

## Alan Sillitoe's Political Novels

Alan Sillitoe's first novel, *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1958) upset a lot of people. It provoked both tremendous enthusiasm and tremendous resistance, going through numerous reprints in the next decade yet having been rejected by a score of publishers before it was finally accepted. It was later used as the basis of a tremendously successful film, but again not before some of the major production companies had turned it down. One Midlands proletarian writer of the 40s read the novel and was shocked by its portrayal of the working class: he advised a major American production company against their buying rights. The movie actor Dirk Bogarde recalled a similar incident:

I remember once taking Rank's a book – they've got to forgive me for this, because it happened – and it was a slender book, and I said; 'I think I'd like to make a film of it.' They said they'd read it. I was summoned to this appalling little flat we used to have at Pinewood which was called the executive suite: it had pine panelling and a big baize table. We started off with smoked salmon. The book was never mentioned till the coffee came in. Then we had cigars and finally they said: 'Would you like to tell us how we can make a movie about a woman of 40 inducing a miscarriage in a hot bath?' I said: 'No, I don't really know how you can make that – forget it.' The book was called *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*. (304)

The establishment and the organized left reacted as one against what seemed to them sordid in the novel – the protagonist Arthur Seaton stumbling through a succession of drunken evenings, getting into various fights, and sleeping with two married sisters, one of whom attempts the bath tub abortion. (Though for what it's worth she is said to be 29–30 in the novel, not 40.) In Britain John Coleman complained that Arthur's brutish anarchism was unrealistically

taken as working class protest, providing an opportunity for liberal self indulgence. In the U.S.A. Irving Howe wrote a review entitled 'The Worker as a Young Tough' and compared the novel unfavourably with Walter Allen's *Threescore and Ten* (originally published in Britain as *All in a Lifetime*),

a sweet-tempered retrospect of the life of Billy Ashted, an English worker who at the turn of the century had educated himself to socialist convictions, a measure of intellectuality and, most impressive of all, an enviable degree of civilized humaneness. Surely the socialist movement, for all its failures, has reason to feel that in nurturing such figures within the European working class it made a genuine contribution to humanity. (27-8)

It is just such 'civilizing' into bourgeois left-liberalism that Sillitoe's Arthur Seaton rejects. Howe argues that 'Sillitoe's mindless young hero is reaping the rewards of Billy's decades of street-speaking and door-to-door canvassing' – and Howe means 'rewards' unironically. Howe sees Billy Ashted's participation in democratic parliamentary politics as the way for change, and Arthur Seaton's complete indifference to this as failure:

but for all Arthur's energy, his life is sadly limited in scope and value. It is a life bound by ritualistic practice and unexamined assumption, for in the absence of genuine consciousness, his freedom comes to little more than a repetition of familiar acts with increasing violence ... Yet Mr. Sillitoe makes a particular point of 'accepting' Arthur; indeed, he strongly implies that there is a special sort of realistic virtue in 'accepting' him as he is, and not expecting him to become anything very different.... Sillitoe's attitude toward Arthur is notably free from moral nagging or political exhortation; but it may be that in its hard-headed and undeluded way it is not quite free from sentimentality, the kind of sentimentality which, passing as cultural relativism or a respect for variant mores, one sometimes finds among anthropologists who celebrate the odd behaviour of 'their' tribes. It is an attitude which tempts the observer – in this case, the writer – to abandon a little too

easily his own standards, his own judgements. (27–8)

Revealingly, Howe cannot believe that Sillitoe could genuinely share Arthur's judgements. He assumes that Sillitoe has abandoned his own more 'civilized' values – for since Sillitoe is a writer, he must have 'civilized' values. That Sillitoe might reject that class whose values are put forward as those of 'civilization', Howe never considers, nor can he conceive that Arthur's behaviour is anything other than 'mindless': the working class figure who learns to think must surely discover the rational ideology of social democracy in Howe's world-picture. Anything else is mindless. When Howe reviewed *Key to the Door* the notice was titled 'In Fear of Thinking'. Praising Sillitoe's achievements, he wrote:

Only one gift seems lacking, the gift of mind; and that I take to be mainly the result of Sillitoe's own wilfulness. For the trouble is not that he can't think, but that he seems to look upon thinking with distrust, as if it were an enemy of the creative impulse.... In *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* this notion leads to an indulgent 'acceptance' of the sporadic violence and constricted consciousness of the young proletarian hero, Arthur Seaton. (25–6)

Because his material was urban working class life, Sillitoe's novel invited certain critical preconceptions. It was subsumed into a socialist realist, proletarian fiction tradition. This identification has been made both by academic critics and by the left wing commentators, to whose ranks so many of the earlier proletarian novelists had belonged. To Howe, Sillitoe's 'refusal to think' can only be a literary self-indulgence, affecting an identity with his mindless protagonist's 'constricted consciousness'. The left offered two approaches: one of angry rejection, one of absorption. The rejection was very similar to Howe's rejection – seeing Sillitoe's stance as a failure of consciousness and of aesthetic. David Craig in his article 'The British Working Class Novel Today' claims that Gunther Klotz's 'argument that Arthur Seaton is not typical in that he is no leader of his class does point to an essential weakness of the novel: the hero is too much of an anarchistic lone-wolf and egoist, and seems almost valued by the author on that account' (37n). But

the very idea of a 'leader of his class' is questioned by Nigel Gray, who sees Sillitoe as 'too much taken with the working-class hero cult' (113) and argues that what he was doing 'in bowing to the Western hero cult, was adopting a middle-class standard' (220). While Dmitri Shestakov absorbs the novel into the conventional, positive socialist tract, stressing the 'representative' quality of Arthur in his confrontations with authority figures:

Indeed, with every new episode in his ordinary life Arthur Seaton feels drawn ever more deeply into a desperate battle for freedom, for the right not to depend on the income-tax man, the army officer, the trade union boss, the Parliamentary windbags, for the right to be a man.

But Sillitoe knows better than 'angry young' Seaton how difficult it is to earn this right and that you must not wait for it by going off secretly – as Arthur does – to fish or to visit the woman he loves. Life, the factory, people call one back, however much Seaton assures himself that there is 'nothing for it but money to drag you back there every Monday morning.' (176)

*Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* is in the slice-of-life tradition of proletarian fiction. There is no overall plot or fable to give the novel a 'shape'; it is sufficiently in the tradition to suspect such shapes as being external, misleading, distorting the naturalistic observation through bourgeois aesthetic mystifications. The lack of overall conscious formal qualities is something that has continued to characterise Sillitoe's novels. In an interview with Brendan Hennessy he remarked 'there is no particular strict form for a novel – it can be as rough, with as many ragged edges as it likes. A novel is like a great piece of bloody meat. As long as it's bleeding and tasty – that's all right.' (111)

*Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* is a string of episodes showing Arthur working in a Nottingham bicycle factory, getting drunk, having an affair with the wife of a workmate, another affair with her sister, being beaten up by the sister's soldier husband and his mate, and finally preparing to settle down with a young girl who wants marriage. These episodes have some loose continuity of narrative. But there are others which express Arthur's nature but that are unrelated to the sexual adventures that supply the story-line

and suspense (will Brenda's abortion succeed, will her husband find out about Arthur, will the swaddies catch him?) – episodes that have the self-containment of short stories. Sillitoe told Brendan Hennessy

Some of my novels do tend to have the appearance of a string of short stories in a way. When I was writing *Saturday Night* I put about 12 short stories into it, ploughed them into the text, which is why it had the appearance of a picaresque novel. (111)

These episodes frequently express in brief the novel's central attitudes. One such describes how, drinking with his brother one night, Arthur is walking along a street when someone throws a beer mug through an undertaker's window.

Arthur was stirred by the sound of breaking glass: it synthesized all the anarchism within him, was the most perfect and suitable noise to accompany the end of the world and himself. He ran towards the disturbance, each strike of his boots on the pavement sending an echo through the empty circle of buildings, rebounding from each deserted corner.

'Come on,' he called to Fred.

Several people already stood near the undertaker's window, as if they had sprung out of the ground, and by the doorway a woman held the bewildered culprit by his wrist. Arthur peered closer and saw that another woman, younger and wearing an Army uniform – the colour of which immediately prejudiced him – had taken command, and had sent someone to fetch the police. (7;94)

The incident epitomizes Arthur's stance, his excitement at the sound of something breaking, of some destruction, his attempt to encourage the 'culprit' to run off before the police came. But the culprit is too drunk, too simple, too brow-beaten, too all-in-all defeated, to be able to resist the authority of the woman in khaki. Both are lost, sad people, the 'culprit' wanting a black vase for his mother's grave:

an odd, lonely person who gave off the air of belonging nowhere at all, which caused Arthur to think him half-witted.

The uniformed woman looked as though she had never had a home and belonged nowhere, but she had aligned herself with order and law, and sympathy was against her. (7;94–5)

But the man fails to run off and the police come and collect him.

What the novel does is identify the various forces of law and order, and identify too the characters who are awed into submission by or collusion with law and order and end up espousing it against their own best interests, to the destruction of their own humanity – like the woman in the khaki uniform, or like Jack, whose wife Brenda is having an affair with Arthur. Jack's advice to Arthur is 'Why don't you get wise, Arthur? Why don't you meet a nice girl and settle down? It'll do you the world of good' (12;146). And what is distressing to many of the old left is that they find themselves lumped in with the repressive forces of law and order, forces hostile to the proletarian individualism of Arthur. Arthur stands in single anarchic opposition to all authority structures.

They were angling for another war now, with the Russians this time. But they did go as far as to promise that it would be a short one, a few big flashes and it would be all over. What a lark! We'd be fighting side by side with the Germans that had been bombing us in the last war. What did they take us for? Bloody fools, but one of these days they'd be wrong. They think they've settled our hashes with their insurance cards and television sets, but I'll be one of them to turn round on 'em and let them see how wrong they are. When I'm on my fifteen-days' training and I lay on my guts behind a sand-bag shooting at a target board I know whose faces I've got in my sights every time the new rifle cracks off. Yes. The bastards that put the gun into my hands. I make up a quick picture of their stupid four-eyed faces that blink as they read big books and papers on how to get blokes into khaki and fight battles in a war that they'll never be in – and then I let fly at them. Crack-crack-crack-crack-crack-crack. Other faces as well: the snot-gobbling gett that teks my income tax, the swivel-eyed swine that collects our rent, the big-headed bastard that gets my goat when he asks me to go to union meetings or sign a paper against what's happening in Kenya. As if I care. (9;114–5)

Politicians, unionists, police, the military – Arthur identifies and opposes all the forces trying to limit, repress, control, organise. All but one; there is one major exception in Arthur's anti-authoritarianism, as Nigel Gray points out. 'Arthur is against all authority except the authority of men over women.' (129)

The situation is never considered from the position of the woman. Women are second-class citizens. Fools who get their hair caught in machines. Bloody shrews who object to man enjoying his glass of malt. (118)

And Gray goes on to redefine Arthur's anarchism as displaced authoritarianism:

The authoritarian personality is one which will submit resentfully to authority and redirect his aggression. Arthur's authoritarianism is most obvious in his relationships with women. He detests the army where he finds himself on the bottom of the heap. (123)

There is no doubt about Arthur's male chauvinism and his 'Victorian' attitudes to women. These were, no doubt still are, endemic to British society, no matter what class. And for someone on the receiving end of an authoritarian system, the pressure to find someone else to lord it over is considerable. That is the nature of authoritarian systems, of hierarchies – to conscript everyone into perpetuating that structure of relationships. Authoritarianism and sexism are part of the establishment, exploitative culture. But it does not necessarily follow that because Arthur is authoritarian and sexist in his attitudes towards women, his anarchic resistance to the authoritarianism and class society pressures he suffers is invalid. His intuitive, spontaneous hostility to authority is something to be extended, so that sexism can be seen as yet another authority system to be rejected: it is not something to be discredited and defused because of some static, conservative, quasi-Freudian theory of displacement. In the 1950s there was no structure of analysis and no vocabulary current with which to identify and place sexism. The women's movement developed in the 60s and its impact on Sillitoe's fiction can be seen in *The Flame of Life* (1974). It is important

to identify Arthur's sexism: but it would be unhistorical and unproductive to disqualify Arthur's forceful anti-authoritarianism because he holds those sexist attitudes.

The military are the recurrent specific example of alien authority running through *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, standing in for all other authorities: the woman in khaki seizing the drunk, the swaddies out to beat-up Arthur for his affair with Winnie, the 15 days of territorial army camp imposing on his time and freedom, and the officer in authority there. The objections to the military are not, as some critics have claimed, pacifist ones, but objections to authorities, and to the maintenance of authorities by force. They arise from the same spirit as Lawrence's objection to compulsory medical examination for conscription in World War I in *Kangaroo*.

Once a rebel, always a rebel. You can't help being one. You can't deny that. And it's best to be a rebel so as to show 'em it don't pay to try to do you down. Factories and labour exchanges and insurance offices keep us alive and kicking – so they say – but they're booby traps and will suck you under like sinking-sands if you aren't careful. Factories sweat you to death, labour exchanges talk you to death, insurance and income tax offices milk money from your wage packets and rob you to death. And if you're still left with a tiny bit of life in your guts after all this boggering about, the Army calls you up and you get shot to death. And if you're clever enough to stay out of the Army you get bombed to death. Ay, by God, it's a hard life if you don't weaken, if you don't stop that bastard government from grinding your face in the muck, though there ain't much you can do about it unless you start making dynamite to blow their four-eyed clocks to bits. They shout at you from soapboxes: 'Vote for me, and this and that,' but it amounts to the same in the end whatever you vote for because it means a government that puts stamps all over your phizzog until you can't see a hand before you, and what's more makes you buy 'em so's they can keep on doing it. They've got you by the guts, by backbone and skull, until they think you'll come whenever they whistle.

But listen, this lathe is my everlasting pal because it gets me thinking, and that's their big mistake because I know I'm not the only one. One day they'll bark and we won't run into a pen

like sheep. One day they'll flash their lamps and clap their hands and say: 'Come on, lads. Line-up and get your money. We won't let you starve.' But maybe some of us will want to starve, and that'll be where the trouble'll start. Perhaps some'll want to play football, or go fishing up Grantham Cut. That big fat-bellied union ponce'll ask not to muck things up. Sir Harold Blabbertab'll promise us a bigger bonus when things get put right. Chief Inspector Popcorn will say; 'Let's have no trouble, no hanging around the gates there.' Blokes with suits and bowler hats will say: 'These chaps have got their television sets, enough to live on, council houses, beer, and pools, some have even got cars. We've made them happy. What's wrong? Is that a machine gun I hear starting up or a car backfiring?'

Der-der-der-der-der-der-der-der-der-der-der-der-der-der-der-der. I hope I'm not here to see it, but I know I will be. I'm a bloody billy-goat trying to screw the world, and no wonder I am, because it's trying to do the same to me. (15;16-7)

Sillitoe's significance as a political novelist lies in his rejection of party politics, in his identifying the authorities of right and left – seeing them as both to be rejected. Sillitoe's only occasional association with the organized left – writing for the English Communist Party daily newspaper *The Daily Worker* for instance – have often obscured his position. Interviewed in 1969 by Igor Hajek he said,

If they ask me what I am, a Communist or Socialist, etc., I can only answer that I'm on the Left, beyond that I can't say much ... A writer never stands still. When you are young, everything is simple, but I am not young any more, I'm 40 and **that means** that I am leaving a lot of simplicities behind. Basic beliefs stay, but things now look more complex. (123)

And the authorities rejected by Sillitoe are not only party-political; any sort of imposition in the name of authority is rejected – whether it is political, military, familial or sexual. Frank Dawley in Sillitoe's later trilogy has to fight for freedom not only by leaving his job and his country, but also his wife and the various women encountered along the way. The positive stance of Sillitoe's fiction is the

individual's aim for his freedom, for free expression, to be an individual, not just a number or statistic to be manipulated. 'Both Marxists and advertisers have this much in common' he wrote in 'Both Sides of the Street' in the *TLS*; 'to them the ordinary people are "the masses" and not individuals' (435). The position he adopted is close to that of the anarchist permanent protest – and this of course was not expected by most of the commentators on his work. Since he wrote sympathetically about the working class, it was assumed he took an organized left position automatically. In his article in *TLS* he attempted a definition of the writer of the right and of the left.

For the purposes of this argument I will call the writer who is content with the society he lives in a man of the Right, and a writer who is by nature against society I will call a man of the Left. By this I don't mean to say that one sort of writer is better or worse than another, but these differing sides must be considered when deciding the attitudes of writing to this age of mass communications. In writing a man of the Left is not a member of the opposition, which implies similarity in basic ideas and the possibility of becoming allies, but a revolutionary, for the Left and Right of literature that I have in mind can never meet for compromise. (435)

Identifying the enemies of freedom in the advertisers, Marxists, unionists, politicians, employers and military, Sillitoe was at the same time anxious to preserve the proletarian origins of his anarchism. Anarchism in the 60s and 70s, perhaps even more than Marxism in the 30s, was an easy, theoretical, clean-handed position for the intellectual to adopt. But Sillitoe's awareness of the dangers of becoming absorbed into the intellectual bourgeoisie resulted in a strong assertion of his role as a proletarian writer.

These working class people who are not afraid to take a hard cover book in their hands suffer from certain disadvantages compared to the middle-class reader. The latter, no matter what values he lives by, can take out a book and see in it either a mirror of himself, or someone he knows; he is fully represented in contemporary writing, while the man who works at the lathe

is not. Working men and women who read do not have the privilege of seeing themselves honestly and realistically portrayed in novels. (435)

It is a position that Sillitoe adhered to. In his interview with Brendan Hennessey he reaffirmed his commitment.

What I do in my work is write about people who are not written about in novels. I'd not read in novels about people who are treated as people and not caricatures. There are one or two, like *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists*, one or two things in the thirties perhaps. But it wasn't a seam that was done at all. If people read a book and they see in it situations in which they are actually taking part in everyday life – as a matter of form – it was the way they were born – then it gives them some way of seeing themselves through the eyes of society. (108)

This observation of Sillitoe's was not new, but it is one that has been largely ignored. William Empson discussed the issue in *Some Versions of Pastoral* (1935) where he argued that much proletarian literature either showed the (sensitive) man trying to escape from his environment, or presented a 'Covert Pastoral'. 'To produce pure proletarian art,' Empson wrote, 'the artist must be at one with the working class; this is impossible, not for political reasons, but because the artist is never at one with any public' (15). But the writer does not have to be 'at one' with a social group to write with or for or in the context of its world picture; if a writer is never at one with any public, then it is no more impossible in theory for him to write proletarian fiction than to write the bourgeois fiction that has been the norm. There have been true representatives of the working class before Sillitoe; and Nigel Gray has situated Sillitoe in a post war group of writers about the English working class in his study *The Silent Majority*. Though since the class origin of most English writers has been middle class – Raymond Williams' chapter on 'The Social History of English Writers' in *The Long Revolution* offers useful documentation of that – when working people have been portrayed in fiction they have usually been presented as stereotyped stock characters, rather than as individuals with individuals' feelings and perceptions:

There is a gap to be filled by novelists who are capable of writing about individuals among this literary underprivileged class in a realistic way, and writers most capable of this are those who have experienced the sort of life in which these individuals are found. (435)

Sillitoe's proclaimed proletarianism inevitably encountered the notorious British repressive tolerance, the welcoming of any lively protest as engaging innovation, interesting entertainment; while society stands firm. As Walter Benjamin put it in 'The Author as Producer':

the bourgeois apparatus of production and publication is capable of assimilating, indeed of propagating, an astonishing amount of revolutionary themes without ever seriously putting into question its own continued existence or that of the class which owns it.... An appreciable part of so-called left-wing literature had no other social function than that of continually extracting new effects or sensations from this situation for the public's entertainment. (94)

When Sillitoe reiterated his position, it got boring to the reviewers: Cyril Connolly commented in the *Sunday Times* on *Key to the Door*, 'The rebel stance so taut in the *Long Distance Runner* has become a vaguely chip-on-the-shoulder near Communism.' It was all right once, but not again, dear boy. Chip-on-the-shoulder in this context referred to complaining of living in houses without baths, of streets grimed over with the smoke of factories, of working short time, of having spent years on the dole, of being uneducated in shoddy schools with classes of forty children, of council house waiting lists, of the continual threat of redundancy, unemployment – of the acceptance that such conditions should ever exist. Yet Connolly's statement at least had the merit of being explicit. It showed the complete incomprehension that Sillitoe's proletarian naturalism continually came up against, and the complete incomprehension of this anti-authoritarian anarchism: 'vaguely chip-on-the-shoulder near-Communism'. For all his apparent success, Sillitoe failed in the proletarianism he proclaimed, failed in the very fact of his success. His large sales showed a ready middle-

class readership and an absorption into the educational text machine, and the savagery of his onslaught on middle-class society was ignored or absorbed. An attack on society gathers force; the society recognizes it blandly and gives it a name and nullifies it; it is all indiscriminately heaped together under some current phrase – Sillitoe was lumped in with the ‘Angry Young Men’ and the ‘Kitchen Sink’ playwrights. And the protest, named, itself becomes established and static. Sillitoe was admired but what he was saying went by without understanding. Connolly, writing of *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* referred to its ‘small closed world – in this case of pub, factory, sex and violence.’ Sixty-seven per cent of the British work force at that time were classed as manual workers: a ‘small, closed world’ of a 40-48 hour factory week. As Nigel Gray has pointed out, what distinguishes *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* is its ‘wealth of detail about the nature of work and the feelings of people engaged in it’ (103). But Connolly would never have known anything about that. Sillitoe’s aim to redress the balance of the primarily middle-class literary world foundered on the flabbiness of leisure-class mandarinism.

‘Proletarianism’ is more consciously, more programmatically a part of *Key to the Door* (1961) than of *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*. It is as if Sillitoe has attempted to provide a representative conspectus of working class life – redirecting attention from Arthur Seaton’s violence and sexuality to allow the qualities of his bookish brother to be established. But Brian, the brother, is no labour club, good student, civilized proletarian rising through Fabian ranks to become an Uncle Tom. Although a broader range of behaviour than Arthur’s somewhat extravagant life is shown, the intuitive anti-authoritarian anarchism remains, and is explored in a wider context; it becomes a theme in the novel, something that is brooded over and developed – in contrast with the anarchic behaviour of Arthur in *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* that is never intellectualised. Whereas Arthur’s anarchism is a spontaneous reaction to his capitalist-industrial urban environment, Brian’s is a conscious position reached not only through his immediate personal experiences, but through observing and thinking about society. Nina Matveyeva recorded Sillitoe’s comparison of the two novels:

‘In our social system,’ he continued, ‘there are many people

to whom "material" things are more important than spiritual. They go all out for material success, and once they've got it they find it has a "bitter taste". In my first novel *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* I tried to show a young British worker who from the point of view of those around him had everything man might need in the material sense. But he was discontented, because he was completely without spiritual sustenance. To a considerable degree the dissatisfaction of British youth arises from this same feeling of spiritual deprivation, although, of course, there is still much material need....

'In my novel *Key to the Door* the hero realizes this lack of something highly essential in life far earlier than did his elder brother, the hero of my first book. He has a more conscious attitude to the society in which he lives.' (180-2)

In part, *Key to the Door* is a consolidation and filling out of the previous Nottingham material. It can be seen as an attempt to examine the total environment which made the protagonist of *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* what he is. The stories of *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* had already done something of this. Here, by following the families of the Seaton boys back through two generations, some historical depth is also given.

But the family chronicle is not a proletarian form. The bourgeois imitation of aristocratic family worship led to the Victorian and Edwardian family sagas. But such a worship of the accumulation of property and the acquisition of status, the hagiography of the individual line and wealth, is impossible for the realities of the working class. The economic pauperisation of industrialism prevented the financial accumulation that would allow the establishment of the 'family'; and industrial capitalism's reduction of individual dignity to a unit on the factory floor prevented the development of an emotional or spiritual overlay to the idea of 'family'. The rallying round of the family members in time of trouble, the close-knit camaraderies of working class life the sociologists all comment on is a thing of the immediate present – of those members of the family alive here and now; but it doesn't extend to a worship of ancestors, or to planting walnut trees for the future. *Key to the Door* is concerned with Arthur's brother Brian, and their father; but their paternal grandfather is not established; he

is said to be an upholsterer who was too drunk ever to teach his son his trade, which offers an explanation for Seaton, the father, being unemployed, unskilled. But that is all we are told of the grandfather. Seaton's wife's father, old Merton, however, does feature in the generational pattern of the novel. He is still alive during Arthur and Brian's childhood, so that he has a family role in the present.

He represents something different, however. Whereas the unindividualised Seaton grandfather is one of the nameless, crushed industrial proletariat, Merton has an individualism, a dignity. Importantly, he doesn't live in a Nottingham slum.

When on an errand to his grandma Merton's, the couple of grandiose miles out from the last houses of Nottingham became an expedition. Across his route lay streams and lanes and stiles, while to the left stretched a greenbanked railway line, rightwards an acre of allotment gardens whose shabby huts and stunted trees were often raided by roving kids from Radford ... (II.41;59)

An important component of Brian's childhood is the escape from the city into this semi-rural environment. But the novelistic interest of this material lies in its moving out of the strictly urban proletarian material; when Sillitoe moves back into this third generation, it is into a rather different milieu.

The problem for the English proletarian anarchist or Marxist novelist is to create an engaging fiction yet avoid celebrating the culture that is being rejected, that politically, socially, ideologically is being condemned. The problem becomes more acute in the generation novel, where the delving back into recent times past so readily induces nostalgia. Saul Maloff has remarked on 'the sustaining vision of the ancient life of coherent community poised against the atomic life of rapacious capitalism – as close an approach as Sillitoe will make to ideology, a kind of pastoral anarchism' (112). The softening blur of nostalgia that such a view presents will destroy the novelist's political points: 'things weren't so bad, we had a good organic time in the good old organic days, etc.' Yet utterly to reject the material ideologically, is to cut off most of the novelistic resources – is to leave little out of which to build the novel.

In creating a past, the novelist puts a value on the remembered

detail simply by remembering it. By recreating the texture of life in the depression, the value residing in the artefact of the fictional recreation tends to spread across into the life recreated. Sillitoe's strategy is to divide his material. He distinguishes between the deadening, destructive, oppressed existence of Seaton living on the dole, and the semi-rural retirement of old Merton. The glow of nostalgia for times remembered, the fictional glow of creation, operates around the Merton sections giving the novel a geniality and positive note: saving it from the prevalent note of rejection of the existence Seaton has to endure. Sillitoe hence avoids the depressing negativity of much proletarian naturalistic fiction, the hopelessness of observed contemporary realities, the sort of thing Georg Lukacs complained of in 'The Ideal of the Harmonious Man in Bourgeois Aesthetics' collected in *Writer and Critic*.

There is a whole group of seemingly left-wing writers who accept the degradation and destruction of the individual under capitalism as fact; they are indignant and express their indignation in their art; they expose the horror, but they do not depict the human nobility in the resistance to this horror. (98)

They reject without compromise all ideals of beauty and harmony as 'out-of-date'; they take people and society 'as they are', or rather as they usually appear in ordinary life under capitalism. And in a depiction of such a given world, the categories of the old aesthetics do indeed lose meaning. Not because they are out-of-date ... But they have lost all meaning since capitalism is destroying their social and individual base day by day; and these writers set out to represent a world destroyed and not the battle against destruction, not a dynamic process but a lifeless result. The consequence is that they reject beauty and harmony and produce a mere chronicle of the 'iron age'. (100-1)

Sillitoe avoids the drabness that Lukacs complained of in the naturalists, but at a cost. He ends up establishing as a positive the rural existence of an older generation, the nostalgic 'pastoral anarchism'. He accepts the recurrent analysis of English fiction – things were better in the past in the country. Rejecting urban industrial life as it is lived now, he lets the weight of the novel's

hope fall to a large degree on rural retirement. This comes close to being the 'answer', as the Garth's rural life was for the urban middle of *Middlemarch* to George Eliot. In *Key to the Door* Brian Seaton doesn't go off to live with his acre and his cow – the Malayan material offers a new perspective. But in the later *A Start in Life* (1970) Michael Cullen, emerging from a similar Nottingham background, having gone through his criminal life and spell in gaol, comes out and settles down on his deserted country railway station. At the end of *The Flame of Life* Dawley and Handley are both settled into this rural privatism. In *Key to the Door*, however, old Merton's rural retirement isn't seen as a possibility for the future, but a fading past; by the end of the novel, the city has encroached on and spread over his rural area. He belonged to a generation that no longer exists. The note is Lawrentian – the destruction of rural independence and the establishment of urban alienation that we see in *The Rainbow*.

D. H. Lawrence is a perpetual presence behind *Key to the Door*, in the shared Nottingham locales, in the generational structure, in the portrayal of Seaton's marriage to Vera, the notation of their courting and of the quarrels of their marriage. 'I've read everything he's written', Sillitoe replied to Brendan Hennessy in response to a question about Lawrence's influence on him; 'I think I was influenced by him in my early writing – before I was published' (109). But the influence is strongly apparent in *Key to the Door*:

She poked ashes through the grate and screwed up a newspaper, shivering in the damp cold. Seaton came down: 'Get out of my bastard way' – pushing by and sitting in an armchair to pull on his boots. She spread sticks over the paper. 'Why don't you wash your foul mouth out?' she cried, knowing how true it was that their quarrels never began by a stray word and went by slow stages to a climax, but started immediately at the height of a wild destructive battle, persisting with violent intensity to blows, or degenerating to a morose energy-less condition often lasting for days. There seemed no halfway stage between a taunting fray, and a loving happiness. Vera could not switch her moods with Seaton's speed, and so detested his fussiness between quarrels, treating him at the best with brittle gaiety and reserve. She had tried controlling her retorts in the hope of finding some other

man in Seaton who never quarrelled, who was kind all the time, who would love her in spite of them both, only to discover that no such breadth existed in him. For six months after Brian was born he had been near to this, but the novelty of a baby soon wore off. (I.3;49)

And overall Sillitoe offers less than Lawrence here. Committed to a naturalistic mode, he gives the documentary detail of the Seaton's life, but without any of the psychic, spiritual, religious overlay of natural rhythms, blood consciousness and so on. That peculiarly Lawrentian vision of harmonies and disharmonies, of supra-naturalistic forces and rhythms, Sillitoe deliberately excludes. Sillitoe's rationalistic naturalism has no room for such things. For someone committed to a rational, materialist, scientific political analysis, the intellectual decision to exclude the Lawrentian dark gods and blood consciousness is understandable. But the fictional consequences are unfortunate. By covering such similar documentary materials to Lawrence, Sillitoe's restriction of his range to the purely documentary gives his work in comparison a thinner, slighter air. The refusal to shape his material, the commitment to documentary naturalism, gives *Key to the Door* a quality of undifferentiated reportage. Some of it strikes particular chords of nostalgia – the visit to the music hall – but overall it lacks any meaning other than itself, the surfaces of documentation. The scrap heap section in chapter 5 where Brian and Bert scavenge the tips for salvable refuse, remains as simply one episode in a childhood. The symbolic potential of the material is not exploited. Mr. Boffin's dustheaps in *Our Mutual Friend* offer a powerful and pervasive image in that novel of capitalist accumulation, of what the Capeks later characterized as the bourgeois's dung beetle propensities. In *Key to the Door*, however, the scrap heaps remain a locale. They make points about poverty, they make points about waste – the dumped loads of fish when Brian and Bert are hungry; later we see them having to scrounge leftovers from a fish and chip shop. But larger resonances fail to operate. There is nothing to distract from the naturalistic.

Occasionally some symbolic extensions seem intended. The slum clearance at the beginning of the novel involves a display of bombing by the Royal Air Force to demolish the houses. The

incident is given some emphasis:

Each plane purred loudly along the rooftops, like a cat at first, then growling like a dog when you try to take its bone away, finally as if a roadmender's drill were going straight to the heart, so that he felt pinned to the ground. Two black specks, then two more, slid from the rounded belly of each. The gloved wheels beneath seemed to have been put down specially to catch them, but the dots fell through and disappeared into the group of ruined houses.

'Now for it,' somebody announced, and an enormous cracking sound, a million twig power went six times into the sky – followed by the muffled noise of collapsing walls somewhere in the broken and derelict maze.

A policeman's horse reared up, tried to climb an invisible stairway leading from the explosions, then saw sense and merely stood nodding its head and foaming. A bleak scream came from some woman at the back of the crowd and Brian saw her led away by men in black and white uniforms. 'Is she frightened, dad?'

'Yes.'

'Well, I'm not, are you?'

'No.' But Seaton lifted him down, dragged him roughly out of the crush.

'Is that the end, dad?'

'Stop asking bleddy questions, will yer?' Brian caught his mood, and the bomb that had lodged itself inside his chest suddenly burst, scattering more blind havoc than the actual grenades sent from the flight of planes. 'Stop cryin', will yer?' Seaton tugged at him angrily. (I.1;19–20)

But apart from looking forward to the war, the bomb carries little significance within the novel's structure. Although it might be possible to deduce significances for the episode – an establishment display of military force against the homes of the proletariat – a warning of who has the military strength in this society (and even the St. John's Ambulance men have uniforms close to the fascist blackshirts) – these are not sustained. Indeed, the attempts to unify the novel by recurrent symbols often seem clumsy and contrived:

the mention of Abyssinia in connexion with the brief allusion to Mussolini's invasion (II.6; 90) is picked up in the visit to the music hall where Brian asks if one of the performers is 'the Abyssinian Queen' (II.6;100), recalled by old Merton when he sees Brian courting (IV.24;363). But it remains a somewhat mechanical, unconnotative image; implicitly it can be seen to offer a political comment on Brian's involvement in Malaya that the novel later deals with – the British presence there comparable to the fascist invasion. But this is never substantiated in the novel's evidence; it remains merely a label, an unsupported assertion.

Although *Key to the Door* in part can be seen as filling out the environment of *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* the choice of Brian Seaton as protagonist instead of the earlier Arthur gives it a different direction and emphasis. There are allusions to the mood of the first novel – in Brian's fight with the husband of the woman he has been drinking with – but these are somewhat perfunctory and, in the wider context of *Key to the Door*, less interesting. The emphasis is on Brian's developing bookishness, something his siblings jeer at, something he shares with other Sillitoe heroes (Dawley of the trilogy, Cullen of *A Start in Life*). This auto-didacticism opens wider horizons for him, allows for his political education. Unlike his father, trapped in illiteracy, Brian is given an awareness of other possibilities, other worlds. But the biggest breakthrough for him is his military service in Malaya. And this is the biggest break with the Nottingham proletarian milieu of the earlier works; a break, moreover, that is naturalistically motivated, that is meaningfully representative, through the exigencies of conscription. I remember on first reading the novel in 1961 that the Malayan material seemed the least interesting part of the book – it seemed an intrusion into the proletarian material, a distraction from Sillitoe's proper concerns. Returning to it ten years later, it was the Malayan material that seemed the most alive. In the Malayan material Sillitoe was in advance of his British contemporaries; his selecting this episode, seeing connexions between imperialist oppression in Asia and industrial capitalist oppression in Britain, were rare insights in 1961. If we can now see Malaya as Britain's Vietnam this is due not to the analyses of Britain's writers or intellectuals, but to drawing analogies from the U.S.A. situation. Even though Sillitoe does not define the connexions between

imperialism and industrial capitalism, even though in 1961 the political analyses were not so widely accessible, novelistically he indicates them by his juxtaposition, his crosscutting, between Brian in Nottingham and Brian in Malaya. The parallels are intuitively perceived to exist: a Marxist position provides the analytical mode to demonstrate how they exist. It is a weakness that Sillitoe only began to point towards them, that his presentation of working class documentary excludes his offering a wider span of economic, imperialist, political and military inter-relationships. We are familiar with that sort of case now from the analyses of the U.S.A.'s Vietnam involvement. But in 1961 it was a bold, imaginative realization to offer the Malayan material in this context.

And shocking. The incident with the Chinese guerilla read pretty well treasonably in 1961, before the great social and cultural watershed of Vietnam. The Chinese attacks Brian with a kriss. They fight, Brian manages to force him to drop his weapon, and then lets him go:

'Get moving,' he said, half afraid the man might be crazy and make another rush. 'Piss off' – threatening to kill him should he refuse.

Words as if spoken by another person deep in his own mind told him he was a bandit, though Brian repressed the thought as being the safest thing for the man before him and for himself. Maybe he doesn't understand English: 'Scoot, for –' But the man lost his bewilderment and neutral face of capture, turned and leapt along the level of the jungle, scrambling away fast. (IV.27;47)

This confrontation with the Chinese – who may have been a guerilla or a bandit, but this is never clarified – is in essence a spontaneous, intuitive act. It is not based on a thought-out attitude to Malayan communism for Brian knows nothing about that; even his conversations with Mimi, the bar-girl, never examine political issues. The origins of the Malayan communist movements and its objectives are never explored. We see the war there from Brian's alienated, ignorant position. He doesn't understand its issues, and there is no way to understand the issues – the RAF troops are given a lecture on the British Achievement in Malaya (which

Sillitoe paraphrases) but there is never any analysis of the guerilla position. It is a revolution in another country observed by an outsider. Brian acts spontaneously, without any rational basis, without any intellectual debate. But it is not a spontaneous act of the absurd, not a moment of irrationality – the typical action of a novel of the 50s. It arises from Brian's basic anti-authoritarianism, his dislike of officials and officers, his identification of his interests with those of the Malayan communists, without ever realising what communism means.

It is the very spontaneity of this action, of course, that various critics found hard to take. Irving Howe complains that Brian

is meant to be not merely an instinctive rebel, but a rebel searching for a rationale by which to live and act, so that his refusal to fire at the Communist guerillas comes to be 'the key to the door', the act of defiance by which he develops the meaning of his anger.

As the story develops, however, Sillitoe fails to justify Seaton's concluding act. Nothing that has been shown to us, other than a few bare hints concerning Communist shop stewards in England, warrants the supposition that Seaton would refuse to shoot or would have any understanding as to why he refuses. More important, nothing in the novel indicates that Sillitoe himself has thought through the significance of the conclusion he provides. Can the easy-going and anarchic nihilism of the Seatons be reconciled with a fraternal gesture towards Communist troops, and if so, what is the valuation Sillitoe would have us put upon it? For Seaton does not refuse to shoot the guerillas because they are fellow human-beings; presumably, if they were of another political color, his hand would not tremble at the gun. A humanitarian or ethical justification for his conduct is thus ruled out, while a political one remains unproved; all that is left, then, is a gratuitous and sentimental gesture. (25–6)

It is not simply that a political motivation is unproved, Sillitoe stresses Brian's political ignorance. Earlier in the novel, after a discussion at the youth club, one of the organisers says she will bring a socialist along to talk to them. We never see this visit, and there is no reason to think that Brian's political education is ever

supplemented by this talk. In Malaya, Knotman challenges Brian's self-labelling; Brian has been thinking, 'I call myself communist, and yet I'm slave-laboured into building these sandbag ramparts to keep them out.'

'You're not a communist, Brian,' Knotman had said when they got talking politics the other night. 'not from what I know of you anyway.' 'Well I'm not part of this system, I'll tell you that.' 'I don't blame you,' Knotman went on, 'because I don't think anybody would be in their right mind, but most of the world isn't in its right mind, though I expect it will be one day.' 'What do you think I am then?' Brian asked. 'You might be a socialist when you've read more and know a bit about it.' 'Hitler was a socialist,' Brian laughed, 'a national socialist, and I don't want anything to do with a nut like him.' 'He wasn't a socialist,' Knotman informed him patiently, 'he only said he was to deceive the workingman. He was sucking up to big business, and they used him to rob the Jews and stamp on the workingman eventually. They fell for it as well. No, if you're anything you're a socialist-anarchist.' 'Maybe,' Brian admitted, but he knew that all men were brothers and that the wealth of the world should be pooled and divided fairly among those who worked, doctors and labourers, architects and mechanics. That's what those on the other side of the sandbags feel, and even though they might not, as Knotman averred, be true socialists, he was still building up sandbags to keep them out. At least, my eyes have been opened. All I've got to do now is learn to see with them, and when one person sees, maybe the next one will as well. 'It's a matter of time,' Knotman said, 'before the world unites, not only the workers either. It's taking the long way round to get there at the moment,' he laughed, 'but that's a thing that often happens.' 'Don't you think you should do something about it though, to help it?' Brian persisted. 'Yes, but no more than you can without being untrue to yourself. History is on our side, so just bide your time: you won't even know when to act; the first thing you know you'll be acting and in the right way.' Brian found these words unsatisfactory to his nature, because in the jungle the communists had acted and he'd seen it with his own eyes, felt their bullets spinning and travelling around him. (IV.28;439-40)

In this stressed context of Brian's confusion about politics, his uncertainties about communism, his gesture with the Chinese appears not so much a gesture of solidarity, but an anarchic defiance of authority – of the RAF ethos personified by the officer Odgeson with whom he had just had an exchange about the British establishment.

'All I said,' Brian said, 'was that this was the last time I'm going to be a pin on a bloody map. And I meant it. And nobody's going to stop me saying what I feel.'

'All right, so you've said it. But if you say it once more you'll be on a charge when we get back to camp. I don't care how near the boat you are.'

Brian was the last to move, looked through the trees over the three of them forming the bottom loop of a letter S – Odgeson leading. We argue and the slob throws his rank, but I've got something to throw at him in my hand: I could put a bullet into his sanctimonious mug and nobody would be much the wiser. (IV.27;413)

Brian's fury with what Odgeson represents has as much a part in his motivation as any hypothetical communist solidarity. It is impossible to accept the episode with the Chinese as an expression of solidarity, since it isn't even certain that the Chinese *is* a communist. Moreover, what use is a gesture of solidarity that cannot be understood? The Chinese's inability to comprehend what Brian means serves to express a larger incomprehension than the simply linguistic. How can a member of the imperialist oppressed make it clear to the 'enemy' that they share the same oppression? There was a higher proportion of blacks in the U.S. forces in Vietnam than per head of the population in the U.S.A. The oppressed are always socially, culturally and economically forced into a complicity in the oppression of others. Brian's position is an absurd one, fighting on behalf of his own oppressors. Knotman has earlier tried to express his own dilemma. After his discharge

'they can get somebody else to guard their played-out Empire then. Not that they won't though: there's one born every minute. They've made use of me for seven years, and now I'm going to

do all I can to balls *them* up. Not by way of revenge, mind you: it's just second nature, and I'll enjoy doing it in a lighthearted sort of way.' He spoke in an easy, yet tired voice, giving Brian the impression that maybe it was possible to undermine the British Empire all by himself. 'Sure, sure, I volunteered to stay on in the air force,' having expected Brian to point this out – 'but I was crazy, I admit that. I thought the Germans would want keeping under a few more years, but from fighting fascism I found myself helping the fascists out here. All I want to do now is get my hands on some hard work for a change, and if any of the friends I make happen to say they believe in the British Empire I'll be in a good position to tell 'em a few things about it.' (IV.23;342–3)

And Brian realizes his own position talking to Mimi:

'This war's nothing to do with you,' she said. 'You should get out as quickly as you can.'

'Not much it ain't. I was dragged into the air force against my will and now they want me to fight the communists. I'm no mug. I've learned a thing or two in my life. They can fight their wars themselves. (IV.25;383)

Rejecting 'them', Brian makes a pacific gesture with the Chinese. He refuses to follow through the imperialist oppressors' expectation that he should kill. He refuses to shoot. It is not a purely ethical, Christian pacifism – as Irving Howe realizes; it is a pacific response in a particular context. And Brian's gesture is anarchic rather than revolutionary. Despite his broodings about Odgeson, he doesn't shoot his officer, though the idea has been mooted in the novel in recollections of such episodes in World War I. He hasn't handed the gun over to the Chinese. He has refused to participate in aggression, rather than moving across to a position of activist solidarity. His action, of course, leaves the Chinese free to continue his aggression. And the dilemma later is acute; by letting him go, did Brian cause the death of Baker? Was the Chinese indeed a guerilla and did he come back with other guerillas and ambush the party? The question of what sort of identity the English proletarian can have with a Chinese communist guerilla is brought up again; as far as the

Chinese is concerned, Brian is one of the imperialist aggressors. And the possibility hangs there that Brian's gesture has resulted in Baker's death.

*Key to the Door* ends on this note of dilemma, not certainty. It ends with a problem, not commitment. It is not until *The Death of William Posters* that the protagonist positively identifies with a third world liberation movement. There Dawley joins the FLN and fights with them in Algeria. Brian's anarchic rejection of British establishment authority becomes Dawley's positive commitment to revolutionary war. Sillitoe's theme of the futility of war that Dmitri Shestakov remarked on is replaced – temporarily – by a leap into a commitment to revolutionary war.

The cross-cutting between Brian in Malaya and Brian in Nottingham suggested a political analysis that was not fulfilled – that perhaps could not be fulfilled. The alienation of Brian from his society and from any understanding of other societies is emphasized. And this issue is open-ended, unresolved. The pacific gesture to the Chinese is at odds with the violence of the Seaton life style and milieu. John Rosselli remarked of Sillitoe's first three books that their characters, offered no outlet in political violence, could only manage 'interior explosions of a hatred that fights, as much as anything, itself'. In the English political climate of the 50s and early 60s, the possibilities of political violence were not seen to exist. Even events like the Notting Hill race riots were seen as an isolated and nonpolitical phenomenon. There could only be discontinuity between the aggrieved aggression of the Seatons, and the slow, alienated processes of social democratic party politics. Sillitoe's novels stress this alienation, this blockedness, this lack of a sense of possibilities for ideology or action, of the British proletariat. The violence of the Seatons remains undirected, unrelated to a political outlet. As Nigel Gray writes of Arthur in *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*,

when you get down to brass tacks it appears that he has only been fighting with his mouth. This is not to deny that there is plenty of actual violence (as well as violent fantasy), but it is never directed at the authorities. (128)

But with the trilogy, Dawley goes to Algeria and joins the FLN

and though Britain is still in a state of placidity, revolutionary war is discussed and planned by the painter Albert Handley, his sons, and his brother John. Sillitoe still has to resort to cross-cutting. The new English revolution has not begun. The realities of the FLN struggle are juxtaposed with a potential, a possibility, a planning of revolution that might be for real, or that might merely be the game of an artist, a madman, and adolescents: when volume 3 appeared, it was revealed as just that game. With the first volume of the trilogy, *The Death of William Posters* (1965) the working class background is taken as read. At the novel's opening, Frank Dawley has already walked out on his 'responsibilities' of wife, child and job that have pinned him down socially and economically. We know what that is all about from the earlier novels, and it is not repeated. And through Dawley, Sillitoe attempts to explore other classes of England – the middle class nurse and her advertising-man husband she is separated from; the primitive painter, Albert Handley, his discontented teenage daughter Mandy and his mad brother John; the intellectual Myra and her culture figure husband. But although some of the documentary surfaces of these worlds are caught – the nurse's house, Myra's trendy intellectual comfort – any further meanings are missing. Perhaps there aren't any; the material itself is not examined in depth. There is little of especial interest in these people. This is Dawley's discovery, driving him south and out of England to revolution.

One of the issues the trilogy raises is expatriation. In part Dawley's journey is Sillitoe's own journey – moving through the possibilities of English life, the class strata, and finding nowhere to settle, nothing to dwell on, so heading further south into exile. And then the intellectual and political decisions for expatriation cause conflict with the writer's relationship to his material – especially if he still feels a need to deal with the material, with his original environment. Igor Hajek asked Sillitoe 'would you be able to continue writing about England while living in another country?' Sillitoe replied:

I'm absolutely sure I would. Even after ten or twenty years spent abroad. Actually I lived in Spain from 1952 to 1958 without any contacts with home. And it was there, in Fascist Spain, that I wrote *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* and part of *Key to*

*the Door*. It is a desperate measure, however, for a writer to leave his country. And not all can stand the separation. (123)

And talking to Brendan Hennessy Sillitoe said:

If you're a writer I think you can't live too much in your own country. I like England – I love it, but I don't like it – I have to get out. I lived in France and Spain for six years. It gave me a distance from which to look at the things in England I wanted to write about. (112)

Hennessy commented, 'I've always thought it strange that many English writers now seem to have the opposite attitude,' to which Sillitoe replied, 'I think they are frightened – I don't know why they are frightened. My impulse has always been to get out' (112).

The journey Dawley makes is a writer's journey, moving away from the familiar and fully written proletarian background, into other possibilities for material. These possibilities are the sorts Sillitoe might have encountered in a literary career; they are not especially convincing for Dawley to encounter, nor especially necessary. Dawley leaves his wife and job and after randomly driving around England and finding how small it is, he calls at a house where a nurse lives alone, has an affair with her for a while; in the village he meets Albert Handley, a painter, poacher, and writer of begging letters; and through Handley's sudden achievement of fame, he meets Myra at a gallery opening in London. The connexions are plausible enough. But what is missing is any central reason for these encounters. Having explored the working class world, Sillitoe is now launched on a class cross-section of Britain. But there is an arbitrariness about that material which we do not find in George Eliot's *Felix Holt* or *Middlemarch*. The stable, middle class viewpoint from which she was able to view, range and place in perspective and position, no longer holds. So that we are left with an inchoate, random impression of England. The change from George Eliot's vision of organic interrelation, of community, is a mark of a social and political change in Britain; in literary terms, however, it is also a falling away of interest. It would be impossible and invalid to write a *Middlemarch* now; but a new literary form, a new way of dealing with the incoherent and

random, hasn't been evolved for English material. And it is as if Sillitoe isn't interested enough in the characters he chooses to bother to evolve something. So many of them are there to be rejected. Rejecting them on social and political grounds, Sillitoe has ended up rejecting his material. For a writer committed to the revolutionary destruction of English society, the only possibility is a rejection of English materials; an honest appraisal of English society could only assure him that such a revolution was in the 60s and 70s unlikely to be generated internally by the English. One or two figures, maybe, like Dawley, he can put faith in. But the rest, politically, have to go; so fictionally they go too – their dismissal cannot sustain the novel. It was a process Lawrence found himself getting into, too. A democratic revisionist might write lovingly or amusingly or ironically about the foibles of the English, even occasionally seeing some slow onward drift to liberal democracy potential or emergent, unlikely as that seems. But that is not possible for Sillitoe. Moreover, Sillitoe's proletarian and political judgement on English society combines with a current lack of conviction amongst many serious novelists about the viability of the novel of bourgeois realism, and its various adaptations – naturalism, socialist realism. There is little faith any more in the cumbersome fabrications of realism – in its particular representational traditions, in its laborious plotting. The ambitious trilogy was built on very shaky foundations.

Still writing about England, yet rejecting figures like the nurse's weak advertising copywriter husband and Myra's weak intellectual husband, easy Clifford Chatterley targets, leaves Sillitoe in an ambivalent, unresolved position. Dawley moves south to Algeria. And the saviour figure is Shelley, an American who has a similar role to the Canadian Knotman in *Key to the Door*. Both are outside the English class structure, both have a North American tradition of egalitarianism and independence instead of English servility or superiority, both have a shady, slightly shifty side to them, an aura of sharpness or criminality which distinguishes them from the purely theoretical left.

His favourite books were those works on guerilla warfare, by Mao Tse Tung, Ngoyen Giap, and Che Guevara – authors who for him had taken their place in world literature even before Shakespeare and Tolstoy. Shelley lived by the principles of

guerilla warfare. The enduring maxim of Sun Tzu: 'Uproar in the East, strike in the West' was the basis of exercises which combined intellect and imagination whenever there was time to kill before catching boat or train. Walking the streets he staged uprisings in that particular town; on the train he laid ambushes in the passing terrain; pacing the beach he planned clandestine landings. 'Life is war, but guerilla war, not the old artificial war that the world's lived with up to now. One of the deepest instincts of Man is to conquer by stealth, to create an uproar at one point while striking with deadly effect at another.' His one unalterable dream was to see Madison Avenue and its thousand commerces erupt into smoke and flame. (III.22;278-9)

The romantic component in Shelley is anyway indicated by his name. But his seriousness is not put in question and he grows in stature in the second volume, *A Tree on Fire*. His death from gangrene after being wounded in an FLN engagement with the French serves to create a value for him, a final seriousness. The undercutting, a strange prudish rejection of his diaries which turn out to be 'pornographic' materials, occurs in the final volume, *The Flame of Life*.

The Algerian material is powerfully written, but it does not support the entire novel – it is too partial, too fragmentary. There is no sense of what the war is about, what the issues are, what the larger strategy is: simply the small focus on Frank Dawley in the desert, gunfire, an attack on an aerodrome, chase. Frank is with the FLN by impulse; there is no picture of Algeria established for us to evaluate his decision to join the revolutionary army. We are given the hardships, the physical surfaces; but no meanings.

Discussing Malraux in *Towards a Sociology of the Novel*, Lucien Goldmann raises an issue immediately relevant to Sillitoe.

Now Malraux, and of course most of the critics felt this, remains a Western writer concerned with the problems of the West. If, in order to write novels of the revolution, he situates their action in China and Spain, it is because the revolutionary movements occur there and because, when writing a work of realistic ambitions, he must situate its action as close as possible to reality. It seems to me however that, in these novels and perhaps in the

thinking of most left-wing intellectuals of the time, one can find *no trace* of any awareness of a fact that has become obvious for us today: namely, that China in particular and the non-industrialized countries in general have their own problems, different from those that arise in Western societies, and that different evolutions are taking place in both groups of countries. (37)

Sillitoe is aware of the issue. He is not one of those writers who attempts to deal with third world revolution. The material of the third world revolutions he includes in his fictions, is material that he presents in an English context. His English protagonists relate to the materials in ways that are important for their role or potential role in England. Malaya, Algeria are not the subjects of Sillitoe's novels; they are the settings of illustrative material relevant to someone contemplating social change, the possibility or impossibility of revolution, in England. Dawley's fighting in Algeria is devoid of political meanings for Algeria. The stress is on guerilla experience, not on ideology. The meanings emerge from the cross-cutting with England, with the Handleys.

Handley's anarchic household is an outrage to English conservatism, order, stability, convention. But perhaps because it is such an outrage, it is unconvincing, unlikely. Handley, the painter, has a brother John who returned from World War II in a state of collapse. A wireless operator (like Brian in *Key to the Door*) he now spends his life tapping out messages to nowhere. Initially we seem to be presented with someone utterly mad, a victim of the war; his first appearance is the extraordinary episode where Dawley wandering randomly around Handley's house quickly has sex with the daughter Mandy and then, trying to find his way downstairs, accidentally walks into the wireless operator's room and John pulls a gun on him. The incident stops at that, unexplained. In part two of the trilogy, however, *A Tree on Fire* (1967) John is given a larger role.

His amiable and highly cultured presence had dominated the Handley household for longer than most of them could remember. He had educated Richard and Adam from the age of five in the romance and ethics of revolution, in the mechanics

of insurrection. (III.24;290-1)

His role is central, and he serves to articulate the meanings Sillitoe has been moving his fiction towards.

He switched off his high-powered receiver, laid down his earphones, and passed an hour eating, and idly looking through his notebook: 'Turn your back on politics,' it said. 'Politics have nothing to do with Revolution.' On another page: 'The American rocket and bomber bases must be treated as were German bases in occupied France during the war. Adopt the attitudes of the French Resistance to the Nazis. And not only the land of the bases, but also the land of the fox-hunters must come under the hammer. The police, the armed forces, civil defence personnel are an army of occupation. Those who join their ranks are traitors. Those who sit on jury service are traitors. Those who hold state secrets and do not try to divulge them to an enemy or to make them public knowledge are also traitors.' He read more: 'The people, by acquiescing to the possibility of nuclear war are giving in to their own death-wish, since they have allowed themselves to be diverted from their ability to become large in spirit and carry out a revolution. The ruling class prefer this death-wish to permeate and operate rather than that the will to revolution should develop. That is presumably what they mean by being better dead than Red. They are already dead. But are they dead beyond the powers of resurrection?'

'All the time one must be ready. All through life one must educate and train oneself for the Revolution, imagine it in all its detail and in a thousand permutations. One must breathe and live for the Revolution, because a revolution is a mystical occurrence as much as something which is brought about and controlled by organisation. It is a healthy state of mind. The perfect and ordered world around one can crumble in a week, and one must be ready to step in and stoke up the fires of destruction in order that you may build when they have gone out – but not until.'

'A revolution is not an impossible pipe-dream in this small old fashioned country. One must make a career of helping to bring about the Revolution in face of the imponderable forces of inanity. This modern world could become prehistoric and half-

empty in four flat minutes, and until that time the only political philosophy will be that of Positive Nihilism.' (III.24;291-2)

Although there had always been a political context to Sillitoe's writing, there had never been anything programmatic, no solutions or suggestions, until this point. John Handley's jottings offer something for the first time: 'a revolution is not an impossible pipe-dream in this small old-fashioned country ...' In the Handley household plans are made; in Algeria Frank Dawley is getting first hand experience.

But how much hope is there? Once again, there is an ambivalence. John's assertion is the only assertion of faith there is of revolutionary change in Britain. But later John suicides on returning to England after his expedition to find Dawley.

The gullshit cliffs loomed out of drizzle and mist, sending a pain of hopeless love through him. England, he thought, if only you could begin again from nakedness, become a green infant born from the soil and salt sea, put a coat on your back of all colours, and start in intelligence and gentleness, but without me, without me. (V.32;417)

Conrad called his country of revolution in *Nostramo* gullshit, too – Costaguana – to express his contempt for the political, his sense of the futility of revolutionary change; here the contempt is for the lack of revolutionary change. With the final volume of the trilogy, John's vision becomes less and less tenable: the prospect of revolution in England seems more and more to have been 'an impossible pipe-dream.'

John's suicide is a rejection of England, paralleling Sillitoe's fictional rejection. In *A Tree on Fire* Sillitoe seems to have found the English material increasingly hard to relate to, increasingly intractable and inert. Handley's daughter Mandy drives up and down the M1 motorway in her red Mini, Handley has a futile interview from a journalist, Mandy's boyfriend Ralph steals a painting – these unexpressive and uninteresting episodes suggest a sense of the bankruptcy of English life, there is nothing for Sillitoe to engage in. An American critic, Allen Richard Penner, has claimed (1972) of *A Tree on Fire*, that Sillitoe's

personal sense of exile seems to be grounded in a bitterness and a hatred of his country that has diminished his art rather than elevated it, as it did James Joyce's. In Sillitoe's earlier works, there is an exceptional rendering of a tragic and classical sense of fate: his characters sense that they may not be destined to win now, in economic or legal terms, yet they battle on with a spirited, fustian vainglory that is in itself a victory of the human spirit. In his most recent novels Sillitoe has abandoned this sense of fate and adopted a determination to win through armed rebellion the economic and social battles in which his heroes are engaged. From the heroes' point of view, and from the authors', this is good politically, economically, and philosophically; from the critic's point of view, aesthetically, it is not, for in Sillitoe's current writings the winning of these battles seems to be expressible only in terms of martial 'liberation'.

This extraordinary comment makes a much better case for the value of the shift in direction of Sillitoe's trilogy, than the criticism it intends. Sillitoe's refusal to rest in an easy, inert, tragic sense that can be lauded by the academic critic, has led to a violent rejection of those so called 'aesthetic' values; there is something contemptible about an aesthetic that can admire the hopeless exploitation and defeat of a people. Trying to shift out of such a pastoral passivity, and its concomitant celebration of the economic and spiritual pauperisation of the proletariat, Sillitoe has offered these revolutionary novels. And their failings come not from the stance of armed liberation, but from the failure to substantiate this stance, from the failure to integrate it with the community it is supposedly to liberate, and from the failure to find the appropriate expressive form for the novel's expressing it.

What is striking about *A Tree on Fire* is that this 'revolutionary' novel is so unconcerned with the economic and social nature of English society. Now certainly we have seen that Sillitoe has dealt with that already. Yet the alienation from those concerns is remarkable here. Partly it is as if his hostility to the society is so great, that he cannot bear to consider it even to work out a strategy for its destruction. It is an understandable position. But what is presented of the society – the Handley household – is so eccentric as to provide no sound basis for analysis. While together with this

failure of documentation is the failure to adopt a new mode. Stylistically *A Tree on Fire* remains a conventional English novel, though the contents of this naturalistic fiction are eccentric and unrepresentative. There is nothing revolutionary about the language or form. The combination of conventionality and eccentricity with the lack of political-social-economic documentation make problematic *A Tree on Fire* as an attempt to write about the English revolution; and the implication is that such a topic anyway is an impossibility. To write about such a theme, the writer inevitably must become eccentric. The theme itself is an impossibility, in art and life – hence John's despair at the impossibility of realizing what he had claimed was not a pipe dream.

The very cross-cutting from Dawley in North Africa to the English materials again emphasizes the unreality, the unrootedness of that English dream of revolution; quite the opposite from *Key to the Door* where the documentary familiarity of the English material cut in with the exotic and new experience of Malaya. Yet even though the North African material has more vigour and reality (we know there was a war going on there) than the English games of planning revolution, it has no more substantiated political basis to it than the English material. The war is just a war Dawley gets involved in. There is no political argument or analysis for Dawley's participation in the FLN struggle. He simply plunges in, intuitively. The nature of the FLN's ideology and struggle remains as unexamined as that of the Malayan communists in *Key to the Door*; while the meanings that can be extrapolated from Brian Seaton's military service in Malaya are not accessible here. The irrelevance of talking politics yet doing nothing is one of Sillitoe's points, of course. However, by offering intuitive commitment, and dispensing with all the talk, he robs his revolutionary war of any significance. He leaves it presented as no more than the banditry the Malayan fighters were often categorised as. Consequently, when Dawley returns to Britain at the end of *A Tree on Fire*, it is hard to see what he has learned – other than physical endurance. He is able to fight in a revolutionary war, now. But where is the analytic theory that is needed to find out where support will come from, to prepare the propaganda to win over support? As presented, in all its theoretical, ideological vacuum, Dawley might as well have been fighting for the Foreign Legion. Reviewing *The Death of William Posters* Frank

Kermode wrote:

It seems characteristic that the best writing in Sillitoe's last two novels comes at the time of his heroes' self-expression in action, and in a context of guerilla warfare. Give him a small society of men, their ankles tied together with string, lying in ambush for the imperialist French, and he will release his hero and his style at one stroke. (*Modern Essays*, 287)

But the action has no ideological commitment; it could be for any ideology. Once political fiction is moved out of the realm of ideas and into 'pure' action, into engagement in the battle alone, there is this huge problem. Yet until it is moved into engagement, into the fight, it remains stuck in liberal conversation, kitchen anarchism, pipe-dream, fiction.

*A Tree on Fire* was published in 1967, but though the third volume of the trilogy, *The Flame of Life*, was begun in that year, it was not completed and published until 1974. Sillitoe comments in a prefatory note:

This is a long time for one book, though during that period other items were written that were more urgently pressing. They elbowed the present work aside, which may have been compliant in this because the plot and form of the book weren't so absolutely clear in my mind as they subsequently became over the years. (5)

The intervening seven years had their own effects on the materials of the novel. Marijuana and the women's movement established themselves in English society, while the possibilities of revolutionary activity in England receded even further. While the first two volumes could be seen as building up to a revolutionary scenario, *The Flame of Life* presents bit by bit the collapse of each of the components of that hopeful radical activism. More than that, it offers redefinitions of what has gone before, so that the more deluded, self-aggrandising, crazy and objectively counter-revolutionary components of the events and personalities of the first two volumes are now brought into clearer focus.

After John Handley burned down the house in Lincolnshire, the

whole community moved in with Myra in the south Midlands. But the family

hadn't made much of an impression on Myra's place ... They seemed subdued by a subtle combination of middle-class economy and bourgeois abundance. (3;24)

Handley, now having made it as a painter, supports them all by the money he makes selling his paintings to the rich. The novel opens with him collecting £3,000 from Sir Edward Greensleeves, the gallery owner who exhibits him, even though Greensleeves complains he had £1,000 the previous month. The economic base of the community is established immediately and its shaky foundations: Handley the only one earning, the community producing little itself except maybe a few vegetables. It is no self-sufficient back to the land experiment.

There are a score of us living in our self-styled community, and that means twenty idle mouths to feed. I'm *not* idle, because I happen to be the breadwinner, but I don't mind that because it stimulates me for my work. (1;10)

What in the first two volumes might have seemed like an experiment in alternative living, a spontaneous anarchist cell from which revolution would be spread, in *The Flame of Life* is revealed as the plaything of an artist; an artist, moreover, who depends on the bourgeoisie and aristocracy for the purchase of his paintings to finance his life style. Handley's background was never proletarian, he has no base from which to build a revolution. 'His father, a small-time builder, had gone bankrupt just in time to retire, a hard old man who'd forced him out to work as soon as it was legal' (27;192). He had experienced the deprivation of the petty-bourgeoisie; which, though certainly a deprivation, was one that in a revolutionary crisis would lead him as likely as not to the counter-revolutionaries.

Dawley always knew that Handley only let his sons play at revolution so that he could get on with his painting. If revolution ever became so real that he had no electric light or couldn't get

razor-blades he'd be the first to turn against it. He wanted to paint just as most people wanted to work and live in peace, and as an artist he really did represent mankind in that respect. (27;196)

Handley's problem is one shared with so many bourgeois artists, that of limited awareness. He can see the contradictions of the community, but fails to perceive his own role as one that involves the largest contradictions. As an artist he observes what is happening; but artists do not passively observe: they manipulate the material in the very act of observation; indeed, Handley like so many artists, manipulates the situations so that what he wants to observe will be manifested.

'It's just an idea for middle-aged people,' Handley said, 'this community. The young ones don't want it, and won't see the need of it till their own kids are grown up by which time it's too late, like it is with me. Cuthbert's trying his best to ruin it. Ralph and Mandy want a nice little cottage thatched with daisies and buttercups so's they can be all lovey-dovey in their pervy way. Adam and Richard are just a couple of lazy bastards pounding out revolutionary ideas in a permanently non-revolutionary society in order to avoid working.' (27;195)

His attitudes here are revealing, he sees himself as the sole provider, sole believer, holding together a community for the community's advantage against the community's will. It is this sort of thing that makes his son Cuthbert suspect that the community's will has no role in Handley's calculations.

'The only thing that is absolutely necessary, and therefore compulsory, in this community,' Handley began, 'is that everybody above the age of eighteen attend these meetings.' (9;63)

And Handley buttresses his compulsion with the alienations of a television quiz show technology for recording votes; and if our doubts about the nature of compulsory meeting attendance and voting were not enough, this apparatus readily summons up all our equally well founded suspicions about the honesty of TV quiz shows, and perhaps by extension the ballot. Not only does Handley's

technology embody the alienations the community members experience from each other and from the idea of the community, it also allows an easier possibility for the manipulation of the vote in favour of the person who installed the system.

The vote-meter had been rigged up soon after Cuthbert's arrival, and on the floor by each chair was a button that could be pressed whenever a motion was put, buttons so hidden it was impossible to say who assented and who did not. On the wall behind Handley was a huge clockface, a circle with ten divisions, so that if two members voted for a proposal the needle swung over that number of segments, and on the rare occasions of unanimity it turned full circle. Agreement was reached if six of the ten parts were covered.

Handley was proud of his democratic installation, but Cuthbert suspected it was fixed in his father's favour, suggesting at each session that everyone sit in a different place to the one they had held before, especially Handley, since Cuthbert believed that his foot-button had several times the lighting-power of any other. The proposal had been defeated, as any would while Handley kept his present seat. But even if the gadget did not cheat it seemed an insult to the more subtle mechanics of the human make-up, a typical innovation of his father who fell for any modern contraption that came along. Cuthbert thought that one day, when his father was in town, he'd call an electrician and have the wires checked. (8;56)

The prose veers in and out of endorsing Cuthbert's suspicions ('The proposal had been defeated, as any would while Handley kept his present seat'). But even if the apparatus isn't fixed in Handley's favour, the very assumptions embodied in it and the aura it exudes express Handley's mistrust, and his reified, scientific-technological drive to dominate and control while keeping his hands clean. He sees the community as a machine that should be run like his vote-meter, his foot on the occasional pedal – touching the accelerator of a car, not physically hauling any load himself.

After each meal Handley went to his studio, and everyone thought he was working. They got on with their chores and

duties, and grumbled while the days and hours passed, but thought it worthwhile because it allowed the great man to do his immortal painting. (23;165)

His wife broods on the situation that has developed – the way Handley has become increasingly alienated from daily activity, the labour-saving machines he has introduced to cut himself off from ‘unrewarding’ chores now permeating his life-attitudes, and cutting him off from her.

There wasn’t much work to do, and maybe that was the trouble. There were more willing hands than necessary, as well as dishwashers, vacuum-cleaners, washing-machines; a fully automated house run by as many people as if there were no gadgets at all. It was Handley’s little plaything of a community, a modern doll’s house of the selfish man complete with furniture and more people to play around with. The only sensible member of it was Dawley’s wife Nancy, who’d left as soon as she saw what was going on. (23;168)

And for all the introduction of labour-saving machines, the allocation of tasks is still determined in a traditional, sexist fashion. This is something no one even thinks about until Maricarmen, mistress of the dead Shelley, arrives in the community from Spain. She asks:

‘Do the men cook?’

Handley’s head jerked up: ‘We have study groups going, and do work in the garage. I paint all the time. There are one or two idle bastards among us, but we pull our weight – by and large.’ (15;109)

Once she has settled in, Maricarmen remarks to Myra:

‘It’s not what I’d call a liberal community the men plotting revolution and equality, and the women kept at their traditional labour.’ (17;123)

She proposes

'Everyone over eighteen, male or female, should do a day's work in the kitchen. That would include Mr. Handley, who may be an artist, but even an artist has to eat.' (17;123)

And it is Maricarmen who exposes another non-radical assumption of the community; the two au pair girls Maria and Cataline have never been given a vote, unthinkingly treated by Handley as further labour-saving devices. But though Maricarmen introduces a vote for the au pair girls and a kitchen roster that involves the men, the community is still doomed. These reforms cannot save something that is inauthentic from the beginning; the purpose of the 'community' was never for the communal good, but for Handley's painting. And Maricarmen's purpose in arriving was not to correct deviations from the revolutionary good, but to kill Dawley for causing Shelley's death. Maricarmen, the revolutionary now released from a Spanish gaol, is wasting her energies in the pursuit of revenge. She has been invited over to the community because she has Shelley's papers – Dawley thinks they might be useful for him in the memoir of his guerilla activities he is writing; Handley has an artist's curiosity to see them.

No one is showing much revolutionary consciousness. And all the doubts about Dawley's revolutionary understanding are now confirmed – not only did he have no clear idea of what he was doing, but his foolhardy commitment to dramatic action did indeed cause Shelley's death.

He did not know with any surety why he had gone to fight for the rebels in Algeria.

True, out of a sense of idealism, and to help the downtrodden of the world after a lifetime of believing that the international socialist brotherhood of man could cure the evils and inefficiencies of capitalist-imperialism, he had agreed to join Shelley Jones in driving a lorry of guns to the frontier beyond Tafilalet – a practical action that could never be confused with any dream.

After a successful ambush, he persuaded Shelley to go on to the war in Algeria. Shelley knew his limitations, and did not care to enter the battle-zone. But Dawley, drunk on the tactical superiority of the fighting, and the intoxicating though

diminishing noise of their own gunfire, forced him to embark on the most stupid enterprise it was possible to concoct. (16;114–5)

Notice the shift in Sillitoe-Dawley's stance: the FLN are now called 'rebels', accepting establishment vocabulary judgements. Other disillusionments rapidly follow for us. Shelley's notebooks turn out not to be a manual of modern revolutionary practice but pornography. Adam says 'they're only feeble attempts to write dirty stories'; Dawley sees them as 'twisted, fly blown trash ... putrid stuff' (36; 252–3). The language of moral judgement, seemingly endorsed by Sillitoe, is again strangely establishment, English huffy. We are given no examples of the work, so whatever sex and violence associations there conceptually might have been, are not revealed.

The adolescent revolutionaries give up playing with Uncle John's radio equipment and request funding to go to university: Oxford, where else? 'We can put our revolutionary and working class contacts to good use in the student movement'. (43;286) The shrine to John's memory is dissembled and the radio equipment junked. Dawley, brooding on John's suicide, sees it as the act of a man despairing of the achievement of socialism by violent means.

In Algeria John had seen that the pursuit of equality brought nothing but death and suffering. He realised that almost anything was preferable to the annihilation or crippling of people.  
(32;229)

And John's letter from the grave is a renunciation of armed revolution. The anti-war, anti-military note of Sillitoe's earlier work, is reasserted.

Revolution is not the normal enslavement of people which we have seen so far. It must mean liberation into mutual good. It must begin in peace and end in peace. A revolution that does not lead to real equality and real freedom is counter-revolution: it takes us back instead of forward. A revolution that is brought about by War and Civil War is likely to destroy freedom. So stop your false pastimes and theoretical pursuits, and instead convert people to the goodness of Revolution by turning it into a religion, but without idols, without figureheads, without

suffering and killing, and with no more ritual than that of inspired words that will show all people how to understand and love. (42;281)

And so traditional activism is renounced. John recommends 'seek the more spiritual way' (42;281) but there are no signs of anyone following that, either, in *The Flame of Life*. The stress is on the collapse of community, the retreat into individualist privatism. Ralph comes into an inheritance and he and Mandy go off and live on it – parody of the 19th century novel, but less a parody than a tired surrender to a clichéd way out of it all. The note of the novel is one of giving up rather than achieving peace or direction. It is a running down of hopes, a burning and burying and drowning of aspirations – guns, papers, hedgehogs and such like are continually being burned, buried or dropped in the lake.

Amidst the pervading dissolution, are there any signs of regeneration? At best ambiguous ones. Doing the community shopping, Enid, Handley's wife, and Maricarmen, pick up an 18 year old hitch-hiker who ends up staying with the community.

'Hi, there!' said Dean, a hand held out in a friendly manner.

Cuthbert ignored it. 'Are you an American, then?'

'No, siree! Just a bit of old Limey down from Nottingham, on my way to hitch-up with some of the lads in London. They've got a grotty pad in the Earls Court.'

His language was a prattle of false American and raw Nottingham ... (22;159)

His name is Dean William Posters and he starts turning on anyone who wants to be turned on to marijuana. He has walked out of his dead-end factory job to go on the road. In one aspect he is a spiritual son of Frank Dawley, a second version – as Dawley himself realizes.

At thirty he felt old enough to be Dean's father – and found the coincidence of the name with his favourite working-class mythological character amusing. Even the William was prominent in it, William Posters Junior who right from the start, would put up with none of the crap and had slung his hook at so early an age

that he would do little damage to himself or others. (25;184)

But Dean is also a reduced English reincarnation of Dean Moriarty, that figure of freedom and energy from Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957) which was published in England the same year as *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1958) – an alternative myth, coexistent with Sillitoe's projected possibilities, yet so very different. Sillitoe now creates a character who is trying to escape the etiolation of Britain by following a track the beats had first trodden in the 40s and the counterculture of the 60s had paved. Dean takes off with Enid, neglected wife of Handley, to the Mediterranean and India where they deal drugs – and make enough money in five years to, of all things, buy a small hotel in the south of England. Yet another escape route turns out not to work, yet another possibility is rejected by Sillitoe. Enid becomes bored with Dean, and there they are back in the Old Country, keeping a hotel.

The other possibility of regeneration is Handley's eldest son Cuthbert who has rebelled against his father consistently. First of all he goes to theological college, then drops out. He has an affair with Maricarmen and they go to Spain together at the novel's end. Perhaps the spirituality that led him to toy with theological college, and his inherited anarchic rebelliousness will provide the base for spiritual revolution as recommended by John in his letter from the grave; and allied with Maricarmen's connexions in the anti-Franco anti-fascist movement, actually lead to somewhere. He takes a copy of John's letter with him. At least he has escaped from Britain.

The last chapters tie up the remaining threads and offer no hope. Handley returns to Lincolnshire, rebuilds on the site of the burnt out house, and paints in rural isolation. Dawley's book becomes a success

but as time went on he did not know how to reconcile his revolutionary principles and writings to his life as a normal family man... They talked about the problem, but he could find no answer. The main thing was that the question continued to gnaw at him. (50; 317)

And the book ends with Dawley's meditations on the possibilities of

keeping the inner light aflame.

The end of life was the fire of life, in which the flame was often invisible, nonexistent. How could one live without this flame? You didn't have to see it to believe it was there. If it was in your heart you could see it spring up in all different places. As long as it stayed in your heart your revolutionary principles were not at variance with the way you lived.

He could wait, and warm himself at his own flame, and let others share it when they needed it. Waiting and guarding your own flame with the faith of your life was justification enough. Because when the call came, when he had waited until he knew what to do, when it was necessary to go out to a cause and do something, then he would do so – but always finally remembering, and being troubled by, the words of Handley's brother John. In the meantime the flame stayed plain, as long as you loved those nearby you would know what to do when the time came.

And if it never did? he asked himself with the healthy bite of scepticism. While the flame of his heart stayed with him he did not need to answer that question. Life in any case was brief enough. If it never came he still had to live. Yet he knew beyond all doubt that it would come. The world that he knew was made that way. (50;318)

After a period of engagement with the issues of political consciousness, and the possibilities of revolutionary change, Sillitoe has returned to the individual isolation of his first great protagonist, Arthur Seaton. But it is a return at a higher level than Arthur's alienation. A lot has been experienced, rejected, and learned. The violence has been examined and its self-destructive qualities revealed. But the flame remains, that inextinguishable inner light.

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