Words and Worlds

Sydney Association for Studies in Society and Culture

The aim of our Association is to bring together concerned scholars from Australia and overseas to discuss and publish on themes which transcends the usual academic disciplines and establish links between subject areas. We now live in a hysterical atmosphere of cold war and anti-intellectual tirade (both from the Establishment and from the Extreme Left). Our Association hopes to provide a forum for those who feel strongly about academic freedom, peace and intellectual achievement to air alternative views on society and culture.

We intend this publication to be the first of a series each based on seminars. We hope to publish two volumes every year. We have already plans for others on "The documentation and notation of Theatrical Performance" (November 1983), "Feudalism: a comparative study of social and political structures of pre-industrial societies" (March 1984) and on "Language and Ideology" (July 1984). Like the material in this collection they are all on topics where the links between subject-areas and also between culture and social world have been obscured by the conservative institutions of cultural and social establishments. We wish to acknowledge the support that we have received from the contributors and members of our Association and to our advisers, particularly to Professor Sir Edmund Leach (Cambridge), who has kindly agreed to be our Honorary President.

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Studies in the
Social Role of
Verbal Culture

Edited by
Stephen Knight and S.N. Mukherjee

Contents

Notes on Contributors:

Margaret Clunies Ross is a Senior Lecturer in English at Sydney University specialising in early Germanic Studies, Old English and Old Norse. In recent years she has also worked extensively on Aboriginal culture.

Devleena Ghosh is a research student in History at Sydney University specialising in popular culture in Bengal.

Max Kelly is a Senior Lecturer in Education in Psychology at Macquarie University, with wide experience of Papua-New Guinea, specialising in language and culture.

Stephen Knight is an Associate Professor in English at Sydney University specialising in Medieval English and Celtic Studies. He has written books on Chaucer and Malory and forthcoming is Arthurian Literature and Society.

Jack Lindsay is the doyen of Australian born socio-cultural critics. He has written over eighty books, recently concentrating on art history and biography. He has a long-standing concern with Indian culture, and his lecture on Tagore is printed here for the first time.

Anne McDonald is a research student in English at Sydney University specialising in modern American literature and its social relations.

Leith Morton is a lecturer in Oriental Studies at Sydney University specialising in twentieth century Japanese literature and history.

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George Quinn is a Lecturer in Indonesian and Malayan Studies at Sydney University specialising in the popular Javanese and Indonesian literature.

Maria Shevtsova is a Senior Lecturer in French Studies at Sydney University. Working in the field of sociology of culture, she is especially concerned with socio-cultural theory and policy and the sociology of theatre on which she has published a number of essays.

Raymond Southall is Professor of English at Wollongong University, and has published frequently on Renaissance and Modern Literature in English.

Richard Tardif is a Lexicographer at Macquarie University who has recently completed a research degree at New South Wales University on the socio-historical relations of the Robin Hood legend.

Michael Wilding is Reader in English at Sydney University. A well-known fiction writer, he has published many essays on English Literature and a recent book, *Political Fictions*.

Introduction

This collection of essays attempts to analyse the relationships between literature and society, between words and worlds, between texts and contexts. We prefer the word 'verbal culture' as it incorporates both literate and pre-literate societies. (It is often forgotten that most pre-literate and some literate societies are rich in oral tradition, which is really part and parcel of our culture.) The editors and the contributors do not follow a strict party line on this issue of interrelationships between society and culture. They approach it from various angles using varied methods of research. But we all agree that texts cannot be studied without their contexts and that the study of literature (or verbal culture) is not the monopoly of one particular university department or one particular discipline. This enterprise of publishing a collection of essays on literature and society had its origin in contemporary tensions. The editors and contributors (who are mostly from the University of Sydney) felt that restraints imposed by such outmoded institutions as university departments hinder our research on human societies in their totality. The universities, in the name of specialisation, conduct research and offer curricula in a fragmentary and alienating manner. It seems that an interdisciplinary approach is still a threat to the existing structures of our universities. As a result a group from the departments of Anthropology, Education, English, French, History, Indonesian Studies and Oriental Studies got together to explore, in this book, the social role of verbal culture.

Apart from its social base within the self-described marginal intellectuals at Sydney University, this collection also has a geo-political position. All the writers are working in Australia, except Jack Lindsay, doyen of Australian socio-cultural criticism, linked to the editors by their admiration and his friendship. The topics of these essays consciously reflect society and culture from an Australian viewpoint—a realistic viewpoint, not one controlled by traditional attitudes and Anglophile limitations. The range of the essays should imply the unique possibilities for Australian work, since the country

is open to so many different sources of energy.

It is our contention that although the Anglo-Celtic connection in Australia is strong, this continent belongs to the Eastern Hemisphere. We start with Australia. Australian literature is so often restricted to those parts of white culture which are familiar and comforting to writers both of the left and the right. Australian literature is here deliberately represented by one ground-breaking essay on Aboriginal culture and a study of one of the uncomfortably radical figures in Australian tradition, William Lane. Max Kelly explores the development of 'Papua-New Guinean literature' against the social and political background of a new nation searching for an identity. Our nearest Asian neighbour is represented here in George Quinn's essay on the role of 'the house' in the Javanese novel. The interrelationship between the texts and contexts is well illustrated in this piece. Jack Lindsay shows how Tagore's poetry and humanism was deeply rooted in Sanskrit and Bengali cultures. Devleena Ghosh examines Premchand's works (short stories and novels) on peasants in India against the social and political background of poverty, exploitation and the Nationalist and Marxist movements of the Twenties and Thirties. Leith Morton has connected the problems of female emancipation and novels in modern Japan. With Stephen Knight we move to the familiar Anglo-Celtic world. But his piece is far from comforting; it is a commentary on the long-ignored 'political function of Arthur and the authorities he symbolises'. Richard Tardif re-opens the debate on the nature and origin of the Robin Hood ballads, forcing us to look at the social and historical context of the narrative. Raymond Southall's essay explores the weaknesses of Eliot's 'modernism'. With Maria Shevtsova's piece we move to non-British Europe. In it Shevtsova examines Genet's politics and theatre. We end this volume with Anne McDonald's essay on Burroughs—how subversive was he?

This book is launched without the glossy production and institutional support of those texts which assert that culture is both separate from society and also the rightful possession of those with money and leisure. Neither the anaesthetic instrument of international business, nor the self-validating hieroglyphics of a mandarin academic class, this essay-collection is the first of a co-operative and, we hope, illuminating series.

Stephen Knight
S. N. Mukherjee