

# FACTS AND FICTIONS: THE POLITICAL MEANINGS OF MODERN LITERATURE

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Modern literature is haunted by the spectre of *significance*. This obsession has bred some alarming confusions in literary minds. To the structuralists, for example, everything is *text*. Their analyses are not confined to literary “texts”: the literary analogy is carried over into the real world, the text is paradigm of “reality”. This means a dissolution of the differences between reality and illusion.

This refusal to see the difference is supposedly a philosophical profundity. Literature illuminates the real world, so much so, that the real world disappears. Literature thus becomes a method of decomposing real experiences, emotions, and desires. These, however transmuted into story, are the stuff of literature. The mandarins would call it “popular” literature, forgetting that even their sacred texts were once, with few exceptions, popular.

These philosophic confusions become ways of positing inversions of traditional values as virtues. They are the means of cultivating introspection and failure as the only “valid” literature. The hero doesn’t just not exist in this literature, he becomes the “anti-hero”.

## ALIENATION

These ideas were made familiar in the theatre by Brecht. He culled his theory of alienation from the pages of Marx (and like Shaw, he was a playwright who apologised for Stalin). In Marxist economics, the labourer in the bourgeois world is deemed to be “alienated” from the product of his labours. To produce is to alienate. As a philosophical tool with which to analyse bourgeois society, Brecht took this theory into literature to reveal the artificiality of theatrical, novelistic, etc. enterprises. But is it not precisely its artificiality that attracts people to the theatre, or any other artistic enterprise? Think of the Victorian mechanical extravaganzas, or Covent Garden Opera, Disneyland, or the Greek theatre. Far from allowing the audience to become however momentarily absorbed in “the willing suspension of disbelief”, Brecht keeps interrupting his plays to remind the audience that indeed the theatre relies upon illusory techniques.

What was the precise point of this cultural adaptation of Marx’s theory of alienated labour? Apart from the crude point that Marxists wished to demonstrate the “artificiality” of capitalist culture, it is hard to say. The theory has become part of the existential air breathed by modern literati. It attenuates into nihilism. Failure and lack of enterprise are deemed the essential human charac-

teristics, a point eloquently made by J. G. Ballard in his short story *A Question of Re-entry*:

‘Why did they really send a man to the Moon?’

Connolly paused. He had remained silent during the conversation, not wanting to antagonize Ryker. The rudeness and complete self-immersion were pathetic rather than annoying. ‘Do you mean the military and political reasons?’

‘No, I don’t.’ Ryker stood up, arms akimbo again, measuring Connolly. I mean the *real* reasons, Lieutenant.’

Connolly gestured vaguely. For some reason formulating a satisfactory answer seemed more difficult than he had expected. ‘Well, I suppose you could say it was the natural spirit of exploration.’

Ryker snorted derisively. ‘Do you seriously believe that, Lieutenant? “The spirit of exploration!” My God! What a fantastic idea. Pereira doesn’t believe that, do you, Captain?’

Later on, Ballard reveals those real reasons:

The implication was that the entire space programme was a symptom of some inner unconscious malaise afflicting mankind, and in particular the western technocracies, and that the space-craft and satellites had been launched because their flights satisfied certain buried compulsions and desires. By contrast, in the jungle, where the unconscious was manifest and exposed, there was no need for these insane projections, and the likelihood of the Amazonas playing any part in the success or failure of the space-flight became, by a sort of psychological parallax, increasingly blurred and distant, the missing capsule itself a fragment of a huge disintegrating fantasy.

Futility has become an art form.

This is not necessarily an overt political demonstration. Many may indeed be ignorant of the ancestry of these ideas. But that something is wrong with us and that what is needed to cure us is a good dose of lack of confidence and a better sense of communality — these are pervasive themes.

Literature which does not subscribe to these views is, if from another age (and therefore hallowed), critically revised into precursors of modernity or, if contemporary, heartily despised. The effect of this “mandarinization” of contemporary literature has been to make good writing synonymous with bad thinking, or at best a repetition of the same depressing themes.

Popular, that is, comprehensible literature is despised by the mandarins — and criticised for being illusory, as if once again that was not precisely the point. Enough fiction to be an entertainment, enough correspondence with reality to be intelligible. This is true of science fiction, which is one area where those who enjoy confidence in man’s abilities alongside philosophical maturity have expended their efforts.

It is a fact that many people enjoy our “corrupt”, “materialistic” and “illusory” ways of life. Therefore a philosophy of literature is needed to cope with this extraordinary fact — that humankind refuses to be made miserable by its “alienation”.

## Cultural Notes No. 4

ISSN 0267-677X ISBN 1 85637 206 5

An occasional publication of the Libertarian Alliance,  
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## A LITERATURE FOR POLITICS

This is the title of issue No. 4 (published 1983) of *Granta*, a literary journal edited in Cambridge. This special double issue is, for its editors, “the most representative statement about what (they) are trying to express in contemporary writing”. I shall take them at their word.

They criticise both typical leftist literature for its heavy-footed realism, and the self-referential retreats from experience, the pyrotechnics of much modern literature. They then assert that “it is imperative that we have a literature and a language that are responsible, accountable, and instrumental to the lives we are having to lead — a literature that is an adversary of oppression and not an accomplice to it.” Overlooking the personification of literature and language, what do they mean? What makes their view of literature different from previous or currently prevailing views? “Part of this difference is in the almost universal treatment of all facts as fictions — as ideological fabrications that require debunking and dissecting.” Extraordinary! Facts are in fact fictions? This is a resounding confusion of categories.

One of the essays in this volume concerns “perhaps the fiction of the most disturbing consequences Adolf Eichmann’s horrific self-deception.” What then? Do we pity Eichmann his “self-deception”? What matters? The philosophical conundrums of Eichmann’s “lying” to himself, or what Eichmann and his ilk *did*? But then such objective happenstances are mere facts.

No, these profundities reveal a literature “that is confident enough to take on contemporary issues and political concerns”. The arrogance is astounding, the ignorance, if not feigned, colossal in those who profess to be students of literature. Did not Trollope write novels of political life? Did not George Eliot depict contemporary issues and political concerns with a great wealth of philosophical insight? Did not Shakespeare make the theatre a vehicle for the political history of England, and an arena for analysing the vicissitudes of power? Did Tolstoy sport with trivia, or Dostoevsky fabricate frivolities?

To take a very different kind of writer, Robert Heinlein in his science fiction novels often explores the complexities of political society. These are indeed favourite themes with many science fiction writers, even the unsophisticated composers of “space opera” who dream of galactic empires and what is needful to sustain or defeat them.

The editors of *Granta* mean of course a very different kind of literature and language: one that is divorced from common perception, a private vocabulary of “dissent” that turns reality inside out. The culture of newspeak.

## THE REAL HERO

This introductory peroration ends with a delineation of the ‘real’ hero of the kind of literature that these pundits would like to see. They call it, typically, a literature of engagement.

But, more important, it is a literature no longer of the individual, no longer about the just or unjust fate of character: it is a literature of social and economic relations. Or, to put it another way: our hero is no longer the individual; our hero is the community.

There we have it; and the intellectual distortion is grave. Take again their instance of the most disturbing fiction: what was most characteristic of Eichmann’s crime? Precisely his abrogation of individuality. His defence was that he was an ordinary man, no different from his colleagues, all cogs in the machine of government. In short, and in his own eyes, the community’s actions and demands upon him reduced him to a cipher in a social and economic relation, and exonerated him therefore of blame or responsibility. It was this feeling that he need not feel guilty that encouraged him to feel pleasure at what he had done, apart from his belief in its ideological necessity. It was in the first place the Community, not Adolf Eichmann the individual, who had perpetrated these deeds. Pace Hannah Arendt (whom I think muddled), it was the “banality of evil” that was in fact Eichmann’s defence.

In doing this, Eichmann was of course in no way deviating from Nazi ideology, merely to try and save his skin. The Nazi regime was intent upon imposing a collectivist order upon Europe, through both the impersonal ideology of the Aryan super-race, and a command economy.

Yet the new hero we are asked to welcome is the Community: self-effacement, “public purpose”. Therefore any assertion of individualism is, in this literature, a failure. The community mentality rejects the individual, denouncing him for lack of communal loyalty (in the jargon: concern, engagement). Thus the individual must be shown to fail; if he does not perceive himself as failing, this must be shown to be “self-deception”.

## OWN GOAL

The first essays in the collection deal with the Falklands war, and the background of “Mrs Thatcher’s Religious Pilgrimage”, examined according to the principle enunciated in the introduction.

For the Falklands conflict is the living parable which exemplifies her power over time. Not only is it a re-creation of a nineteenth century imperial splendour, it is also, by that same process of absorption and manipulation of popular memory, a re-play of the Second World War: but *this* stand against Fascist aggression is a revised version, with the meaning of the people’s war squeezed out. She has re-created Churchill’s triumph without the subsequent socialist victory.

This is Mrs Thatcher’s imperial fantasy, launching a war to dramatise her dreams upon the world’s stage, whatever the cost.

However, the “reality” of this war is problematic: “how we think and talk of the war is largely determined by what politicians have to say about it.” Daniel Kon, a journalist from Argentina, contributes conversations with Argentinian soldiers.

Kon’s aim was hardly impartial. He did not speak to generals or politicians. He couldn’t be bothered with dates or battles or even the reasons that accounted for why Argentina found itself in the ‘Malvinas’ in the first place.

This is intellectual dishonesty: conversations with participating soldiers help fill out the overall reality of any conflict, but as a detail of that reality, not as the only facet of it.

But, *Granta* has philosophical difficulties with reality anyway. Let us examine these events on the grounds of *Granta*’s own logic. All facts are fictions. That is, the word fact does not mean what common usage has it mean. Grant this, then how do they know the Falklands war took place at all? What is their evidential procedure for demonstrating that things happen? And if event x is claimed to be the result of person y’s delusion, how do we know that event x is not an ideological fabrication, the purpose of which is to impugn the mental integrity of person y by the editorial board of Claptrap Journal?

Those who have a more modest definition of reality have no problems with the actuality of the war. It is up to *Granta* to prove not only their version of events, but that the events, on their own principles, ever took place. Own goal.

## STRUCTURALISM, DECONSTRUCTIONISM, AD NAUSEAM

Such confusions of facts and fictions belong together with Structuralist scholasticism. And as much of its successor Deconstructionism, which seems to say that nothing ever meant anything anyway. The Structuralists are a high priestly caste, with the meaning of their “texts” only accessible to the initiated. They treat all events and texts as of equal psychological validity, and purport to see significances and purposes in them that uncover the roots, the springs of our existences, archetypal (that is, collectivist) patterns, that reduce all individuals to ciphers, swayed by dark emotions rooted in childish or primitive terrors and accidents. Such a view of the world obscures the boundary between perceived knowledge and the fantasies of introspective novelists for whom the only reality is their own morbidity.