy and America” and with a charm marked by “its glossiness, its transparency, its surging waves of coloured plaster.”

For a crisis of representation, and its sense of the city’s representational impossibility, we need to look instead in one of the “classic realist texts”:

The wheels rolled on, and rolled down by the monument, and by the Tower, and by the Docks; down by Ratcliffe, and by Rotherhithe; down by where accumulated scum of humanity seemed to be washed from higher grounds, like so much moral sewage, and to be pausing until its own weight forced it over the bank and sunk it in the river. In and out among vessels that seemed to have got ashore, and houses that seemed to have got afloat – among bowsprits staring into windows, and windows staring into ships – the wheels rolled on, until they stopped at a dark corner, river washed and otherwise not washed at all.

Dickens’s London is so covered in “moral sewage” and symbolic fog it is virtually unrepresentable. As Efraim Sicher argues, “despite the praise lavished on Dickens for his exactitude in portraying the city, the details are often obscure or obscured. The toponomy, even when it relates to a geographical map, is of little help in seeing the city, which is covered in mud, slime and fog.” Far from Dickens providing models of realist confidence later modernists will need to take apart, Julian Wolfreys has suggested that “it may be possible to witness Dickens as already writing the ineffable city, writing of a city which cannot be constructed simply and unproblematically, which cannot be expressed through words, a city which is unpronounceable, beyond description or expression; except, that is, through descriptions which speak of the unspeakability, informing us of the ineffable condition of the city’s architecture.”

In a passage that offers evidence that Dickens was familiar with Jameson’s “Postmodernism” essay, he seems to suggest a London where nature and the unconscious have been abolished:

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His [Reginald Wilfer’s] home was in the Holloway region of North London, and then divided from it by fields and trees. Between Battle Bridge and that part of the Holloway district in which he dwelt was a tract of suburban Sahara, where tiles and bricks were burnt, bones were boiled, carpets were beat, rubbish was shot, dogs were fought, and dust was heaped by contractors.295

A city of dust, rubbish and rejected old bones: Dickens’s London is a much bleaker and more impenetrable proposition than Woolf’s introduction via Oxford Street. A final example from the literature of London is that of Romanticism for which, far from the city blocking experiential possibilities, London acts in the 1805 Prelude as a great stimulus for knowledge of production and global trade:

> Briefly, we find, if tired of random sights,  
> And haply to that search our thoughts should return,  
> Among the crowd, conspicuous less or more,  
> As we proceed, all specimens of man,  
> Through all the colours which the sun bestows,  
> And every character and form of face:  
> The Swede, the Russian; from the genial South,  
> The Frenchman and the Spaniard; from remote  
> America, the Hunter-Indian; Moors (219 – 241)296

One vision of the capitalist city is drawn to its globalising force, and finds clarity and expansiveness through the city’s organisation.

> At leisure let us view, from day to day,  
> As they present themselves, the spectacles,  
> Within doors, troops of wild beasts, birds and beasts  
> Of every nature, from all climes convened;  
> And, next to these, those mimic sites that ape  
> The absolute presence of reality,  
> Expressing, as in a mirror, sea and land,  
> And what earth is, and what she hath to show (244 – 251)

295 Our Mutual Friend, pp. 41 – 42.
When this abundance and the crowd threatens to bewilder the poet, the sight of a beggar, and, with him, economic relationships, forces him to gain a new sense of perspective (284) and, through the noisy chaos of the moment, a new possibility for representation emerges:

   But though the picture weary out the eye,  
   By nature an unmanageable sight,  
   It is not wholly so to him who looks  
   In steadiness, who hath among least things  
   An under-sense of greatest; sees the parts  
   As parts, but with a feeling of the whole. (708 – 712)

These three examples of complications or counters to Jameson’s scheme offer a way to position what is distinctively realist about Hensel and Kelman’s contributions. Firstly, there is the “privilege of backwardness” associated with distance from the cultural and economic centre. Woolf, Dickens and Wordsworth all have to negotiate some sense of the global importance of their city-space, and to account for its international presence in complicated ways unimportant to the contemporary realist of marginalised urban spaces. Kelman’s Glasgow and Hensel’s Leipzig are no longer so much national centres as they are merely particular marginal places, as governed by the workings of global capital (and finance capital from London) as any other cities in the world might be. Narratives of capitals – Berlin, London or Edinburgh – still have to negotiate their financial centrality (the narrative of Capital), the place of the City, speculation in the pound and so on, in ways which narratives produced in decentred, liminal urban areas do not. This narrative freedom allows Kelman and Hensel the space to re-imagine and start to think through how a re-integration of “phenomenological experience and structural intelligibility” (Jameson) might be figured. Hensel’s narrator walks the city and maps it through the locations of its dilapidated welfare state: charity rooms, shelters, police stations, evoking an urban world emptied of a particular form of productiveness, but manages at the same time to outline an urban experience all too close or fearfully familiar to readers living in other cities and urban organisations.

Glasgow has an added importance for this project. In its transformation from “Second City of Empire” to de-industrialised urban area, Glasgow may only now be returning
to a local representability an earlier period may have needed to internationalise. Edinburgh’s importance as a centre of finance obscures its own poverty and working-class experience, whereas with Glasgow Kelman can focus on the city alone without sacrificing relational content. His fiction has long set itself the task of finding ways of mapping the class experience of Glasgow: the earlier *The Busconductor Hines* (1984) uses the zoning and divisions of the transport system to outline the city’s class geography and, within it, its narrator’s alienated paralysis.

Hensel and Kelman achieve representations of these restricted working-class spaces of city life through a remorseless process of labelling. Gabriela positions herself as one of the thousands of outsiders to the life of the city, removed from the circulation of production and consumption. Her prose is accordingly detached and empty: “I’ve got no preconceived ideas any more and so when I come to write about this public world, I do so as a stranger.” Gabriela comes to gain the ability to know the city of Leipzig by gaining the appropriate distance: from the perspective of the riverbank, and using the materials of the city’s rejections and refuse, she builds up a sense of it.

Sammy is equally thorough in his labelling, and uses almost no adjectives when producing for us a sense of Glasgow. His sudden blindness forces him to begin the process of cognitive mapping of his city anew, allowing the reader to gain some sense of the social co-ordinates of a city life. Naming involves ordering and, in what Sartre calls the “verbal moment”, “to speak is to act; anything which one names is already no longer quite the same.” Sammy’s mental organisation of his city creates or acts out a social representation of institutional and economic constraints where police station, council flat, pub and taxi rank are the sole distinguishing features. Because Sammy is held at the Hardie Street station, his walk home to Argyle Street leads him across a huge swathe of Glasgow. We’re offered nothing but the barest names: “the Red Road flats”, “the Edgware road”, “Davis Street”, “Argyle Street on a Saturday afternoon,”

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297 This is not to suggest, of course, that there is no Edinburgh fiction that makes the attempt. Irvine Welsh’s *Trainspotting*, whatever the compromises and repetitions of his later works, is an exciting example, but it is symptomatic of the strain Edinburgh fiction labours under that *Trainspotting*’s most interesting features – in particular its treatment of sectarianism – were absent from the successful film adaptation.


“the taxi rank round Gordon Street”\textsuperscript{300}: \textit{How Late it Was, How Late} is almost entirely devoid of adjectives. The working-class experience of the city, Kelman seems to suggest, is not one where one is, as with Lyotard, confronted with choices but rather one where choice and any sense of eclectic options or alternate routes is all too thin on the ground. Sammy’s blinding by the police operates at two levels: as a narrative event it draws our attention to the repressive state apparatus’ role in social oppression but, as a plot device, it allows Sammy’s re-negotiation of Glasgow to take on wider significance. Sammy’s re-learning of the social coordinates of a particular experience of working-class Glasgow gives him the opportunity to map them for the reader. Dislocation in \textit{How Late it Was, How Late} is both personal and suggestive of a wider social disorientation: “I cannay see eh…I’m blind; I’ve lost my bearings.”\textsuperscript{301} Woolf’s Mrs Dalloway gives us an exhilarating narrative of London from a particular point-of-view but it is quite relative and determinedly individual. Sammy’s forced de-familiarisation in the form of blindness leads to him re-learning the typical of city experience. Sammy has a rough-and-ready cognitive mapping or class-consciousness of sorts (“folk take a battering but they do”),\textsuperscript{302} but his own insights are not central to the sort of information the novel produces. In discovering what sort of spaces are open to him in the city, the reader comes up against its limits and class organisation.

\textbf{Bending Modernism}

This emptying of narrative variation or adjectival distraction marks one of the crucial separations between Hensel and Kelman’s “bending” of modernist techniques and modernism proper. Joyce’s reconstruction of Dublin darts off impatiently into other areas, parodying other writers’ styles, teasingly suggesting parallels with myths and generally expanding the reach of the novel. Eliot’s London transforms itself into a model or unrealized (“unreal”) city, the Thames becoming the Ganges by the time of \textit{The Wasteland}’s fifth section and London commuters suggesting Tiresias. Hensel and Kelman’s recycling of modernist innovations point them in the opposite direction. These are two novels which use the estranging and distancing techniques of

\textsuperscript{300} James Kelman, \textit{How Late it Was, How Late} (London: Chatto and Windus, 1994), pp. 29, 42, 85, 368.
\textsuperscript{301} \textit{How Late it Was, How Late}, p. 129.
\textsuperscript{302} Ibid., p. 16.
modernism to remind us of what is all around us. The prose needs to shock in order to remind us of the deeper continuities of capitalist production and its human damage that dominant ideologies seek to minimise and obscure. The work-a-day, pedestrian detail of these narratives is significant. Hensel’s description of homelessness does not aim to shock, but instead numbs with its repetitive descriptions of bored stasis in pubs and charity shelters. Kelman – and this is a detail across all his fiction – returns time and again to the kitchen sink, with his characters making cups of tea, slicing sandwiches and generally busying themselves with the drab details of everyday struggle. The drabness of this realism performs V-effects of its own. As Slavoj Žižek has suggested,

Today, more and more, the cultural-economic apparatus itself, in order to reproduce itself in competitive market conditions, has not only to tolerate but directly to provoke stronger and more shocking effects and products...perversion is no longer subversive: such shocking excesses are part of the system itself; the system feeds on them in order to reproduce itself.  

Kelman and Hensel’s realist bending of modernist techniques works them against this trend and uses them to draw attention once again to the everyday. It is the ordinariness of Bloom on the toilet, and not the mythical or rarefied moment of an Eliot or a Lewis, that these novelists take from the modernist legacy into their contemporary realism. This is not to suggest the cognitive mapping these novels carry out is some sort of banal “triumph of the everyday”; their modernist borrowings, rather, are used to draw us into a deeper sense of the organisation of working class life and better representations of its challenges.

Plot is the test of the division between a contemporary modernist-inspired realism and modernism proper. The modernist novel – Finnegans Wake, the Unnameable trilogy, Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften – radically devalues plot (Gertrude Stein: “Narrative is a problem to me, I worry about it a good deal”) as it moves towards its eventual elimination. The opposite takes place in these novels. Not only is plot important in

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305 “the case of Joyce...involves the bracketing of the pole of subjectivity itself and the suppression of the place of the sender as such, producing the illusion of a language that speaks all by itself, without the
terms of the structure of the narrative – its timing, the plotting of events and so on – but Kelman and Hensel use modernist techniques and formal innovation to illustrate the content of their novels. There is an emphasis on content, and the specificity of content, here quite at odds with the trajectory of modernism. Part of Kelman’s and Hensel’s attempt at creating connections between their mappings of the globalised city and politics more generally is this stress on specificity and individual stories, a renewed attention to experience and its variations.

What seems paradoxical here, though, is that it was precisely on the basis of fidelity to reality and a greater realism that modernism first launched its assault on the doxa of contemporary fiction. Joyce’s Portrait was received by its contemporary reviewers as realism taken to extremes, and Woolf’s polemic against the Georgian writers in “Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown” attacked their lack of perception of deeper and more important realities.306 That these were the aims of the modernists is a matter of public record, but the modernist legacy is a different matter altogether, and I intend approaching this paradox with the same attitude Bourdieu took to theoretical tradition. What is needed is “an inseparable assertion of both continuity and rupture, through a critical systematization of acquisitions from all quarters.”307 Whatever modernism’s initial impetus, it has come down to us, its readers and inheritors, as an autonomous or distanced turn and, whether one follows Bourdieu’s reading of genres and value or Jameson’s of modernism and monopoly capitalism, its innovations are no longer our own. What energies modernism may once have had, Kelman and Hensel’s realist borrowings suggest, may now live on in the tradition of engaged realism and, like Bourdieu’s insistence on both “continuity and rupture”, by negating their particular inheritance or form, these modernist-realisms complete and confirm what is best in both traditions.

intervention of human agency. Here an autonomy of language is secured by the systematic refusal of expression as such, as well as the strategic exploitation of all those features and dimensions of language susceptible of being abstracted from the normal operations of human expression and communication, human meaning, and of being potentiated as though each could somehow prolong its existence under its own power alone.” Jameson, The Modernist Papers, p. 191.

306 See Deborah Parsons, Theorists of the Modernist Novel: James Joyce, Dorothy Richardson, Virginia Woolf (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), chapter one, “A New Realism.”

Taking a Battering: Experiencing Politics / the Politics of Experience

Kelman and Hensel’s realist projects lead them to complicate discussions of the globalised city by insisting on the complex specificity necessary to any discussion of politics in particular places and in particular determinate circumstances. What at first seems like pure negativity – “folk take a battering but, they do; they get born and then they get brought up and then they get fuckt; that’s the story; the cot to the fucking funeral pyre” – turns out, on closer inspection, to be an insistence on the specificity of individual lived experience. These novels offer fruitful comparison with those moments in Jameson’s work when he tries to work through the contradiction of globalisation’s homogenising tendencies and the stubborn presence of the nation state. “No society has ever been so standardised as this one”, Jameson argues in The Seeds of Time, “and the stream of human, social and historical temporality has never flowed quite so homogeneously” and yet, within this stream, and politically, “the nation-state today remains the only concrete terrain and framework for political struggle.”

By staging their narratives in cities both typical and untypical of the era of globalisation Hensel and Kelman interrupt the “stream of temporality” in ways which force readers to think through the idea of the nation state as a political terrain.

How Glasgow and Leipzig are typical is fairly obvious, and we can deal with this in short order. Both are cities ravaged by neo-liberalism and the restructuring of manufacturing of the 1980s and 1990s, and both are cities marked by high levels of inequality, poverty and structural unemployment brought about through what David Harvey calls “accumulation by dispossession.” In this sense Tanz am Kanal and How Late it Was, How Late can join the long list of realist works carrying out something like an aesthetic version of Harvey’s call for a “geographical and historical materialism.” These novels, and we could include in this list Gee’s portrait of Muldoonist New Zealand and Peace’s Yorkshire, draw attention to hitherto neglected areas of the social whole where global processes are at work in myriad determinate, and locally felt, ways. Accent and dialect are both constant features in both novels’

308 How Late it Was, How Late, p. 16.
309 The Seeds of Time, p. 17.
styles, as are the use of proper nouns over “thick description” to describe city spaces. But Kelman and Hensel also challenge their cities’ smooth insertion into an opposite, neo-liberal narrative of the transition to so-called “consumer” society and affluence. Sammy’s first beating at the hands of the police occurs after, fatefully, he mistakes them for tourists:

Maybe they were tourists, they might have been tourists: strangers to the city for some big fucking business event. And here they were courtesy of the town council promotions office, being guided round by some beautiful female publicity officer with the smart tailored suit and scarlet lips with this wee quiet smile, seeing him here, but obliged no to hide things; to take them everywhere in the line of duty, these gentlemen foreigners, so they could see it all, the lot, it was probably part of the deal otherwise they werenay gony invest their hardwon fortunes, that bottom line man sometimes it’s necessary, if ye’re a businessman, know what I’m talking about. So fair enough, ye play yer part and give them a smile…

So municipal solidarity man know what I’m saying, the bold Sammy gets to his feet…Only they werenay tourists, no this time anyway they were sodjers, fucking bastards.311

Where “municipal solidarity” of the New Labour council demands Glasgow’s differences and distinctive urban features - the worst public health in Europe, say, or major poverty-induced alcohol dependency312 - be refigured as marketable quirks or minor details as part of global marketing (“these gentlemen foreigners”), How Late it Was, How Late aggressively insists on the reality of its working-class experience and representations.

*Tanz am Kanal* faces similar homogenizing pressure, both from the drive to forge a singular narrative for a newly united Germany and in the capitalist commodity logic of *Ostalgie*, which repackages images from DDR history and reduces them to marketable objects. Hensel chooses not to confront the problem head-on as with Kelman, but instead dots her narrative with subtle reminders of the city’s place in history. The fall of the Wall is mentioned only once, and then indirectly.313 Instead,

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311 How Late it Was, How Late, pp. 2 - 3.
313 *Tanz am Kanal*, p. 115.
Hensel fills Gabriela’s recollections of the *DDR-Zeit* with commodities now lost to history, labels which, in their absence, conjure the still un-negotiated legacy of Stalinism.

Both novels complicate Jameson’s sense of the nation-state as the “framework for political struggle” because they offer representations of cities that exist in fraught relationships to non-existent states and confused nations. Gabriela’s narrative offers a portrait of a whole social era that, with the collapse of the Wall, became obliterated almost overnight: her autobiographical sketches of school life, youth organisation and Stasi harassment all build towards the state Leipzig was part of but which now no longer exists and which, over ten years after *Tanz am Kanal*’s first appearance, a unified Germany still struggles to incorporate. Kelman’s Glasgow is the main city of a nation without a state, and Sammy’s attempts at survival in this space point to the tensions inherent in this representation. That the novel ends with him *leaving*, and leaving for England, points, I think, to the difficulty of the material Kelman has set himself, but we cannot expect a full political or programmatic solution to this as yet unsolved problem of Scottish social life to emerge from within its aesthetic production, no matter how advanced. If Marx is right and humanity “thus inevitably sets itself only such tasks as it is able to solve” we ought to add that there is really only interest in artists who work at the as-yet unsolved of these problems. Kelman cannot run out ahead over the political boundaries still constraining the rest of his class. But the extent to which Kelman, across his whole *oeuvre*, has extended realism’s reach to representations of Glasgow as a city is thrown into relief when we consider an argument his one-time collaborator Alasdair Gray dramatises in his classic *Lanark*. This is from a moment in the novel set during the 1950s:

> “Glasgow is a magnificent city,” said McAlpin. “Why do we hardly every notice that?”
> “Because nobody ever imagined living here,” said Thaw. McAlpin lit a cigarette and said, “if you want to explain that I’ll certainly listen.”
> “Think of Florence, Paris, London, New York. Nobody visiting them for the first time is a stranger because he’s already visited them in paintings, novels, history books and films. But if a city hasn’t been used by an artist not even the inhabitants live there imaginatively. What is Glasgow to most of us? A house, the place we work, a football park or golf course, some pubs and connecting streets. That’s all. No. I’m wrong, there’s also the cinema and library. And

314 A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy, MECW 29: 263.
Perhaps the true measure of the success of Kelman’s attempts to create the kind of realisms that forge a Glasgow where “the inhabitants live there imaginatively” lies not so much in the internal detail of one of his works considered in isolation but rather by considering what has been able to come after his own efforts. Janice Galloway, A.L. Kennedy, Jeff Torrington, Irvine Welsh; from, just fifty years ago, being considered one of the leanest of European literatures, today Scottish writing enjoys a popularity and esteem almost unknown since the Act of Union. And north of the border, in marked contrast to much contemporary English writing, Kelman’s insistence on class language has not been erased. “Largely thanks to the work of Kelman and [Tom] Leonard,” Liam McIlvanney writes, “urban [i.e. working class] vernacular has become a legitimate - some might say oppressively dominant - Scottish literary register. When Kelman was starting out, most of the Scottish literati viewed it as a broken-down, vulgar patois.”

Struggle in the City

Unlike Peace’s *GB84*, Hensel and Kelman cannot structure their narratives around great collective class conflicts or transformations for the eminently realist reason that these sorts of transformations were rather thin on the ground in the early 1990s. After the great anti-poll tax demonstrations hastened Thatcher’s demise and until the French public service strikes of 1995 there were not the kinds of class mobilisations in Europe that realism could aim to capture in all their challenge and excitement. *Tanz am Kanal* and *How Late it Was, How Late*, falling as they do between the stools of the poll tax and the French hot December, are realisms of resistance and survival much more than they are realisms of upheaval.

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317 There was, of course, one great transformation in this time, dramatised in the fall of the Berlin Wall. But because, in my view quite mistakenly, the dominant response to this revolutionary event, from both
Kelman’s stress on forms of resistance in the everyday\textsuperscript{318} is reinforced by his repeated emphasis on Sammy’s typicality, his unexceptional qualities as a protagonist like many of us: “it’s no as if he was fucking special but man I mean he wasnay earmarked for nay fucking glory.”\textsuperscript{319} Sammy is trapped by the same limits as the rest of us, where “the trouble is most cunts arenay able to think. Including Sammy, let’s be honest, a bit of honesty.”\textsuperscript{320} This stress on the everyday and the typical has a political motivation. Kelman himself has claimed that “ninety percent of the literature of Great Britain concerns people who never have to worry about money at all”\textsuperscript{321} and, whatever the statement’s factual inaccuracy – one need think only of Jane Austen – it reveals his commitment to producing a fiction of working-class life. Populating a fictional universe with characters who are concerned with the pedestrian and prosaic details of how to make it from one pay cheque to the next is a realist project all of its own.

But, more importantly, Gabriela and Sammy both survive and thus fulfil Lukács’ demand for “the minimal hope of a change for the better”\textsuperscript{322} as a precondition of any realism. Both novels show the force of the repressive state apparatuses at work and have, in whatever minimal way, their characters come through this process. Gabriela’s attempts to reject both her middle-class upbringing and the demands of the various states she and Leipzig live through bring her into contact with medical authorities:

\begin{quote}
Ich finde mich in der Aufnahme der psychiatrischen Abteilung des Städischen Krankenhauses.
- NEIN! sage ich. Ich will das alles nicht, ich bin Schriftstellerin.
Jede Erklärung ein Fehler.
\end{quote}

left and right, was to consider it as a sign of the impossibility of revolutionary transformation and of the so-called ‘End of History,’ my point stands.

\textsuperscript{318} I intend the term here to have its full Marxist and revolutionary implications as first formulated by Lefebvre but all too often lost by his epigones. For an important restatement see John Roberts, Philosophizing the Everyday: Revolutionary Praxis and the Fate of Cultural Theory (London: Pluto, 2006).

\textsuperscript{319} How Late it Was, How Late, p. 115.

\textsuperscript{320} Ibid., p. 288.

\textsuperscript{321} Quoted in Cairns Craig, “Resisting Arrest”, p. 98.

\textsuperscript{322} The Meaning of Contemporary Realism, p. 68.
[I find myself in Admissions of the Psychiatric Ward, City Hospital. Again already, I think. Hear words like anti-social and crazy. “NO!” I say. I want none of that: I’m a writer.” Every clarification’s a mistake.] 323

But Gabriela isn’t asozial or durchgeknallt and the hospital is forced to let her go. Similarly, and despite the novel’s unclear ending, we never see Sammy break under police interrogation and he never informs on Tam Roberts. These are novels documenting resilience under pressure, models of the very basic levels of resilience and endurance.

In another register, Sammy suggests some ways cultural resistance can manifest itself under globalisation: all through his narrative he thinks of song lyrics from country and western music and other U.S. genres with outlaw, progressive or anti-authoritarian themes. Bob Dylan and Kris Kristofferson, two musicians associated with dissent politics, make frequent appearances.324 These lyrics point to globalisation’s contradictory unity: Jameson may be right to see a growing standardisation and homogenization of global culture, but globalisation also expands the cultural models available at any particular moment. It is surely significant here that, when at his most constrained, Sammy can choose aesthetic freedoms in the form of country music that do not restrict him to Scottish models or forms. How Late it Was, How Late’s musical allusions, and Sammy’s musical frame of reference (“the first thing he needed and the last thing he wanted, auld fucking Willie [Nelson]”)325 complicate any sense we might have of U.S. cultural dominance. In spreading U.S. culture around the world, globalisation draws out how U.S. culture, like any other, is internally contradictory and drawn in different directions by differing class forces and political projects. Sammy’s cassettes act as a reminder of this.

The Problem of the Present

323 Tanzt am Kanal, p. 49.
324 For Dylan and Kristofferson see How Late it Was, How Late pp. 6, 32, 51, 60, 61, 230, 262, 291, 323. For some of the politics suggested in these lyrical allusions see Mike Marqusee, Chimes of Freedom: the Politics of Bob Dylan’s Art (New York: New Press, 2003).
325 How Late it Was, How Late, p. 136.
But resistance on its own, no matter how worthy it is and no matter how appealing a soundtrack accompanies it, is fairly thin gruel if it cannot suggest ways forward politically. Realism demands something of the structure of the *Bildungsroman*, in which particular types of reader can be created and where action and behaviours can be modeled for their political sense and possibilities. There is precious little *Bildung* in the two novels to hand, for reasons much more historically determined than matters of individual authorial failure of nerve. Indeed, Barbara Foley suggests the *Bildungsroman* form is inherently weighted against the proletarian narrative, forced as it is to strive for collective transformation if any individual subject is to be able to change for the better. 326 Despite this, Kelman’s and Hensel’s narratives act as guides to conduct just the same. Each novel is intimately concerned with its characters’ approach to the challenges they face and how these are organised, both as narrative and as action. This approximates the tasks Lukács demands of realist investigation:

[realism’s] goal is to penetrate the laws governing objective reality and to uncover the deeper, hidden, mediated, not immediately perceptible network of relationships that go to make up society. Since these relationships do not lie on the surface, since the underlying laws only make themselves felt in very complex ways and are realized only unevenly, as trends, the labour of the realist is extraordinarily arduous, since it has both an artistic and an intellectual dimension. 327

This challenge, for *History and Class Consciousness*, has practical consequences when narrative itself becomes a central political category: “the fate of a class depends on its ability to elucidate and solve the problems with which history confronts us.” 328 Thinking through the immediate moment as the result of past processes and class actions requires, then, the task of thinking “the problem of the present as a historical problem.” 329

Gabriela models this process for us through her withdrawal. As a declassed, outsider figure relegated to the *Lumpenproletariat*, production itself is rigorously excluded from most of her narrative. Instead Gabriela cultivates critical distance, a “wise

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326 See her “Generic and Doctrinal Politics in the Proletarian *Bildungsroman*” in James Phelan and Peter J. Rabinowitz (eds.), *Understanding Narrative* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1994).
328 *History and Class Consciousness*, p. 53.
passiveness” or “negative capability” that soaks up the political relations surrounding her: “what luck! Nobody knows my name; nobody knows what I’ve done, who I was, who I am.”

Sammy, on the other hand, is thrown into the “deeper, hidden, mediated…network of relationships” that are Britain’s security forces and state apparatuses. The reader follows him as he struggles to make sense of the violence of these forces’ impact on his life and as he struggles, “edging into awareness” as the novel’s opening has it, to narrate coherent representations of his situation and the balance of forces at work:

Funny how ye telt a story to make a point and ye fail, ye fail, a total disaster. Not only do ye no make yer point it winds up the exact fucking opposite man, the exact fucking opposite. That isnay a misunderstanding it’s a total…
…plus some folk, they’re never happy unless they’re giving ye a sharp fucking talking to…some of these other cunts man they think they know and they fucking dont.

In the same way that Sammy has to re-learn his Glasgow in order to cope with his blindness, and Kelman reminds us that knowing the city was one of Sammy’s main pleasures (“he didnay so much like it, he loved it, the auld wandering”) he now has to learn to reconstruct narratives of his life and activity in order to better prepare himself for assaults from the authorities. The narrator and Sammy collude in their shared interior monologues to try and furnish him with a narrative and viewpoint that will allow him to continue to survive against the hostile forces facing him. Sammy is, at times, no mean dialectician:

So what Sammy was feeling was the opposite of the opposite, in other words, he fucking was hemmed in man know what I’m saying, hemmed in: and it was gonny get worse, afore it got better; that was a certainty, it was gonny get worse. His entire approach had to be changed. The whole set-up. Everything.

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330 “Keiner weiß mehr meinen Namen, keiner, was ich getan habe, we ich war, wer ich bin. Was für ein Glück.” Tanz am Kanal, pp. 16 - 17.
331 How Late it Was, How Late, p. 1.
332 Ibid., p. 17.
333 Ibid., p. 285.
334 Ibid., p. 133.
*How Late it Was, How Late* offers its readers less a model of *Bildung*, then, than a series of opportunities to compare and contrast different survival techniques and holding patterns. Sammy, after realising he has been blinded, grasps the importance of narrative for his survival. The police will manipulate the time missing from his memory that has been blacked-out by his bender, but Sammy can re-form the rest:

> that was for him but no for the sodjers. It was him needed the story. Once it was there and solid in that fucking nut of his then fine, it was alright; a stick of dynamite man that was what they would fucking need. Other stuff he could let slip, it didnay matter. Know what I’m saying, once the solid stuff was there, he could let slip the other stuff.\(^{335}\)

Some critics see these limited horizons and the lack of transformation in *How Late it Was, How Late* and *Tanz am Kanal* as politically disabling weaknesses. If, as Birgit Holzer glosses it, the typical Hensel character is “a loner, isolated, someone who’s an outsider, a loser”\(^{336}\) and if in Kelman’s fictional world Cairns Craig is right and “there is no hope of transformation: there is no sustenance in community”\(^{337}\) then these novels are in fact no realisms at all, but rather further examples of the trend toward the apolitical in fiction where, Dominic Head argues, “the political novel of public life has been largely eclipsed by the novel that concentrates on isolated, individual lives.”\(^{338}\) Willy Maley connects these observations to a more strategic and Marxist criticism of Kelman’s technique, suggesting that Kelman’s distinctive stylistic advances are not democratic or collective at all but are better read as “possessive individualism, bourgeois individualism taken to its extreme.”\(^{339}\)

These are serious allegations, based on serious and attentive reading, that we cannot ignore or side-step. But Hensel and Kelman’s refusal to introduce “sustenance in community” to their narratives as conclusion or solace is part of their commitment to a basic empirical duty that must be the groundsheet of the realist project. The full destructive impact of neo-liberalism – the wrecking of whole lives and communities,

\(^{335}\) Ibid., p. 25.
\(^{336}\) “Kerstin Hensels Mensch ist ein einsamer, ein isolierter, er ist ein Ausenseiter, ein Verlierer”, “Der Blick durch die Clownskleider auf die Knochen”, p. 338.
\(^{337}\) “Resisting Arrest”, p. 102.
the destruction of much of Wales, the north of England and Scotland as viable social areas, the emergence of mass social problems like long-term unemployment and drug abuse – need brought into fiction if we are to be able to produce reliable information and useful representations of our current urban lives. Conservatives and neo-liberals have been remarkably open and honest in their own view of these processes. Alan Budd, a senior economic advisor to Thatcher, described her employment policies like this, early in 1992:

[in the fight against inflation] what was engineered – in Marxist terms – was a crisis in capitalism which recreated a reserve army of labour [the unemployed], and that has allowed capitalists to make high profits ever since.  

Hensel and Kelman, in their penetrating attention to the miseries and human waste of this unemployment, register something like the aesthetic truth of a situation where in Britain the proportion of the population with less than half the average income has trebled since 1977.

Blindness and Insight

Sammy’s sight-loss is used, and the modernist innovations around vision are “bent”, to stage some of these complications. Sight is the modernist concern – the figure of Lily Briscoe can stand in for this claim – and Sammy’s sudden deprivation allows Kelman to use bewilderment to insert plenty of vital social detail at the level of content (how Sammy is to get around a city with inadequate public transport, for instance, or the fear involved in being without work and disabled in a housing estate). But blindness functions in How Late it Was, How Late as a Formalist “motivation of the device”, opening up to the novel’s attention one of the great blockages to representation of industrial life in globalisation: the computer. “Computers”, Jameson argues, are machines “whose outer shell has no emblematic or visual power. Our own machines are those of reproduction: and an exhilaration which would attach itself to them can no longer be the relatively representational idolatry of the older engines and turbines, but must open some access, beyond representation, to processes themselves

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341 The figures are from 1996’s Rowntree Inquiry into Wealth and Income, quoted in Diana Coole, “Is Class a Difference that makes a Difference?”, Radical Philosophy, 77, May-June 1996, p. 17.
Blindness allows Kelman to represent the sort of social world and reorganisation of production the computer facilitated, incorporating our dislocation and powerlessness in front of it while, through Sammy’s need for communication, avoiding the reification so much technological writing involves, all the time stressing its place in human relations of production:

Then could ye kindly step forward please.
She must have been close. A whiff of perfume or something, fresh soap maybe; this sensation of total and absolute fucking cleanliness man ye could imagine her, blouse parted at the neck, the top two buttons open, hints of sweet mystery, then the smart skirt and jacket, the jewellery, and then that what’s-the-word fucking eh – class or something who knows, style, he was up from the chair…

She tapped into the computer and spoke at the same time…

…Sammy sniffed. He rubbed his eyes. They were itchy. He wasnay gony lose his temper. He shouldnay lose his temper anyway cause it was his own fault, as per fucking usual. If he was gony get angry then he should kick fuck out himself cause he was the fucking idiot, fucking him, nobody else…It was a case of screwing the nut. It was his belly just, the ribcage. A case of relaxing, relaxing. Ye let it go, ye just let it go. He listened to the keyboard. It was fucking pointless. So ye leave it.343

These images of an invisible and controlling computer, where the sound of the keyboard tapping at once controls Sammy and drives him to distraction, offers us an image of social relations much more compelling than any description of the office itself might be. Sammy’s blindness, Aaron Kelly argues, “sharpens the sense that power can only be traced through a cognitive mode able to imagine a macrostructure beyond immediate appearances. The need to make this cognitive leap itself indicts society’s institutions, since if they are not directly representable, then they are also unrepresentative.”344 The motivation of the device of Sammy’s blindness, in other words, is a device that allows us to see more of the social world than what we have been trained to perceive.

As this brief digression on Sammy’s blindness shows, these novels aim at more than mere reportage or recording of the truths of 1990s poverty and the impact of neo-

342 The Modernist Papers, pp. 236 – 237.
343 How Late it Was, How Late, pp. 101, 103, 107.
liberalism. Gabriela and Sammy are both figures at the edges of their own class: Sammy with his experiences in the construction industry and Gabriela with hers in the factory, they both retain some connection with working life despite their current unemployment. This focus on the edges of class location allows *How Late it Was*, *How Late* and *Tanz am Kanal* to direct us away from two false views of the economy popular in cultural and literary studies. In their emphasis on production, and on urban cities and lives still organised around industrial production, these novels implicitly critique the widely held belief that, as Steven Connor asserts, the economy “has shifted from a dependence upon industrial production to the provision of services and consumer products.”

Equally, though, Sammy’s connection – through his relationship with his partner Helen and through his own work-history – to the active working class and to the production process warns against some of the more extreme hyperventilating which declared that Thatcherism had achieved the end of class politics and that “the growth of an underclass is probably the most marked development in recent times.”

The sort of knowledge these texts produce of this situation comes, partly, from their swimming against this tide. More importantly, though, is the knowledge of relationships these novels produce: I discussed in the introduction Raymond Williams’ advocacy of the “novel of region and class” that aims to uncover “fully developed class relations.” Kelman and Hensel add to the vital project of documenting particular areas of region and class, and their distinctive ambition in these novels – as Kelman’s use of Sammy’s sight-loss illustrates – is how they use these distinct locations to then explore the networks of relationships – between social security bureaucracy, the police, health workers and others – that maintain class relations and control.

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346 Diana Cooley, p. 18. As Chris Harman points out, theories of an “underclass” have appeared periodically in British political theory since at least 1958 with very little empirical evidence to support them. See his “The Working Class After the Recession”, *International Socialism*, II: 33, 1986. My reading here is in contrast to John Kirk, who see “the unemployed man, or urban vagrant, [who] traverses a de-centred post-industrial landscape; and the rootless individual [who] constitutes the diaspora of the un- or under-employed seeking work.” “Figuring the Dispossesed: Images of the Urban Working Class in the Writing of James Kelman”, *English*, vol. 48, no. 191, 1999, p. 105.
Neither Kelman nor Hensel had the historical raw materials to hand to offer narratives of community or social transformation. It would, as we saw earlier, take a good twenty years for the materials of the Miners’ Strike and Thatcherism to become available to proper historical treatment in fiction. Between the sustained ruling-class offensive of Thatcher’s 1980s and the more open possibilities of the late 1990s and Devolution, Sammy’s determination to forge a story “solid in the fucking nut of his” may have been the most resilient realist model on offer.

**Responsibility, Narrative and Voice**

Both Kelman and Hensel are explicit in their leftist and working-class affiliations, and both set themselves demanding political and social tasks. From working-class backgrounds – Kelman was for many years a construction worker before getting the chance to write full-time; Hensel worked as a nurse before her move into the theatre and full-time writing – both authors see their role as both political and explicitly connected to class politics. Hensel has stated that “the role of a writer in class society will never change: they will always take the position of opposition.” Kelman connects this role to the possibilities of literary realism in an intransigent position worth quoting in full:

Realism is the term used to describe the detailing of day-to-day existence and most writers who advocate social change are realists…Nothing is more crucial nor as potentially subversive as a genuine appreciation of how the lives of ordinary people are lived from moment to moment.

Ordinary people. In the African Horn the children of ordinary people are eating insects to stay alive. It is a fact of existence so alien to other ordinary people that it cannot be admitted: there is an element lacking, a sort of structural base that does not allow us to be with folk for whom starvation is death and not simply a concept. To face such a fact in literary terms seems to be possible only in the work of a writer prepared to encounter the minutiae of day-to-day existence. And as far as I can see any formal advances in prose have occurred directly because of that struggle; formal advances and “imaginative leaps” may not be the same thing but they cannot easily be prised apart.

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As long as art exists there are no areas of experience that have to remain inaccessible. In my own opinion those who think otherwise are labouring under a misapprehension which will lead to a belief that it is not possible to comprehend someone else’s suffering, that we cannot know when someone else will be in pain, that whenever I close my eyes the world disappears. It is an old problem.348

Kelman links this approach to his rejection of postmodernism and what he sees as its valorising of historiographic metafiction, arguing that postmodernism “attempts to tie in with the political agenda, the whole idea of the classless society, the argument that somehow we’ve moved along from the possibility of structural political change. In a way, it sets the route for globalisation.”349

What first strikes the reader new to *How Late It Was, How Late* – and what so famously shocked and disgusted Baroness Neuberger – is the distinctive and unfamiliar narrative voice:

…he was wearing an auld pair of trainer shoes for fuck sake where had they come from he had never seen them afore man auld trainer shoes. The laces wernay even tied! Where was his leathers? A new pair of leathers man he got them a fortnight ago and now here they were fucking missing man know what I’m saying, what chance ye got.350

The most radical innovation of these novels is their insistence on a new realism of the voice and of language itself. Where Gee’s *Plumb* or Barker’s *Regeneration* trilogy mobilise realist strategies within the accepted framework of Standard English and its received spelling and grammatical forms, Kelman and Hensel view these very forms as amongst the barriers to a contemporary realism. There is, of course, behind this a very familiar narrative of ethnic exclusion and English imperial smugness and appropriation. Stephen Dedalus worries at the impossibility of telling his own story in the English of the oppressor:

The language which we are speaking is his before it is mine. How different are the words *home, Christ, ale, master* on his lips and on mine! I cannot speak or write these words without

350 *How Late it Was, How Late*, p. 1.
unrest of spirit. His language, so familiar and so foreign, will always be for me an acquired speech. I have not made or accepted its words. My voice holds them at bay. My soul frets in the shadow of his language.351

But Kelman in his writing carries out a far wider-reaching critique of received English than this and, crucially for my purposes, one much more closely attuned to the class politics of narration than Dedalus’ individual and artistic fretting can be. Kelman writes How Late It Was, How Late in Glaswegian not only to restore the “voice” (or, more properly, a voice) of his own community into print but also to critique the hierarchies implicit in conventional narrative techniques. In a discussion of previous social realisms he writes,

I am a socialist myself...I was uncomfortable with “working class” authors who allowed “the voice” of higher authority to control narrative, the place where the psychological drama occurred. How could I write from my own place and time if I was forced to adopt the “received” language of the ruling class? Not to challenge the rules of narrative was to be coerced into assimilation. I would be forced to write in the voice of an imagined member of the ruling class. I saw the struggle as towards a self-contained world. This meant I had to work through language, find a way of making it my own.352

This is a project which, if adopted by other class-conscious writers, could transform realism utterly and is far more radical in its implications than the more defensive “identity politics” of a previous decade, which sought merely for one set of experiences or community interests to be (however assertively) registered. Kelman’s target is the entire organization of narrative form itself:

In prose fiction...the distinction between dialogue and narrative [is] a summation of the political system; it [is] simply another method of exclusion, of marginalising and disenfranchising different peoples, cultures and communities.353

Eliminating this distinction isn’t, for Kelman, a move to the particularism of identity politics but rather, in a move which has echoes of the “standpoint theory” of the Lukács of History and Class Consciousness, a way of increasing realism’s reliability

352 “And the Judges Said...”, p. 40.
353 Ibid. Lest his critique be assimilated by a classless Scottish nationalism Kelman underlines time and again, “it isn’t a nationalist point I’m making. I’m a socialist, and I’m talking about class.” (p. 87).
and knowledge-production: “Getting rid of the narrative voice is trying to get down to that level of pure objectivity. This is the reality here, within this culture. Facticity, or something like that.”\textsuperscript{354}

The elimination of this distinction is not its absolute destruction, however, and I think those critics who read Kelman’s novels as “first person narratives told in the third person”\textsuperscript{355} miss the point. \textit{How Late it Was, How Late}, has a narrator, but he is a narrator who does not assume a position of looming authority over his subject matter. Kelman’s use of the modernist techniques of interior monologue turns out, ironically enough, not to be interior monologue at all, but rather a form of third person omniscient narrative dressed up in modernist garb. Dickens and Lawrence wrote their narratives in standard English and reserved “dialect” or “class” speech (as if standard English is not itself always already a class speech so ingrained we no longer hear it) for moments bracketed off in quotation: Stephen Blackpool and Mellors “authenticate” the very texts they are internally distanced from. In the Scots context, Hugh McDiarmid took the rather odd option of striving for realism by making up and then using a language nobody actually spoke, and dotting it with apologetic apostrophes - “a triumph o’ discord shairly” - every time it departed from standard spelling. The narrator of \textit{How Late It Was, How Late} resolves these representational dilemmas by speaking the same voice as his narrative objects:

Okay, cutting a long story short here cause Sammy’s head was getting into a state and what was coming out wasnay always very good. The guy was fuckt I mean put it that way, he was fuckt, so there’s nay sense prolonging it. If ye’re wanting to play fair: alright? Let it go, fucking let it go, just let it go, a wee bit of privacy, know what I’m talking about, ye give a guy a break, fuck sake, sometimes its best just accepting that.\textsuperscript{356}

“A wee bit of privacy”: this demand that we treat fictional characters ethically adds to the sense of \textit{How Late it Was, How Late} as a democratic model in its rejection of a narrative/dialogue split. Kelman adapts modernist developments in free indirect style in order to turn them back toward realist ends; \textit{How Late it Was, How Late}’s style is

\textsuperscript{354} Quoted in Uwe Zagratski, “Blues Fell this Morning: James Kelman’s Scottish Literature and Afro-American Music”, \textit{Scottish Literary Journal}, vol. 27, no. 1, 2000, p. 107.


\textsuperscript{356} \textit{How Late it Was, How Late}, p. 51.
not, as we might at first expect, a way of representing Sammy so much as it is a way
of narrating him while breaking the distance between narrator and narrative object.
Not only is there an inherently progressive element in giving Glasweigans some sense
of the lyrical possibilities and narrative dignity of their own way of speaking – and
studies by many linguists reveal the quite shocking extent to which Scots, and
working class Scots men in particular, see their own language as a shoddy and inferior
English – but it suggests realist possibilities of a quite different kind. Where most
departures from the conventions of standard English – in the poetry of Linton Kwesi
Johnson or Tom Leonard, for example – are read as moves away from the certainties
of realism, Kelman’s unapologetic use of his own language reminds us of the ways in
which standard English is in fact a particular class dialect masquerading as a universal
condition. As Michael Gardiner comments,

> What learners of English often do not realise is how few people speak SE [Standard English] natively. Most linguists estimate the number of speakers of SE to be less than two per cent of the British population - and this is a tiny percentage of the Anglophone population - and mostly middle-class and elderly residents of the South East of England. In other words, SE is pretty much only a written dialect.

What – to a reader outside the Clydeside, at least – seems at first like a stylistic move away from realist convention turns out, on reflection, to be a pushing of these conventions into new and as yet never properly pursued areas of social experience for representational exploration.

If Kelman presses realism at the level of speech, Hensel underlines hers with an emphasis on writing and the process of production itself. Gabriela von Haßlau writes her own story and stresses the material products she needs to produce it. Where *How Late it Was, How Late* is about the struggles of daily life at the edge of the working class (Sammy himself may be unemployed, but his partner has regular work), *Tanz am Kanal* looks to those most damaged by the economic upheaval of the *Wende* and neo-liberalism. Gabriela’s homelessness means she can narrate her story only by finding the waste and refuse of consumer society on which to write it: discarded rolls

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of toilet paper, factory seconds, wrapping paper and paper bags all make their appearance through the narrative as we’re reminded of the material struggle involved in the construction of this very story. Gabriela not only narrates her attempts to survive as one of the rejects of Leipzig, she narrates this very story out of those materials rejected by the *Alltag* of Leipzig at work. The reader has their attention drawn to these material details from the story’s beginning:


[Now that I’ve got this big, empty sheet of wrapping paper by my feet next to the bridge’s left pillar, I feel happy for the first time in years. It’s no accident, that this paper brings me my destiny: I’ve been chosen to write. And not just about anything! Today I’ll start to tell the story of my life.] 359

As well as these formal or narrative devices, both novels include plot developments which stress the need for the autonomy of their characters, and which implicitly critique those approaches - both conservative appeals to the “people” and putatively left-wing and reformist parties’ promises to speak “for” the oppressed - that deny working people agency and a voice in their own struggles. After he is blinded by his beating from the police Sammy needs to try and re-register with the DSS, a process told in all its realist bureaucratic nightmarish detail by Kelman. Along the way he has to negotiate the attentions of Ally, a dubious “rep” who makes his living off pursuing other people’s cases for them. Sammy’s response to Ally after a moment of particularly intrusive questioning resonates with the wider character-author-reader relationship: “Aye well you’re no me. There’s a difference between repping somebody and fucking being somebody; know what I’m talking about, being somebody?” 360 Similarly, in *Tanz am Kanal*, Gabriela is “discovered” by a group of West German liberal feminists hoping to produce an exposé on “women in need” for their magazine:

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359 *Tanz am Kanal*, p. 7.
360 *How Late It Was, How Late*, p. 241.

- Das ist meine Geschichte.
- Sie schreiben?
- Mein Leben.

Eva notiert auf den Schreibblock: Frau schreibt.


Gabriela’s interior monologue making its inventory of the material processes of writing gives us a sense of the reduction going into the liberal feminists’ rendering of her life, and their promise that their magazine will “rescue [her] from the filth!” sounds like another act of appropriation and denial of agency.362

These details of narrative style and sub-plot underline the extent to which, in the material that follows, Kelman and Hensel attempt not only to produce representations of life in the globalised city but, equally important, they set themselves the ethical limits of making the representations out of life in the city. Unlike a whole tradition of writing from the working class which sets its sights and stylistic ambitions on some class position quite distant – and in Scotland Ralph Glasser’s Gorbals Boy books are surely exemplary here – the limits of Kelman and Hensel’s language are the limits of their class and the shared structures of feeling of their own class experience and world.363

Modernist Legacies and Social Targets

Both Kelman and Hensel enrich their texts through ongoing and complex negotiations with the legacy of modernism. How Late it Was, How Late and Tanz am Kanal read

361 Tanz am Kanal, p. 79.
362 “MAMMILIA holt Sie aus dem Dreck!”, Tanz am Kanal, p. 80.
363 “I wanted to write as one of my own people, I wanted to write and remain a member of my own community.” “And the Judges Said…”, p. 63.
as borrowings from, and variations on a homage to, some of the breakthrough moments of modernism. Both authors draw on modernism’s reserve pool for further investigation – what I take as at least part of Getrude Stein’s sense when she writes of how “out of an eye comes research”\(^{364}\) – as part of their realist project.

A strain of sympathetic Kelman criticism either misses, or seeks to minimise, these clear literary antecedents and debts, preferring instead to view him as a practitioner of a sort of anti-literature. “Kelman’s fiction”, for Cairns Craig, “sets out to resist becoming ‘literature’ by a fundamental commitment to realism in content and style”\(^{365}\) while, for Liam McIlvanney, “Kelman writes with a reckless swagger which comes from a sense of literary homelessness.”\(^{366}\) But literary innovation is not the same thing as homelessness: as Kerstin Hensel observes of her own work, “there is no text where nothing was beforehand, no text that produces itself out of nothing.”\(^{367}\) In fact, \textit{How Late it Was, How Late} is stuffed to bursting with dim echoes of earlier modernisms: from Sammy’s endless trials at the hands of the DSS bureaucrats and police with their suggestions of Kafka to his too-tight shoes and shuffled walking reminiscent of the Beckett of \textit{Molloy} or \textit{Godot}, each of Kelman’s sentences seems to have a whole tradition of writing supporting it.\(^{368}\) Indeed, in what must be an embarrassment for those critics who, at the time of the novel’s publication, mocked Kelman as – in the words of \textit{The Times’} chief book critic – “an illiterate savage”\(^{369}\) exciting recent research has pursued the intricate conversation with Milton’s \textit{Samson Agonistes} (another work about a Sammy who never gets around to shaving) carried


\(^{369}\) Quoted in Zagratski, “Blues Fell This Morning”, p. 105.
out as part of *How Late it Was, How Late*. Other recent scholarship drawing on Deleuze’s idea of a “minor” literature has placed Kelman’s work as part of a philosophical tradition of critical theory as a response to modernism and modernity.

These links and allusions are important, and complex, and we need to listen with careful attention for the echoes of these earlier pieces getting to work within *How Late it Was, How Late*. But an exclusive focus on Kelman’s modernist debts can end up reproducing the very exclusionary logic so damaging in Craig and McIlvarey’s readings. Where Craig reads Kelman as an anti-literature, and thus loses any sense of the quite delicate and subtle retrieval operations his works carry out over the body of modernism, those critics who read Kelman exclusively for his philosophical arguments or modernist legacy erase crucial moments of realism in his work. Kelman is explicit in acknowledging his debt to individual *modernists*, but when he cites Kafka as “probably the greatest realist in literary art of the twentieth century” we get some sense of his quite different relation to *modernism* proper.

Symptomatic here are philosophically-minded critics’ treatment of Sammy’s torture by the police. Sammy is held without charge for long periods through the novel, beaten – and blinded – by the police and repeatedly interrogated over his connections to “Tam Roberts, the political.” Many readings of these central events try and produce them as evidence of Kelman’s existentialist ambitions, arguing that Sammy’s beating is a “mysterious” event not explained in the text and best understood as part of the text’s non-realist distance from portrayals of Scottish life and instead as its continuation of Kafka’s project or some abstract meditation on the human condition. Not only is the idea that representations of unjustified and physically devastating police violence against working people in Britain are some sort of departure from plausibility or realism extremely naïve, to use the most charitable

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372 “And the Judges Said... “, p. 101.

373 *How Late it Was, How Late*, p. 168.

term, it also requires an active suppression of the many realist contextual moments and clues to the source of this violence the text provides.\textsuperscript{375}

We know that Sammy Samuels himself is not religious, but he remembers his granny talking to him about “limboland”\textsuperscript{376}, a clear indication he his from a Roman Catholic (and, in Glasgow, this is a synonym for \textit{Irish}) background. At another stage he expresses scorn for the “gentry…at Ibrox Park”\textsuperscript{377}, the centre of Protestant sectarianism and violence in Glasgow. Sammy’s associate Tam (Thomas) and “Mister Donoghue”\textsuperscript{378} both have Irish names. Glasgow is home to one of Britain’s larger republican communities and has long been associated with political movements such as the Scottish based Cairde Na hEireann as well as Republican Sinn Fein, the IRA, INLA and others. Protestant violence against Catholics is, although not at the levels of the middle of last century, still a reality. \textit{How Late it Was, How Late} was written before the Good Friday Agreement and when the Irish Republican Army was still involved in armed struggle and military operations. What these contextual details ought to make clear, hopefully, is that, far from being a mysterious or unexplained moment, the police’s attempt to implicate Sammy in a network of men who “talk about violence and…acts of terrorism”\textsuperscript{379} has an immediate realist reference point in the social and political life of the city. I am not, of course, suggesting that either Tam Roberts or Sammy himself were involved in the republican movement or paramilitary activity but, as any of the Birmingham Six could tell us, actual \textit{involvement} in republican activity is hardly the important factor here. What matters is that Kelman’s use of the techniques of Kafka is aimed at providing a more concrete representation of British police brutality in the specific context of the early 1990s, and not at offering “general” meditations on capture and detention. Sammy may be typical, but he is not Everyman.

Typicality and detail: \textit{How Late it Was, How Late}’s extended negotiation between these competing demands underline its realist effects. The details – Sammy’s Irish

\textsuperscript{375} For some sense of the extent of violence and death in custody in Britain see the Annual Report of INQUEST: \url{http://inquest.gn.apc.org/pdf/INQUEST_annual_report_2005.pdf}.

\textsuperscript{376} \textit{How Late It Was, How Late}, p. 63.

\textsuperscript{377} Ibid., p. 67.

\textsuperscript{378} Ibid., p. 168.

\textsuperscript{379} \textit{How Late it Was, How Late}, p. 178.
background, the historical accuracy of the bureaucratic procedures he needs to go through – are important for making the reader work, forcing us to confront local detail different to what we may live in our own life and, in the process, challenging ideas of the supposed homogenity of globalised space. But typicality and, with it, our ability to grapple with the local detail, suggests realism effects in other ways:

The possibility of realism will thus be closely related to the persistence of a certain kind of community existence, in which the experience of the individual is not yet completely sundered from the mechanisms of the socio-economic: a kind of society then that one might still overhastily describe in terms of the rhetoric of transparency. Intelligibility here means that the experience of a given life is still able to convey the structure of social life proper: so that the “realistic” narrative of the destiny of individual characters retains an epistemological value and is still able, according to narrative laws and logic, to convey something of the inner truth of social life itself.380

Hensel’s narrative-within-the-narrative, with Gabriela arranging her life so as to be able to achieve “recollection in tranquility”, allows her to reflect on the trajectory which led to her homelessness and thus evoke as part of her own life-story “the structure of social life proper” in the form of the sharpening class tensions of the DDR. Kelman’s third-person narrative adaptation of free indirect discourse generalises Sammy’s experience, suggesting a whole shared experience of bureaucracy, unemployment and deindustrialisation lurking behind this individual narrative. Kelman’s “motivation of the device” in Sammy’s blindness draws his character into plot-lines exposing coercion and violence in both state forces and government services (“something of the inner truth of social life itself”) and, at the same time, enacts a re-mapping or re-learning of the social world of the city, providing that minimal level of hope demanded by the realist project.

Kelman and Hensel transform the techniques of modernism into realisms of the globalised city by turning these techniques back out towards the social world. Lukács’ demand that fiction “penetrate the laws governing objective reality and to uncover the deeper, hidden, mediated, not immediately perceptible network of relationships that go to make up society” is dramatised through Sammy’s blindness and Gabriela’s homelessness and dislocation. As marginal and dispossessed figures they have to
attempt to discover the organising logic of their own life and its surroundings. Gabriela’s need for writing material and Sammy’s need to reorganise his life bring them into contact with the range of ideological and repressive state appratuses which make up the contemporary city’s organisation.

That the city can be comprehended, *How Late it Was, How Late* and *Tanz am Kanal* argue, through the elaboration of their characters’ own emphasis on self-reflection and the preparation of narratives and explanations (Sammy needing his story “solid in that fucking nut of his”). This intelligibility differs from that of the modernists in its emphasis on the radically emptied, blighted space of the urban environment. Whereas Woolf or Joyce were provoked by the newness of the languages of advertising and technology into their city-novels, Kelman and Hensel can assume a familiarity with this ever-present abundance of information and turn instead to the hollowing out of lived experience and the social world. *Tanz am Kanal* is in this sense a rebuke to Lyotard: the ever-present threat of poverty, and with it no choices at all, is the degree zero of contemporary culture in a way eclecticism never can be.

The historical situation of these novels’ production determined, of course, their political perspectival horizon, and it does not diminish their claim to render intelligible our city experiences to note also that they are not novels of collective transformation or wider social change. But if, as I argue above, realisms of the mid-1990s were holding operations and survival techniques, in keeping these visions and maps of city life open they play a central role in enabling realisms to come.

**Coda: the Politics of Reception**

I insist throughout this study on realism’s ability to transform its readers and forge new possibilities of knowledge and action in its readers and have, in the close readings that structure each chapter, paid close attention to the ways in which, as Jameson puts it, “realism and its specific narrative forms construct their new world by *programming* their readers; by training them in new habits and practices, which amount to whole new subject positions in a new kind of space; producing new kinds
of action.\textsuperscript{381} How Late it Was, How Late’s reception offers a salutary reminder of the determining power of class and class-location in the kinds of readerly programming a text can carry out. If my reading of Hensel and Kelman has shown some of the ways these two authors extend realism and can, in turn, be read for their realist and political potential, the reception of How Late it Was, How Late is an illustration of the role social class and political interest plays in the kind of readers we present ourselves as before whatever text is to hand.

Baroness Neuberger, of the Booker’s judging panel, famously described Kelman’s work as “crap”, and resigned when the prize was awarded to How Late it Was, How Late.\textsuperscript{382} Simon Jenkins in The Times followed her lead, describing the book as “literary vandalism” and, in one of literary journalism’s more bizarre moments, imagined a war between Kelman’s Glasweigan and his own speech. Readers were assured, however, that “if it comes to war, [Jenkins’] Standard English will win.”\textsuperscript{383} Kenneth Baker, a former Home Secretary, reassured readers of the Daily Express that they need not bother either way because “the winning book is impenetrable.”\textsuperscript{384} The central complaint for critic after critic was Kelman’s “illiterate” use of swearing and obscenity. This carping over Kelman’s choice of words is symptomatic. As Drew Milne argues,

\begin{quote}
The perception of obscenity is class specific…the nature of this taboo indicates a pervasive distortion of the question of realism in the language of written fiction with regard to the language the majority of people use. The centrality of the question of obscenity in the bourgeois reception of Kelman’s work highlights the extent to which this reception prefers to reduce Kelman’s realism to certain formalist questions about particular words, rather than attending to the broader attack on the claim to objectivity of the class which controls writing.\textsuperscript{385}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{381} Fredric Jameson, Signatures of the Visible (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 166.
\textsuperscript{382} See Richard Todd, Consuming Fictions: the Booker Prize and Fiction in Britain Today (London: Bloomsbury, 1996).
\textsuperscript{384} Ibid., p. 230.
Kelman’s swearing, in other words, is a part of his wider literary project and not, as Jenkins and others would have it, a move away from the literary. Milne reminds us of Roland Barthes’ observation of an earlier obscenity, that “here is an example of modern writing whose function is no longer only communication or expression, but the imposition of something beyond language, which is both History and the stand we take in it.”

More disturbing than those conservative critics who attacked Kelman was the response of those allegedly coming to his defense. John Bayley, in a *Guardian* article defending awarding the Booker to Kelman, offers a précis of *How Late it Was, How Late* as “James Kelman’s novel, set in Glasgow, about a blinded ex-convict on the binge.” Not only does Sammy consume only three pints of lager and two halves of whisky through the whole novel - making Bayley’s idea of a binge a wee bit different to mine - his summary reveals other class prejudices. Why is he an “ex con”? We know Sammy has spent time in prison, but we also know he’s spent time on building sites. Why is one experience more central than the other? As Geoff Gilbert comments, “most reviewers hold [Sammy] to his prison record...with as much tenacity as the police.” Most bizarrely of all, the *Daily Telegraph*’s reviewer imagines a Kelman made acceptable if, like the new postmodern architecture in Renfrew on Glasgow’s border, he accepted some eclectic redesign:

> It occurred to me that he would not look too bad with a piece of panelling here and there, a pagoda or a minaret on top of him. They might improve his manners, soften his outlook on life and persuade him to write something which some of us might wish to read.

> “Soften his outlook on life”: the political and aesthetic assumptions behind this smug complacency remind us that, however much any particular text may construct its own realist world and political argument, these effects are never put to work anywhere but by particular readers with particular reading projects. It is to these readers, and their

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387 Quoted in Gilbert, p. 234.
388 I’ve reconstructed Sammy’s drinking from *How Late it Was, How Late*, pp. 276, 371.
389 “Can Fiction Swear?”, p. 231.
390 Ibid., p. 230.
role in determining what sort of future a realism of globalisation might have that we turn in this thesis’ conclusion.
Chapter Four

*Regeneration: the Historical Novel After Postmodernism*

The last two chapters have been concerned with demonstrating how, with appropriate interpretive apparatus in place, we can mine contemporary realism for useful and accurate information about the social world today. This chapter shifts our focus back to questions of the more properly historical in realism, and of the uses of the cultural past. I propose here a turn away from discussions of realism’s immediate applicability to various contemporary situations and, through a discussion of Pat Barker’s *Regeneration* trilogy, to a consideration of the current state of what has traditionally been one of realism’s prime vocations: namely, the tasks of the historical novel. The previous discussions of *GB84*, *Tanz am Kanal* and *How Late it Was, How Late* have attempted to align them with a particular argument about the state of this globalised world and have illustrated realism’s political potential, this chapter is organised *empirically*. Through a close reading of Barker’s recurrent concerns – and of the new material she incorporates into our familiar cultural images of the Great War – I aim to produce evidence of the realist novel’s ongoing innovative potential. A reading of an author as formidably talented as Barker could be of interest for any number of particular reasons. My wider ambition here is, like the child with Meccano, to pull apart her texts in order to display their component parts and, in doing so, demonstrate how her realism has extended our historical sense.

Barker’s most exciting advance in the *Regeneration* trilogy is her expansion of the *perspectival* horizons of the historical novel and of realism proper. The trilogy expands our horizons firstly through its careful project of documentation and incorporation into the fictional record of realms of the social and of class experience not normally penetrated by representation in the war novels we have to hand. But, at the same time as Barker penetrates these new areas and throws up revealing – and often shocking – historical events for us to try and incorporate into our stock of cultural memories of the war, her trilogy carries out a far more original and complex operation within the tradition of historical fiction. I call this a perspectival expansion because, at the same time as Barker produces this new information, she uses it to shift the familiar focus and approach we have to the current historical record. The *Regeneration* trilogy deconstructs the boundaries between the home front and the
zone of the war and trenches. In shattering our received separation of war experience and home experience – a separation with marked political implications – the trilogy manages to both illustrate realism’s contemporary potential to offer new approaches to the historical, and to advance an argument about the nature of the war and the class society behind it.

*Regeneration*’s achievement is all the more remarkable when we consider its moment of initial production and reception. Published between 1991 and 1995, the *Regeneration* trilogy’s appearance coincided with one of the most concerted attacks on the notion of History’s intelligibility and coherence in recent intellectual history, the moment of postmodernism. More an intellectual mood or family of philosophical relations than a set of party positions and programmes, the popular sense of postmodernism combined – in what now seems like a bizarre fashion – a Lyotardian “incredulity toward metanarratives”391 with credulity towards Fukuyama’s vulgar-Hegelian metanarrative of the End of History in the face of the collapse of the Stalinist bloc. While this particular intellectual and aesthetic moment may now be largely a matter of the past392, its resonance and implications are still felt.393 If history is unknowable or no longer knowable, then what future for the historical novel? If, as was invariably the example, we have lost the resources to give us certainty in using the historical record to defeat relativism and *know* events such as the Holocaust, how can history provide any epistemological or political grounding for action today? The idea that poststructuralist philosophy renders Holocaust denial undefeatable was always nonsensical, but intellectual currents and cultural logics do not take their

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orders on the basis of philosophical coherence. In the immediate aftermath of the collapse of Stalinism in Eastern Europe and of what, at the time, seemed like the undisputed triumph of neo-liberalism world-wide, the sense that history was fragmented, chaotic and indecipherable gained currency. In this context, *Regeneration*’s demonstration of the possibility of historical fiction takes on more than a localized and aesthetic interest.

Barker reclaims the possibilities of historical fiction not by appealing to some positivist version of the historical (Ranke’s history *wie es eigentlich gewesen*) but rather through an incorporation of methodological and epistemological concerns and enquiry into the fabric of her narration. As well as drawing new material into the project of representation and using the novel form to deconstruct artificial divisions between home front and front line – with all the political implications that brings – Barker uses her historical characters as an opportunity to reflect upon the process of history and its intelligibility. As John Brannigan argues, “Barker the historian and Barker the novelist are thoroughly interfused.” Barker is alive to the challenge of representing history as trauma and break – as a process at times threatening to defy comprehension or order – and, instead of shrinking from this challenge, she makes it her subject matter. As Brannigan puts it, “history is represented as trauma, the effects of which tend to manifest themselves in figures and tropes of haunting.” This is another way of recording the impact of those fictions Hutcheon identifies as “historiographic metafictions” on fictional production generally: although Barker’s trilogy does not share the dominant concerns of the various metafictions, her rich sense of historical perspective and what may inhibit the historical understanding grant her realisms a deeper and more informed historical sense.

Barker’s epistemological concerns are, then, as much political as they are literary and so the dominant question of Barker scholarship from previous decades – is she a feminist or a realist? – dissolves itself once we realize that it is precisely through her commitment to realism, and, following it, the coherent narration of a knowable

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History, that Barker serves the feminist or more generally progressive cause and project.396

My focus on the historical content of the trilogy, and on Barker’s various formal and thematic innovations in offering representations of the historical material of the First World War is not meant to suggest that her work ought to be read as mere fictionalised documentary, or as some sort of quaint and gruesomely nostalgic recreation of a lost and forgotten era. I agree with Lynda Prescott when she observes that the “factual dimension [of Regeneration] does not generate a ‘period’ flavour.”397 The traumas of the First World War – the era of total war and total mobilisation, militarization of civilian life, imperialism and attacks on democratic freedoms – are all still our traumas. Barker has refused to label her novels as historical, commenting that “they’re about a period of the world’s history that we have never come to terms with,” adding that she “chose the First World War because it’s come to stand in for other wars.”398 But if the psychoanalysts are right, and the child is the father of the man, then a thorough study of the child remains an essential precondition of any thorough understanding of the adult’s current misery. In the same way, we need a careful attention to the differences and distances Barker’s narrative of the First World War throws up if we are to make connections with the present era both strong and subtle enough to be of any political use. We need, in other words, to pay attention to the ways in which Barker works with “the essential mystery of the cultural past”399 and transforms it into the usable preliminary material for a retelling of today’s struggles, before leaping to discussions of those struggles themselves. I want, in other words, to read in this chapter for connections between the past as narrated in the Regeneration trilogy and the present as it confronts us today and not, as some sympathetic critics have done, to suggest parallels between these states. The

separation between these two methods is one of levels of mediation and not one of differing intent.

The political importance of these preliminary remarks becomes clear when thrown into relief by parallels drawn in much left-wing commentary on *Regeneration* between the First World War of the narrative’s present and the First Gulf War of the novel’s contemporary moment. What at first seems like an anti-war or progressive parallel turns out, on reflection, to be a distorting and distracting approach to both wars. Perhaps the most important point of difference is that between the two states grouped under the terms “shell-shock” and “Gulf War syndrome.” Treatment of neurasthenia and hysteria in World War One focussed on the internal life of patients and operated under a conflicting regime of residual Victorian morality and emergent psychoanalysis, while the systematic neglect and abuse of U.S veterans after the First Gulf War takes place in a quite different context where, since 1980 and in the wake of the U.S. defeat in Vietnam, the American Psychiatric Association’s creation of the category of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder recognises a series of psychological problems precipitated *wholly* by external stressors. These two states share connections, obviously, and the former is a clear genealogical link to the latter but, I suggest, it blunts our understanding of the contemporary world if we reach too quickly for historical parallels that might blur these complexities, instead of helping us seek out key historical moments to begin the process of explaining this world. Barker’s trilogy demonstrates realism’s vitality, I attempt to illustrate here, in part through the distance it places between the world of the war and our own, and the relative autonomy it grants its subject matter. Posterity’s “enormous condescension” does not always come from the unsympathetic.

I shall focus my discussion of the success of the *Regeneration* trilogy around three of what seem to me its most productive and provocative subjects: Barker’s treatment of madness and mental injury in war; her focus on moral panics and sexual anxieties both aroused and altered by the state of war; and her treatment of anti-war and

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400 This parallel figures as an aside through almost all sympathetic commentary on Barker, most notably in Sharon Monteith, *Pat Barker* (Tavistock: Northcote House, 2002).

oppositional currents within the working class on the “home front” of the conflict. These three individual themes are subsumed within the novels as part of a wider ranging focus on class relations and antagonism and, indeed, on the centrality of class itself both as a motivating factor demanding representation and as a relationship with explanatory power. In meditating on these less often considered aspects of World War One’s history, Barker has fused together two of the prime tasks of the realist. In the trilogy she at once uncovers and gives voice to the repressed and marginalised class locations systematically excluded from received history and, in the process, suggests alternative connections and relationships which can then present the war to us in a new and revealing light. Whereas GB84 carried out this task vertically – providing parallel narratives of miners and ruling-class antagonists – and Plumb seeks, through sheer historical scale and social reach, to represent changes within determinate class locations, the Regeneration trilogy uses figures who, at first glance, seem peripheral or marginal to class formations in order to uncover insights about the social whole. Sassoon and Owen seem – in their mental states, their homosexuality, their revulsion with the war – eccentric to the “standard” subject of middle-class British imperialism. Barker uses their stay at Craiglockhart to draw out the way in which their breakdowns highlight the strains at work in this class formation, and how their acts of repression show them and their class at its most revealing. More importantly, her representations of women’s experience of the war and of the home front transforms this material – so long considered background matter – into our primary focus for attention. Her insistence on class and class antagonism helps, in the process, undermine what Sharon Ouditt calls “one of the war’s more prevalent tropes: the chasm between war zone and home front.”

I will, in conclusion, consider these achievements in comparison with what seem to me two of the most successful war novels of realism and modernism produced so far: Ford Madox Ford’s Parade’s End series and Lewis Grassic Gibbon’s Scot’s Quair trilogy.

Highlighting Barker’s focus on this repressed and marginalised material is another way of saying that she demonstrates how far from exhausted contemporary realism is through the energetic way she has managed to enlarge the range, scope and subject

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matter of the novel. Barker, in her combination of “the well known and the barely documented,” has widened the novel’s horizons and has forged readers attuned to these newly uncovered aspects of history.

The concerns of the trilogy – with class, with sexual regulation, with madness – underline how integrated it is into the project of Barker’s oeuvre. Barker, like Maurice Gee, is both an accomplished and prolific practitioner of realism who, over more than twenty years, has had an insistent focus on class relations and on incorporating into fiction both the voice of working class life and its social centrality. Barker’s realism has been hailed by many feminist critics as a political intervention showing how “in the post-modernist era many women novelists have returned to realism, subverting and changing it into an exciting new form” and Barker herself is conscious of this project and her work’s part in it. Where a sizeable, and expanding, critical literature paying attention to Barker’s representations of Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen already exists, in focussing instead on these less commonly explored aspects of the trilogy I hope here to link it to Barker’s wider realist project.

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403 Ibid.
406 She is, indeed, one of the most self-aware writers I have encountered. For examples of her eloquent reflections on her own work see, in addition to those statements I quote in the body of the text, Donna Perry, Backtalk: Women Writers Speak Out (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1993), pp. 44 – 61 and Rob Nixon, “Interview: Pat Barker”, Contemporary Literature, vol. 45, no. 1, Spring 2004. Barker also follows the debates on her work in the scholarly literature; see her comments on Sharon Monteith’s work in Sheryl Stevenson, “With the Listener in Mind: Talking About the Regeneration Trilogy with Pat Barker” in Sharon Monteith, Margaretta Jolly, Nahem Yousef and Ronald Paul (eds.), Critical Perspectives on Pat Barker (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2005).
The Great War’s Challenge to Realism

Barker’s regeneration of the First World War’s historical moment is a project of inherent interest: in a study of the fortunes of contemporary realism it takes on an added excitement and challenge for choosing as its raw material the first moment, of many, when realism itself went into crisis. Realism has come through more crises and breakdowns than a character from a Woody Allen film, but the impact of the First World War was the model for all these subsequent crises. The sheer scale of the war and its irrational, massive brutality seemed to defy coherent and whole aesthetic representation, and was a precipitating factor in the emergence of modernism. Sassoon himself, in a passage that doesn’t make it into Barker’s trilogy, expresses, with typical understatement, this sense of futility:

Like many people, I had a feeling that ordinary human existence was being converted into a sort of nightmare. Things were being said and done which would have been considered madness before the war. The effects of the war had been the reverse of ennobling, it seemed. Social historians can decide whether I am wrong about it.\(^{407}\)

In moves that anticipate the postmodernism of seven decades later, contemporaries felt this social crisis as an aesthetic one, where either reality had altered so drastically that old aesthetic norms were obsolete (and, in John Buchan’s words, “melodrama has become the prosiest realism”\(^{408}\)) or representation itself was thrown into crisis. This was Henry James’ response to the outbreak of the war:

The subject matter of one’s effort has become utterly treacherous and false – its relation to reality utterly given away and smashed. Reality is a world that was to be capable of this – and how to represent that horrific capability, historically latent, historically ahead of it? How on the other hand not to represent it either – without putting into play mere fiddlesticks?\(^{409}\)

Accompanying this representational crisis, the war destroyed nineteenth-century positivist historiography and ushered in many anxieties familiar to those in today’s realism debates. Significantly, the final section of the famous satire 1066 and All That

\(^{409}\) In ibid., p. 11.
(1930) is entitled “Up to the End of History.” These twin crises – of history and language’s representational power – inform realism’s challenge by modernism, when society becomes “an old bitch gone in the teeth / […] a botched civilization” and where “the slimy mud of words” is able to do little more than “strain,

Crack and sometimes break, under the burden,
Under the tension, slip, slide, perish
Decay with imprecision.

Even if one is not convinced by the modernist case – and Barker’s characters Sassoon and Robert Graves, in their historical lives, fought long, rearguard actions against the modernists – the enormity of the war presents itself as a challenge to the realist with ambitions for its coherent representation. World War One was the first truly total war in over a century, and was the first really globalised conflict, drawing in troops from Australia to Armenia, in capitalism’s history. It set the standard, with its total mobilisation, its impersonality, technology, use of torture and massive civilian causalities, for all the wars of the twentieth century. While contemporaries felt this made it impossible to represent, it has also made it impossible *not* to represent. As Eric Hobsbawm observes, “Jane Austen wrote her novels during the Napoleonic wars, but no reader who did not know this already would guess it, for the wars do not appear in her pages…It is inconceivable that any novelist could write about Britain in

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410 See Modris Ekstein, “The Cultural Legacy of the Great War” in Jay Winter, Geoffrey Parker and Mary R. Hanbeck (eds.), *The Great War and the Twentieth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), for the impact of the war on historiography. The impact of war, as recent scholarship uncovers it, was not all one-way, however, and also served to reinforce particular strains of positivism. The war, for example, “enhanced the authority of photography” where “photographs were presumed to be radically innocent images, freed of being coded and constructed, released from the contradictions of participation in a signifying system.” Sue Malvern, *Modern Art, Britain and the Great War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), p. 47.


the twentieth century wars in this manner.”

The war’s centrality and model status – the First World War has had a much more enduring cultural impact and presence than the Second – has turned it into a demand on representation and a challenge. It is, in the words of what is still the classic cultural history, “part of the fiber of our own lives” an event which is now what Winter and Prost describe as “iconic, a symbol of the catastrophic character of the twentieth century as a whole.”

What for the modernists is a crisis of the failure or inability of representation transforms itself, for a realist like Barker, into its opposite, a crisis of over-representation. If the very cultural and political centrality of the war has resulted in its being overwhelmed with narratives, memorials and representations until it has become “more aggressively memorialised and commemorated than any war before or since” then the scope of the realist historical novel is threatened by the weight of this cultural load. The subject matter Barker has selected has been obsessively rewritten and represented by generations of writers, from the war poets and novelists themselves (Owen’s poetry, Graves’ and Sassoon’s memoirs of Craiglockhart and Rivers) to decades of war films and novels. Barker’s trilogy joins Johnston’s How Many Miles to Babylon? (1974), Boyd’s An Ice-Cream War (1982) and Faulks’ Birdsong (1993) as part of the enormous body of literature concerned with the war. Stephen Macdonald’s play Not About Heroes (1983) covers very similar ground down to almost identical conversations between Sassoon and Owen. The representational danger here is that, as Jameson suggests in “Postmodernism”, “the historical novel can no longer set out to represent the historical past; it can only ‘represent’ our ideas and stereotypes about that past” and in the process lose its claim to produce useful historical knowledge. Some critics have seen the combination of this modernist crisis of knowledge and the superabundance of war material as the primary subject or focus

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418 As Peter Hitchcock observes, “the enormity of what the First World War represents is matched only by the archive that attends it.” “What is Prior? Working Class Masculinities in Pat Barker’s Trilogy”, Genders, 35, 2002, paragraph 9. Available online: www.genders.org
of the trilogy itself, but I want to suggest some ways Barker works the dilemma out.\textsuperscript{420}

Instead of avoiding or ignoring this mass of background the reader is bound to take to the trilogy, Barker carries out the bold and aesthetically original task of passing through it on the way to her new material. Her novels are like clippings books from ninety years’ worth of information on the conflict, producing readers attuned to the war’s complexity and encouraged to search the historical record. Alistair Duckworth captures this aspect of the trilogy:

much of the appeal of her novels rests not only in the stories they tell (or retell) but in the information they provide on such topics as conditions in the trenches, treatment (or non-treatment) of shell-shock, experiments in nerve regeneration, female employment in munitions factories, early twentieth century anthropology and homophobic paranoia during World War One.\textsuperscript{421}

This stockpile of reliable historical information is supplemented with borrowings from, and reworkings of, the existing literature of the war. Barker eases the reader into her own concerns by starting with the familiar and edging out: where \textit{Regeneration} is almost wholly familiar ground (Sassoon and Owen, Sassoon’s declaration and so on), \textit{The Eye in the Door} and \textit{The Ghost Road} introduce more and more unfamiliar and repressed historical material. \textit{Regeneration} starts by reproducing, in its entirety, Sassoon’s anti-war declaration; many readers will be familiar with this from its earlier reproduction in Graves’ \textit{Goodbye to All That}.\textsuperscript{422} A few pages later Barker has Rivers declare that Sassoon has a “powerful anti-war neurosis”: the line has been lifted, almost directly, from Sassoon’s memoirs.\textsuperscript{423} Prior notices the “slightly yellow tinge” to the skin of the munitions workers, an observation Robert Graves


\textsuperscript{423} Compare \textit{Regeneration}: “You seem to have a very powerful anti-war neurosis” (p. 15) with “Well, you appear to be suffering from an anti-war complex”, \textit{Sherston’s Progress}, p. 15.
made some decades before.\textsuperscript{424} Several of Sassoon’s and Owen’s poems are reprinted in Barker’s text.\textsuperscript{425} Through these borrowings and quotations Barker establishes the historical base upon which she then constructs her fictionalised speculations.

Some critics have suggested these borrowings position Barker’s work as an example of what Linda Hutcheon calls “historiographic metafiction” instead of within the tradition of realism.\textsuperscript{426} Whatever superficial resemblance her novels might have to the canon of historiographic metafiction, I think these aspects of Barker’s trilogy are better read as innovations in the formal range of realism. Metafiction, for Hutcheon, “destabilizes received notions of both history and fiction” and “decode[s itself] by foregrounding…contradiction” through its use of parody, quotation and the blurring of historical and fictional boundaries.\textsuperscript{427} Barker’s appropriation of the historical record, far from foregrounding contradiction, in fact serves to reinforce for the reader the plausibility and “realistic” representation involved in her fictional extensions and speculations. Like David Peace in \textit{GB84}, Barker provides a list of sources and further reading at the end of each book, and her fictionalising of events adheres closely to and does not, as in Rushdie or Atwood, say, ironically call into question the historical record.\textsuperscript{428}

Barker’s incorporation of historical documents, in contrast to that of practitioners of metafiction, extends the reach of contemporary realism in two ways. Firstly, after beginning the trilogy with material many readers will already be familiar with, she then expands readers’ historical sense of the war and their historical imagination of it. After the safe and comfortable ground of Sassoon’s declaration, it comes as something of a grisly surprise to learn that the report of a treatment for shell-shock in which “hot plates had been applied repeatedly to the back of the throat, and lighted cigarettes to the tongue” is a detail sufficiently historical and orthodox for its

\begin{footnotes}
\item[424] \textit{Regeneration}, p. 87; \textit{Goodbye to All That}, p. 213.
\item[427] Linda Hutcheon, \textit{A Poetics of Postmodernism} (New York: Routledge, 1988), pp. 120, 211.
\end{footnotes}
practitioner to have boasted about it in a post-war publication. The full craziness of the Pemberton Billing trial (of which more below) is equally shocking, yet is again a forgotten and sensational aspect of the war. Barker, in an innovative realist turn, frames her intervention into historical debates by weaving repressed war stories, those marginalised in mainstream narration and history, into her narrative alongside the familiar outlines of a history the reader comes to the text with some sort of ghostly outline already ideologically primed. This framing by the familiar acts like the dimming of the lights in a cinema before a movie begins: by allowing the reader time to reposition themselves within the reconstructed world of the war, Barker’s new representations gain additional force. What we are dealing with, in other words, is, contra contemporary criticism, not a metafictional trilogy at all but, rather, an instance of what Barbara Foley has identified, in her classic study, as “documentary fiction.” Barker has offered what Foley describes as a “mimetic contract”, “wherein writer and reader share an agreement about the conditions under which texts can be composed and comprehended.” The documentary novel, in this contractual arrangement,

locates itself near the border between factual discourse and fictive discourse, but it does not propose an eradication of that border. Rather, it purports to represent reality by means of agreed-upon conventions of fictionality, while grafting onto its fictive pact some kind of additional claim to empirical validation.

In the trilogy the most obvious “convention of fictionality” is the figure of Billy Prior who, without the historical and biographical basis in fact of a Sassoon or an Owen, is given free reign to explore the novels’ tensions and concerns. But even his fictional life makes definite claims to “empirical validation”: it is through the Prior narrative that the reader encounters the world of working-class anti-war activism, wartime

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429 Compare Regeneration, p. 227 with Lewis R. Yealland, Hysterical Disorders of Warfare (London: Macmillian, 1918), p. 8. Yealland’s demand that his patient “must behave as becomes the hero I expect you to be” (Regeneration, p. 230) is also repeated verbatim from Hysterical Disorders (p. 9). Yealland, who believed electricity to be “the great sheet anchor of treatment” (p. 4) must surely be one of the great villains in the history of psychiatric medicine.


432 Ibid., p. 25.
sexual anxieties and mental illness. If Prior is a wholly fictional construct moving in a wholly fictional world, the fictional events he encounters can, every time, be traced back to a neglected historical moment. As much as the fictionalised facts of Sassoon’s life, the factual history conjured in the plotting of Prior’s fictional destiny advances an argument within the historiography and the collective imagination of the war.

One astonishing aspect of the Regeneration trilogy’s reception over the past decade has been the way in which it is now possible to document how the novels have impacted on historical understanding. Theoretical debates about the sort of readers produced by various genres and forms are often, of necessity, carried out at a high level of abstraction. But, unusually, many of Barker’s readers have, in their own writing, acknowledged the role the trilogy has played in opening up for them new areas of the First World War to explore. Miranda Seymour, in her biography of Robert Graves, attributes to Barker’s writing her own ability to cohere her information on Graves’ relationship with Rivers, and Dominic Hibberd’s latest biography of Wilfred Owen thanks Barker for similar inspiration. If these two examples illustrate only how Barker’s work has expanded an already existing field, her representation of the Pemberton Billing trial produced new space for research. Two studies of this significant case both note the paucity of scholarly literature surrounding it, and point to The Eye in the Door’s pioneering role in attempting representation of this unknown territory. Lest any of this make the reading process sound too dour and worthy, it is worth recalling the enormous popularity of the trilogy. The Ghost Road won the Booker Prize in 1995, all three works were best sellers, Regeneration has been adapted into a major feature film and all three texts are popular choices for book clubs in the United Kingdom and United States. Readers’ comments on the pages for the trilogy on amazon.com and amazon.co.uk stress the novels’ ability to give them new insight into the war and its impact as well as providing them with information that changed their view of the war. “I was previously

435 See Karin Westerman, Pat Barker’s Regeneration Trilogy for details of the novels’ exceptional popularity.
unaware,” one reader writes, “to [sic] the full extent of the shock and revulsion of trench fighting…it seems virtually impossible to leave the situation untouched.” Another recorded that “at first I didn’t like that I couldn’t mold [sic] the characters to fit how I wanted them to be…[but] now one realizes how completely mistreated soldiers are.”\footnote{436} If successful realism involves the programming of determinate kinds of reader, then the Regeneration trilogy’s impact on both scholarly and general audiences is strong evidence in its favour.

As for the modernist sense of the war inducing a crisis of realist representation, Barker, in a deft move, incorporates this as material for her own realist project. Her characters voice this sense of crisis, with Prior noticing how “language ran out on you, in the end, [until] the names were left to say it all. Mons, Loos, Ypres, the Somme. Arras.”\footnote{437} Sassoon is given even more explicit lines:

\begin{quote}
I keep thinking how big it is, the war, and how impossible it is to write about, and how useless it is to get angry, that’s such a trivial reaction, it doesn’t, it just doesn’t do any sort of justice to the to the the [sic] tragedy, you know you spend your entire life out there obsessed with this tiny little sector of the Front…you’ve no conception of anything else…And it’s marvelous in a way, but it’s terrible too and I get so frightened because you’d have to be Tolstoy.\footnote{438}
\end{quote}

This is a trick the poets have long been familiar with; by homing in on the unrepresentability of a particular target as subject matter and obsession, all of a sudden, and with the reader’s unnoticed assistance, representation has in fact been produced. One thinks of the recurrent referencing of Isaac Rosenberg, Edward Thomas and the poetry of the trenches in the work of Michael Longley: in framing his own poems as “silent departures” in this unrepresentable zone Longley manages, in the process of articulating its impossibility, a form of representation.\footnote{439} Pat Barker, with inspired confidence, imports this technique into prose.

\footnote{436} \url{http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0140236236/ref=cm_cr_pr_product_top}. Website accessed 12 February 2007.  
\footnote{437} Regeneration, p. 90.  
\footnote{438} The Eye in the Door, p. 220.  
\footnote{439} The best examples of this are in Michael Longley, Poems 1963 – 1983 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), pp. 61, 134, 135, 151, 168, 199.
Informing all these crises, and the novels’ insights I discuss below, is Barker’s repetitive insistence on death and the reality of pain and suffering. The narrative is studded with details of individual and collective suffering, of “a fucking great nail sticking up through the heel of [Wilson’s] left boot” to cause a “septic sore.” There is a wearilying insistence on detail, on a tunic “stiff with blood” and spattered with “blood and brains.” In one section we encounter a man “thrown into the air by the explosion of a shell [who] had landed, head-first, on a German corpse, whose gas-filled belly had ruptured on impact” giving the soldier “time to realize that what filled his nose and mouth was decomposing human flesh.” These details point again and again in the direction of physical suffering, reminders of the realities of warfare too easily coloured out in the new technologies of videogaming or too easily lost in the ironic and smooth surfaces of metafiction. Barker’s resilient focus on death and the dying places her trilogy in the tradition of what Rachel Falconer has identified as descent narratives, or katabasis, where transformation occurs only through these journeys to (figural) Hell. Death “makes special demands on our cultural modes of representation” and, in figuring it as a sort of narrative excess (very few of the accounts of death in the trilogy have any real bearing on the development of the plot) Barker allows the fact of death its full significance and import. The dead are named, whatever their status as “minor” or peripheral characters (Hallet, Bainbrigge, Longstaffe: the books are stuffed to bursting with proper nouns) as Barker establishes some focus we can cling to as we attempt to make sense of the disorienting event of total war. Total war is the space in which, for over a century now, “death is no longer necessarily an individual matter, but can now be the result of a vast and anonymous operation carried out upon us.” Acknowledgement of death and death’s realities is the foundation of Barker’s realism.

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442 Ibid., p. 199.
443 Regeneration, p. 19.
What each of the three areas for representation considered below do, then, is act not only to expand our sense of the war and restore to vision experiences lost, but also to try and set in motion ways of imagining the war not stalled by the weight of received wisdom. The dream of a history *wie es eigentlich gewesen* writes out the sorts of alternate possibilities and unexplored tensions realism ought to engage with. While, from this distance, Allied victory and the failure of the revolutionary movements outside of Russia and Germany may now seem like inevitabilities, Barker’s novels manage to restore some of the contesting forces of the time. Her realism acknowledges and attempts to work its way through the difficulties Jameson identifies in all representation:

Contradiction is always one step before representation: if you show it in its conflicted moment, you freeze over it so rigidly that it tends to take on the form of the antinomy. If on the contrary you anticipate its resolution, you empty it of all its negativity and generate the impression of a rigged ballot, a put-up job, a sham conflict whose outcome has already carefully been arranged in advance.447

Restoring these conflicts and contradictions is the active focus of Barker’s narratives of psychiatric regulation, moral panic and anti-war activity.

**Dottyville: Rivers, Sassoon and Mental Illness**

World War One was not only, with the partial exception of the American Civil War, the first total war carried out following a capitalist logic. It also represented or precipitated a whole series of cultural, political and economic shifts and ruptures in society. Indeed, the enormous periodising force the war has gathered around it has been dominant for so long that recent historiography has stressed important elements of continuity between pre- and post-war worlds. Barker alludes to these debates by placing them in Rivers’ thoughts: “before the war…but one must beware of attributing everything to the war. The change had started years before the war.”448

But, whatever nuance there might be to develop in the argument, the war’s centrality in the history of mental illness and hysteria cannot be downplayed.

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448 *The Ghost Road*, p. 225.
Beard had advanced neurasthenia ("weakness of the nerves") as a syndrome as early as 1869, noting that it was more common among middle-class patients, with the working class presenting with the more demonstrative hysteria. The pattern reversed during the war, with mutism and paralysis transforming themselves into the symptoms of the ranks and stammers and nervous tics distributing themselves amongst the officers. Within the atmosphere of forced passivity and uncontrollable technology that was trench warfare, the incidence of hysteria, "shell-shock", break down and neurasthenia (each label as inadequate as its successor) emerged as serious problem. Towards the end of the war, close to half of all injuries sent home were due to nervous conditions.\textsuperscript{449} The emergence of a whole new field of illness and suffering within the prosecution of the war led to sharp battles – both theoretically and at the level of policy formation and political struggle – over how best to treat this new phenomenon and, as crucially, how to label its forms. "Those who treated shell-shock during the war", Ted Bogacz observes, "occupied a position somewhere between sympathetic counselor and military policeman" and their close implication with regimes of power and control gave their theoretical positions influence they might, outside of war-time, never have achieved.\textsuperscript{450} The history of debates over shell-shock is the history of debates within psychology and psychiatry in the twentieth century: it was through these debates that Freudian psychoanalysis gained much of its influence in the English-speaking world.

Barker’s representation of these debates centres on the figure of W.H.R. Rivers. Rivers’ life, incorporating psychological research, anthropological study in Melanesia, Labour party activism, publications in neurology and childhood acquaintance with Lewis Carroll, was so richly varied he is perfect material for realist depiction. Barker develops her narrative through Rivers’ reflections on his various case studies, most notably those of Sassoon and Prior, but also minor characters’ pathologies: many of these cases are lifted directly from Rivers’ own posthumously

\textsuperscript{449} These facts, and what follows, draw on the discussion of "shell-shock" in David Healy, \textit{Images of Trauma}, , pp. 92 – 104.

published accounts. Barker uses free indirect style to render Rivers’ thought processes, his speculations and collegial disagreements.

It is common in the scholarly literature to see Barker as herself a Freudian and Rivers as a sort of domesticated or watered-down Freudian, the low-alcohol alternative to Freud’s Elephant Beer. Elaine Showalter, in an article Barker recommends in her “Author’s Note”, suggests that


Barker has been described as creating a “heavily Freudian world” where “Freudian scenarios permeate her writing.”\footnote{452}{Margareta Jolly, “After Feminism: Pat Barker, Penelope Lively and the Contemporary Novel” in Alan Sinfield and Alistair Davies (eds.), British Culture of the Postwar (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 65, 66.} Indeed, a more conservative version of Freudian criticism has even gone so far as to read Barker’s investment in Rivers as an instance of transference, with her own lack of a father directing this attention!\footnote{453}{Anne M. Wyatt, “Headhunters and Victims of War: W.H.R. Rivers and Pat Barker”, in Frederico Pereira (ed.), Proceedings of the 13th International Conference on Literature and Psychoanalysis (Lisbon: Instituto Superior, 1997).}

Barker has made no secret of her intellectual debt to Freud and the work of subsequent psychoanalysts, but I think this reading of her work irons out some of the complexities that enliven its realism. Firstly, Rivers was far from the tame follower of Freud Showalter suggests; his essays on dream analysis were conceived as, in part, a polemic against the Freudian method. Rivers records his interest in war trauma as due, in a large part, to what he saw as the ways it cast doubt on the wish-fulfillment thesis Freud had earlier advanced, where traumatic dreams represented coded expressions of desire and other unconscious factors.\footnote{454}{See W. H. R. Rivers, Conflict and Dream (London: Keegan, Paul, Trench, Trubner, 1923), pp. 66 – 68.} But, more importantly for my purposes, the debates in Regeneration and the other novels, far from didactically illustrating certain theses from either thinkers’ theories, perform the far more
aesthetically original task of recreating some of the intellectual atmosphere of the
time. Figures who now, like Rivers himself, are relegated to minor places in
intellectual history had, during the war and after it, popular influence and following
now all too easy to forget. As recent research in sexology has demonstrated, most
homosexual self-description between the two world wars used the vocabulary of
Havelock Ellis, and there was a “general reluctance of learned homosexuals in
interwar Britain to adopt a Freudian subject position.” The originality of Barker’s
treatment of the theme of madness lies in her resolute historicising impulse, not in her
ability to fictionally adjudicate between competing schools.

A useful example of Barker’s method is her representation of what Rivers identifies
as the “suicide dream.” In his case studies Rivers narrates a dream recorded for him
by a patient he labels “Captain.” In the dream, the Captain is delivering a speech
when the following bizarre events occur:

I resumed: “We must continue to struggle to the last man. Better let us die than lose our
manhood and independence and become the slaves of an alien people.”

The man in the seat [the Captain’s double] seemed to become intensely depressed as
I said these words. Yet, though he approved, my words seemed to arouse some dissent in other
parts of the hall, and it was then that I noticed that there were two stewards, one at each exit.
The steward on my left was a Canadian with the face of my father-in-law, and the man on my
right was Dr. X, wearing his post-mortem apron and gloves. I continued pointing out how
everything depends upon our putting out our mightiest fight. The man in my chair cheered and
his eyes shone.

“Silence there,” threatened the Canadian, “or I’ll deal with you,” as he glanced at the
man in my chair. “I’ll give you a taste of this,” and he held up a stick towards the man. Then I
noticed that a snake was crawling up the stick and it seemed to menace the man in my seat. I
was filled with horror, and then I noticed the man in my chair had changed.456

Rivers then goes on to analyse this dream as an illustration of his thesis that dreams
act as an attempted meditation on or resolution of conflict: the snake, it turns out,
“was a symbol of Medicine, with which his wife’s people were, in fact, threatening”
the Captain. Traumatic trench experience meant he became hysterical at the sight of

455 Chris Waters, “Havelock Ellis, Sigmund Freud and the State: Discourse of Homosexual Identity in
Interwar Britain” in Bland and Doan (eds.), Sexology in Culture, p. 167.
discussion of the “Suicide Dream” is pp. 22 – 37.
blood and so could no longer practice medicine.\textsuperscript{457} After using the dream to score a few shots against Freud’s notions of displacement and wish-fulfillment, Rivers goes on to use elements from the dream to elaborate his own scheme.\textsuperscript{458} In her use of this material Barker takes what are the minor details of a half-forgotten psychological work and transforms them to produce a widened sense of the intellectual atmosphere and currents of debate at the time. After recounting another of his dreams, Barker has the Captain (called Anderson in \textit{Regeneration}) speculate on the dream in his therapy session.

“What was the most frightening part of the dream?”

“The snake.”

A long silence.

“Do you often dream about snakes?”

“Yes.”

Another long silence. “Well, go on then,” Anderson exploded at last. “That’s what you Freudian Johnnies are on about all the time, isn’t it? Nudity, snakes, corsets. You might at least try to look grateful, Rivers. It’s a gift.”

“I’d think if I’d made any association at all with the snake – and after all what possible relevance can my associations have? – it was probably with the one that’s crawling up your lapel.”

Anderson looked down at the caduceus badge of the RAMC which he wore on his tunic, and then across at the same badge on Rivers’s tunic.\textsuperscript{459}

In poignant details like these Barker, far from using her source material to illustrate some particular point of psychoanalysis, offers instead a recreation of the intellectual atmosphere and of the crises and shifting theoretical orthodoxies of the time. Anderson’s half-formed impressions of Freudianism – as likely garnered from the popular press and medical prejudice as any close reading – widens our sense of the period and of its anxieties and attitudes in relation to dreams and madness.

Alongside this imaginative reworking of the historical record, Barker makes stunning use of that old realist staple – the meeting or debate – to throw alternative views and competing ideological tendencies against each other. Military and institutional life is

\textsuperscript{457} Ibid., p. 25.
\textsuperscript{458} Ibid., pp. 30 – 31.
\textsuperscript{459} \textit{Regeneration}, p. 29.
the perfect vehicle for these sorts of representations: after each board review hearing, in which a panel of officials decide whether Craiglockhart’s patients are fit to return to active service, Barker has the various panel members debate the symptoms and pathology of shell shock. By incorporating these moments she can, in full accordance with the plausibility clause of Foley’s “mimetic contract”, depict the range of intellectual views competing at the time, from militaristic opposition to shell-shock as glorified shirking all the way through to more progressive thinking influenced by Freud, Adler and others. Rivers is also offered ample opportunities to discuss his work with medical colleagues and friends from Cambridge: still more chances to sketch the intellectual mood of the war. Locating her action in a mental asylum has other representational advantages. Barker’s characters are able to do very little other than talk, play golf and display their own variety of neurotic symptom, offering Barker a full range of opportunities to both depict shell-shock as it occurred and offer varying strands of running internal narrational commentary on its causes and impact. What Sassoon calls “Dottyville” is a realist’s feast for location.

None of this is to suggest, of course, that the trilogy is a mere record or sorting through of the Craiglockhart archive; Barker, like any author, manipulates her material for its narrative flow and, as Anne Whitehead has suggested, performs subtle reworkings of Sassoon’s stated decision to return to the front in order for his actions to draw out more of Rivers’ dream theories. The thoroughness with which she incorporates these moments of speculation and commentary into her narrative is the key, however. In weaving her subjects’ contemporary intellectual debates into her own texts Barker offers a re-creation of the atmosphere surrounding one of the central debates in twentieth-century psychology. The material may be “realistic” here, in the sense that it conforms to the historical record, but what is distinctive about Barker’s realism is, however, the ways in which she transforms this material into an imaginative and fictional experience. Too much discursive plodding, too many details and expositions by Rivers, and the novelty of the novels is threatened: what Barker mobilises these discussions for is not their own documentation but, instead, their

ability to challenge and re-work our own imaginative view of the war and its social impact.

The Cult of the Clitoris: Moral Panic and Masculinity

If shell-shock and its treatment has long been a staple concern of commentary about and recreation of the First World War, Barker’s trilogy demonstrates the innovative potential of contemporary realism by using this more familiar territory as a launching pad for speculation on and recreation of debates much less widely known. One of the most important of these is the sexual panic mobilised by ruling class supporters of the war to maintain the war effort and, alongside them, the shifting class bases of sexuality and sexual identity opened by war experience.

The Regeneration trilogy’s interest in these aspects of war experience marks it as a part of a wider shift occurring in the scholarly literature. As Angela K. Smith has noted, feminist scholarship in the 1990s focussed on women’s experience of war as this was an area for study which, until that point, had been excluded from war studies. But women’s exclusion on the basis of gender does not mean men were included on the basis of theirs; it was, rather, assumed. New scholarship, Smith suggests, needs to see gender and a process of “gendering” at work in both representations.462 As Trudi Tate observes, “the Great War was not simply a ‘crisis’ of masculinity; rather, it made visible – and intensified – differences within masculinity at this point.”463 Barker’s trilogy, by unpacking some of these differences made visible, and placing them within the interpretive framework of class, expands her readers’ understanding of the dynamics at work in the war. While some of her admirers read the trilogy as a denunciation of “how patriarchal constructions of masculinity colonize men’s subjectivity”464 I think Barker is carrying out a much more complex and useful operation. In examining how the war acted to both restrict and liberate various sexual identities and activities, how sexuality was used by both the nation’s rulers and its

working class, Barker restores to historical complexity a little studied aspect of the war. She does this through her use of Prior to examine shifting developments in masculinity, her representation of working-class women, and her “rediscovery” or return to representation of the trial of Noel Pemberton Billing.

Indeed, this aspect of the trilogy is the one that has proved too ideologically hot for handling in its more mainstream reception. The excerpts from the trilogy included in a modern textbook on the war in literature betray none of the work’s recurrent concern with sexuality, and Gillies MacKinnon’s screen version Regeneration (1997), as well as narrowing the range of Prior’s objects of desire considerably, wholly heterosexualises him as a character.

Billy Prior is the most obvious force for the trilogy’s exploration of the evolution of sexuality in the war. Energetically bisexual, Prior’s position as an outsider or “temporary gentleman” within the officer class allows Barker to have him at once participate in and observe with some detachment the sexual regimes of the time. Prior, in a move which led various Casaubons to deny Barker the status of realism, tells Rivers that the experience of going over the top feels “sexy,” and his therapy is marked by a constant undertone of sexual aggression. Prior’s various sexual encounters are used by Barker as a device to illumine wider social relations. His romantic association with Sarah Lumb, a munitions factory worker, allows the narrative to travel into the lives of the Northern working class. His liaisons with Charles Manning, a middle-class officer also being treated by Rivers, fuse Barker’s twinned concerns of shifting sexual regulations and class relations:

Prior ran his fingers through his cropped hair till it stood up in spikes, lit a cigarette, rolled it in a particular way along his bottom lip, and smiled. He’d transformed himself into the sort of working-class boy Manning would think it was alright to fuck. A sort of seminal spittoon. And

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466 For this, and many other reasons, I share Sara Martin’s judgement that the film is “reduced to being an eloquent illustration of its literary source rather than an independent work of art”, “Regenerating the War Movie: Pat Barker’s Regeneration According to Gillies MacKinnon”, Literature Film Quarterly, vol. 30, no. 2, 2002, p. 98.
467 Regeneration, p. 78. The first usage of “sexy” is not recorded – and then only as “engrossed in or concerned with sex” – until 1928 (this according to the Chambers dictionary of etymology), a slip noted by Ben Shephard, “Digging up the Past”, Times Literary Supplement, no. 4851, 1996.
it worked. Manning’s eyes grew dark as his pupils flared. Bending over him, Prior put his hand between his legs, thinking he’d probably never felt a spurt of purer class antagonism than he felt at that moment. He roughened his accent. “A’ right?”

Between these two ongoing relationships lie a whole range of encounters – with prostitutes, French teenagers, fantasies of soldiers and so on – Prior’s sexual experience spills over into representation of new areas of the social whole. Prior’s sexuality is as much a narrative device as it is an object for analysis.

One of the most important areas for representation Prior opens up is that of the shifts in women’s sexuality occasioned by the war. Prior’s relationship with Sarah Lamb – newly economically independent due to the high wages associated with munitions work – allows Barker the chance to stage all sorts of conflicts between an older economy of women’s sexuality and its emergent post-war (relative) independence. Sarah’s mother, who always wore black “less in mourning for her husband – if she’d ever had one – than because black enabled an air of awesome respectability to be maintained at minimal cost” stands in for pre-war working-class regulations of sexuality. Mrs. Lumb argues for strict self-control and abstinence in order to win a husband, noting that “no man likes to think he’s sliding in on another man’s leavings.” Sarah, in contrast, is given opportunities to voice the ambitions of working women newly independent through the war effort. While this is an area of social life that has, in recent years at least, received scholarly attention, Barker’s aesthetic innovation has been, through Prior as connecting figure, her use of relationships to connect the front line and the domestic sphere. Earlier fictions of war have tended to focus on one of these zones at the expense of the other in a fashion that, although it might offer successful renditions of partial aspects of the social, fails to suggest links and connecting strands. So in Sebastian Faulks’ *Birdsong* the depiction of the pre-war affair never really manages to raise itself above the level of literary erotica, while, in the case of literature of the Second World War, Angela Huth’s excellent *Land Girls* (1998) confines itself to a determinedly separate sphere for representation. Sarah and Prior’s relationship draws these two areas together,

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468 *The Eye in the Door*, p. 11.
469 *The Ghost Road*, p. 65.
470 *Regeneration*, p. 194.
forcing the reader to see the “Home Front”, and its sexual arrangements, in the context of total war.

Of course, any discussion of women’s sexuality and shifts in its organisation is always already a discussion of women’s oppression and women’s space for self-organisation. The trilogy uses Sarah’s conversations with work-mates to extend our sense of these dynamics. The loss of a husband is not always something to mourn:

Lizzie’s yellow face showed two bright spots of colour on the cheekbones. “Do you know what happened on August 4th 1914?”

Sarah opened her mouth.

“I’ll tell you what happened. Peace broke out. The only little bit of peace I’ve ever had. No, I don’t want him back. I don’t want him back on leave. I don’t want him back when it’s over. As far as I’m concerned the Kaiser can keep him.” She lowered her chin, brooding. “I’ll tell you what I’m going to do. I’m going to get meself some false teeth, and I’m going to have a bloody good time.”

As Lizzie’s decision to get false teeth suggests, Barker’s uncompromising depiction of the realities of women’s oppression (the dangers of childbirth, domestic violence, sexual assault, poor work conditions and so on) does not edit out the realities of women’s agency either. This work conversation is part of a pointed riposte aimed at the vulgar class snobbery and reactionary elitism of T.S. and Vivien Eliot in The Waste Land. “The money he gave you / To get yourself some teeth” is not Barker’s only rewriting; she also moves Eliot’s “HURRY UP PLEASE IT’S TIME” from the mouth of a publican to that of the supervisor. The Eliots wrote the voices of women in wartime as slightly disgusted middle-class observers peering in but Barker, as a working-class woman and a realist, renders her female characters as the subjects of their own destiny and not just its objects.

The trilogy’s most dramatic representations of the question of sexuality, though, centre on the bizarre libel trial of maverick M.P. Noel Pemberton Billing. Sassoon and Owen’s homosexuality allow Barker to make the persecution of deviance a topic for

471 Regeneration, p. 110.
reflection throughout the novel. Rivers speculates on the increased persecution of homosexuals during the war:

Sassoon looked downcast. “I thought things were getting better.”

“I think they were. Before the war. Slightly. But it’s not very likely, is it, that any movement towards greater tolerance would persist in wartime? After all, in war, you’ve got this enormous emphasis on love between men – comradeship – and everybody approves. But at the same time there’s always this little niggle of anxiety. Is it the right kind of love? Well, one of the ways you make sure it’s the right kind is to make it crystal clear what the penalties for the other kind are.” He looked at Sassoon. “One of the reasons I’m so glad you’ve decided to go back. It’s not just police activity. It’s the whole atmosphere at the moment. There’s an MP called Pemberton Billing. I don’t know whether you’ve heard of him.

Sassoon shook his head. “I don’t think so.”

“Well, he’s going around London claiming to know of the existence of a German Black Book containing the names of 47 000 eminent people whose private lives make their loyalty to their country suspect.”

Contemporary accounts associated the war with major shifts in sexual behaviour. Magnus Hirschfeld claimed that “London became a veritable Sodom” where “the sexual hunger of soldiers’ wives…very frequently led to pseudo-homosexual actions between women” and the *Weekly Dispatch* in the middle of 1918 reported that “the air is electric with this current of abnormal sexuality…men and women who led sober lives in 1914 have abandoned themselves in many cases to orgies.” Whatever the exaggerations of newspaper reports, the war did lead to an enormous sexualisation of ordinary language. As Paul Fussell points out, it is difficult to imagine anyone after 1918 repeating the intensely religious Kathleen Isherwood’s self-description of decorating a Christmas Tree as “bending over an erection” or the army issuing instructions in World War Two that no one was to “practice intercourse of any kind with Germans.” Barker documents this cultural shift through the Pemberton Billing trial and, in the process, expands our sense of the war by drawing attention to the sorts of sinister forces at work in war mobilisation more mainstream history has found it convenient to forget.

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473 Regeneration, p. 204.
474 Both quoted in Danielle Thornton, “Sex Scandal as Propaganda”, p. 28.
475 Both of these quotes are taken from Fussell, The Great War and Modern Memory, p. 190.
The trial is such an odd mixture of the sensational and the commonplace it seems to bear out Buchan’s claim for melodrama as the “prosiest realism.” In anticipation of relative ignorance on her readers’ part, Barker includes several précis of the case within the trilogy. She also reproduces contemporary press reports, especially from Pemberton Billing’s own *Vigilante* (later *The Imperialist*):

**THE CULT OF THE CLITORIS**

To be a member of Maud Allen’s [sic] private performance in Oscar Wilde’s *Salome* one has to apply to a Miss Valetta, of 9 Duke Street, Adelphi, WC. If Scotland Yard were to seize the list of these members I have no doubt they would secure the names of several thousand of the first 47 000.\(^{476}\)

Allan felt obliged to sue for libel and, in his defense, Pemberton Billing went on the offensive against both the “first 47 000” (of whom he accused the presiding judge – Lord Justice Darling – of being a prominent member) and against what he saw as deviancy and degeneracy in general. The trial combined the most up-to-date in sexology with the most outlandish prejudice. In his defense Pemberton Billing invoked the authority of Havelock Ellis and Kraft-Erbing as well as Lord Alfred Douglas, who labeled Wilde “the greatest force for evil of the last three hundred years.” His star defense witness, Harold Spencer (later certified insane), used the trial to give “free reign to his obsession with women who had hypertrophied and diseased clitorises and therefore could be satisfied only by bull elephants” while also alleging an affair between Maud Allan and Asquith’s wife.\(^{477}\)

Barker’s skillful inclusion of all this information and historical background as part of her already complex narrative structure is impressive enough and, on its own, would be ample evidence of the trilogy’s extension and development of the range of the novel and realism on a purely quantitative level: it’s hard to imagine another contemporary novel that packs in as much neglected historical information. But, even more impressively, Barker uses this raw historical material to conduct an investigation into the prosecution of this campaign of paranoia and its impact. Manning receives

\(^{476}\) *The Eye in the Door*, p. 22.

\(^{477}\) “Author’s Note”, *The Eye in the Door*, p. 279. This account of the trial draws on the research of Thornton and Bland, both cited above. See also Felix Cherniavsky, *The Salome Dancer: the Life and Times of Maud Allan* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1991) and Philip Hoare, *Wilde’s Last Stand: Decadence, Conspiracy and the First World War* (London: Duckworth, 1997).
anonymous threats and clippings in the post, giving Barker an opportunity to reproduce material from The Vigilante verbatim without breaking the mimetic contract. Both he and Prior are stalked and followed throughout The Eye in the Door, adding to its sense of paranoia and of vast, intricate conspiracies. Both Sassoon and the fictional Manning are indirectly connected to the Robert Ross circle, allowing the narrative to include both the Salome performance and the complex subculture of homosexual London.\footnote{The Eye in the Door, pp. 77 – 82. On homosexual London during the war see Matt Houldbrook’s thorough study, Queer London: Perils and Pleasures in the Sexual Metropolis (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).} The trial studies conversations and whispered asides in the novel like an obsession and, in a particularly neat arrangement, allows Barker to incorporate literary criticism within her own text. Rivers and Manning discuss Salome in therapy:

[there is] anxiety. So to put on a play by a known homosexual in which a woman kisses a man’s severed head…”

“I talked about the trial to Jane [Manning]. I said I thought the real target was Ross, and one or two others, and she said of course I did…She says the…sentimentality about the role women are playing – doing their bit and all that – really masks a kind of deep-rooted fear that they’re getting out of line. She thinks pillorying Maud Allan is actually a way of teaching them a lesson. Not just lesbians. All women…”

“What do you think about that?”

“I think it’s a bit naïve. I think it ignores Wilde’s identification with Salome. He isn’t saying women like this have to be destroyed. He’s saying people like me have to be destroyed. And how right he was. Is.”

This was all very well, Rivers thought, but Manning was ill, and it was not literary discussion that was going to cure him.\footnote{The Eye in the Door, pp. 156 – 157.}

Rivers’ dismissal of literary discussion is, I suspect, placed here precisely to draw our attention towards Manning’s speculations: as both narrative treatment, representation and analysis of shifting sexual regulation in the war it is hard to think of a document as ambitious and wide-ranging as The Eye in the Door.

Representing Class
History, as they say, is written by the victors and, from a Marxist perspective, this saying takes on an added tragic weight when one recalls that the losers of a particular war are just as likely to be members of the working class in the “winning” country as they are those of the defeated. The extent of pre- and post-war political and industrial upheaval was such that historians have been unable to ignore it, but most representations of the war have kept their attention firmly at the front, thus conveniently writing out and repressing histories of dissent and division at home.\(^{480}\) The popular imagination of the war, which has changed little in the past eighty years,\(^{481}\) systematically downplays or distorts the historical reality. There was significant class struggle on the home front, both of an economic kind and as part of wider anti-war activity. Contrary to what Samuel Hynes has called the “War Myth” of anti-war sentiment emerging only through poets experiencing trench life as a “catalyst for opposition”\(^{482}\) there were, from the beginning, currents of anti-war feeling and activity within the British working class. Workers in 15% of industry struck in 1914 immediately after the passing of the Defense of the Realm Act, and networks of syndicalists, Independent Labour Party socialists and others continued agitation throughout the war.\(^{483}\) Barker’s realism sets itself the task of drawing these hitherto neglected and dissenting aspects of the historical record into the realm of representation, and of restoring the proper balance between internal dissent and the external Front.

As with her treatment of therapy, Barker eases the reader into her representations of anti-war activity, covering the familiar ground of middle-class opposition (Bertrand Russell, Ottoline Morrell, Sassoon himself) in *Regeneration* before, in *The Eye in the Door*, introducing sub-plot lines offering narratives of working class opposition; radical Suffragettes, syndicalist union leaders and pacifists involved in anti-war agitation. Her characters Beattie Roper and her daughters – childhood acquaintances of Prior now imprisoned on frame-up charges for conspiring to poison Lloyd George

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482 Ibid., p. 81.

and their situation are based on the historical “poison plot” of 1917, as a result of which socialist-feminist Alice Wheeldon was gaolèd on identical charges.\footnote{See Sheila Rowbotham, \textit{Friends of Alice Wheeldon} (London: Pluto, 1986).} By locating the Roper plot line in the North Barker extends the scope of representation, including radical representation: until very recently scholarship of the suffrage movement has been focussed on London at the expense of what is sometimes called “regional” England.\footnote{But now see Jill Liddington, \textit{Rebel Girls: Their Fight for the Vote} (London: Virago, 2006)} Barker adds to the historical detail of the case a vast web of conspiracy and sleaze: Prior, in his role in the Ministry of Munitions, is implicated in a piece of class-treachery by arranging the capture of his childhood friend (and current syndicalist militant) Mac. Evidence for the Roper case has been obtained in suspicious circumstances by a shady villain with the marvelous name of Spragge (Barker has well-nigh Dickensian fun with his nastiness) and the recurrent intrusion of the Pemberton Billing trial all combine to suggest a society descending into collective hysteria. This dramatic heightening of the facts insists on being read in systemic terms, as a critique of the whole method of organisation that allows a society to mobilise for war, and is why I think we must reject those readings which would reduce the trilogy to a personal story or appeal for classless or context-less emotionalism. For these reasons Laurie Vickroy seems mistaken when she claims that in the trilogy Barker is “advocating that wars might be curtailed if the human consequences of war experience took priority over conceptualisation and language which are dissociated from human suffering.”\footnote{Laurie Vickroy, “A Legacy of Pacifism: Virginia Woolf and Pat Barker”, \textit{Women and Language}, vol. 27, no. 2, 2004, p. 45.} The trilogy’s emphasis points in the opposition direction. By emphasizing sinister connections and links these sub-plots point, time and again, to class and class structure as organising principles of war-time society and the kind of oppression it entails, and away from the idea of these individual cruelties as matters of mere personal feeling. A catalyst cannot draw out a change that was not going to occur and, in a similar manner, the war acts only on social forces already at work. “The conceit of ‘regeneration’,” as Peter Hitchcock insightfully observes, “is clearly that it depends on something that has already been generated, overdetermined, produced. It is not war that fashions a subject for
annihilation, but the social that performs this task, and this is the process of memory that Barker is interested in writing into history.”

Barker has an expert eye for symbolic detail too. Heattie Roper is kept in a cell with an “eye in the door,” a painted eye covering the door’s peep-hole, which means she can never tell if a warden is looking in on her or not. This is an accurate historical detail of how political prisoners were held, but is also an apt image of the entire social organisation of total war and, at the same time, reminds us of Foucault’s use of the image of the Panopticon as a metaphor for the development of modern regimes of punishment and control. In alluding to Prior’s front-line trench trauma (his mutism is precipitated when, in collecting the remains of a soldier he uncovers his eye and ponders “what am I supposed to do with this gob-stopper?”), this detail nicely connects the domestic and the soldiers’ sphere.

Again, Prior is central to Barker’s representations of class and, crucially, class relations. Not content with expanding representation to new and unexplored areas of the past, Barker also sets herself the more ambitious project of offering representations of class at its most significant. Class in the trilogy is, through Prior, presented as a relational, antagonistic and connecting force between social groups, and not merely as the record of the “voice” of one or other class fraction. Barker told Sharon Monteith she arranged Prior as “a way for the two worlds [the working class and the ruling class] to confront one another, rather than abandoning one and concentrating entirely on the other.” As an upwardly mobile “temporary gentleman,” what Prior loses in a sense of class location and solidarity he gains in his detached ability to drift between both worlds. Lynda Prescott suggests he is like “an older, military version of the twentieth century ‘scholarship boy’, whose critical intelligence is accompanied by a qualified emotional detachment from his class.”

489 Regeneration, p. 103.
490 Monteith, Pat Barker, p. 65.
This comparison captures some of Prior’s narrational uses but misses the energy his class *antagonism* brings to the trilogy. In his hatred for both his class-conscious unionist father and the public schoolboy officers his work brings him into contact with, Prior’s interrogative approach sends off sparks of class insight and analysis in both directions. When Barker records Rivers’ first impressions of Prior as “a Northern accent, not ungrammatical, but with the vowel sounds distinctly flattened, and the faintest trace of sibilance” it is clear this is a trilogy concerned with the full complexity of class attentiveness and relations. Those critics who claim that “Prior is not a convincing character since it is obvious that his role is to illustrate the issues of class, gender and sexuality which the author aims to explore” reveal more about their own class prejudices than they do about the novels being discussed. The “issues of class, gender and sexuality” are, for many millions of us, the issues that make up being alive, and it is an odd criticism indeed that sees them as somehow detracting from a character’s convincing status.

**Deconstructing the Home Front**

These empirical details I have listed so far remain, however, only so many instances of interesting material Barker has managed to gather together. Their full significance becomes clear only when considered against the trilogy’s primary innovation: its deconstruction of the division of the home front and the trenches and, as part of this, the representational centrality this deconstruction gives to the problem of class relations. “Because class is a relational (and conflicting) social order”, Raymond Williams argues, “the representation of a class in isolation (the ‘working class novel’) is one-sided and distorting. Class means ’social relationships within a whole social order.’” Whereas each of the moments I have considered above – of madness, class and sexuality – are of interest on their own, their full aesthetic significance for realism becomes clear when they are considered together. While the proceeding sections of this chapter have documented empirically what is at work in Barker’s trilogy, I want here to consider the relations between these aspects against the background of the two

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492 *Regeneration*, p. 49.
most successful war novels of modernism and realism so far; Ford Madox Ford’s *Parade’s End* tetralogy and Lewis Grassic Gibbon’s *A Scot’s Quair* trilogy. In placing Barker’s war trilogy alongside other successful examples of the genre we can gain a sense of the ways in which her documentation of class in the war marks a decisive shift. This comparison is one long overdue; where there already exists ample Barker scholarship documenting her relationship to the work of Sassoon, Owen and Graves, no serious critical approaches have tried to locate her work within the wider field of World War One literature and literary responses.\(^495\)

Of course, a novel can take as its starting point a particular war without becoming a war novel: Evelyn Waugh’s *Sword of Honour* trilogy may be set during World War Two but its prime vocation is more that of reasserting a variant strain of English conservatism – Waugh’s own, reactionary middle-class Catholicism – than it is with mapping out the significance of the War itself. Equally, Dick Wolf’s enormously successful *Law and Order* television series routinely incorporates details of the Iraq War into its plot lines, but does so in order to give killers’ motivations, not in order to fathom the tragedy of Iraq. Ford and Gibbon are useful points of comparison here because they represent successful examples of works attempting the exact opposite of Barker’s trilogy: detailed portraits and surveys of social classes in isolation.

Ford Madox Ford’s material is the English ruling class, and his primary character – England’s “last Tory” – stands in for the displacement and decay of a particular fraction of this class. Ford’s literary modernism – what he called his “impressionism” or “kaleidoscope” technique – is as attuned as Barker’s realism to the enormous difficulties in representing a break as momentous as the war.\(^496\) *Parade’s End* is sensitive to the shifting politics of gender within the ranks of its own class and, as Davinda Pines persuasively argues, Ford’s treatment of the misery of the Tietjens’

\(^{495}\) Ronald Paul “In Pastoral Fields: the *Regeneration* Trilogy and Class First World War Fiction” in Sharon Monteith et. al. *Critical Perspectives on Pat Barker*, makes no mention of Ford’s classic trilogy, while Dennis Brown, “Remains of the Day: Tietjens the Englishman” in Robert Hampton and Max Saunders (eds.), *Ford Madox Ford’s Modernity* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2003) mentions *Regeneration* in passing (p. 165) but does not seriously discuss the trilogy. The utter absence of any consideration of *A Scot’s Quair* as a war novel in scholarship south of the border is as predictable as it is disappointing.

marriage, and of Christopher’s chances of happiness with Suffragette Valentine Wannop, acts as an intervention into contemporary debates about the status of divorce laws.\textsuperscript{497} But \textit{Parade’s End}’s resolute exclusion of the working class and working-class experience acts as an enormous break on its capacity to generate reliable information on the full impact of the war. Ford’s representations of a particular class fraction’s sense of loss, and the literary innovations this involves, are extraordinary but, for all their skill, are forced into a drastically reductive representation of the war and, by the final \textit{Last Post} (1928) can offer nothing but a sense of loss and finality. Groby Great Tree has been felled, Mark Tietjens silenced and Christopher Tietjens, in a slightly heavy-handed moment, reduced to selling England’s “heritage” (in the form of high-class furniture) to wealthy but uncultured Americans. The war in \textit{Parade’s End} acts as a total break and sense of an ending but, with the Tietjens’ great social antagonists reduced to bit roles and passing detail, the tetralogy never establishes representations of the war and class with any explanatory power.

If Ford can see only a lost past, Gibbon’s exclusive focus on the working class forces him into an equally limiting and relentless futurity. In \textit{A Scot’s Quair} – one of the great realist novels of the twentieth century and, south of the border at least, one of the most unjustly neglected – the war acts as a wholly outside influence, impacting on the lives of working-class women in Aberdeenshire but never figuring directly in the novel itself. Gibbon’s concern is the impact of the war and its aftermath more than the immediate experience of conflict. Chris Tavendale’s first husband is executed for cowardice during the war and her second dies, from the after-effects of being gassed in the trenches, just after the defeat of the General Strike in 1926, but nowhere does the war itself appear. Again, Gibbon’s exclusive focus on the life of one class instead of on the relational process that is class itself prevents his trilogy from breaking out of this representational dilemma. For all his considerable skill at representing the lives of the working people of Kincardineshire, Gibbon can never figure the world-historical events he so clearly has as his targets as anything other than external disasters wholly alien to the deeper patterns of working Scots’ lives. The impact of the war is felt everywhere through \textit{A Scot’s Quair} and yet, because it remains so determinedly concerned with the sphere of the domestic and the female, remains oddly diffuse and

\textsuperscript{497} See Davida Pines, \textit{The Marriage Paradox: Modernist Novels and the Cultural Imperative to Marry} (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2006), pp. 50 - 54.
unfocussed. For all his – historically necessary and undeniably heroic – effort at recovering repressed experience, Gibbon’s trilogy ends up enacting a complex process of evasion and repression. If the war is everywhere in a novel concerned wholly with the home front it remains for the reader strangely nowhere.

It is against the achievement of these two great works that Barker’s own approach becomes clear. My earlier discussions of the determinate instances of her representation of class – in the hospital, the trenches and the gentleman’s clubs of Manning and the persecution of homosexuality – were kept separate in order to demonstrate the full complexity at work in each of Barker’s operations. But actual experience of reading the trilogy fuses and blends these three representations and it is this process of reading we ought now to remember. Far from keeping the domestic sphere and the home front, or the ruling class and the working class, in separate sphere the trilogy brings them into contact with each other. The reader first learns of the working-class Prior away from the front and in the company of both officers and women; first hears about the experiences of the front line and the trenches through the mediating distance of the mental hospital and the process of treatment; first encounters the reality of women’s work through representations of a munitions factory central to the smooth operation of war activity in France. The Regeneration trilogy implicates each of its areas of representation in each other.

Barker’s mutual implications and crossovers not only draw out the complexities of class relations and antagonisms – and here Prior is both the central character and plot device – but also provide the reader with crucial insights into the operations and organization of the war. Parade’s End provides its representations of one particular class fraction – Yorkshire Tories – in all its pointillist brilliance only at the expense of a deeper repression and denial of working-class experience. A Scot’s Quair draws out these neglected representations of workers and workers’ lives only through a repression of a thoroughly utopian kind, where contending classes and class conflict make only sporadic and inessential appearance. What Barker achieves, through her

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498 The immediate objection - that Grey Granite (1934) - has as its immediate focus a strike does not change my formulation here. Gibbon’s treatment of the strike is abstract and secondary; for all Ewan Tavendale’s importance, the reader is given the overwhelming bulk of her information through Chris’ consciousness and perspective, one quite foreign to the aims of the strike movement.
strategy of mutual implication, is at once representation and explanatory force. Her use of omniscient narration is crucial here: each of the characters are given opportunities to reflect upon their lives and the forces working on them in ways that draw out conflict and social pressures and shifts. Rivers on Sassoon; Sassoon on Owen; Sarah on Prior; Prior on Manning; Manning on Rivers; the three novels are interspersed with these moments of reflection and speculation that gesture towards areas for further exploration.

It is no accident, of course, that Barker should fill so much of her narrative with moments of therapy and consultation, when psychoanalysis has earned its reputation as the great narrative of uncovering hidden relationships and repressed motivations. This useful formal device – allowing the novels to speculate without losing their narrative structure and drive – harks back to Barker’s earlier fiction, with its use of women’s conversations as the vehicle for authorial comment and intervention.

**Formal Innovation**

In addition to these representational advances on the level of content, Barker’s success can be measured by the skill with which she manipulates the conventions of realism at the level of form. These are extraordinarily complex and well organised novels, arranging pairings of Rivers’ patients to illuminate and reflect one another, paralleling sacrifices and sufferings between officers and using analogy as a “key method to understanding.”499 The novels’ focus on significant detail – on names, the yellow skin of the munition workers, the routines of trench life – is an exciting contemporary reinterpretation of the realist demand for the novel to be “fraught with background”, just as Barker’s confident use of Northern speech and working-class accents fill the text with what Auerbach calls “the concrete vigour of the venacular.”500 When those hostile to realism write of “Pat Barker’s literary conservatism” they make the mistake of imagining innovation can go only one

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way.\textsuperscript{501} In reinvigorating and experimenting within the realist form Barker has produced a trilogy as adventurous and expansive as any attack on the genre of the last ten years. A. S. Byatt encountered Barker’s choice of realism as “an act of shocking rebellion against current orthodoxies”\textsuperscript{502} and part of this “shocking rebellion” is surely the sense that Barker’s realism, which at first seems so conventional, carries within it so much aesthetic innovation.

I do not mean, naturally, to suggest that the \textit{Regeneration} trilogy is a complete success or that, somehow through aesthetic magic, Barker has managed to manipulate such difficult material without any problems. The final sections of \textit{The Ghost Road} teeter and strain under the enormous weight of the historical material Barker has challenged herself to represent. As the war staggers towards its conclusion Barker breaks the “mimetic contract” by arranging Prior’s thoughts in diary form. Aside from the obvious question of how the diary survives intact when its author is so clearly destined to die, it seems inconceivable that Prior would risk the sort of frank and self-aware comments Barker provides him with. What was acceptable when rendered as free indirect discourse, with its convenient blurring of authorial and narrative voices, seems stark and unconvincing as part of a diary entry. There is also the matter of Prior’s homosexual activity. Barker’s roundabout way of justifying the incorporation of so much self-incriminating evidence (she includes a passage “which this morning [he reread], tore out and burned”) serves only to underline its out of place status in diary form.\textsuperscript{503} Equally, Rivers’ increasing flash-backs and recollections of Melanesia, and the fairly heavy-handed comparisons between a society sick from the excess of war and another sick from its absence, seem like nothing more than a narrative flinching, a turning away from the conflict’s sharpest intensities and crisis points. Whatever aesthetic failures or flaws the trilogy contains, though, serve, like the flaw in the Persian carpet, in the end as reminders of the work’s triumph as a whole.

I started this chapter by arguing for a turn away from the search for parallels and suggested, in keeping with \textit{The Political Unconscious}, that giving the past its proper

\textsuperscript{501} Margaretta Jolly, “After Feminism”, p. 77.
distance and space is an important scholarly project. But working towards that sense
of distance, and gaining an expanded sense of what it is exactly we are distant from, is
a pedagogical task with dynamics all of its own, and its learning trains readers to seek
out complexity in their own situation and time. Peter Middleton and Tim Woods
claim that Regeneration’s

brilliance lies in its treatment of the genealogy of modern beliefs about identity, memory and
history in the ad hoc military psychology used to try and deal with the physical, moral and
spiritual destruction of the First World War. 504

Just as we are different from our ancestors but inherit from them our own individual
set of genetic and medical curses, so, too, do the blockages we deal with today owe
some of their form to their origins in the crisis years of the First World War. The
Regeneration trilogy, in its careful attention to the details and implications, both well
known and hidden, of these crisis years illustrates both the imaginative power of the
realist project and some of its lessons for the contemporary reader. Realism suggests
not parallels but connections, crucial connections in “the single great collective
story”505 of class struggle and its antecedents, echoes from the past calling to the
present to pity them and to remember

…whatever mourns in man
Before the last sea and the hapless stars;
Whatever mourns when many leave these shores;
Whatever shares
The eternal reciprocity of tears. 506

504 Literatures of Memory: History, Time and Space in Postwar Writing (Manchester: Manchester
505 The Political Unconscious, p. 3.
Chapter Five  
Maurice Gee’s Marginal Realism

Is my life experience or spectacle?

*Sole Survivor*  

I am still prone to symbolic acts.

*Meg*

Maurice Gee’s *Plumb* trilogy displays so many of what are the generally accepted nervous tics and personality traits of the realist work that interpretation and explanation seem, at first, both gratuitous and redundant. When the objects of analysis themselves gesture so frantically towards significant features of history, labour at producing representations of well-rounded and believable characters engaged in lives expressing “typicality” for their historic periods, and when the triple narratives all concern themselves with personal growth and development of figures who, “sadder but wiser”, reflect on their state in the world, critical argument about the trilogy’s realist status or importance threatens to turn itself into mere dreary repetition and rewriting of the books themselves. When a critic as eminent as Robert Scholes can announce, over a generation ago now, that “realism is dead,” one is tempted to point to the *Plumb* trilogy and, like Johnson kicking the stone, refute him thus.

On any second reading, however, this too-ready identification and mutual confirmation of analysis and object transforms itself from an advantage into a critical problem or dilemma of a quite serious kind. If, as this dissertation argues, realism’s ongoing possibility and vocation lies in its “distinctive spirit...as the ambition to capture contemporary society in motion” then Gee’s initial aesthetic successes seem to indicate a much deeper political failure. The dominant critical account of the

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510 Roberto Schwarz, “A Brazilian Breakthrough”, *New Left Review*, II: 36, Nov/Dec 2005, p. 96. Schwarz’s discussion of Joaquim Maria Machado de Assis, a realist “who works with apparently anti-realist devices” (p. 92) and whose career “raises the question of what happens to realism in a peripheral country where the sequences of European social and literary history do not strictly apply, losing their inner necessity” (Ibid.) suggested many of my observations on Gee in what follows.
trilogy and, by implication, the dominant type of realism—subjects it has produced, has been one marked by an individualist perspective radically opposed to the sort of “demand of a collective life to come” which identifies “social collectivity as the crucial centre of any truly progressive and innovative political response to globalisation.”\textsuperscript{511} It is a meagre sort of victory for the proponent of realism if Gee’s trilogy illustrates the tradition’s formal resilience while at the same time emphasizing its inability to offer reliable information about or cohered political subjects for its own political situation. This is not to suggest that the \textit{Plumb} trilogy’s obsessive and recurrent concerns with the historical and with social change go unregistered. Gee is, indeed, described by one of New Zealand’s leading critics as one of that country’s “most significant social historians.”\textsuperscript{512} This recognition of history is hardly ever elaborated on, however, and is used instead as either illustration for more narrowly concerned political science or is rewritten, allegorically, to figure as part of a more familiar narrative of the “human condition” and its continual decline.\textsuperscript{513} Recognition of changes in the social world, when they do occur in the bulk of sympathetic Gee scholarship, take on an agonistic and wistful force. For Mark Williams, an enthusiast for what he calls Gee’s “richly detailed and extensive psychological realism”, Gee’s realist flair serves only to highlight deeper historical failure:

his effort of transparent representation [in novels of the 1970s, \textit{Plumb} and \textit{Meg}], the characteristic expression of Gee’s particular talent as a novelist, thwarted the full fictional potential of his work once the historical conditions that had supported realism had passed.\textsuperscript{514}

Even this sense of moments passed is unusual, however, and, for the most part, the trilogy’s social, political and historical concerns have been subsumed in the scholarly literature into discussions of what, in what is still the classic study of Gee, is presented as the novels’ true focus: “ironies of growth and judgement” in the

\textsuperscript{513} Mark Robert Lyons, “Gee’s New Zealand: in the Throes of Entropy” (unpublished MA thesis: Massey University, 2000) is an example of the latter approach, as is Margaret Clark “The Politics of Literature”, \textit{British Review of New Zealand Studies}, vol. 7, 1994, of the former.
\textsuperscript{514} Mark Williams, \textit{Leaving the Highway: Six Contemporary New Zealand Novelists} (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1990), pp. 172, 188.
individual subject’s personal development. Maurice Gee’s point of view is, Bill Manhire suggests, “that of the liberal humanist – at once resigned to and pleased by the mixed nature of the human condition.” When the trilogy is recognised as “a family chronicle which in turn implies something of a social history of New Zealand over ninety years” this social material is refigured in the dominant liberal humanist reception of Gee scholarship as a set of backdrops or staging devices for properly individual themes and events. Although his novels remain massively popular, critical interest in Gee has, over the last decade, declined, leaving the individualist criticism of previous decades still dominant.

This interpretive dilemma – if, in some sort of winner-loses logic, the discovery of a “pure” or “classic” realist aesthetic in the age of globalisation brings with it the discovery that these very texts have, to date, produced reading subjects of the kind Jameson and others tell us are not up to today’s tasks – can be solved, I want to argue here, not by refuting the individual claims or interpretive arguments of the current scholarship on Gee but, rather, by reversing their methodological assumptions. We can gain reliable information of the contemporary world system from the Plumb trilogy, and use these in turn to view the collective motion of History itself, if our focus of analysis shifts from the terrain of content to that of form. Through multiple indirections we can find directions out to our initial concerns, the questions of history and historical possibilities for action. Where the dominant criticism of the trilogy has been characterological in approach and ethically informed, this chapter structures itself around the suggestion that the aspects of history flaunted so brazenly by the text

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515 “Maurice Gee’s fiction always has two main subjects: human growth, its desirability and difficulty and cost, and the human habit of assessing other people and, all too often, dismissing them merely because they happen to have grown in ways different from ourselves…Gee’s work is concerned with the value and cost of extending individual possibility.” Brian Boyd, “Maurice Gee: Ironies of Growth and Judgement”, Islands, Oct-Jun 1981, p. 268.
can be properly unpacked only when placed as part of a much fuller discussion of the trilogy’s organising *formal logic* and this logic’s attendant strategies of containment.\footnote{This critical dominant is by no means confined to Gee scholarship. “the predominant form of literary and cultural criticism today…is what we will call *ethical* criticism…[the] dominant form taken by ethics in our own situation, which is essentially psychological and psychologizing.” Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* (1981; London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 44 – 5.} The *Plumb* trilogy is the oldest of the works considered as part of this study, and thus offers a fitting place to conclude. In reading these realisms of the recent past we are forced to consider Gee’s impact on three distinct groups of readers. There are those readers from the novel’s initial publication, our own contemporaries reading the novels and (significantly, as we shall see in a moment below) readers from both groups outside the New Zealand context. Each group of implied readers brings different sets of knowledge and assumptions to the trilogy. Previous chapters have read recent realisms against their own particular political and aesthetic challenges; concluding this study with the *Plumb* trilogy gives us the chance to reflect on a piece from early in the era of globalisation, a moment that is now itself at the same time as it is an aesthetic event also an historical object.

My alternative approach to the trilogy involves a set of four indirections. Firstly, there is the strictly *empirical* question of what historical raw material and information the trilogy offers to the reader and here, although I choose different moments for emphasis and interrogation, I am in closest agreement with the dominant ethical interpretation. Secondly, the way this information is recorded and organised – through the use of three narrators, split perspectives, the arrangement of time and so on – can then be discussed for the sort of *experiential* data it might provide, both for Lukácsian examples of typicality and for the less controversial sense of lived experience and historical detail. Thirdly, these two layers need to be incorporated into a discussion of the *ideological* aspects of the novels’ organisation and logic, their historical and political omissions, their strategies of containment, aporias, moments of coyness and occasional elision of authorial and narrative voices. Here I draw on the suggestive, if undeveloped, insights in Sarah Dugdale’s recent study. Finally and, for my purposes here at least, most importantly, these three elements all need to be subsumed in an approach to the trilogy from a quite different perspective. When we come to consider the trilogy as an essentially *methodological* work, reflecting on the aesthetic,
epistemological and political problems facing realism in the early phases of
globalisation, then *Plumb, Meg* and *Sole Survivor* take on, with the force of a shock,
quite new characteristics and significant moments. The structural omissions, which
earlier critics have commented on in passing but never dwelt upon in any detail, are
refigured here as part of the trilogy’s very system of information- and subject-
production, drawing attention to, and implicitly commenting on, the gaps and
incoherences enabling the liberalism staged within the narrative.

This critical realignment takes on an added importance when we consider *Plumb*
scholarship against the wider backdrop of recent interpretive struggles over the status
of historical literature produced in nations marked by the experience of white settler
colonialism and, as part of these discussions, the additional question as to whether
Gee’s trilogy qualifies as realism at all, or whether it might not better be situated as
part of a tradition of national allegory. National allegory is best understood as “a
formal attempt to bridge the increasing gap between the existential data of everyday
life within a given nation-state and the structural tendency of monopoly capitalism to
develop on a world-wide, essentially transnational, scale.”

Most critical attention to the concept of national allegory has been concerned with its political status in the so-called Third World.

All Third-World texts are necessarily…*national allegories*…even those which are seemingly
private and invested with a properly libidinal dynamic, necessarily project a political
dimension in the form of national allegory: *the story of the private individual destiny is always
an allegory of the embattled situation of the public Third-World culture and society.*

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If these claims about the embattled situation in “Third World” culture have been debated thoroughly, very little attention has been paid to Jameson’s earlier formulation of national allegory, according to which the conflict between existential data and the global system could apply to any national literature. To take the strain of this particular situation it might help, I want to assert and illustrate in what follows, by negotiating some interpretive path between the allegorical and realist. This third term I want to introduce here between First and Third world cultural situations in order to try and extract more readily usable information from the *Plumb* trilogy is an idea of *marginal realism*. White settler colonial states – Australia, Canada, New Zealand, South Africa – are, with the glaring exception of the United States, defined by a contradictory unity of economic and political independence and, until recently at least, locally promoted cultural and intellectual dependency and prostration. Far from enduring an “embattled situation”, the rulers of white-settler colonialisms have enjoyed political independence, prosperity and regional dominance as part of the so-called “First World” while, at the same time, emphasizing their cultural attachment to earlier imperial powers (in New Zealand’s case, Britain) through both ties of tradition and motivations of contemporary political alignment.  

Where, in Jameson’s scheme, the “Third World” text must, of necessity, be transformed into an allegory on the national situation, what I am calling here “marginal realism” faces its audience in a much more ambiguous position. Gee, and writers like him – for a New Zealander the names Owen Marshall, Maurice Shadbolt and, of course, Bill Pearson spring to mind – are marginal realists because they are not, by virtue of their “First World” economic and political dominance, forced into producing narratives of allegorical national situations and, in constructing texts not always-already framed within contexts of national political struggle, may instead present their works as “straight” realisms to a cosmopolitan audience. At the same time, however, and paradoxically, the option of this initial Western literary

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522 This is why “postcolonial”, when used as a term that ought somehow to apply to Margaret Atwood, Peter Carey and Janet Frame as much as Mulk Raj Anand or Sembene Ousmane, must be unacceptable for Marxists. Although any extended discussion of the status of marginal “first world” white-settler colonies, such as Gee’s New Zealand, in contemporary Marxian political economy falls well outside the research remit of this particular thesis, it is important to acknowledge that the perspective my concept of “marginal realism” bases itself on is by no means uncontroversial. Compare the classic expression of the “semi-colonial” view, David Bedggood, *Rich and Poor in New Zealand* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1980).
universalism or denial of local struggle turns out, on closer inspection, to resemble nothing more than a variant on national allegory stripped of the political purchase or aesthetic interest with which a “Third World” author can invest it. The very irrelevance and peripheral status of their national status globally – and its uncertain historical condition – threatens to turn marginal realist narratives into nothing more than local curiosities. Even if Gee can offer reliable information about the social life of the towns of Henderson (the real life model for Plumb’s Loomis) and Timaru (Thorpe), how useful can this information be beyond the quite limited social context of New Zealand? Added to this anxiety is another concerning the status of indigenous populations and historical dispossession, because any truly reliable information on white settler history will be forced, against its own instincts and colonial anxieties, to reveal a founding act of dispossession and theft. This uncertainty of origin produces a foundational ambiguity within marginal realism and its criticism. Consider these two radically differing views on the status of history in contemporary New Zealand prose. For Stephen Turner,

New Zealanders have a weak sense of history…the pervasive effect of contemporary settler culture in New Zealand, which is rather a problem of living in the present, living without history. This is to say that the will to forget the trauma of dislocation and unsettlement has taken the form of a psychic structure.

Compare this with Anne Maxwell’s rather different observation that

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523 Compare this with the situation of the embattled “Third World” writer and intellectual: “a popular or socially realistic third-world novel tends to come before us [i.e. the Western cosmopolitan], not immediately, but as though already-read. We sense, between ourselves and this alien text, the presence of another reader, of the Other reader, for whom a narrative, which strikes us as conventional or naïve, has a freshness of information and a social interest that we cannot share.”, “Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism”, p. 66. A study of the varied responses of Maori and Pakeha readers to the early “socially realistic” texts of Witi Ihiremia or Patricia Grace would be revealing in this respect.

524 The relative absence of Maori characters in Gee’s work is symptomatic here. “There are areas I haven’t looked into, I’ve stood off from because I’m not fully equipped. There’s a gap in my novels where the Maori should stand and he [sic] doesn’t. On the other hand, I don’t think one should expect a writer to delve into areas where he doesn’t come properly alive. That’s why I don’t write about Maoris [sic] or, any more, about what I suppose I have to call the working class.” Colleen Reily, “Interview with Maurice Gee”, Australian and New Zealand Studies in Canada, no. 3, 1990, p. 5.

In the last decade New Zealanders have been more than usually preoccupied with producing and consuming narratives that revise the nation’s history. The large number of books dealing with New Zealand’s colonial past that have appeared in this period suggests that history is being seen as a way to enter the post-colonial condition. History has even taken hold of the nation’s fiction writers; indeed, some of the most compelling rewritings of history today are to be found not in those areas that have been most active in implementing biculturalism – history and anthropology – but in the novel and film.⁵²⁶

Although Gee’s trilogy is a decade out from the period Maxwell discusses directly, we can use the term marginal realism to turn what seems like an antinomy into the more productive status of a contradiction. The Plumb trilogy tells the truth of a determinate history, but tells it aslant. It is through reading the novels’ hesitations and skipped instances that we can combine the partial insights of Turner and Maxwell to uncover both information on the concrete historical and social situation of twentieth century New Zealand, and the prominent ideological fantasies and anxieties surrounding this history.

The problem of another, more pedestrian, form of “marginality”, in which the history of a country as small as New Zealand is too minor to interest more than a few thousand of the world’s readers, can also be turned into a productive contradiction when we recall the status of the nation as “an imagined political community” and as one “imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign.”⁵²⁷ In its affinities with the histories of other white settler colonialisms, and in its moment of signal difference, the Plumb trilogy can illuminate for non-New Zealand readers in white-settler colonialisms unconsidered areas of their own social experience. Finally, this very marginality can, after this necessary excursion through the determinations of national


status, be transformed again for another advantageous use: the smallness of the New Zealand story can allow us to use Gee’s realism as a scale model for one of the dramatic international processes of globalisation itself. This process is nothing less than the long collapse of Keynesianism and the clearing of the economic ground needed to institute its neo-liberal successor.\footnote{So, in one of the celebrated modern histories of the country, James Belich argues, in distinction to the prevailing view that New Zealand history is boring, that “New Zealand is an historian’s paradise: a laboratory whose isolation, size, and recency is an advantage, in which grand themes of world history are often played out more rapidly, more separately, and therefore more easily discernibly, than elsewhere.” Making Peoples: a History of the New Zealanders from Polynesian Settlement to the End of the Nineteenth Century (Auckland: Allen Lane, 1996), p. 7.} Marginal realism, by taking as its focus a manageably small and yet socially comparable chunk of the world system, can in turn be read synecdochically in the cultural centre as a narrative on the process of globalisation itself.

Positioning Gee as a “marginal realist” has an additional, and more theoretical, use in concluding a study concerned with the fate of realism and realism’s potential in the era of globalisation. A whole influential strand of post-Marxist thought has, in recent years, attacked the usefulness of the centre/margin conceptual split. All my arguments thus far have assumed a difference between the imaginative worlds of readers in New Zealand and elsewhere in the so-called First World, let-alone readers from the “Third World” or Global South. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s recasting of the era of globalisation as one of “Empire”, on the level of political economy, radically challenges this assumption. Empire, for Hardt and Negri, is “a kind of smooth space across which subjectivities glide without substantial resistance or conflict” and “tends toward a smooth space defined by uncoded flows, flexibility, continual modulation, and tendential equalization.”\footnote{Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, Empire (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000), pp. 198, 327.} This new “smooth space”, they have argued, produces a situation in which “there is an increasingly common condition of existence and creative activity that defines the entire multitude,”\footnote{Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire (New York: Penguin, 2004), p. 134.} thus rendering marginality outdated as a way of thinking global spatial organisation and power. “In this smooth space of Empire there is no place of power – it is both everywhere and nowhere,”\footnote{Empire, p. 190.} Hardt and Negri argue; “we are immersed in a system of power so deep and complex
that we can no longer determine specific difference or measure." Five years in to the Iraq war these claims seem harder to sustain than when they were first articulated, but the task of taking Empire’s measure is more for the political scientists than it is this particular thesis’ task. But, if assessing the conceptual advances Empire might offer is a project more for political studies than literary scholarship, the experience of the literary text can draw attention to some of the dangers that accompany this new rhetoric of space. Justin Rosenberg has suggested that “the attempt to construct ‘globalisation’ as an explanans leads to a conceptual inflation of ‘the spatial’ which is both difficult to justify ontologically and liable to produce not explanations but reifications.” If recent history casts doubt on Hardt and Negri’s spatial turn from one direction, an experience of marginal literary production in the age of globalisation can, from another, provide an alternative account of differing – and nationally bound – historical and political experience of a kind which ought to inform our wider political thinking and theorising. What Gee’s marginality might offer readers, in the light of this debate, is a chance to reflect upon the dense specificities of lived political legacies and situations, and on their accessibility and changing status across a widening historical distance. If Kelman’s Glasgow and Hensel’s Leipzig suggest some ways in which the global space is not as “smooth” as Hardt and Negri imagine it, Gee’s New Zealand situation, with its local detail and particular context, challenges readers to think through the “uneven and unified development” of globalisation and its impact across different nation states and national situations. If Gee’s marginal realism produces a world whose readers can recognise outlines and challenges from their own experience, and yet also forces them to come to terms with a set of unfamiliar historical and political coordinates, its aesthetic success indicates possible limitations and dangers in conceiving of globalisation’s horizons as those of a “smooth space.”

532 Ibid., p. 211.
Empirical Approaches

Near the beginning of *Sole Survivor*, the final novel in Gee’s trilogy, the narrator, Raymond Sole, suggests a motivation for his own writing: “I catalogue these names [from the past of *Plumb* and *Meg*] and map the place to hold them still.”534 This observation could stand as a description of the trilogy’s sorting, recording and canvassing approach to New Zealand history. Gee has positioned his three narrators to be able to observe most of the nation’s twentieth century.

The trilogy is based – very loosely – on Gee’s own family history and he has described how the characters of George and Edie Plumb owe something to his grandparents, while the character of Meg is drawn from the raw materials of his mother’s life.535 *Plumb*’s historical model, James Chapple, had similar experiences to his fictional counterpart, including trial for heresy, time in gaol for anti-war sedition and socialist activism.536

The narrators arrange each of the novels as a set of recollections and thought-gatherings at a later stage in their lives (Plumb in 1949, shortly before his death, Meg in the late 1960s, Raymond Sole in the early 1980s). This structure allows the trilogy to range over a wide area of social life and history – from George and Edie’s courtship in the 1890s through to Raymond’s middle age in the 1980s – while at the same time returning, from different perspectives, to key historical events. Organising the novels as recollections, if never quite recollections in tranquility, has the additional advantage of focussing and directing the narrative; information reliable but dull can be imparted in a few sentences, while multiple narrators and multiple recollections can help round out turning points such as the First World War, the Depression and the election of the First Labour Government.

534 *Sole Survivor*, p. 23.
George Plumb’s narrative follows that of the development of Labour politics in New Zealand. He joins the Socialist Party in 1902, is, like many of the Labour Party’s future parliamentary leaders, gaoled for his anti-war sermons during World War One and, as the century progresses, he represents the left-wing of the Labour movement as parliamentary and reformist strategies gain dominance. Plumb is filled with fictional characters who relate to historical characters – the fictional Dan Peabody sits, when Plumb sees him in Parliament in 1949, alongside the historical figures of Sid Holland and Peter Fraser – while his allusions and references sketch out the intellectual landscape of early twentieth century socialist thought. Another character, Bluey Consendine, “had shared his frying pan with Jack London. Later he had been a ‘mate’ of Pat Hickey [and] witnessed the birth of the I[ndustrial] W[orkers of the] W[orld].”

Each of the narrators is placed in a position where they observe rather than participate in historical action – Plumb as a preacher, Meg confined to domestic duties in the home, Raymond as a reporter – and Gee engineers their lives so they are placed in locations side-on to the main action in order to draw attention to the act of recording. Plumb’s occupation as preacher is a useful narrative device as it allows him to slip into conversations where the competing ideological and social forces of the day can be staged. He is involved in discussions around the very significant waterfront strikes of 1913, and later manages to “blast open the continuum of history” and insert himself in an historical event. A Labour meeting held at the height of the Great Depression, and just before the party’s historic win in 1935, stages the ideological conflict within the workers’ movement. Plumb intervenes:

I sat one evening with Bluey in an Auckland hall. It was full of hungry men. Savage and Fraser and Nash were on the stage. Lee with his empty sleeve. Semple. Dan Peabody. They were all there…I heard a murmur about me and saw angry faces. These men were not to be

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539 Plumb, pp. 72 – 77 deals with the 1913 strike, perhaps New Zealand’s most violent and contested industrial conflict to date. For historical context see Melanie Nolan (ed.), Revolution! (Christchurch: Canterbury University Press, 2006).
fed with words. They had suffered enough. I rose to my feet. Nash was speaking: scattering his handfuls of tin tacks about the hall. My voice has a wider range...For a moment or two we fought in single combat...I said, ‘Your way is wrong. It can only end in repression. This parliament you want to take over will take you over...[the workers] want a movement, a revolution, a people’s government.’

In addition to these instances of direct historical reportage or recreation, the character of Plumb himself, in his sheer range of interests, theological controversy and opinionated intervention, presents as, in Bill Manhire’s judgement, “probably the most considerable [character] in all New Zealand literature.”

If Plumb gives the reader a broad picture of the key moments in New Zealand social history, Meg, in its focus on the results of activity and their observed consequences, offers more concentrated illustrations of social attitudes and changing contexts. The post-war boom, and its accompanying shifts in geo-political hegemony from Britain to the United States, led Australia and New Zealand to shift their attentions from the one to the other. Meg’s narrative captures this shift, and, with a nice touch, draws connections between economic and cultural transformation by registering the impact of a new vocabulary:

“George was one of the good guys,” Fred Meggett said. Since his first success with U.S. Army surplus after the war, Fred had been full of Americanisms. They marked his moments of sincerity.

Her story focuses on the experience and impact of the Depression and the post-war boom on her family life. These experiences illustrate the wider social context, as does

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540 Ibid., pp. 220 – 221. Of those listed as present at this meeting only Plumb and Peabody are fictional characters. The classic biography of Plumb’s opponent is Keith Sinclair, Walter Nash (Auckland: Oxford University Press, 1975). A meeting very similar to the one described in Plumb is recounted in Jim Edwards’ memoir of the Auckland Unemployed Workers’ Movement, Break Down These Bars (Auckland: Penguin, 1987). On Peter Fraser the authoritative work is Michael Bassett with Michael King, Tomorrow Comes the Song: a Life of Peter Fraser (Auckland: Penguin, 2000) See in particular pp. 117 – 136.
541 Manhire, Maurice Gee, p. 42. Lawrence Jones observes that “New Zealanders seem to have an appetite for realism and it isn’t often we have the chance to read of a life which can boast among its highlights trials for heresy and sedition.” Quoted in Xiaoning Wang, “The Three Voices of Maurice Gee’s Plumb Trilogy” (unpublished MA Thesis: University of Waikato, 1991), p. 26.
542 Meg, p. 57. British cultural dominance is clear in Plumb, where Edie writes to Meg how “a child is an unwritten page, a ‘bundle of possibilities’...never call your children ‘kids.’” (p. 53).
her narrative’s central event, the murder of her brother Alfred. Alfred, whose “outing” in the garden is the central dramatic event of *Plumb*, appears in *Meg* as a broken alcoholic. After an argument with his sister he is attacked while cruising by a group of youth who beat him to death and urinate over his clothes and in his mouth. At trial they are acquitted of murder and manslaughter. Meg records her interaction with her brother-in-law, property developer Fred Meggett:

“Well,” – he shrugged – “what the hell? I heard they got off. I suppose you’re sore about that?”

“Not particularly.”

“I can’t work you Plumb sheilas out…You’re too bloody dumb. Both of you are dumb.”

I laughed at him. His cheeks went red and swelled up. “I’m glad those kids got off. I used to do some queer bashing myself.”

If these local details and historical incidents are what so attract ethical criticism such as Jones’s and Williams’s to the *Plumb* trilogy, *Sole Survivor* offers its historical evidence in a quite different fashion. Journalist Raymond Sole chronicles not only his own life but also that of another of George Plumb’s grandchildren, Douglas Plumb, a populist politician on the rise. Where *Plumb* mixed fictional characters and historical actors, *Sole Survivor* takes this realist technique to a second order and runs a fictional copy of a historical actor against the actual figure. Duggie Plumb is clearly a model of Robert Muldoon, right-wing populist leader of the third National government in 1975 – 1984, and the final conservative leader before neo-liberal reforms were introduced to New Zealand. But Duggie Plumb is not presented in the novel as a substitute figure to be read, allegorically or metaphorically, as Muldoon; rather, he figures alongside the Muldoon of the narrative as a point of comparison. “Jack Latham called Muldoon ‘the monstrous fart of a flatulent party.’ Duggie’s arrival had that quality.” Duggie Plumb’s career follows that of Muldoon’s closely, and Gee works in some sub-plots with loose echoes of controversies in Muldoon’s career. Duggie

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544 For political and economic background to this period see Brian Roper, *Prosperity for All? Economic, Social and Political Change in New Zealand since 1935* (Melbourne: Thomson Dunmore, 2005), pp. 149 – 156.
545 *Sole Survivor*, pp. 161 – 162.
546 Duggie’s battle with Sir Cyril Butts for the National Party nomination for the seat of Epsom in 1963 (*Sole Survivor*, pp. 162 – 170) suggests Muldoon’s factional struggles with Sir Leslie Munro. When
shadows Muldoon as a sort of running textual commentary on the populist leader. This blurring or bleeding of characters, models and historical subject matter is gestured at when a character comments of one of Plumb’s speeches that it is “word for word Muldoon’s.” Duggie replies that they “think alike.”

This small selection of examples ought to give some sense of the full range of historical reach and ambition the trilogy attempts. In its ambition and scope the trilogy illustrates the very best of what the realist project can tackle in the contemporary situation: the origins of the modern labour movement; contemporary politics; two world wars; religious change and controversy and shifts in attitudes to sexuality. Registering the impressive bulk of this social information in an empirical reading is a necessary initial move, recording this ground-work without which no realist project is possible. Gee’s efforts here are also surprisingly unmarked by the kind of authorial doubt or epistemological skepticism towards history that marked so many of the “historiographic metafictions” of the 1980s. In a 1986 interview Gee commented of his project that

New Zealand history is a kind of ground that my novels grow out of…yet I don’t think of them as historical novels. They’re historical in the sense of lives, not of society or country…the characters are in some particular time and place, historical time and place.

By staging this story across multiple novels and from differing characters’ perspectives Gee adds a new level of complexity and depth to the realist project of portraying something of the experience or feeling of historical process.

The experiential level

Duggie finishes the career of his Labour opponent Latham by revealing in the House how he spent his “time in motel bedrooms with schoolgirls only fourteen years of age” (Ibid. p., 195) this is a thinly veiled, and heterosexualized, portrait of the “Moyle affair,” when Muldoon, assisted by drink, destroyed the parliamentary career of Labour M.P. Colin Moyle by announcing “I shall forgive the effeminate giggles of the member for Mangere because I know his background.” That background allegedly involved police warnings for cruising. On the Moyle affair see Barry Gustafson’s excellent, if somewhat uncritical, scholarly biography, *His Way: a Biography of Robert Muldoon* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2000), pp. 198 – 204.

547 Sole Survivor, p. 132.

Edie’s phrase, another shake of the kalidoscope.\textsuperscript{549}

When, in 1978, \textit{Plumb} was first published, Gee revealed he was planning a trilogy of novels, but never revealed which characters would narrate the next two books.\textsuperscript{550} Each book can still be read on its own, and the reader needs to work to find moments of deeper connection and dissonance. There are also clear signs that the novels can be read against each other, though, the most obvious being their shared symbolism. Near the beginning of his narration George Plumb notes how eels, “slimy and snake-like…drive themselves through the water like thoughts better not admitted.” Obligingly, eels make their appearances each time the repressed or unwelcome surfaces in the trilogy.\textsuperscript{551}

But this division of narrative labour represents more than just a teasing out of readerly expectations on Gee’s part and marks, I want to suggest, a real formal and technical advance in the options now available to the realist. Splitting narratives within a family history not only gives Gee’s trilogy a much greater range of historical material than would fit into the plotting of a single life, but also allows three quite distinct experiential perspectives to contrast with each other. These contrasts give the reader representations of the social world at once richly illustrated, in keeping with the traditions of realism, and also alive to the determinations, ambiguities and impact differing perspectives provide in the construction of that social world itself.

This experiential level is first indicated in the different novels’ presentations of non-narrator characters. Plumb idealises his wayward and promiscuous son Willis. “I looked at Willis and Mirth out the back window: the peg-legged sailor and his fat old wife. One at least of my children has built his Jerusalem.”\textsuperscript{552} Meg shares similar feelings towards Willis, but Raymond deflates both illusions:

\textsuperscript{549} \textit{Plumb}, p. 233.
\textsuperscript{550} See Manhire, p. 43. In another example of how contemporary realism draws as much on models from modernism as it does earlier realisms, Manhire also records Gee stating that Joyce Cary’s great \textit{To Be a Pilgrim} trilogy was his formal inspiration for this approach.
\textsuperscript{552} \textit{Plumb}, p. 249.
My mother made a myth of Mirth and Willis. That pair always made her soft and blind. They had the same effect on Grandpa Plumb. He elevated the orchard into a temple and found there natural wisdom, lessons in acceptance and fruitfulness. Mirth was priestess/Mother. He thought those naked children in the trees – “dryads, fauns” – were Mirth’s, but they were grandchildren of her first marriage, and later on of her second. 

As for natural wisdom…

These localised details of personal judgement allow the narrative to then stage commentary on earlier ideological positions. Raymond comments on how he “saw even at fourteen that his [George Plumb’s] was a simple view of things…his hatred of tyrannies did not extend to the home.” Personal feeling is used to sketch out the experience of a much wider political change, as reformist Labour-socialism – associated with the battle over Clause Four in the United Kingdom or with the Rowling-Lange battle in New Zealand – loses the ideological coherence and political confidence it had in Plumb’s day:

It is time for me to say where I stood in politics. Easy. I stood nowhere. I rationalised it by saying that I followed my sense of right whichever way it led me. It was, I said, the honest thing to do. My socialism was gone – it had never had any real existence. I grew up breathing haunted air. But Grandpa Plumb’s socialism was sentimental; and mine was as insubstantial as a shadow. I read nothing, I thought nothing, but did a lot of “feeling.” I joined no organisation or party. What I managed was to idealise a class. Joe the Wharfie, yelling slogans, made no dent in my idea of him. When I thought of working men I saw myself. What a lot of people there were with my face and my sensibilities.

These direct comments on the impressions and opinions of other narrators are given an additional layer of experiential value and information through the organisation of what Bill Manhire describes as the “contrapuntal time scheme” of Gee’s narratives. Arranging events so the novels contain internal self-commentary and limited self-awareness on the part of their narrators places earlier events and judgements in ironic

553 Sole Survivor, p. 41.
554 Ibid., p. 49.
555 Ibid., p. 171.
556 Manhire, Maurice Gee, p. 40.
distance. One of the funniest of these moments marks shifting sexual mores in the colonial society.

Florence was nineteen and engaged to a young Church of England curate; a promising young man from all accounts, and handsome, easy in his ways, attentive to his elders, jolly with the young. He was very popular, and she very much in love. One day this young man vanished, simply vanished. He took nothing from his room, no clothing, no books. Only his bicycle was gone. The police began enquiries. But at the end of two or three days his bishop received a letter. The young man explained that he had undergone a crisis of soul, had come to understand he had no calling for the church. He had thought it better in the circumstances simply to take himself off. He had left Christchurch and was leaving the country.

Florence’s letter – it arrived in the same post – told another story. He had met a young lady, the curate said, and fallen in love with her, and he wished all arrangements for the coming wedding cancelled. He was leaving, he said, for Australia, where his wife-to-be would join him presently. A tale that need not have been so cruel. I doubt he was so gifted as people believed. The truth, never known to Florence or Edie, but told me in confidence by Mrs Hamer…was this: the curate was bicycling in the country when he found it necessary to answer a call of nature. He retired behind some bushes, looked about to be sure of his privacy, made water, and turned, buttoning up, to find himself observed by a party of ladies out picking wild raspberries – wives and daughters of members of his church. In that time, the eighteen-eighties, in the place of his curacy, a suburb of well-to-do tradespeople and professional folk aping the genteel ways of Home, he took his only course. He mounted his bone-shaker, rode off down that country road, and through the town of Christchurch, and on again, and stopped somewhere to write two letters, and for all I know is riding still.

These historical and political details, which add substance and rich detail to the plotting of broader history in the texts, are accompanied by small markers and indications between novels which, when remembered after a final reading, give the trilogy a coherence and connection adding to its realism effects. Plumb, for instance, sits through an adultery trial conducted by his son, the judge Oliver Plumb, and sees obscene graffiti – “Goodlad rides again” – connected with the case. This case turns out, in Sole Survivor, to be a central traumatic event in the youth of Raymond Sole’s

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On this partial self-awareness Gee observes that in his work “the narrator knows everything about himself, but does not necessarily know it correctly, so there’s tension and irony, and those are things that shape and pare down the whole life that’s on offer.” Quoted in Som Prakash, “Dislocations, Distortions and Resolutions in Maurice Gee’s Fiction”, SPAN, no. 34, Nov. 1992, p. 121.

Plumb, p. 7.
future wife Glenda.\(^{559}\) Different fictional incidents – sales, deaths, and funerals – arrive for the reader in the fresh packaging of a new narrative perspective and, in the process, build up the kind of whole imagined life associated with the realist project. These verifiable but entirely fictional events take what Lilian Furst calls the “game of pretense that lies at the heart of realism” to a whole new level of complexity.\(^{560}\) What C.K. Stead calls these “technical decisions about how to deal with the past”\(^{561}\) are also formal advances in the sort of experiential realist illusion now available in authors’ technical armoury. The trilogy takes as one of its central obsessions what Eric Alliez has described as the “analysis of the practices of time”, or, in this fictional context, the plotting of time and its arrangement.\(^{562}\) There is nothing particularly new about the family narrative or differing perspective, as any reader of Balzac will know; what Gee adds, in the trilogy, are the elements of ironic doubt and distance, and narrative self-interrogation, made possible by his partially aware characters and their connections.

Consider, for example, the clues we receive about Meg’s life. Although none of these dates are mentioned in the texts, we can reconstruct her fictional life thoroughly; she was born in 1908, marries Fergus Sole in 1928, her father dies in 1950, her brother Alfred is killed in 1955 and she in turn dies in 1981.\(^{563}\) Gee’s ability to engage readers in a process of fictional cross-referencing is more evidence of the ongoing vitality and innovative potential of the realist form.

For a confrontation with our more properly political interests, however, these empirical and experiential readings must be considered as nothing more than a necessary but insufficient ground-clearing to prepare for an engagement with the novels’ political and methodological projects.

\(^{559}\) Compare Plumb, p. 150 with Sole Survivor, pp. 102 –106.


\(^{561}\) “Maurice Gee, Moralist”, p. 99.


\(^{563}\) Compare – as carefully as possible – Meg, pp. 26, 120, 156 with Plumb, p. 207 and Sole Survivor, p. 215.
Strategies of Containment

Considering the way that Gee’s trilogy is routinely praised as a significant document of social history or, in the terms of the Oxford Companion to New Zealand Literature, as “novels which bountifully give us a rich vision of some region and aspect of New Zealand life…together with lush images of the natural and social worlds” it is surprising how little critical attention has been paid to those areas of the social world the trilogy actively avoids and suppresses. Indeed, where comment does occur regarding these moments of evasion, critics have been surprisingly banal. The most Bill Manhire can make of the complete absence of the controversy surrounding the Springbok Tour of 1981 in Raymond Sole’s narrative – and him a journalist! – is that it is “one very puzzling absence.”

But the trilogy’s organising structure and moments of recurrent concern reveal themselves, on closer inspection, as facilitating a quite significant ideological evasiveness masquerading as reticence and narrative aporias. Our third indirection, then, is through the silences, gaps and skipped historical moments indicating themselves through omissions in the texts at hand. The best term for these omissions is Jameson’s descriptive label for the process by which ideology is produced: they are strategies of containment, attempts within the text to both sustain its liberal underpinnings and, in the process, exclude and marginalise historical and social matter which calls into question and undermines the liberal operation taking place.

There are, on my reading, three crucial gaps in the trilogy we can designate in a periodising shorthand as 1951, “the ’60s” and 1981. These dates refer to the Waterfront Lockout, the period of a mass upsurge in class struggle and the emergence of Maori land-rights protests and, finally, the intensely contested and divisive Springbok Rugby tour. These omissions flash before us in part because of the attention drawn towards them by the contrasting presence of other traumatic historical events. Plumb offers ample representation and narrative material on the 1913

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565 Manhire, Maurice Gee, p. 59.
566 On the working concept of “strategies of containment” see The Political Unconscious, pp. 37 – 43.
waterfront strike but Sole Survivor and Meg are almost wholly silent on the 1951 waterfront lockout. Plumb and Meg both draw on the protests, riots and political activity of the Depression years and on Plumb’s anti-war activity during World War One, but neither Meg nor Sole Survivor approach the class struggles of the 1960s or 1970s with any seriousness. Both are strangely silent on the mass campaigns against the Vietnam War.

I first started thinking through the implications of these omissions when reading Sarah Dugdale’s excellent recent study of Gee’s work. Where most criticism, committed as it is to the liberal humanist dominant in Gee scholarship, is either silent or unconcerned with the trilogy’s historical gaps, Dugdale makes these a focus for her critical energy. Her study is an attempt to read the Plumb trilogy as a politically useful aesthetic document, part of what she calls the “revisionist rewriting of New Zealand’s cultural history.”

Gee’s formal approach is enlisted as part of this revisionist project:

By presenting the familiar, Gee creates a sense of security for his implied reader. Anecdotally, many middle-class Pakeha [NZ European] readers claim to feel as if they already know the place they read about in his work…From this position of familiarity, even complacency, a number of values and expectations are challenged, particularly those concerned with communal and individual morality and the imagined ideals of collective national aspirations…Gee’s writing style [is] a specific strategy utilised in order to confront the conditions of uncertainty and complacency undermining the intellectual and social environment he works in.

If, for Dugdale, Gee’s style is part of this broader strategy then his novels’ blindesses are weaknesses which need to be exposed in order for the politically useful parts of the trilogy to be mobilised. Dugdale’s primary focus is on gender and ethnicity, and she argues that “in a complex evasion, [Sole Survivor] acknowledges but avoids engaging with the male insecurity caused by shifting gender assumptions. The masculinism that shapes the novel’s value-system is acknowledged but largely

unscrutinised.” By “ignoring the issues raised by these events [the 1951 Lockout and the 1981 Springbok Tour]”, Dugdale continues her argument, “the novel [Sole Survivor] itself enacts an evasion.” She goes on to label these as moments when both the novel and its characters use “strategies of evasion” to skirt around potentially ideologically explosive events and challenges. These evasions, by implication with the rest of Dugdale’s argument, are aesthetic and political moments of failure in the texts, when Gee’s potential to provide confrontations with the “conditions of complacency and uncertainty” undermines the “social environment” in which potential insight would need to develop. The trilogy’s silences, on this reading, also figure as its weaknesses.

There is much to admire in Dugdale’s careful, attentive, scrupulous and politically engaged close reading of the trilogy, and Sole Survivor in particular, and I try to build on her concept of “strategies of evasion” in what follows. But, in eliding what really ought to remain conceptually distinct terms – political utility or value and textual fidelity or self-awareness – Dugdale has limited the potential political uses of the Plumb trilogy. Combining her notion of “strategies of evasion” with Jameson’s “strategies of containment” and Machereyan silences may suggest alternative ways out of this particular political blockage or impasse.

Finding value in these “strategies of evasion” also has implications for my wider argument about the potential and relevance of realism in the age of globalisation. If the preceding sections of this chapter have concerned themselves with the necessary, if uncontroversial, task of listing some of the ways in which Gee continues and develops the tradition of producing realism effects, the underlying question forcing these two following indirections is whether the novels at hand are capable of offering us reliable information. It is here that we need to consider the novels’ fate in history; what, for the reader three decades after their first publication, is an immediate and striking absence may have been missed on first encounters. For the non-New Zealand reader, Dugdale’s catalogue of evasions stands, and marks the limits of the novels’

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570 Dugdale, p. 168.
571 Ibid., p. 171.
information-generating power. But it is impossible to imagine New Zealand readers – either from Sole Survivor’s initial publication or later periods – coming to the text without an intense awareness of the importance of the Springbok Tour and its political implications. Gee acts as a useful concluding study to this thesis in reminding us of this mutual implication of reader and text: Sole Survivor has different realism-effects of different readers of its realism. There is no “smooth space” of novelistic reception.

What is, in Dugdale’s scheme, a draw-back or negative aspect of the trilogy can, for the New Zealand reader, be transformed into a bonus if we take as our project the search for “rifts and discontinuities within the work” and in the process attempt “diagnostic revelation of terms or nodal points implicit in the ideological system which have, however, remained unrealised in the surface narrative of the text, which have failed to become manifest in the logic of the narrative, and which we can therefore read as what the text represses.”

Reliable information of a quite particular kind can be obtained through this operation if it in turn allows us “to acquire the instruments by which we can force a given interpretive practice to stand and yield up its name, to blurt out its master code and thereby reveal its metaphysical and ideological underpinnings.” As we shall see in a moment, the Plumb trilogy reveals far more uncertainty about its ideological underpinnings – and covertly expresses these anxieties through a hostility towards the project of writing – in ways its more sympathetic critics have failed to take up.

The trilogy’s evasions are not just a matter of excluded or repressed content but, instead, inform the formal devices and structures of the narratives. There are, of course, simple omissions as well: the mass strikes of the 1970s go without mention in Sole Survivor and, astonishingly, neither Sole Survivor nor Meg registers the massive upsurge in class struggle that defined New Zealand politics in the late 1960s and through the 1970s. More important for our purposes here, though, are the ways in which the three narratives, and their respective narrative presents, are all constructed in ways that circle around historical flash points and so, paradoxically, draw our

572 The Political Unconscious, pp. 41, 33.
573 Ibid., p. 43.
attention to their very absence. *Plumb’s* narrative present is sometime in 1949, just before the election of the first National government and its confrontation with the watersiders, and the narrative within it stretches back away from this event. *Meg’s* narrative present is late in the 1960s, again just before the outbreak of the sharp industrial and social struggles that marked the end of that decade.

*Sole Survivor’s* evasions are even more striking. As a character Raymond, born in the early 1930s, is at once too young to witness the struggles of the Depression years and too old to be a participant in the events of 1968. His life and observations are at one remove from the society he is a part of; without war service, union activity, student struggle or other forms of activism, he seems almost a characterization of evasion. Despite the fact that his narrative present is 1983 – two years after the key events – the social upheaval surrounding the Springbok Tour is entirely absent from his narrative.\(^{575}\) Where political struggle of a truly social and collective kind – in the form of the 1951 Lockout – does make a brief appearance, the narrative focus is Raymond’s own insufficiency and defeat, and on matters extrinsic to the heart of the dispute. During the lockout he goes out at night painting anti-government graffiti (‘my favourite was Sid Holland’\(^ {576}\)) around the rural town of Gerriston. But, far from leading to further activity, Raymond’s graffiti suggests only political paralysis:

I was swollen with accomplishment. Grandpa Plumb would be proud of me. I dropped my brush down to join the tin and climbed on to the roof of the tower. It was past midnight and most of the lights were out. I sat and grinned at Gerriston, feeling it was mine; but soon became disturbed by its smallness on the plain. I felt that I was on the edge of nothing, hanging on with fingernails and teeth. I was afraid of my tininess. The town was made of cardboard. It was accidental. Raymond Sole, sitting on this tower, was accidental.\(^ {577}\)

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\(^{575}\) This is all the more astonishing considering Duggie Plumb’s role as a shadow-Muldoon. Muldoon’s victory in the 1981 elections is widely supposed to be due to the popularity of his support for sporting contacts with South Africa in marginal rural seats. See Gustafson, *His Way*, pp. 309 – 321. On the anti-tour movement, Trevor Richards, *Dancing On Our Bones* (Wellington: Bridget Williams Books, 1999) is, despite some major “strategies of evasion” of its own, the indispensable work.

\(^{576}\) *Sole Survivor*, p. 82. National Prime Minister at the time was Sid Holland.

\(^{577}\) Ibid., p. 83. On the 1951 waterfront lockout see Dick Scott’s contemporary history *151 Days* (Auckland: New Zealand Waterside Workers’ Union, Deregistered, 1952) and Tom Bramble (ed.), *Never a White Flag: the Memoirs of Jock Barnes, Waterfront Leader* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 1998). Gee’s relative reticence about the lockout is all the more notable when one considers that, unlike the Miners’ Strike in Britain, the dispute has figured prominently as a marker of social
A moment’s bitter and bathetic humour underlines Sole’s futile gesture. Police arrive and, instead of capturing Sole, identify the flaws in his slogan: “it’s the same bloke. He’s got his bloody swastika the wrong way round.”

Later Raymond tries to write up a story about police attacking a union agitator. His paper’s editor refuses to publish (“you’re supposed to be a reporter not a novelist”) and an argument breaks out:

How did it end? I walked out of the paper. But I went back, and wrote my sale report. I was pleased with myself for walking out; and felt a cold satisfaction in going back. I did not feel diminished. This was how life had to be played. I would play along. But I wouldn’t pretend to like it. I wold keep my eyes open.578

Whatever Raymond’s own rhetorical tough-eyed swagger, it is hard not to read this as capitulation and defeat. This may well have been the response of many an individual in 1951 but, as Sole Survivor’s only real treatment of this massively significant historical moment, it represents a narrative flinching from the waterfront lock-out’s deeper significance and social importance.

For the contemporary New Zealand reader, in its circling around its evasions, and then approaching them aslant, the Plumb trilogy offers up reliable information for us about the flash-points and anxieties of liberal humanist ideology in the era of globalisation. The trilogy is like a reverse catalogue: its ambition and range draws our attention to what is left out, what is missing and, in turns, suggests what is too hot for representational handling, too clearly marked by class division and contestation to be incorporated into narratives of personal development and family history. Where Dugdale reads these evasions as aesthetic limitations we can, building on her important initial political move, transform them into a political opportunity and advantage. These narrative aporias and silences implicitly critique, in this complex realism, the very ideologies informing the trilogy’s narrative voices. Where events,

578 Sole Survivor, pp. 87 – 88.
such as the 1913 strike, are far enough in the past for contemporary liberal comfort, the narrative may incorporate them but, once the tensions of the present pass into view, the gaps and fissures widen.\textsuperscript{579}

But, of course, the text produces none of this knowledge – or, more properly, none of this refining and heightening of knowledge and knowledge’s ambiguities – for the reader who is not already in some way primed or programmed with some sort of mental map or sense of Gee’s omission’s context and importance. Macherey’s critical strategies, and \textit{The Political Unconscious}’ “reading what the text represses” require the interpretive assistance of the critic in “uncovering” the historical repression at work. The \textit{Plumb} trilogy evades historical material of such ongoing intensity that, at this stage in its history and reception, it carries out this task of uncovering unaided: like an apolitical French novel set in 1968, 1981, for the New Zealand reader, looms large in \textit{Sole Survivor}. For the non-New Zealand reader the situation is more complicated: they may, spurred by the wealth of detail contained in the trilogy, go on to read of that country’s recent history elsewhere, but this sort of uncovering “after the fact” lacks the sort of intensity necessary to grant it full status as a realism effect. For the non-New Zealand reader the trilogy’s evasions remain as Dugdale reads them – mere evasions – and have to be recorded here as political failings. Whatever else they do, though, these differing readerly responses indicate serious limitations inherent in conceiving of the world system as a “smooth space” without “specific difference or measure.”

These differing reading possibilities, and the implicit critique I have attached to one of them, may go some way towards explaining the uncomfortable and ambiguous position of \textit{Sole Survivor} in most Gee scholarship. As the final installment of the trilogy, and the novel facing the crisis years of Keynesianism’s collapse directly, \textit{Sole Survivor} is commonly criticised as a dropping off or falling apart after the coherence of the previous two books. \textit{Sole Survivor} “will not cohere”, for Lawrence Jones, as

\textsuperscript{579} The proper subject of the novels is, of course, our ideologically and socially mediated access to this historical past and its impact and not that past itself. As James Belich argues, the 1913 strike was far more violent, and far more of a challenge to the existing order, than later more famous events. See his \textit{Paradise Reforged} (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2001), pp. 259 – 269.
“the book becomes unstuck” in its final fifty pages. Mark Williams reads it as a novel which “enters a world of banal repetition, parody, emptiness, shallowness. It proliferates with signs that point to no substantial meaning.” By the end of the book, Williams suggests, “history itself has disappeared as a meaningful shaping of selfhood and national identity” and “at the close of Sole Survivor Gee undercuts the basis of the realist and humanist method he had perfected in his early work.”

These complaints within the dominant critical approach are variants on “the ‘normative’ illusion, which measures the text against a ghostly model of what it might be. The normative illusion constitutes a refusal of the object as it is: it ‘corrects’ it against an imperfect copy, an inessential appearance…[leading to] the typical gesture of normative criticism…[which is] to inscribe a ‘could do better’ in the text’s margin.” The chief defect of this normative approach is its elision of a particular literary form – realism – with ideological approaches only occasionally attached to it. Sole Survivor can be best read not as an example of a crumbling and collapsing humanism (one which “will not cohere”, “comes unstuck” and so on) but rather as documentation and representation of this process at work. Where the classical realisms of the period of capitalism’s growth – the work of Dickens, say, or Balzac or Eliot – chart the expansion and development of the bourgeois subject, Gee’s trilogy maps its disillusion and deeper fragmentation. Raymond Sole comes unstuck as the ideological maps available to him, his reformism, his grandfather’s faith in progress, his security, fail to account for his situation. Just before he is due to travel to Australia to cover the 1981 Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting, Sole feels the secure identity of his name and self begin to slip:

Towards the end of that time I heard a voice. Softly in my ear it said “R. Sole.” It came from narrow windows, thin as a bat call. It came in the noise of traffic, and wagons crashing in the railway yards. In trees, in lifts, in doors that closed with a well-bred huff. Sometimes it came shouting from high scaffolds, where men in hard-hats perched against the sky, “Gidday, R Sole”…Going out, I thought I heard a man in the waiting room say, “R. Sole.”

580 Jones, Barbed Wire and Mirrors, p. 128.
581 Williams, Leaving the Highway, pp. 176, 177, 180.
583 Sole Survivor, pp. 212 – 213.
If Raymond loses any sense of the gap between proper noun and obscenity, the novel’s bathetic ending reads like a parody of earlier realisms’ narratives of development: “I feel like a survivor. I feel like Ray, Ray Sole, Raymung, R. Sole. All of those. I’ve got some life in me.”

What liberal humanist criticism sees as an aesthetic weakness, then, can be re-coded as part of the strategies of containment the novels throw into such stark relief. Raymond Sole’s narrative – and recall here that each of the novels is narrative recollection – cannot face the decisive political events of his era head-on, is forced to avoid attempting direct representations of political confrontation, but is equally paralysed when trying to depict individual life stories or narratives of growth. The trilogy returns to its absences and omissions like a child to an unpicked scab. Plumb closing his story just before 1951, Raymond finishing his in the 1980s without mentioning the Springbok Tour, Meg and Raymond both filling the 1960s with personal details and anecdotes: these individual moments of omission add to a veritable counter-narrative running against the current of the primary narration, drawing our attention to these symptomatic and traumatic moments. The novels’ strategies of containment, then, far from constituting “a puzzling absence” (Manhire) or an organisational failure of ending (Jones and Williams) are a vital component of the texts’ realist logic. If this description of a realist logic makes it sound suspiciously close to modernism, the familiarity is not wholly accidental. Gee’s use of plausibility, typicality and coherent narrative offers us so much information and then, in marking its informational borders, suggests further areas to follow. This is, as with Kelman or Hensel, a “bending” or adaptation of some of modernism’s most suggestive moments. Gee’s realism, especially in Sole Survivor’s painful, disjointed final pages, carries out a far more original and ambitious project than fashioning its material to fit liberalism in the way the normative critics suggest. Rather, Gee’s literary vocation involves reproducing development of the systematic contradictions of the contemporary subject. Raymond Sole fragments but his is not a fragmented narrative: there are

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584 Ibid., p. 231.
585 In contrast to the normative approach, Perry Anderson’s suggestive method seems appropriate here, to “try to locate specific contradictions of argument where these occur, generally treating them not as random lapses but as symptomatic points of tensions, either within the body of thought itself, or with the evidence beyond it.” *A Zone of Engagement* (London: Verso, 1992), p. x. Characterization and
differing levels of response and modeling at work. Each of Gee’s narrator-characters has partial insight, and their narratives’ unreliability only ever touches on interpretations rather than events. We may not believe their self-knowledge is convincing or whole but, unlike the reader of Pynchon or Burroughs, this doubt is not extended to the reality the trilogy portrays.

These political gaps take on an added significance when their supplementary material, on the method of realism itself, looms into view.

“Out of the boigraphy business”: Plumb and Realist Method

Very early in his own narrative Raymond Sole announces that he is “out of the boigraphy [sic] business”\(^{586}\): it is autobiography and self-reflection that the trilogy concerns itself with. In this project most critics see the trilogy as a chronicle of success and self-realization. “All three [narrators]”, writes Lawrence Jones, “are frustrated writers and each achieves a kind of literary fulfillment only in writing the story of his or her own life.”\(^{587}\) This reading subordinates the writing of the texts to the status of mere tool or prop in the project of character development whereas, on my reading at least, the trilogy seems littered with clues suggesting that one of its objects for analysis is in fact that methodological difficulties of the task of writing and representation itself.

Each of the narrators draws attention to the plotting and crafting of their own stories; they are, to put it awkwardly, self-conscious about the self-consciousness of their craft. “I have noticed many times that I turn to some example or case from literature when I want to evade a clear sight of my behaviour,” George Plumb observes in an aside which casts doubt on the ambitions of both his own narrative’s potential worth and of this particular study.\(^{588}\) Meg, less willful, points out her craft’s failings and inadequacies: “I must avoid these fancies, Raymond says they spoil me as a writer, he

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586 Sole Survivor, p. 8. A bog is New Zealand English for a toilet.
587 Jones, Barbed Wire and Mirrors, p. 136.
588 Plumb, p. 85.
calls them coy and clever and tells me I must be plain or fall into self-regard and falsity.”

These moments of self-consciousness and attention to writing mark each of the novels, but grow at once more pronounced and less confident as the trilogy moves toward the present. Plumb’s asides focus on what he sees as his own growth and growth of judgement; his “children are short of language” but he manages to craft his own life-story into a useful narrative. His notes mark moments when his consciousness in the narrative present is a step in advance of what it was in the event narrated (“I had not read Proust in 1928”) and each of his comments underlines his own ideological confidence and the confidence – reformist, social democratic, eugenicist – of his age.

By the end of the trilogy, however, this dominant note of growth and self-realization has been replaced with paralysis and uncertainty. Raymond Sole’s attitude towards his own self and his life is radically uncertain (“is my life experience or spectacle?”) and, where classic realism typically recorded subjects’ growing into themselves, Sole Survivor offers representations a subject in the process of disillusion and decomposition. The familiar narrative coordinates Raymond relies on cease to function:

Glenda is dead, twice dead. I’ve read it over. And see that my life has made me adjectival. I don’t like that. The truth is nouns and pronouns. Adjectives blur things, adverbs too; and verbs can falsify.

If activity and action (verbs) have falsifying potential, nouns and pronouns (facts, things) begin to slip away from Raymond’s control as well. If his own life story acts out the ideological crisis of Keynesian reformism and the destruction of its subjects, Sole Survivor includes a second-order commentary on this decomposition in the form of Raymond’s other writing project. As well as trying, unsuccessfully, to shape a

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589 Meg, p. 7.
590 Plumb, p. 39.
591 Ibid., p. 122.
592 Sole Survivor, p. 180.
593 Ibid., p. 179.
narrative of his own life – the book that turns out to be *Sole Survivor* – Raymond is also the would-be author of a biography of the first Labour Prime Minister, Michael Joseph Savage.\(^{594}\) In a double irony, as Raymond’s narrative offers us coherent representations of how his ideological formation can no longer produce coherence, his attempts to represent one of the foundational and well-nigh mythical figures in this ideological constellation also collapses:

I still had my notion of a book, and my torments were not so different from those of a real writer. My problem was I had lost my subject and could not find another…

“How’s the writing going?” [Felicity Plumb asks him.]

I told her I had put it aside again. “Everything’s there. The work’s all done. But I can’t bring it together.” I could not make a whole round life. I lacked the stillness and the breadth; I lacked the measure.\(^{595}\)

These are extraordinary passages, demonstrating the resourcefulness and flexibility of the realist method. Gee utilises “realism effects” here to offer us rounded, reliable representations of an author realising that his own realism – and the liberal ideology underpinning it – is exhausted and unworkable. As opportunities for self-discovery, explanation or improvement narrow, Raymond obliterates his own writing ambitions in the world of ghost writing:

(Let me get my career in literature out of the way. I did another rugby book, *Boom! Boom!* I did *Sweet Millie*, the story of Millicent Bean, the musical comedy star. I did Frank Murphy’s story (the union boss): *Nor Shall My Sword* (his title). I helped Jim Horrocks with *Tough Cop*. Horrocks made my footballers seem like marshmallows. “Just off the record Ray, I’ll tell you what we did to that cunt…” Stomp! Thump! Aargh! I hated Horrocks. Sitting with him, listening to his hatreds, I felt stirrings of nausea; but I got the book finished. And that was enough. I made plans for a different sort of book, *M. J. Savage:* started research, did some interviews. I’ve still got the stuff in an old suitcase. One day I’ll give it to the Turnbull Library.)\(^{596}\)

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\(^{594}\) Savage has a cultural status and importance in New Zealand comparable to Whitlam in Australia or to the memory of the 1945 Labour government in Britain. See Barry Gustafson, *From the Cradle to the Grave: a Biography of Michael Joseph Savage* (Auckland: Penguin, 1988).

\(^{595}\) *Sole Survivor*, pp. 159, 211 – 212.

\(^{596}\) Ibid., p. 159
This final biography – the one work from the list that could transform Raymond into a realist offering reliable information – joins a whole series of unwritten, abandoned and ignored books that litter the trilogy. In each of the novels there is, beneath the layers of immediately recognizable political information and comment, a constant concern with the process of writing and information gathering itself. George Plumb is the author of three ignored works of philosophy and commentary.597 Sole Survivor is, in its own way, an unfinished book, as is the biography of Duggie Plumb that Alaric Gibbs is preparing.

Again, the family and generational structure of the trilogy allows Gee to introduce other perspectives to highlight or draw attention to the plotting and focussing at work in the novels. Oliver Plumb, George’s judge son, is also preparing a set of memoirs. It remains unfinished, but at the same time points to evasions the novels might also involve “Are you really writing your autobiography?”, Meg asks him.

Memoirs, Meg, they’re memoirs. I’ll suppress a lot. It serves no purpose to bring up certain things. I’ll deal mainly with my career in the law. That is what will interest people. But you understand, when the Chief Justice – when the former Chief Justice – writes of his life, he has to be discreet. He’s a public figure.598

These competing accounts and unwritten books jostle for attention with the written and completed ones, which guide the narrators’ lives. Meg encounters an event that “was just as [she] had found it described in so many novels.”599 Each piece of action and attempt at representation is followed in the trilogy by one of these doubting notes or unfinished works. While the Plumb trilogy never offers a full worked out statement or representation of the fate of a particular (liberal humanist) variant of realism after the collapse of Keynesianism, the evidence presented in this fourth indirection ought

597 “My Commentary on ‘The Song of Myself’ was the last of my publications. It came out as a pamphlet in 1939. I paid its way. And, to my knowledge, not a soul noticed it. There are two copies in the General Assembly Library and two in the Turnbull Library. And three hundred more in a cardboard box under my house.” Plumb, p. 240. “Today I look at my books. They sit on my shelves in their brown covers, a trio without distinction of style or content: sunk without a trace. (In 1934 I posted copies to G. B. Shaw when he visited Auckland, and had a note from his from Panama. He had donated my books to the ship’s library!) Only The Growing Point of Truth found a publisher.” (p. 178). James Chapple’s original Growing Point of Truth is available in Gee’s MSS at the Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, MS Papers 4678-027.

598 Meg, p. 112.

599 Ibid., p. 200.
to show how this is one of the trilogy’s constant concerns. If the trilogy builds through its characterisations something of a social history, this is a social history intimately concerned with its own process of creation and representation. One of the dominant themes in the *Plumb* trilogy, then, is the nature of the realist enterprise itself.

What then of *Plumb*’s status as realism in the age of globalisation? The trilogy is the oldest of the works studied in this dissertation and is the one closest to the cusp of the age in question. Written at a time when the Keynesian -Bretton Woods era had drawn to a close, and yet before the veritable explosion and upsurge of international activity we call globalisation, the *Plumb* trilogy faces in a number of different directions. Taking these four indirections through the trilogy is worthwhile today for the sort of information and experience it can offer as both a scale model and example.

If, as I mentioned earlier, marginal realism faces the danger of potential irrelevance through its common-or-garden marginality, this can, after our excursion through the workings of the texts themselves, be refigured as a boon. Gee does not see himself as a specifically New Zealand author, but the mass of local detail and example he produces – from public figures like Muldoon or Savage to historical details like 1913 or the absent 1951 – forces his readers to reconfigure the story for their own local contexts. The story of white-settler colonialisms in the twentieth century share many common features – welfare states in the Long Boom, neoliberal reform, industrial struggle, social, political and economic crisis in the 1970s – and yet most histories rarely take comparative approaches. While the best Gee criticism has approached his writing from a New Zealand perspective, this chapter has attempted to offer an internationalised reading. The different details and historical instances of the broader narrative the *Plumb* trilogy chronicles – that of the development of the post-war boom and its decomposition – can prevent historical skim-reading, and force us to

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600 “I don’t feel like a New Zealand writer, I just feel like a writer. I live and work in this country, so there’s nothing else I could be but a New Zealand writer – but *New Zealand* isn’t constantly presenting itself as a subject…I’m not – as some novelists feel they are – writing the story of my tribe. I’m trying to write stories of individual people – and maybe those become the story of my tribe, or part of it.” Colleen Riley, “Interview with Maurice Gee”, *Australian and New Zealand Studies in Canada*, no. 3, 1990, p. 8.

601 See James Belich’s witty remark: “General histories of Canada, the United States, Australia and New Zealand read like so many biographies of the Apostles, each pretending that its subject was the only one.” *Making Peoples*, p. 277.
consider our own situation with greater care and attention. Marginal realism, in this instance, can provide opportunities for us to, in the old saying, compare and contrast our own situation with another and, in the process, make connections which are a vital part of gaining reliable information about the social – and, by implication, global – whole. There is, in addition to this positive knowledge, the implicit critique the trilogy provides in its evasions and missing moments. This “implicit critique,” of course, requires some degree of local knowledge, but for the reader unfamiliar with the political resources Gee draws on, his fictional world – and its historical referent – still contain readily recognisable processes and developments that can be compared with the reader’s own knowledge and experience. Gee’s marginal realism, in this sense, is the fictional equivalent of comparative political studies: reading of a world outside of one’s own immediate frame of reference can help sharpen one’s sense of the dynamics at work within both worlds. The specifically realist part of this project is what slows us down and forces us to pay attention: the weight of detail, character and circumstances all grounding the narratives in their particular moments.

Even where this information does not have a political use or point of comparison, the Plumb trilogy deserves a chapter in a study such as this one for the kind of experiences it offers of the early processes of globalisation. Even where an experience is marginal in numerical terms – the grim years of Muldoonism represented in Sole Survivor did, after all, only affect a few million people – the trilogy provides a vital realist function here by expanding our sense of the social world and its impact on individuals. While social processes may, on a grand scale, be directly comparable, their lived experiential qualities differ from context to context. In illustrating a fragment of the global political whole the trilogy increases our sense of the impact of recent historical shifts and of their life-changing impact and power.

Thirdly, this experiential level is connected to a sense of the past and of history itself. Even where the trilogy does not directly concern itself with disputes of pressing political importance – and George Plumb’s theological battles with the backward Thorpe Presbytery are hard to read as anything other than historical curiosities or relics – it brings the contemporary reader into contact with passions and polemics of the past. A common complaint against the era of globalisation is that, as Jameson puts it, “no society has ever been so standardized as this one…[and] the stream of human,
social and historical temporality has never flowed quite so homogeneously.\textsuperscript{602} In selecting as its raw material such odd and wayward social matter – a renegade minister and his family – the \textit{Plumb} trilogy provides a vital realist function, that of forcing the past itself into view. The sort of reader the trilogy programs and fuses is one who spends several hours involving themselves in theological debates from the early past of last century and in the political struggles of a globally marginal and distant country. If this is not an awareness of the past and the historical then realism’s critics have set it impossibly high standards. The \textit{Plumb} trilogy does not only create readers who have worked through this amount of historical detail, but also confronts them with the complexity of politics’ application in different settings and times. For the non-New Zealand reader the trilogy offers chances to model their own nation’s political shifts against that of another’s, and the chance to notice processes familiarity with their own situation may have obscured. For the New Zealand reader the novels’ implicit undoing of their authorial ideology, only recently visible, add a new sense of the ideological organization of contemporary liberalism.

Finally, the trilogy’s methodological concerns, unwritten books, unnerved narrators and literary self-consciousness point to realism’s potential for innovation and internal reform. Where some critics see these as Gee staging his narratives at the limits of realism,\textsuperscript{603} a careful reading of these asides reveals, I have argued here, a tradition far more in good health than one in decline. One is more likely to trust a barman who knows when to change the keg, or a surgeon who knows the difficulties and dangers involved in an operation, than one so confident as to be unaware of her tools’ limitations. The same approach should apply to the realist; by incorporating the limits of realism into the narrative of his texts, and recording the internal crisis and collapse of one of the ideologies – liberal humanism – long associated with the realist project, Gee illustrates nothing more than this project’s resilience and representational strength. His trilogy ought to be of interest for this reason alone. It ends this study but originates at the beginning of the era under study and, as a product of these early years of globalisation, points two different ways at once. The \textit{Plumb} trilogy thinks through realism’s dilemmas, and attends to them with a care and attention that gives

the lie to those who claim that in realism “we are persuaded that language and form have disappeared” (MacCabe).\textsuperscript{604} And yet, unlike the work of Barker or Peace, Gee, at the time of the trilogy’s composition, was not able to absorb into his practice the debates around realism’s renewal and adaptation that were provoked, in the decades to come, by metafiction, postmodernism, and so on. His later fiction has, like Barker, Hensel, Kelman and Peace, incorporated elements of other forms and approaches into the realist arsenal. The \textit{Plumb} trilogy can only indicate its ideological and aesthetic limitations, and reflects eloquently on these limitations; it stands as a fitting conclusion to this study by rehearsing these in realist fashion. These “bendings” can be clearly distinguished from the fiction of postmodernism and modernism not by isolating certain techniques or narrative tools but by recognising their differing stances. Gee’s narrators’ unreliability revolves around their self-knowledge, and we are drawn into reflection upon it: the “ironies of growth and judgment” strengthen our sense of the historical instead of, with historiographic metafiction, throwing it into doubt.

The \textit{Plumb} trilogy has none of the political urgency of GB84, nor any of its representational ambitiousness and innovation. But it carries out the tasks set for realism with skill and sensitivity. It illustrates the tradition’s political purchase and historical concern and, crucially, suggests readers who, even if occasionally “sadder but wiser”, are programmed for political engagement and action:

Sharon called me into the house and made me a cup of tea. She scolded me for getting wet. I must look after myself, she said, I’m not a boy any longer. I don’t feel like a boy, but I don’t feel like a man with high blood pressure either. I feel like a survivor. I feel like Ray, Ray Sole, Raymon, R. Sole. All of those. I’ve got some life left in me. That’s what I think. So I’ll get to sleep, and in the morning put my things in the car and head for Thorpe… Tomorrow I’ll kiss her goodbye. And offer a man’s shake to her friend. And to Che. And kiss my Indian grandson if he’ll let me. Then I’ll go. \textit{Get on with it}.\textsuperscript{605}

This is, of course, a character in the novel, and not one of the novel’s readers, finding himself programmed for action. What we do with realist narratives like these, and

\textsuperscript{605} \textit{Sole Survivor}, p. 231.
how we might use them to model social behaviour outside of reading are the questions I shall pick up in my final, concluding chapter. But if Gee’s novels’ shifting time frames and schemes, the plot digressions and recurrent moments are all indirections, they are ones which, in this final call to “get on with it”, offer directions out.
Chapter Six
Conclusion
Realism in the Valley of Its Saying

Why does realism need defending again? The sense that this might be an exhausted or spent form, that realism’s effects may in time reveal themselves to be little more than shams and confidence tricks, is not a new one and, if Eagleton is right that realism “has proved perhaps the most resilient cultural form in Western history”606 this resilience has been followed by a nagging sense of doubt and disbelief. This thesis has, through its readings of particular realisms and particular achievements of realist literary practice, made a case for how we might find the form of use in the era of globalisation but, in conclusion, it is worth reminding ourselves how the very process of defence itself acknowledges that there is a case to answer.

Most of the objections to realism encountered so far have been variations on the theme of scale. From Jameson’s suggestion that globalisation may find the form “exhausted” to worries about the unrepresentability of the globalised and postmodern city, realism’s critics see its defeat in the enormity of the world system. But anxieties about size and the dizzying speed of social transformation have been with artistic production since capitalism’s inception and, when we remember the famous railway scene from Dombey and Son or the Parisian crowd of Baudelaire, size seems all at once much more a challenge to contemporary realism than its negation. Besides, it is not as if the modes of production immediately before our own were aesthetically problem-free. As Brecht never tired of repeating, putting a factory on stage tells us nothing about the workings of capitalism. The same is true for the computer, and so suggestions that digital technologies as such are a threat to representation seem either wide of the mark or dewy-eyed in their sense of an earlier moment’s intelligibility. The great advantage of Jameson’s account is its enormous productiveness: where other theorists have discounted contemporary realism, Jameson’s asides and insights offer spaces where we might set out something of

a programmatic call for reading contemporary realism. Such a programmatic intervention has been this present study’s ambition.

More serious than size, though, has been the other objection I have pursued through each of the last four chapters: defeat. If realism is formally possible, the objection runs, what actual viability does it have after the “end of History”, the collapse of metanarratives and the (alleged) defeat of the socialist project? What hope for realism in the era of neoliberalism’s triumph? These questions, naturally, need not apply to all realisms or even to realism alone: a politically conservative or ironically detached variation on realism – the later Martin Amis, say, or John Updike – is unlikely to feel itself under threat from the post-socialist present. This thesis has been concerned, though, with realisms that set themselves the task of somehow assisting social transformation, and it is in this context that the two concerns run together. Some readers may feel this collapses a necessary distance between immediately political events and the sort of cognitive and epistemological crises associated with the “crisis of realism.” These different parts of the social have, doubtless, their own “relative autonomy” and differing logics: what unites them, though, is the insistence of History. One feels the lack of a proper perspective all the more keenly when one has lost political influence or direction.

So the objection defeat raises is real, and serious, and one that can’t be wished away. Each of the novels I have considered here concerns itself, to a greater or lesser extent, with the reality of failure and the attendant cost of lives ruined and political organization undone: Peace’s “year zero”, Hensel’s Germany of the Obdachlose, Barker’s unresolved war trauma, Kelman’s Glasgow of the unemployed and Gee’s emptied reformists all register the experience of late twentieth-century defeat and demoralisation. After all, any serious aesthetic project, if it aims at representing a social truth of any significance, has to register these defeats. Here I agree with Adorno that “scars of damage and disruption are the modern’s seal of authenticity.”607 I do not want to conclude, therefore, by holding up any of the novels analysed in this study as models of realist perfection: their scars, damaged moments and aesthetic disruption register, rather, the full range and ambition of

the task and its scale. These scars point again at realism’s distinctive blending of aesthetic and epistemological categories. Earlier periods of lull or defeat have seen inverted relations between political movement and aesthetic advance; one recalls here *Paradise Lost*’s context of the last, counter-revolutionary years of the Republic, the flowering of African novels in the wake of the decolonisation struggles, or of the tragic productivity of Victor Serge, offering his eloquent and committed witness to the barbarity of Stalinism. But realism’s commitment to reliable information and epistemological positioning tightens political and aesthetic connections. A flawed and compromised body of work is not necessarily realism’s negation but, where it carries just enough of its project through to the reader, can instead be its affirmation. Realism is a project, these chapters have argued, in the process of becoming and struggle: it cannot, while it ranges against both the world system and its ideological structures, ever yet be an achieved mode of being. Again, these comments only really apply to oppositional realisms. The questions one has to ask of a new Updike novel concern less its flaws than whether its repetitive insistence on the small change of the present really functions as a catalogue of “reliable information” in the first place.

Anyway, what travels under the sign of defeat and demoralisation turns out, more often than not, to reveal itself on closer inspection to be an assumed relationship between realism and the notion of the *inspirational* text. It is customary to conclude studies of various forms – science fiction here as much as realism, metafiction as much as romance – with an appeal to their inspirational qualities, their ability to convince their readership that “another world is possible” or, with all its variations, that “now is the hour for all good men to come to the aid of the party.” But do we need to conclude in this manner?

There are a number of problems with the argument from inspiration. Firstly, and most damagingly, it is a case without any evidence to support its claims. “Hardly anyone,” as Raymond Williams dryly observes, “becomes a Marxist for primarily cultural or literary reasons, but for compelling political and economic reasons.”608 The demand for inspiration, with this insight in mind, starts to feel like a demand much more for wish-

fulfilment and comfort than it does for political efficacy. The record of those cultural works that have earned an enduring presence in the workers’ movement adds little to the inspirational case either. *The Internationale, The Red Flag*, Shelley’s “Mask of Anarchy”, Florence Reese’s “Which Side are You On?”; Tressell’s *Ragged Trousered Philanthropists*: the great cultural works of the international workers’ movement demand resilience or insist on political choice and action, but few of them offer inspiration as their primary effect.

**Readers in the Space of Realism**

It is common at moments like these to use Auden’s “poetry makes nothing happen” as an aestheticist stick with which to beat inspiration, but “In Memory of W.B. Yeats” can also be read in a way which opens a space for offering some conclusions on realism’s uses that don’t rely on inspiration’s platitudes and vagueness. Contrary to how he is often deployed, Auden’s great poem does not argue for art’s uselessness. Rather,

```plaintext
...poetry makes nothing happen: it survives
In the valley of its saying where executives
Would never want to tamper; it flows south
From ranches of isolation and the busy griefs,
Raw towns that we believe and die in; it survives,
A way of happening, a mouth.609
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Set in its proper context the line suggests that art creates a certain space of its own from where we can then “flow south.” In offering a “way of happening” art in turn allows us to model challenges and ethical problems from the social world in a slightly removed space where this world’s immediate demands will not overwhelm us. “The valley of its saying”, on this reading, is what the Althusserians used to call relative autonomy, and suggests to me a way we can view contemporary realist practice. The novels I have studied in these chapters aren’t moments for vague inspiration but are, more productively, models for

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thought and political action. In an era when strategic and epistemological paralysis – what is globalisation and, within it, what is to be done? – afflict great swathes of the international left, models and thought experiments may offer themselves as the most useful aesthetic experiences of all.

The relative autonomy of realism’s “valley of its own saying” should not suggest any retreat into an aestheticist stance of l’art pour l’art: we have all learnt a good deal since Auden about the political impact of narrative and thought itself. In an age where the U.S. military is using the simulations and narrative effects of video gaming and action films to better “prime” its soldiers for urban war in Iraq and Afghanistan, realism can carry out a counter-task of offering fictional narratives as practice for us to come to terms with those ideologies of the present shaping and inhibiting our lives. Various theorists of realism offer metaphors of this process. For Peter Brooker “the realist novel provides a sense of play very similar to that given by the scale model” while, for Lilian Furst, “far from being a lie, realist fiction is a construct in its own right: it constructs an alternative, possible world adjacent to the real world.” Janet Frame has one of her novelist characters suggest the contours of this area when she describes fiction as the place where one can “live and work in the house of replicas, usefully having all in mind.” Spending time in the valley of realism’s own saying is, following these metaphorical descriptions of the reading process, not a retreat from the world of the political but a preparation for it. Poetry makes nothing happen, but this may be as much because we, and not the texts we consume, are the proper focus for and subjects of political action. Whereas arguments from inspiration stay caught within the world of the text, rethinking realism as a model may offer us directions out. Spatial metaphors, and their attendant emphasis on the active responsibility of the reader in the non-textual world, have the advantage of keeping open and legitimising readerly disagreement. Defences of the value of realist literature often rely on assumed or “correct” responses to canonical realist texts: reading Martha

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Nussbaum, one is struck by how little room for interpretation or disputation her reading schemes offer, and by how constrained – always white, heterosexual, bourgeois – her implied reader must be. Conceiving of reading as a space for reflection and thought experiment restores the democratic impulse to the realist project. Booth’s concept of coduction lurks somewhere behind all this, and these metaphors may shake our stock image of the reader. If the “ideal reader” of an earlier realism was the solitary individual reclined on their couch, the space of contemporary realism may be that of the reading group, and collective discussion. Starting with the fact that “poetry makes nothing happen”, following this logic, returns us to the proper subjects of political action. Here I agree with Italo Calvino:

> It is not so much the book that is politically revolutionary as the use that can be made of it; even a work intended to be politically revolutionary does not become so except in the course of being used, in its often retarded and indirect effects.

Conceiving of realism as this sort of imaginative and literary space – Auden’s valley of its saying, Frame’s house of replicas, Brooker’s scale model – allows us to by-pass the problems of a mimetic or reflectionist model, and points to the kind of reliable information that novels might offer. When, in his history of psychiatry and war, Ben Shephard complains that “the novelist Pat Barker would have us believe that by 1918 officer-patients in shell-shock hospitals were discussing the finer points of Freudian doctrine with each other” he mistakes the kind of mediations a fictional experience of the war involves. The *Regeneration* trilogy is packed to bursting with vital social and historical information and detail, but its primary success and ambition is not so much in its specific historical claims as in the way it turns Barker’s readers’ attention to thinking through the historical moment. An engaged reader of the trilogy, in other words, does not finish with its account of psychiatry and the war but is, rather, awakened to the moment’s

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importance through Barker’s imaginative recreation. Barker’s use of Sassoon and Rivers, and her creation of Prior, offers a variation on Lukács’ idea of the typical: Shephard is right that not all officer-patients were discussing Freud in 1918, but this is hardly the point. Barker’s realism lies in her re-creation of those moments of the most significant contradictions of the era, its intellectual flashpoints and political strains. Reliable information here is not information about just anything (Lukács’ “mere cult of the facts”); it is, much more usefully, a distillation of those moments of real historical significance. The realist novel, using these metaphors, is an imaginative space we can inhabit in order to think through and model problems and questions of the world in a distanced and deliberate manner.

Those readers who find my strategic deployment of Auden and Frame too vague or imprecise may wish to substitute for the poet and novelist these rather more stringently materialist lines from Bourdieu:

> There is no better testimony of all that separates literary writings from scientific writing than this capacity, which it alone possesses, to concentrate and condense in the concrete singularity of a sensitive figure and an individual adventure, functioning both as metaphor and as metonymy, all the complexity of a structure and history which scientific analysis must laboriously unfold and deploy.

Realism offers an area where we can, through imaginative leaps, carry out thought experiments and reflect on areas of the social and historical that “scientific analysis must laboriously unfold and deploy.”

What, then, do the realisms studied here offer?

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617 For an example of how the trilogy can be used to instigate wider historical investigation see Lynda Prescott’s useful pedagogical aid, “Pat Barker, The Ghost Road” in David Johnson (ed.), The Popular and the Canonical (London: Routledge and the Open University, 2005).

The Centrality of Content

Pat Barker, Maurice Gee, Kerstin Hensel, James Kelman and David Peace demonstrate realism’s ongoing potential through their determined expansion of the reach of the novel. These novels’ empirical achievements are their most important: in the age of globalisation, when various ideologues and enthusiasts sell us the era of “digital revolution,” flexible labour and endless leisure and luxury, it is a vital task to return the attention of the aesthetic to labour, suffering and the social. Even after the great social struggles of the 1960s and 1970s, it still remains the case that the productions of the cultural world bear little or no resemblance to the lives of millions of us. Novels that take working class life seriously, and that labour at reliable representations of Sheffield and Glasgow establish themselves as a worthwhile tradition through this effort alone. We need novels of the Sudan as much as of Sheffield, and Ghana as much as of Glasgow, and there are rich and vital realisms of the non-Anglophone world being produced today, but, as I argued in this thesis’ introduction, learning from the literature of the so-called “Third World” does not demand a neglect of that of the First: contemporary realism reveals and examines the contradictions and class-determined content of a putatively “First World” experience.

These novels document worlds that exist, and which we inhabit, that may otherwise be lost to representation. It is astonishing, when watching television or commercially-minded films, to register the utter absence of work, of labour and of those tasks that make up the vast majority of most people’s lives. Those artists who produce our pop images tell lies of the most venal kind, and a whole culture has grown up that trains us not even to notice the most offensive of them: when thousands are homeless in the richest nation on earth, why did the realization that no real-life aspiring Manhattan actor could afford an apartment as luxurious as Chandler and Joey’s in Friends not choke us with indignation? Kelman’s Sammy, with his struggles over accommodation, unemployment benefits and bureaucracy, is an example of the kind of reminders realism

can offer, with its depictions of our own lives able to pierce and deflate the aesthetic fantasies of the culture industry. Class relations and antagonism structure and drive capitalist society, yet their impact and experience is everywhere occluded, distorted and denied. The culture industry’s answer to realism – “reality” television – suppresses crucial constitutive elements of our social lives. Where reality television removes its participants from work – locking them in the Big Brother house or sending them to a remote island – realism uncovers and explores work’s centrality, and its networks and patterns as they shape social life. Where reality television consciously fosters anti-social individualism in the name of ideologies of some Hobbesian human nature – in the rule of Big Brother or the lure of prizes – realism stresses social relationships, human patterns and collectivity. The cultural studies cliché, whereby any criticism of so-called popular culture is returned to its sender as an accusation of their alleged disdain for the masses, can here be repaid with interest: far from being a popularly created form of “mass” entertainment, reality television’s origin and support base is located amongst wealthier and more educated audiences. What is occluded in all of this is class, and class relations. Lawrence’s “Autobiographical Sketch” identified the problems this creates for morally serious fiction: “class makes a gulf, across which all the best human flow is lost. It is not exactly the triumph of the middle classes that has made the deadness, but the triumph of the middle-class thing.” In taking this “gulf” and its impact as their subject matter, the realisms I read in this thesis assert themselves as works of documentary value.

Defeat re-appears here as its opposite, and realism’s insistent recreation of the felt, historical reality of defeat as it occurred stands as a stark and dignified contrast to the ideological wallpaper that attempts to cover the reality of class experience today. Catherine Gallagher has shown how the emergence of the novel is bound up with the development of the bourgeois subject, and how “almost all of the development we associate with modernity – from greater religious toleration to scientific discovery –

620 The eternal popularity of lurid accounts of drug addiction, homelessness, sexual abuse and so on are not, as is sometimes argued, evidence against this. Middle class fascination with life-experiences of the lumpenproletariat is as much an avoidance of thinking about work and working-class life as any costume-piece. Alan Ayckbourn and Sarah Kane are, in this sense, merely variations on a theme.
required the kind of cognitive provisionality one practices in reading fiction." For an older realism, and in the era of capitalist expansion, these practices could be associated with personal transformation but, already by the fantastical “hidden inheritance” plot resolutions of Dickens, this took a toll on the form. Contemporary realism, in stressing our dependence on the social, our containment within the political and collective structures of our day, offers a salutary reminder both of what inhibits our growth and of what forces can sustain it. David Peace records a failure, and a massive failure at that, but does so in a way that restores it to attention and concentrated reflection. Just a year before GB84 was published, Richard Curtis’ directorial debut Love Actually (2003) appeared. In it, catering assistant Natalie manages both to win the romantic attention of Prime Minister Hugh Grant/Tony Blair and to change the U.S./U.K. alliance into a force for good through an innocent combination of feminine submissiveness and suitably proletarian demure docility. In such a cultural climate, Peace’s realist gloom and venomous negativity are salutary and rewarding. Contemporary realism’s content is the record of careful excavation and unturning of neglected historical moments and concealed aspects of the social: they assert this content as important and imaginatively engaging in the face of its general neglect. We need to interrogate the ideological assumptions informing the endless assertions of the newspaper reviewers that the industrial theme and working-class subject matter are dull or out of date. The full savagery of the response to How Late it Was, How Late indicates some of the forces arraigned against the revival of a contemporary realism (on this venom see chapter three, above).

Realism’s content is, of course, never just content, and the form of its presentation provokes reflection on wider social relations. We could learn about the Miners’ Strike by reading historical works or social theory, a task Peace himself suggests is important through his inclusion of a list of further sources at the novel’s end. But fiction differs from this “scientific analysis which must laboriously unfold” in its findings and conclusions. Peace animates the content of the strike with a range of personal relationships and conflicts that have us think through the events both from the perspective

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of the participants and within a time frame (the pace of reading) that sets past events in motion again. Realism’s twin vocations – as “scale model” or experiment in the valley of its saying and as chronicle or record of class experience and historical struggle – rely on and complete each other. Marxist scholars as diverse as Chris Harman, David Harvey and Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri have all attempted analyses of the emergence and impact of neo-liberalism. Important as these works are, they cannot, on their own, give us that vital sense of the experience of policy change and its impact on workers’ lives. A whole history of the shift from Keynesianism to Thatcherism – and of the reconstitution of the subject of the welfare state and NHS from worker to deviant-to-be-policied – can be captured in one exchange in a doctor’s surgery:

So ye’re no saying I’m blind?
It isn’t for me to say.
Aye but you’re a doctor.
Yes.
So can you give me an opinion?
Anyone can give an opinion.
Aye but to do with medical things.
Mister Samuels I have people waiting to see me.
Christ sake!
I find your language offensive.
Do ye. Ah well fuck ye then. Fuck ye! Sammy crumpled the prescription and flung it at him: stick that up yer fucking arse!
Yes good morning.
Ya fucking edjit! Sammy stood there. He started smiling, then stopped it. Fucking bastard!
Yes, thank you.
Fucking thank you ya bastard. Sammy grasped at the desk; there were papers there and he skited them; he turned and headed to where he thought the door was but banged into something that fell and he stumbled, tried to right himself but couldnay fucking manage and ower he went, clattering into something sharp and solid and he cried out.624

“Something sharp and solid” stands, in our imagination, as a marker or reminder of that whole social world of ideological and repressive state apparatuses, each of which demand

624 How Late it Was, How Late, pp. 225 – 226.
their own particular historical and political analysis. But Sammy’s confusion here, and his inarticulate, fumbling struggle with the authority represented by Doctor Logan gives us a set of experiences to compare our own – and the studies of the historians – against. *How Late it Was, How Late*’s focus on Sammy and Sammy’s experiences gives us a guide, a narrative way in to the field of Thatcherism and neo-liberalism’s devastation. The novel’s catalogue of the impact of neo-liberal reform is one part of its value, but this passage – with its sense of confusion, dislocation and bewilderment – captures the other, experiential aspect of the realist project.

This turn to marginalised and neglected areas for aesthetic attention has epistemological uses too. There is a danger that talk of globalisation can slide from actuality to possibility and tendential speculation. If science fiction and cybepunk allow us spaces to think through the world system’s tendencies and potential development, realism’s emphasis on the continuities of labour and lived experience – Sammy’s search for work, Peace’s miners, Barker’s historical recreation of war – reminds us of the carry-over from monopoly and late capitalism into its newer form. David Harvey notes how “fixed capital embedded in the land…[acts] as a significant drag upon geographical transformations and relocations of capitalist activity” and goes on to observe how “the geographical landscape of capitalist activity is riddled with contradictions and tensions and…is perpetually unstable in the face of all manner of technical and economic pressures operating upon it.”

We need fictions of the spaces where this “drag upon geographical transformation” is acted out as much as we need sketches of digital transformation: realism’s scale models carry out this vital task. That these particular novels struggle and strain under the weight of the task they have set themselves, and that they are not always perfect in their attempts at representation is no argument against realism. As Alasdair Grey once misquoted Hugh MacDiarmid: “inadequate maps are better than no maps; at least they show that the land exists.” In turning attention to the social world and the sphere of labour these novels, in both their triumphs and off-notes, provoke further work and attention. This is a sign of realism’s vitality.

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As the example of Barker reminds us, though, imaginative recreation and the attendant extension of the reach of the aesthetic need not aim solely at the contemporary: realism’s labour of imaginative reconstruction extends a particular form of the historical imagination. Realism reconfigures our sense of the past as a space for organising interventions into the present. As John Roberts argues, “our experience of the past is the constant renewal of the ‘possible’ through the gateway of the ‘after’ rather than a dead continuum haunted by the dream of irrevocable distance.”

The Miners’ Strike, the anti-war networks of 1914 – 1918, New Zealand’s socialist movements: contemporary realism not only offers us representations of these events, it renews them as moments of the possible. Nikolai Bukharin, in his *Philosophical Arabesques*, considered this approach to the past a crucial part of any revolutionary inheritance:

Time, like space, is both discrete and continuous, and of course, infinite as well. The present exists because there is no longer a past; it is the negation of the past. The non-being of the being of the present, that is, its negation, is the future. Only the present exists, but it is the result of the past, and it is pregnant with the future.

**Imagination Confronting History**

If the present is pregnant with the future, it may take imaginative leaps and reaches to grasp the present as a result of the past as Bukharin conceives it. Realism’s vocation here is in extending our imaginative faculties. In spending time with the past – and the concrete and determinate detail of these particular pasts – contemporary realism repositions imagination.

Harry Shaw suggests that realist novels “are doing work with respect to the real world that more abstract modes of thought can’t do.” These tasks have a practical importance: as the Lukács of *History and Class Consciousness* argues, “the fate of a class

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depends on its ability to elucidate and solve the problems with which history confronts it.”

Realist novels, in their weight of detail, circumstance, motivation and character, offer trial runs and practice areas for this process. Most readers, outside the restricted world of criticism and professional reviewing, spend several days if not weeks working through a particular book. In offering us opportunities to incorporate into our life routines – the chapter before bed, on the tram, in lunch breaks – the imagination of the past, realism provides opportunities to practice this task of elucidation. But realism does not only present opportunities; it may, in its contemporary form, help in the project of renewing the task of elucidation itself. Jameson sees a weakened sense of history as one of the great disabling curses of our current situation:

Our historical metabolism has undergone a serious mutation; the organs with which we register time can handle only smaller and smaller and more and more immediate, empirical segments; the schematisation of our transcendental historical imagination encompasses less and less material, and can process only stories short enough to be verifiable via television. The larger, more abstract thoughts…fall outside the apparatus; they may be true but are no longer representable.

What, at a first reading, feels almost unbearably bleak is redeemed through the metaphor of the metabolism. Metabolisms change and, even as they slow with age, are impacted by exercise and its training regimes: the close readings of the previous four chapters have attempted to show how an attention to realism can begin to undo the most damaging effects of this mutation.

The method of specification realism uses to extend our imagination of the past has dangers of its own. Terry Eagleton suggests in Criticism and Ideology that there is “a mystification inherent in the very form of realist fiction, which by casting objective social relations into interpersonal terms, constantly hold[s] open the possibility of reducing the

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630 Georg Lukács, History and Class Consciousness, p. 53.
631 My argument here is in contrast to Lennard Davis’ Foucauldian reading, Resisting Novels: Ideology and Fiction (New York: Methuen, 1987).
This danger is real enough, and I have no wish to deny that the possibility remains. But – in the terminology of Lukács’ *Lenin* – is this problem the key link in the era of globalisation? It may in fact be the case that our sense of the system’s impersonality, of vast banking networks and electronic transfers determining the fate of whole industries, retards the development of a sense of this as a dynamic totality. Digital technologies have done their share in creating anxieties of knowledge, and fears of amnesia and anamnesia – flip sides of the same coin of computerised memory and storage – order much of the current discourse of globalisation. If “casting objective relations into interpersonal terms” leaves the door ajar for mystification, this may be a risk the current moment demands we take. In inserting a sense of the personal and the human into our imaginative grasp of the world system, realism restores its properly dynamic and changing element.

This insertion has strategic consequences. “What is crippling,” Jameson argues, “is not the presence of an enemy but rather the universal belief, not only that this tendency is irreversible, but that the historical alternatives to capitalism have been proven unviable and impossible, let alone practically available.” This sense – where, in some sort of negative teleology, the one certainty about the past is that it could never have improved – rests on a whole series of under-examined and under-theorised historical assumptions. Margaret Thatcher’s supposition that There Is No Alternative rests on a sense that there never was one and this, in turn, demands that readers are directed away from history’s lost moments and missed opportunities. Realism can fulfil the useful task of suggesting plausible outlines and alternatives in a knowable history. Joyce’s Stephen Dedalus worries at precisely this dilemma of historiography:

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Time had branded them and fettered they are lodged in the room of infinite possibilities they have ousted. But can those have been possible seeing that they never were? Or was that only possible which came to pass?  

The answer to Stephen’s final question, for Marxism in any case, has to be no. Realist fiction reminds us of this fact. Barker’s *The Eye in the Door* not only recreates under-represented areas of the war but also turns attention toward the anti-war and revolutionary currents at work in war-time society. We too easily forget that the Europe of 1917 – 1923 was a continent of revolutionary transformation and what Lukács called “the actuality of the revolution”  

had several potential insurrectionary moments in the workers’ revolts in Germany, for instance, developed more fully, the whole course of twentieth-century history would be different.  

Peace’s *GB84* runs several plots parallel to one another: individual stories of miners’ lives during the strike itself and, alongside these, broader historical narratives of class violence and conspiracy at the highest level. For the hours one is reading, “the infinite possibilities” are no longer ousted but open again, and the whole series of strategies, victories and defeats the Miners’ Strike represents return with their full force. The novel reminds us, with a real sense of shock, of the delicate balance of forces that combined to ensure Thatcher’s by no means certain victory, and in the process Peace evokes a whole era in motion. The sheer effort involved in *GB84* stands as a provocation for us to renew the historical imagination. These novels’ urgency and seriousness come from their sense of the impact of the past, of Benjamin’s sense of historical understanding as “an after-life of that which is understood, whose pulse can still be felt in the present.”  

If this pulse is what drives novelists to represent particular historical moments, the reader of realism is offered an opportunity by these recreations to make imaginative demands of the past and its ousted opportunities. Dialectics’ “wager”, Slavoj Zizek argues,  

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638 It will be hard, after the appearance in English of Pierre Broué’s monumental *The German Revolution 1917 – 1923*, trans. John Andrew (Leiden: Brill, 2005) for Marxism’s critics to dismiss claims like this as lightly as they have done until now.  
is not to adopt to the present the “point of view of finality”, viewing it as if it were already past, but, precisely, to 
reintroduce the openness of the future into the past, to grasp that-which-was in the process of becoming, to see the contingent process which generated existing necessity.⁶⁴⁰

Realism, with its studied recreation of both the content and the lived experience of historical events as its narrative present, takes up this wager.

In Defence of Slowness

Of course, not all of the novels considered here take as their narrative focus social struggles and transformative ruptures. If GB84 and Regeneration aim for representations of world-historical events, How Late it Was, How Late and Tanz am Kanal are tales of personal survival with a narrative pace that fits itself to that of an individual life.

But these individual narratives extend our historical imagination and reach in their own ways. Kundera has one of his narrators suggest that “speed is the form of ecstasy the technical revolution has bestowed on man [sic].”⁶⁴¹ Globalisation’s forms are relentless, with just-in-time delivery turning production into a frenzied denial of the physical limits of the human while the home computer, with its high-speed internet access, dissolves the boundaries between work and domestic life. When our boss can e-mail demands at any time of the day or night, and production is geared in the hope of obliterating time zones, speed presents itself as a threat to the order and control of the human. In the cultural sphere comments on this state of affairs can end up being mere reinforcements of its worst excesses: I have often found myself bewildered and disoriented amongst the multiple screens and split digital imagery of contemporary art galleries. Not all of these developments need to be politically reactionary – Ursula Biemann’s installation Geobodies uses video to document the impact of oil pipe-lines on everyday life in ways that suggest exciting new possibilities for cognitive mapping – but all eventually

exhaust. In the 1960s Pynchon, Burroughs, Ginsberg and others used the trope of drugs to evoke cultural revolution and changed consciousness, but now the novels of Will Self and Irvine Welsh deploy drug use to suggest deeper parallels between capitalist production models and commodified leisure time. Where “speed” itself is the cultural logic and drug of choice for the era of globalisation, work and its allegedly deviant rejection in the form of the drug-taker unite in attempting to obliterate the limits of physical frailty and bodily rhythm to temporality.

Realism, in this frantic and well-nigh fully decontextualised societal sphere, reasserts the rhythm of human labour, of slowness and of lived time itself. There are readerly benefits to lingering with a text and drawing out the distance between the time-pace of the story and the time-pace of its narrative, but this element of realism makes a political comment too. The old moralistic attack on the indolent bourgeois novel reader – John Thorpe’s dismissive remark in *Northanger Abbey* that “he doesn’t have time to read novels!” – should be accepted nowadays as a compliment. In forcing a slowing-down and demanding a “lingering” narrative time, realism creates a time frame whereby readers might gain some perspective from which to view the restless world around them. Political thought, if it is serious, needs reflection and elaboration, demands too often denied in the frenzy of information from computer technology and digital imagery. Realism restores a necessary perspectival balance.

What Eco calls the discourse time, or the time of the narrative, is, at the level of subject-matter, one of the ways in which realism punctures the wilder excesses of globalisation’s speed-addled advocates. If digital technologies can transform life experience they are far from universally available and, for the masses of unemployed and under-employed who

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642 See Ursula Biemann’s *Geobodies: Gender and Geography* at www.geobodies.org
populate globalisation’s massive cities, an all-too-familiar time of spaced out boredom and wasted human potential has far more in common with earlier time experiences than it does with the digital present. The narrative time of Sammy Samuels and Gabriela von Haßlau serves here as a reminder of the time of human suffering and waste, of the misery of unemployment and its seemingly endless and pointless hours. If a minority enjoy unprecedented access to a truly globalised world of luxury and immediacy – Lyotard’s postmodern consumer of McDonald’s, reggae and Tokyo perfume – then realism’s discourse time speaks to the life experience of that great globalised reserve army of labour and proletariat working longer hours in increasingly repetitive insecure employment. Even reading these novels quickly, in other words, forces us up against the life-rhythms of unemployment and under-employment, of the “psychic misery involved in chronic unemployment, the demoralization, the morbid effects of boredom and the waste of vital energies and the absence of productivity.”

There is, behind this insistence on slowness, a wider argument around how we talk about globalisation and, in stressing the continuities not only of life-experience but of the technological organization of capitalism, realism’s measured pace acts as a rejoinder to those too easily caught up in the glittering self-presentations of the current age.

What of the time of the story? If realism’s discourse time fits a human pattern in ways that offer uncomfortable reminders of continuity to the ideologues of speed, its narrative time trains us in keeping a slower pace. These are novels that take time and are very hard to read in a single sitting. Contemporary realism demands time and effort and, in demanding this time, carves out for itself a space of concentrated attention of a kind quite different to that of other forms. These are novels that, whatever their internal time schemes, protest against the destruction of human rhythms by globalised organisation. Terry Eagleton draws out the political implications of this:

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646 Archaeologies of the Future, p. 148.
anti-capitalist revolution, if the system it opposes is so perpetually restive, must be in the name of a quiet life as well as an exciting one. The middle-aged, as well as the young, thus have their insights to contribute to revolutionary theory. An authentic materialism soberly recalls humanity to its creaturely limitations, its frail, vulnerable species-being, as well as imagining developed powers far beyond the present. It must combat the fearful hubris of capitalism along with its chafing constraints.648

If cyberpunk covers capitalism’s “chafing constraints”, realism joins with it in a united front to face the flank of “fearful hubris.” What are usually clichés and commonplaces we can, here, turn into demands for slowness as slogans of a renewed contemporary realism: curl up with a good book! Take your time over it! Find yourself unable to put the book down! Realism organises an all too rare slowness.

Further Research

Any survey or comparative study is necessarily limited by its selection, and contemporary realist practice extends well beyond the record of the five authors I have focused on in this study. The revival of scholarly interest in realism suggests to me two directions in which further research is needed.

Firstly, the figure of the reader of realism is still massively under-researched. The first-person plural has been my pronoun of choice in the previous chapters, and I have used this “we” to try and create an implied reader of realism alongside me. My rhetorical sleight-of-hand here is standard operating practice in realism and most other genre scholarship, and how could it be otherwise? Without access to detailed research into the psychological and political impact of particular books on readers, the student of realism has to work with the constructed reader of the text and the potential of readings they themselves can produce. These readings could be complemented by further research that studied readers and reading patterns in real detail: similar research has already been carried out on romance readers. As Franco Moretti’s recent use of maps, graphs and trees in historical studies of the novel has shown, the potential uses of quantitative approaches

to literary studies are only just starting to become apparent. The ongoing debates about realism’s potential and vocation would be all the richer, concrete and complex if we had scholarship to hand detailing the reading patterns, political affiliations, responses and behaviours of reading subjects. In its scale and demands, such a project – which would require funding for research librarians, field work, and, to be truly useful, international reach and comparative data over an extended time-frame – falls outside of the scope of doctoral research, but it remains an area demanding further investigation.649

Anecdotal evidence suggests that many readers do not confine themselves to one genre or type of fiction. I read Dickens as a child, but also C.S. Lewis, and am now as likely to pick up the latest novel from China Mieville or William Gibson as one from Sarah Waters or David Peace. This reading practice has informed my defence of realism here; the arguments I advance in this thesis do not polemicise against other genres or literary forms and are, indeed, compatible with them. Realism could form a part of a readerly united front, marching separately from the future-investigations of cyberpunk and the ideological interrogations of metafiction, but striking together at the same targets of reification and the doxa of globalisation. Again, politically engaged novelists’ practice suggests some ways these sorts of united fronts could be formed. Adam Thorpe, surely one of the most exciting British novelists of recent years, has single-handedly attempted what looks like a reversal of Jameson’s realism-modernism-postmodernism division. His debut Ulverton (1991) is a bravura postmodernist echo-chamber of a novel, with pastiche and borrowings from different historical eras commenting wryly on each other and, interspersed with its metafictional and intertextual asides, builds up to a cunning and careful comment on English history and historical memory. Then Still (1995) appeared, an obsessive and all-encompassing modernist performance of stream-of-consciousness and exhausting meditation on the nature of creativity and art. Finally, his No Telling (2003) is a “straight” realist piece, using a child’s perspective to recreate the fragile social order challenged by 1968 and dissecting the ideological framework of petty-bourgeois France of that time. Thorpe’s obvious novelistic commitment – to books that make his

649 Whatever the limitations of his doggedly individualist ideological frame, Jonathan Rose’s The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001) stands as an enormous inspiration and challenge for more quantitative work of this kind.
readers work, to art which investigates the historical, to morally serious and politically engaged imaginative labour – has so far driven him to work across the genres and forms (he is also an accomplished poet) as well as between the literary strategies. Thorpe’s œuvre seems an excellent example of what wider future contemporary realism can have; where earlier critics, following Lukács, have promoted realism by detracting from other forms, my argument has attempted to show how it can be a useful part of the general aesthetic-political armoury. Thorpe’s combination of ethical commitment and rigidity with formal opportunism and flexibility is a model for future work. Whether this is how many others read is a question that can be answered only by empirical research but, at the strategic or theoretical register, I have structured my argument’s logic with these possible reading combinations in mind.

The second area for further research in realism is that of realisms produced in the oppressed nations or so-called “Third World.” Vital and urgent realisms are being produced in response to the political demands of these regions: recent translations reveal to English-language readers the savage and exciting mapping of the fault-lines of the current agonies in the Middle East by Egypt’s Alaa al-Asway and Lebanon’s Elias Khoury. These realisms’ vocation and target, and their role with or against fable and metafiction – the whole terrain of the “national allegory” debate Jameson initiated two decades ago now – are pressing questions, and ones which demand scholarship concerned with local historical and political context and detail as much as comparative attention and surveys of literary form.

The “Third World” text’s absence from this current study, however, is not a matter of accident or oversight. There are, of course, questions of personal linguistic competence, but I have also selected so-called “First World” texts, and “First World” political dilemmas, for attention in order to complicate some received ways of viewing political problems. Slavoj Zizek outlines one of the ways choice is complicated here:

> Every exclusive focus on the First World topics of late-capitalist alienation and commodification, of ecological crisis, of the new racisms and intolerances, and so on, cannot but appear cynical in the face of raw Third World poverty, hunger and violence; on the other hand, attempts to dismiss
First World problems as trivial in comparison with “real” permanent Third World catastrophes are no less fake – focussing on the “real problems” of the Third World is the ultimate form of escapism, of avoiding confrontation with the antagonism’s of one’s own society.650

Peace’s Yorkshire of strikes and state-sponsored thugs, Hensel’s DDR, Barker’s focus on class divisions: I read these novels precisely for the attention to the class realities of “First World” life, and for their ability to interrogate the ways that this class reality produces differing “First World” experiences along class and geographic lines. The realisms of the Third World demand study on their own terms: their absence from this study, along with the absence of any novels produced in or about the United States, is not intended to promote a blinkered “First World” vision of contemporary politics but has, instead, been arranged in order to highlight the deeper fragmentations, divisions and lacunae in the dominant account of this very “First World” politics itself.

Personal choice and its subjective dimension are essential elements in this, and, on their way to academic and scholarly research, each of these novels first presented themselves for my attention in political circumstances or discussions arranged around the quite different priorities of activity and agitation. But these choices are not central or determining. Rather, in their attention to the neglected social areas within the “First World” or global North – the post-industrial ruins of Glasgow and Leipzig, New Zealand’s economic and political marginality, Thatcher’s devastation of Yorkshire, the class dimension to received wisdoms of World War One – and in their search for innovative and refreshing ways to attack reification in presentation of history and the political, these novels have been read as exemplary instances of what a contemporary realism can achieve.

The Realist Inheritance

650 The Parallax View, p. 128.
Realism, to borrow a line from Adorno, lives on because the moment to realise it was missed, and each of the arguments against it that I have introduced in the preceding chapters have a local and specific validity because of this. It is, after the horrors of the twentieth century – the Holocaust, the Gulags, Hiroshima and Nagasaki – almost too painful to read *The Eighteenth Brumaire* with its evocation of the “poetry of the future” and the revolution of the nineteenth century. That revolution never happened, and its one successful return in the twentieth century was still-born, defeated by Stalinism barely ten years after it first emerged. This wider historical reality, and the enormous pressure it places on any emancipatory politics or vision, is what informs some objections to the realist project and, for this reason, any adequate theory of realism today must be one that acknowledges and incorporates its opponents’ objections and attacks.

Globalisation’s particular strains on the relations of production, and the reshaping of the world order precipitated by the “war on terror” both demand empirical study and scholarly labour. As Brecht realised in his day, neither artist nor activist can rest content with repeating yesterday’s certainties in the face of today’s dilemmas. But there is a danger in transformation as much as in conservatism. “It’s easy to feel baffled by the insistent multiplicity of the present,” Raymond Williams once wrote, “and there’s always the temptation of making long-term adjustments to short-term difficulties. Most of the talk about the decline of the novel seems to me exactly that.” Because, for all its failures and missed moments, the task the realist project sets itself – to know and, in knowing, start to change this reified and commodified social world – is one with distressing urgency and relevance for us today. What a study of realism ought to leave its reader with, then, is not a sense of neat answers to particular questions but, instead, a renewed sense of this as an area for novelistic research or, in another register, of a particular inheritance. In the same way that historical materialism is the distilled insights from one hundred and fifty years of struggles and controversies in the workers’ movement, a contemporary realism will involve a re-reading of older novels, an appropriation of current ones and a struggle over a determinate reading programme:

A theoretical-political legacy is never straightforward: it is not some position that is received and banked. Simultaneously instrument and obstacle, weapon and burden, it is always to be transformed. For everything depends upon what is done with this inheritance lacking owners or directions for use.652

So Pat Barker, Maurice Gee, Kerstin Hensel, James Kelman, David Pace: this is not a new great tradition but a particular line of flight, a provocation for new reading programmes and newer arguments about inheritances. It is a historical launching pad.

The call was made, a few years back, for the “wholesale displacement of the thematics of modernity by the desire called Utopia.”653 I take this to be a move from the paralysing intellectual certainties of the past decades to the realm of action where Utopia – socialism itself – is a rallying call as much as analytical object. We already have archaeologies of the future to help us in this project: what ontologies of the present might also demand, this study has suggested, are nothing less than forecasts of the past.

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