

Social Visions

by Michael Wilding

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Michael Wilding

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Note on references

Page references following quotations are to editions specified in the bibliography. For the convenience of readers using different editions of the novels discussed, chapter references and where applicable part or volume references are also given. Hence (I.2;34) means Part or Volume I, chapter 2, page 34 of the editions specified; (5;67-8) means chapter 5, pages 67-8 of the edition specified.

Preface

Social Visions is concerned with the ways novelists deal with issues of society and politics. It is an attempt to restore the political dimensions to the reading of both 'classic' and contemporary authors and to explore the formal strategies evolved by writers committed to a vision of society. The social role of literary criticism, as institutionalized by the educational apparatus, has been to absorb literary works into the dominant ideology, to reconstitute by 'interpretation' these works' components into forms expressing, or not disturbing, the dominant ideology; and to exclude from the accepted canon of 'texts' works that cannot be so absorbed. A radical criticism has as its task the undoing of this false structure by re-emphasising the problematic socio-political features of works accorded classic status, and by restoring excluded works to attention, opening up the area of discourse of literary studies. Insofar as literary works embody and illuminate socio-political issues, they are part of an ongoing and unceasing ideological debate, and they are enlisted as evidence for now this position, now that position, sometimes explicitly, sometimes covertly. To object to the multiplication of readings, of interpretations, is futile, this is all part of literature; to try to fix *the* reading as a single final and immutable reading of a text is to be mystified by the reifications of commodity production, to see the printed book as an object of finality, rather than as part of a communication process. Reading a novel is an individual, isolated activity; but it naturally issues in the social activity of discussion. To talk about, to discuss, to interpret, to argue about a literary work is part of the experience of the literary work. Literature is part of a consciousness battle, not only in what the writer writes and the sources and influences he absorbs, but in the uses and interpretations made of the work by readers and critics. The critical disputes may at times seem as remote and absurd as the disputes Swift records in *Gulliver's Travels* about whether high or low heels should be worn or whether eggs should be broken at the big or little end; but these

absurdities, it is essential to realize, were Swift's rewriting of the political, social and economic conflicts of the English Revolution; the reduction of them to trivia was the ideology of the Augustan ruling elite, attempting to depoliticize the events of recent history, to discredit sectarian, radical commitment. So thoroughly, indeed, was the depoliticization achieved that the political nature of *Gulliver's Travels* can be lost and Fredric Jameson writes in *The Prison House of Language* of Swift's 'relatively metaphysical vision' in opposition to 'analogous literary techniques of defamiliarization ... being put to rather different political and social ends' by his European contemporaries. (56) The restoration of the political and social meanings of the work of classic authors is a necessary role for a radical criticism, retrieving them from the realms of the purely 'metaphysical' or abstractly 'literary' and resituating them in the context of specific thinking on society and politics, revealing the repressed radical components of their fiction and the ways in which the implications of these components are confronted, displaced or evaded. Swift, Meredith and Conrad are here looked at in this regard. But equally important is the restoration of an authentic radical tradition, the necessary project of redrawing the map of fictional possibility. In the context of a resurgence of formalism, a reassertion of a radical socio-political reading is required; since formalist approaches come to the fore in times of political reaction and conservatism, the reassertion is doubly important. The critical denial of the socio-political is a repression expressive, enactive and reinforcing of social repression. The redirection of attention to the social and political meanings of literary texts has been done before and will have to be done again; it is something that needs continually to be restated, against the persistent attempts to deny it.

The essays collected here have been written over a number of years for a variety of occasions and publications. Acknowledgement is given to the following publications in which the material first appeared: *Arts; A (Critical) Ninth Assembling*, ed. Richard Kostelanetz; *Cunning Exiles*, ed. Don Anderson and Stephen Knight; *Essays in Criticism; London Review of Books; Studies in the Eighteenth Century – II*, ed. R. F. Brissenden; *Sydney Studies in English*.

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