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The Social-Problem Novel and Literary History

Two kinds of critical practice which consciously set out to minimise the role of historical knowledge in literary evaluation are the so-called 'humanist' criticism of F. R. Leavis and structuralist criticism, particularly that practised by David Lodge in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Both Lodge and Leavis wrote essays on *Hard Times*; indeed *Hard Times* has probably received more attention and been the subject of more disputes than any of the other social-problem novels. A close examination of Lodge's and Leavis's arguments reveals some fundamental limitations in their 'ahistorical' approach. In particular, their tendency to ignore or marginalise the novel's topical reference leads them both to partial and in some ways tautologous readings. This shortcoming is most apparent in their attempts to explain weaknesses in the novel's plot and characterisation. For my purposes, though, the significance of their readings of *Hard Times* lies in some features which they share with the historical accounts, despite the fact that these accounts seem to be diametrically opposed.

Unlike historically-orientated critics, Lodge and Leavis discuss only one social-problem novel. Indeed they make no attempt to locate *Hard Times* within any sub-genre. By contrast their discussions of the novel centre on its archetypal qualities – that is, on features which they suggest it shares with all literary works. So, for example, Leavis draws comparisons between Dickens and other writers in his 'great tradition' – D. H. Lawrence and Henry James – rather than contemporaries such as Gaskell, Kingsley or Disraeli. Lodge identifies affinities with Shelley and E. M. Forster. In both essays scant attention is paid to the topicality of *Hard Times*, or to its local reference; moreover no account is taken of its political functions. For Lodge and Leavis, the failures and successes of *Hard Times* have nothing to do with what might be called its 'Victorian' qualities. Indeed by dwelling on its archetypality they abstract the

novel from the moment of its production and reception. In general terms the validity of this ahistorical approach depends upon two factors: upon the assumption that the category of literature is essentialist – that is, the features which define works as literary are transhistorical and transcultural; and (this being the case) upon the accuracy with which particular archetypal features are identified. However, Leavis and Lodge identify a different set of archetypal features: for Leavis, successful literary works are defined in terms of their ability to embody a form of moral knowledge – what he famously called ‘life’; for Lodge, it is a particular kind of ‘verbal activity’ or ‘rhetoric’ which distinguishes the literary from the non-literary. In both cases, the quality or qualities which define ‘life’ and ‘rhetoric’ are assumed to be independent of historical and cultural circumstances; they are absolute in the sense that they can be applied to any work produced at any moment in time.

What is immediately striking about Leavis’s account of *Hard Times* is his overall valuation of it as a ‘masterpiece’, whose success is ‘complete’.¹ While such wholehearted admiration is unusual in modern accounts of the novel, it is nevertheless also true that Leavis admits that there are some elements which present the critic with problems, particularly the caricatured portrayal of Slackbridge and the unions and the sentimentalised treatment of both Stephen Blackpool and Sleary’s circus. As I shall argue later, it is precisely these weaknesses which are seized upon in historical accounts of the novel. In what I have called ‘political’ accounts, for example, these moments are taken to be the strongest evidence of what are alleged to be Dickens’s bourgeois politics; and it is these politics which are in turn cited as the chief reason for the novel’s failure. On the surface, Leavis’s interpretation of the same episodes could not be more different. In his view, *Hard Times* is ‘intended’ as a ‘moral fable’, and the ‘significance’ of every character and episode (including those which later so offended critics such as Raymond Williams, Arnold Kettle and John Lucas) becomes ‘immediately apparent’ once we read the novel in these terms.² Leavis argues that the defining feature of a moral fable is an ‘intention [which] is peculiarly insistent’; in other words, all the features of fiction, such as plot structure and characterisation, will always be subservient to the fable’s moral imperative. In this particular instance the moral of the fable (the articulation of an insistent intention) is ‘the confutation of Utilitarianism by life’, a message which is conveyed, according to Leavis, with ‘great subtlety’.³ This argument allows Leavis to

explain those elements of the novel which other critics would later see as flaws (such as its use of caricature and its sentimentalising) as exaggerations which are completely necessary to the fable's overall purpose and design. Hence Leavis argues that the characterisations of Sleary's circus and Stephen Blackpool have value as 'symbols', and should not therefore be judged in terms of their verisimilitude; rather, they should be valued in terms of their ability to suggest or embody certain moral ideals. Leavis readily admits that a real Victorian travelling circus would in all likelihood be distinguished by 'squalor, grossness, and vulgarity', qualities which he sees consorting oddly with Dickens's description of Sleary's people's 'remarkable gentleness and childishness ... a special inaptitude for any kind of sharp practice'.⁴ However, according to Leavis this evident disparity does not mean that Dickens's symbolism is 'sentimentally false'. What is important for Leavis is the function of the symbolism in the novel as a whole, and the validity of the *qualities* which the circus is intended to symbolise:

The virtues and qualities that Dickens prizes do indeed exist, and it is necessary for his critique of Utilitarianism and industrialism, and for (what is the same thing) his creative purpose, to evoke them vividly. The book can't, in my judgement, be fairly charged with giving a misleading representation of human nature. And it would plainly not be intelligent criticism to suggest that anyone could be misled about the nature of circuses by *Hard Times*. The critical question is merely one of tact: was it well-judged of Dickens to try to do *that* – which had to be done somehow – with a travelling circus?⁵

Unsurprisingly Leavis concludes that overall Dickens's efforts were well-judged, and that the success of the circus as a symbol of 'humanity' – or of what he later calls 'life' – is 'complete'. Moreover, Leavis stresses once again that this success depends upon the reader judging the novel from the outset by the right criterion, that is, as a moral fable. 'Success', he argues, 'is conditioned partly by the fact that, from the opening chapters, we have been tuned for the reception of a highly conventional art.'⁶

Leavis's entire argument rests upon what is fundamentally a Platonic view of morality – that, for example, moral values about 'life' or about 'humanity' exist independently of historical or

cultural circumstances. Criticism of this view (and indeed of Leavis's 'humanism') is so well-known and so thoroughgoing that it does not need to be rehearsed in detail here. It is sufficient to observe that critics since Leavis have emphasised what has become a commonplace of twentieth-century social thinking, that the definition of terms such as 'humanity' or 'life' is historically and culturally contingent. In this sense Leavis judges *Hard Times* by using anachronistic criteria; he does not take account of the fact that the Victorians might have had their own way of understanding terms such as 'humanity' and 'life', and that these were derived from their own (and local) moral values. The limitations of this kind of anachronistic thinking become clearer when we see the relationship between Leavis's moral Platonism and his assertion that *Hard Times* is 'intended' as a moral fable. I use the word 'assertion' because Leavis never actually argues his case: he provides no evidence from outside the text to prove that Dickens wrote his novel as a fable. Rather, we are asked to believe that Dickens wrote the novel as a fable simply because it makes sense as one. But when he demonstrates how it makes such sense, Leavis only draws attention to those aspects of the novel which fit his hypothesis. In so doing he ignores or dismisses the novel's many ambiguities, particularly its ambivalent attitude towards sexual transgression in, for example, the contrasting characters of Louisa and Sissy. The reason is not hard to find, for fables, by definition, cannot embody moral ambiguity. Hence any moral complexities in the novel have to be described by Leavis as 'subtleties' in the fable's design, evidence merely of the 'flexible' and 'inclusive' nature of Dickens's 'art'.⁷

It is worth recalling at this point Leavis's argument that the accuracy of the novel's social reference has no bearing upon its moral meaning. Of course, it is obviously true that fables are not realistic; but the obverse does not necessarily follow. It is not the case that an absence of realism – in this case Dickens's sentimentalising tendencies and his use of caricature – are sufficient reasons to categorise a novel as a fable. What makes *Hard Times* a fable is, in Leavis's eyes, an absence of realism combined with simple moral oppositions between the self-evidently 'bad' Coketown and the self-evidently 'good' values of the circus. The obvious difficulty with such a view lies in its circularity: the moral meaning which Leavis finds is used as a reason to label the novel as a fable in the first place, while at the same time, the novel's identity as a fable is used as evidence for the particular nature (and the particular form)

of the moral message. Identifying the novel as a fable permits Leavis to ignore the moral complexities which confuse or undermine a simple opposition between 'good' and 'bad'; but at the same time, Leavis's assumption that such a moral framework is an appropriate way of criticising Utilitarianism leads him to marginalise the moral complexities in the novel and thus identify it as a fable. Leavis's argument, in other words, is tautologous, and the main reason for the tautology is a refusal to take account of the novel's historical and cultural specificity. Leavis assumes that 'Utilitarianism' and 'industrialism' (the targets of Dickens's moralising) meant the same thing to Dickens as they do to the twentieth-century reader (and in particular to Leavis himself). This assumption in turn leads him to separate the activity of criticising – writing a moral fable – from the specific social phenomena which are being criticised – what Dickens means by Utilitarianism and industrialism. The result is that Leavis's account tells us a good deal more about his own values than it does about Dickens's.

David Lodge's account of *Hard Times* appeared in 1966 in *Language of Fiction*, in the same year as the 'political' account by John Lucas, but nearly two decades after Leavis's essay.⁸ In some ways it marked a significant change in the practice of literary criticism, for it was distinguished by a linguistic approach to texts which in turn derived from Lodge's own interest in structuralism. Jonathan Culler has pointed out that structuralism is a difficult term to define exactly, for it encompasses a wide variety of critical practices which range from Claude Lévi-Strauss's analysis of myths to the semiotic analysis developed by Roland Barthes, Roman Jakobson's 'poetics' and A. J. Greimas's emphasis on semantics.⁹ These differences certainly do exist, but there are nevertheless several important analytical threads which are common to all structuralist analyses, and they are helpful for understanding the general orientation and significance of Lodge's essay on *Hard Times*. The most important of these threads (and one which links Lodge to the anti-historical biases of Leavis) is an emphasis on what is termed synchrony rather than diachrony. Applied to the study of language, synchrony refers to an attempt to reconstruct a language system as a functional whole. A diachronic analysis, by contrast, refers to the investigation of the historical development of a language's various elements. More important, perhaps, is the assertion that both activities must be thought of as separate. Indeed Culler argues that to conflate the diachronic with the synchronic is to

'falsify one's synchronic description'. He goes so far as to assert that 'language is a system of interrelated items and the value and identity of these items is defined by their place in the system rather than by their history'.¹⁰ A synchronic analysis of a literary text therefore requires the critic to ignore its specific historical location; rather, he or she is confined to investigating the structures (which can include, for example, grammatical features, linguistic signs or forms of address) which purportedly allow a text to function *as text* at any time.

A second important basic tenet of structuralist criticism is the assumption that the descriptions of texts which structuralism produces are value-free. One of the claims of early structuralist accounts was that they were objective or scientific: they described a system which was simply 'there'. Indeed much of the initial popularity of structuralism in the 1960s, when Lodge began writing, derived from its claim to have provided a critical method which corrected the subjective biases allegedly inherent in the work of critics such as Leavis (as well as Marxists such as Raymond Williams and Arnold Kettle). A third fundamental tenet of structuralist criticism is the assumption that literary texts can be described in the same terms as non-literary texts; that literary texts contain no linguistic features which cannot also be found in non-literary texts. In his popular and influential anthology, *Modern Criticism and Theory*, Lodge included two pieces of work by Roman Jakobson, published in 1956 and 1958. They set out what Lodge claimed to be Jakobson's most significant contribution to modern literary theory: in the first place his 'identification of the rhetorical figures, metaphor and metonymy, as models for two fundamental ways of organizing discourse that can be traced *in every kind of cultural production*' (my emphasis); and in the second his 'attempt to understand "literariness"' by defining 'in linguistic terms what makes a verbal message a work of art'.¹¹ Jakobson (as anthologised by Lodge) starkly argues that 'many poetic features belong not only to the science of language, but to the whole theory of signs, that is to general semiotics. This statement, however, is valid not only for verbal art but also for all varieties of language since language shares many properties with some other systems of signs or even with all of them'.¹²

Lodge took this last tenet as his main point of departure. In his Introduction to *Language of Fiction* he argued that most literary criticism assumed 'that the lyric poem is the literary norm, or the

proper basis for generalizing about literature; and that there are two quite different kinds of language, the literary and the non-literary'.¹³ Lodge further suggested that this false opposition has led to an impoverished understanding of prose fiction, the language of which tends to be much more discursive. The main aim of Lodge's Introduction is to describe a critical practice which is capable of analysing all literary forms – poetry and prose fiction – in the same terms. The underlying principle of this new practice is the proposition (which Lodge adapts from J. M. Cameron) that 'all poetic fictions exist only as certain words in a certain order'. If the fictional world of the novel 'is a verbal world, determined at every point by the words in which it is represented' then, Lodge suggests, 'there can be no essential difference between the criticism of poetry and the criticism of prose fiction'.¹⁴ In each and every case, the critic is simply analysing how language is used to produce certain effects. Over the course of *Language of Fiction* Lodge described the methods which such an analysis might use, taking care to distinguish between his new critical practice, and that adopted in linguistics or stylistics. The most important difference concerns the role played by value-judgements; Lodge suggests that an analysis of the language of a literary text must be preceded by a judgement about its literary value. And it is the ability to make such judgements which separates the literary critic from the specialist in linguistics:

The language of the novel, therefore, will be most satisfactorily and completely studied by the methods, not of linguistics or stylistics (though these disciplines can make valuable contributions), but of literary criticism, which seeks to define the meaning and value of literary artefacts by relating subjective responses to objective text, always pursuing exhaustiveness of explication and unanimity of judgement, but conscious that these goals are unattainable.¹⁵

The role of a verbal analysis, then, is to explain language use in those works which a critical community labels as literary: in this sense, the critical practice Lodge was outlining was an attempt to give an objective explanation of a series of subjective responses. Lodge was obviously aware that such prescriptions could seem to be very similar to the 'close reading' practised by F. R. Leavis, and he added a rider about evaluation which was deliberately intended to distance his views from those of Leavis. He suggested that

judgements about morality – Leavis’s definition of ‘life’, for example – have little to do with literary value; the critic should be concerned with the effectiveness with which a work communicates, rather than prescribing the kind of (moral) message it ought to communicate. And it is a judgement about the effectiveness of language use which determines whether or not a work has a literary identity:

In the last analysis, literary critics can claim special authority not as witnesses to the moral value of works of literature, but as explicators and judges of effective communication, of ‘realization’ ... In reading *Tom Jones* or *Clarissa* or any other novel, we enter a unique linguistic universe; we learn a new language designed to carry out a particular view of experience ... If this language has its own internal logic and beauty, if it can consistently bring off the feat of realization, we adopt it, and give our assent to the beliefs of the implied author, for the duration of the reading experience. But if this language is characterized by confusion, contradiction, internal inconsistencies and expectations unfulfilled, we will not adopt it, even temporarily.¹⁶

This paragraph represents an important caveat, for it suggests that judgements about literary value are solely judgements about language use, a conclusion which in turn provides the justification for Lodge’s linguistically-based criticism. Lodge’s propositions, however, beg some very important questions. For example: What is the measure of effectiveness? What counts as good ‘communication’? What are the criteria of ‘logic and beauty’? Importantly, Lodge has tried to divorce all these questions from any (subjective) judgements about the moral validity or truth functions of the ideas which a work might express. Instead he uses only linguistic criteria: effectiveness and communication can be measured by what he terms a ‘structural approach’ – that is, by tracing ‘significant threads through the language of an entire novel’.¹⁷ He glosses this definition in the following way:

The structural approach has the obvious attraction that it tries to discuss the work as a whole, with a beginning, a middle, and an end. By tracing a linguistic thread or threads – a cluster of images, or value-words, or grammatical constructions – through a whole novel, we produce a kind of spatial diagram of the accumulative and temporarily-extended reading experience.¹⁸

It is important to notice here the replacement of the term 'significant threads' with 'linguistic threads'. This substitution disguises a fundamental question – what defines, or is to count as, 'significant'? Is it what we can for brevity call the ideas expressed in a novel? Or is it what we can call the novel's use of language? Clearly Lodge wants to argue that judgements about the appropriateness of certain kinds of linguistic devices (the use of repetition for emphasis, for example) predetermine our views about significance. The difficulty with this proposition is that it leaves unanswered the question of *which* linguistic devices the critic chooses to analyse. As Lodge himself admits, the critic must 'select' linguistic devices; he or she must 'take a certain path' through the novel. The principles on which that selection is made – the manner in which one linguistic path is chosen rather than another – these crucial questions are left unresolved. In fact there is more than a suspicion that it is ideology which determines these choices; so in the critic's mind there exists a prior judgement about the validity of certain ideas which then directs the critic towards a positive identification of those linguistic forms which have been used to represent them. As Lodge had suggested earlier, 'language is designed to carry out a particular view of experience' – a proposition which suggests that it is the critic's initial identification and valuation of 'a particular view of experience' which directs him or her to analyse the effectiveness of the language 'designed' to convey that experience. This dilemma (and its implications for how a novel is to be judged) can be seen more clearly in Lodge's account of *Hard Times*.

As I have suggested, Lodge's essay on *Hard Times* was written in explicit opposition to the moral interpretation of Leavis. In contrast to Leavis, Lodge focuses exclusively on what he terms Dickens's 'rhetoric', and his aim is to define the success and failure of *Hard Times* solely in these terms. The words 'success' and 'failure' of course imply a value-judgment, and Lodge's concern, no less than that of Leavis, is to decide whether *Hard Times* is indeed a good novel. The difference is that Lodge's account of the work, by being limited to a description of its textual features, gives the appearance of being more objective; that is, it does not obviously depend upon contested or anachronistic judgements about what constitutes 'life' or 'humanity'. On closer examination, however, and despite these differences, Lodge's essay turns out to share many of the limitations of Leavis's account of the novel.

The easiest way to glimpse these limitations is by comparing Lodge's account of what he calls the novel's successful and failed rhetorical strategies. Like Leavis, Lodge begins by noting the strength of Dickens's opening chapter; and again like Leavis, he judges the portrait of Gradgrind's school to be entirely successful. For Lodge, that success is the result of Dickens's 'rhetorical patterning': his 'manipulation of repeated words' and his use of 'metaphors of growth and cultivation'.¹⁹ And again like Leavis, Lodge goes on to argue that this rhetoric 'works to establish a symbolic atmosphere' and that the efficacy of the rhetoric has nothing to do with the accuracy of the novel's representation:

Whether [the chapter] represents fairly any actual educational theory or practice in mid-nineteenth-century England is really beside the point. It aims to convince us of the *possibility* of children being taught in such a way, and to make us recoil from the imagined possibility. The chapter succeeds or fails as rhetoric; and I think it succeeds.²⁰

Lodge then turns to what he perceives to be the novel's weaknesses, and he concentrates on exactly those episodes mentioned by Leavis: the portrayal of Slackbridge, the unions and Stephen Blackpool. Unlike Leavis, though, Lodge does not try to revalue these episodes; but nor does he attribute their failure to the conservatism of Dickens's politics or to the alleged limitation of bourgeois ideology. Lodge rather argues that the problem is simply one of rhetoric. He suggests that the reader is dissatisfied because Dickens's rhetorical devices are inappropriate: indeed at one point he claims that the metaphors are not sufficiently 'inventive'. In a revealing paragraph, Lodge uses this example of failed rhetoric to demonstrate the overall importance of his linguistic approach:

the failure of understanding here reveals itself in the first place as a failure of expression; the portrait of Gradgrind, on the other hand, though it probably derives from an equivalent misunderstanding of Utilitarianism, succeeds.²¹

A basic definition of rhetoric is that it is language use which is consciously designed to persuade; successful rhetoric is therefore language which succeeds in persuading us. If a consideration of 'rhetorical patterning' is to form the basis of a judgement about

Hard Times, we might ask: about what exactly is Dickens trying to persuade us? At this point the limitations of Lodge's emphasis on language become apparent. In his account of the novel, Dickens's persuasiveness – his rhetoric – is completely unrelated to an understanding of the novel's reference, of actual events; so Lodge paradoxically argues that Dickens can be 'wrong' about Utilitarianism but still persuade us of the rightness of his criticism of it. The shortcoming of this argument is that it obscures the fact that the values which allow us to make such a distinction must themselves be non-rhetorical. More simply we might ask: what criteria is Lodge using to define rhetoric as successful? At this point there is once again more than a suspicion that the term 'successful rhetoric' is a way of defining those views which map on to Lodge's own values; and that unsuccessful rhetoric refers to views which Lodge disagrees with. To put matters bluntly, it is ideology which is silently providing the criteria for judgement about rhetoric. This suspicion is reinforced towards the end of the essay, when Lodge elaborates another rhetorical strategy which the novel employs: that of the fairy-tale. Lodge notices that the devices of the fairy-tale are used by Dickens with varying degrees of success:

where Dickens invokes the world of the fairy-tale ironically, to dramatize the drabness, greed, spite and injustice which characterize a society dominated by materialism, it is a highly effective rhetorical device; but where he relies on the simplifications of the fairy-tale to suggest means of redemption, we remain unconvinced.²²

The paradox here is one not dissimilar to the tautology underlying Leavis's account of the fable elements of the novel. It is not clear whether it is the devices of the fairy-tale – the 'rhetorical patterning' – which determine the validity of the views expressed; or, conversely, whether it is the validity of the views expressed which determines the appropriateness of the devices of the fairy-tale.

At this point it is helpful to return to Lodge's general account of criticism. As I suggested, it is unclear whether he assumes that certain linguistic devices are inherently pleasing, or whether he assumes that certain ideas are 'right' and in turn direct the critic towards an approval of those linguistic forms which represent them. His analysis of *Hard Times* seems to suggest the second possibility: the appropriateness of the fairy-tale – its 'effectiveness' as a

means of communication – seems to be defined in contextual rather than absolute terms; that is, the properties of the fairy-tale (its simplifications) ‘work’ when expressing some ideas – of which Lodge approves – but not others. The implication here is that ‘effectiveness’ requires some sort of ‘fit’ between a rhetorical device and an idea expressed. (To repeat again Lodge’s formula, ‘language is *designed* to carry out a particular view of experience’.) But what criteria will allow us to define this fitness? How do we judge the appropriateness of the ‘design’? In the case of *Hard Times*, it would seem that the fairy-tale is a fit device to critique Coketown’s materialism because materialism itself is assumed to be amenable to the simplistic moral dichotomies which characterise fairy-tales. Similarly the fairy-tale is not a fit device to persuade us of ‘redemption’ because redemption is assumed to be too complex a phenomenon to be encompassed by the simplistic morality of the fairy-tale form. The important point to notice here is that ‘fitness’ is not being determined by any properties that inhere in rhetorical devices, but rather by a value-judgement about what constitutes materialism and redemption – about, that is, the ‘view of experience’ which the language expresses. More importantly, we should note that these judgements are *Lodge’s*, not *Dickens’s*. So it is possible to imagine a writer holding to a different definition of redemption (which the critic may or may not agree with), one for which the rhetoric of the fairy-tale would be an entirely appropriate and convincing medium. Lodge’s argument, then, contains exactly the same kind of limitation as that of Leavis, for Lodge too judges the effectiveness of the novel in terms of what would constitute an appropriate response to Utilitarianism or materialism when those phenomena are defined and valued from the point of view of the twentieth-century critic. As a consequence, his account turns out to reveal much more about himself, and his own values, than it does about those of Dickens; more significantly, it collapses that important distinction (which Lodge had earlier insisted upon) between an objective description of a text and a subjective (literary) response to it.

In one sense the anachronisms which (I have argued) limit the work of Lodge and Leavis are to be expected, for their ahistorical approach to literary works simply would not see as significant conceptual discontinuities between, say, the 1840s or 1850s and the 1950s or 1960s. More precisely, their critical precepts prevent Leavis and Lodge from seeing that such discontinuities might be relevant to how we interpret *Hard Times*, and to how we judge the effective-

ness of its polemic. We might expect that accounts which make a virtue of paying attention to historical contingency would avoid this kind of anachronism, and would therefore provide a less restrictive reading of the social-problem novels. However, somewhat surprisingly, this turns out not to be the case: as I will show below, 'political', 'contextualist' and 'new historicist' accounts of the social-problem novels all betray a similar sort of insensitivity to the specificities of historical circumstance; it is simply that these insensitivities take different and very much more subtle forms.

I

The individual works which are now commonly categorised as social-problem novels attracted the attention of a variety of critics in both the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; but a stress on the writer's political or social (as opposed to a literary or aesthetic) conscience made it inevitable that the generic relationship between the individual works (which was needed in order to categorise the social-problem novels as a distinct sub-genre) was first established systematically by a group of Marxist critics – Raymond Williams, Arnold Kettle and, principally, John Lucas. The linking of the novels in this way can best be understood as part of a larger project in literary historiography, an attempt to use some Marxist critical paradigms in order to challenge the assumptions underlying the critical hegemony which had been established by previous critics, and particularly by F. R. Leavis and his prescriptive view of the 'great tradition'. The restriction of Leavis's 'tradition', it was argued, had literally prevented him from 'seeing' social-problem novels. As a consequence the identification of the social-problem novels as a distinct group by Williams, Kettle and Lucas became a vindication of their new historiographical method, for without it what they claimed to be important 'events' in literary history simply went unnoticed and so unmarked.

What was new about their literary history was the locating of literary understanding within a revised notion of historical context, one which encompassed social, cultural and principally economic circumstances. Underlying such a view was an adaptation of a popular Marxist literary historiography in which works of fiction were to be analysed in terms of the attitudes which they took towards the economic base of a society. This view in turn assumed

that knowledge of those attitudes was the most important information to be derived from works of fiction.²³ The social-problem novels seemed to present the paradigm case for such a historical method, because it was suggested that in them literary or aesthetic ambitions are most clearly subordinate to political or social concerns. In this history, then, the most significant attitudes to the economic base were those which Marxism assumed to be most critical of the demoralising tendencies of bourgeois capitalism. As a result social-problem novels were to be valued chiefly in terms of the radicalism of their political critique.

The nature of that radical critique (a particular way of viewing class relationships) was laid out in advance by Marxist thought. This qualification is important, for it means that what is to count as a problem in society (and an appropriate solution to it) is determined not by nineteenth-century novelists, but by the twentieth-century Marxist critics who engage with their works. One caveat never entertained in this Marxist literary history was the possibility that definitions of 'society' – more generally definitions of the 'social', and therefore of what is to count as a 'social' problem – might themselves be historically unstable. In other words, Marxist critics were not alert to the possibility that there are pre-Marxist ways of defining both society and the social, and that these may have more relevance to understanding the problems in society (and the solutions offered to them) identified in pre-Marxist novels. Like Leavis and Lodge, political accounts of the social-problem novels have failed to distinguish adequately between the conceptual schema employed by the twentieth-century literary critic, and those concepts available to the nineteenth-century author. A more detailed examination of the work of Williams, Kettle, Lucas and Gagnier (who draws upon the line of argument established by the earlier three critics) will indicate just how pervasive and distorting this shortcoming can be.

Raymond Williams's *Culture and Society: 1780–1950* (1958) is often rightly cited as a seminal work of cultural history. In it Williams devotes a chapter to what he calls 'the industrial novels', a chapter which describes one moment in a larger historical sweep which is characterised by a series of fundamental changes in what Williams calls the 'structure of meanings' – that is, changes in 'our characteristic ways of thinking about our common life: about our social, political, and economic institutions; about the purposes which these institutions are designed to embody; and about the relations

to these institutions and purposes of our activities in learning, education, and the arts'.²⁴ Williams goes on to identify five key terms, the definitions of which map these changes in the 'structure of meanings'. The terms are: 'industry, democracy, class, art, and culture'. He then discusses a number of works (both fictional and non-fictional) which he argues provide evidence of the changed meanings of these key terms. It is through an examination of these works, and the changed modes of thinking which they embody, that we are able to glimpse the 'tradition' which, Williams argues, produced modern British society.

According to Williams, the significance of the group of works which he calls 'industrial novels' (*Mary Barton*, *North and South*, *Hard Times*, *Sybil*, *Alton Locke* and *Felix Holt*) lies in their articulation of a 'common criticism of industrialism', one which has 'persisted ... into both the literature and the social thinking of our own time'. The main limitation of the criticism, and one which characterises all of the novels in the group, is that a 'recognition of evil was balanced by fear of becoming involved. Sympathy was transformed, not into action, but into withdrawal'.²⁵ In other words, the industrial novelists all fail to confront fully what Williams terms the 'evils' of industrialisation, and they also fail to provide any satisfactory way of countering them. Williams goes on to argue that such failures were a consequence of what he terms a 'general structure of feeling' which exists independently of what he calls the 'facts' of industrial society, and which determined the intellectual, moral and political imagination of the novelists in question.²⁶ In all of this, the main aim of examining a nineteenth-century sub-genre was to shed critical light on modern modes of thought, for the limitations which Williams identifies in the industrial novels are also the limitations of 'our own time' (of, that is, the 1950s).

The labels 'structure of feeling' and 'structure of meanings' have been criticised for their inexactitude and they might perhaps strike the modern reader as quaint. Nonetheless Williams's work provided the generation of critics who followed him with a powerful way of analysing the relationship between literature and the society which produced it. We now tend to subsume what Williams was describing under the umbrella term 'ideology', and what Williams tried to identify as 'meaning' and 'feeling' are now defined as part of a much larger group of social phenomena. Indeed, if we recognise a theoretical continuity between Williams's concepts and those developed in more abstract Marxist thinking, his writing seems

much less dated. Nevertheless there are anomalies in his work, and these apply equally to his successors: in other words, they apply to the principles underlying the Marxist paradigm which Williams was instrumental in helping to establish and popularise.

The first anomaly concerns Williams's assumption that 'facts' (about industrialisation or whatever) are simply self-evident, and that they exist independently of the values, prejudices or politics of the individuals who identify them. The second is the contradiction between his assertion that a 'structure of feeling' is 'determining' and his subsequent criticism of novelists who fail to resist it. Both anomalies are a direct result of Williams's (and Marxism's) failure to perceive the anachronisms which a Marxist historiography produces – the failure, that is, to separate the conceptual schema of the Victorians from that of the present. Williams's dilemma is a local example of a larger problem in philosophy (and particularly in the philosophy of history) concerning the relationship between facts and values. In principle, the number of facts about any given subject is always infinite. When we talk about 'facts' we always assume that certain criteria of relevance are in operation: the term 'facts', in other words, refers only to those facts which are considered relevant to any particular topic, and relevance is in turn determined by criteria specific to both history and culture as well as to the particular values, prejudices and politics of the historians or critics concerned.²⁷ So, what are to count as the facts – the relevant facts, we should say – about industrialisation will always be identified in different ways (depending on the historical and cultural location of the values, principles or prejudices of the individuals who are making the identification). Facts about industrialisation will therefore invariably differ and will probably be contested. Williams's 'facts' (which he assumes are the *only* facts) are in practice derived from the values of Marxist politics which identifies as important certain kinds of economic facts, such as the allegedly class-based nature of the means of production. It is clear that any individual who does not share (or in the case of the Victorian novelist, could not possibly have access to) Marxist schemata, and thus to Marxist value-systems, will identify a set of facts about industrialisation which could be very different indeed: for these individuals industrialisation could quite literally be a different phenomenon. Consequently, the way in which Victorian novelists analyse and explain the problems of industrialisation – and hence the solutions they find to those problems – are also likely to be dif-

ferent. What Williams fails to acknowledge is that a 'structure of feeling' and the 'facts' which indicate a problem in society are causally related to each other. So the 'structure of feeling' which determined the Victorians' frame of reference may have prevented them from recognising the facts about industrialisation which Williams was later to identify. In this sense it is simply unhelpful to criticise the Victorians for their 'fear of becoming involved' (with the facts) and their subsequent 'withdrawal' (from the facts), when the whole domain of what are to count as facts (and how those facts are to be interpreted) will be contested because of the non-identical value-systems by which Williams and Victorian novelists identify different facts.

In the same year as Williams published *Culture and Society*, another Marxist critic, Arnold Kettle, drew attention to the importance of the self-same group of novels, but he emphasised rather different elements in them.²⁸ Rather than label them 'industrial novels', Kettle employed the term 'social-problem' novel on the grounds that most of the works in question are concerned with the poor in general rather than factory workers in particular. Kettle acknowledged that subjects such as social disturbance and economic inequality – in brief, 'social' issues – were not in themselves at all new in English fiction; he suggested that they can be found in a 'tradition' stretching from Hogarth through to Swift, Defoe and Fielding. However, in Kettle's eyes, what distinguishes the attention given to the poor by some mid-Victorian novelists is the *quality* of their insight, and he coined the term 'social-problem' to try to capture this quality.

In fact the first word in Kettle's label – 'social' – was not his invention. It was derived from an older description and categorisation of the novels made by critics such as Louis Cazamian and Kathleen Tillotson, who used the simple phrase 'social novels'.²⁹ Kettle argued that such terminology was inadequate because all novels are in some sense 'social novels' – they are all, that is, in some sense about society. By contrast, what matters for Kettle is precisely the attitude towards, or engagement with, society. In this sense, the second item in Kettle's label, 'problem', identifies the special nature of the Victorian novelists' social interests. Kettle went on to argue that to think in terms of 'problems' presupposes a certain kind of reification, one characterised by a remote 'abstraction': that is, by 'the limit of involvement – emotional and artistic rather than social and political – concerned'. The social-problem

novelists, in other words, are distinguished by the fact that they 'preach' where that preaching or 'didacticism' is 'incompletely fused', the term 'fused' standing for some kind of emotional identification by the novelist with the subjects of his or her work.³⁰ Kettle refines his definition further by arguing that the degree of abstraction and the degree of identification or involvement is significant. So social-problem novels are also marked by their intensity, a quality which is explained by comparing them with works such as William Godwin's *Caleb Williams* and Edward Bulwer-Lytton's *Pelham*. The latter two novels, according to Kettle, are 'socially-conscious works', but they fail to be 'true' social-problem novels because they are 'disastrously and often ludicrously abstract ... one has the sense that what is being written about is not life but ideas about life. Even when they become involved with a specific social situation ... they manage to dehydrate the reality into an abstract generalization'.³¹ Social-problem novels, in other words, are abstract and 'preaching', but they also possess elements which are strongly 'concrete'. What determines this concreteness – this attention to the details of 'life', or to 'reality' – are 'changing social conditions and forces and also partly ... ideological developments':

In the first place the actual size and urgency of the problem of poverty was so great and so obvious by the forties that it was almost impossible to treat it from a largely theoretical standpoint. In the second place, with the Reform Bill of 1832 and especially with the Chartist movement, political action had become more than a future possibility.³²

In all of this we have a body of value-judgements and assumptions which are very close to those of Raymond Williams. So Kettle, like Williams, judges the social-problem novels principally in terms of their understanding of 'life', and he comments (again like Williams) on the limits of their involvement – their tendency, that is, to also remain detached or withdrawn from life (that is, to be abstract). Significantly, what defines 'life' or 'concreteness' (which, in Williams's terms, is an attention to the 'facts') is again simply assumed by Kettle – it is 'reality'; and abstraction, the analysis of those concrete details, is again seen as an entirely separate activity, one strikingly similar to Williams's 'structure of feeling'. Not surprisingly, some difficulties arise when Kettle attempts to evalu-

ate a novel's understanding of life in terms of the relationship between the concrete and the abstract. In the case of Disraeli, for example, Kettle admires the 'conscientious use of documentary details' but at the same time he admits that such concreteness does not 'guarantee the novel's status as serious writing'. In Disraeli's novel, seriousness is to be found in the analysis of details, but when indeed he turns to this analysis, Kettle complains that there is an 'artificiality, which is sometimes more than a little ridiculous, a glibness we are right to hold suspect'. The paradox is that the feature which defines Disraeli as a social-problem novelist – his abstraction, 'a quality of limited engagement' – on inspection also turns out to be his work's most serious shortcoming. A similar dilemma occurs in Kettle's account of *Mary Barton*. Here, too, he admires concreteness – that is, Mrs Gaskell's involvement 'with the actual life of the people' – but he is critical of that specificity on two grounds: that in this case there is simply not enough abstraction (or analysis), and that when abstraction does occur, it equivocates – it becomes 'fence-sitting'.³³

It is possible to suggest some reasons for Kettle's unease with accommodating Victorian novelists' emphasis on specificity with his notion of their abstraction. It is worth recalling his initial premise that abstraction implies a kind of withdrawal or limit to the novelist's involvement. It should now be clear that the identification of this shortcoming derives from the discrepancy between what the documentary detail in the novels (their 'concreteness') suggests to Kettle, and what it suggests to the individual novelists. Simply put, that detail is not interpreted or analysed by the Victorians as it is by a modern Marxist critic; and the limitation of Kettle's account is his failure to provide any adequate explanation as to why this should be so. He suggests, rather unhelpfully, that it is related to an absence of 'emotional and artistic' involvement – that it is, in some sense, a personal failing. Significantly, he does not see that the discrepancy might be historically determined, perhaps because his concept of historical determination is limited to explaining how the 'reality' of poverty – the 'actual size and urgency of the problem' – forced writers to take note of it. Another way of putting this point is to say that Kettle takes the documentary detail in the social-problem novels to be evidence of 'reality', without realising that 'reality' for the Victorians (that is, their understanding of the kind of social problem poverty gave rise to) might be different from Kettle's 'reality' – that is, from *his* reading of mid-nineteenth-

century social history. In these respects, Kettle has repeated exactly the strategic errors which Williams makes: by assuming that certain facts about mid-nineteenth-century society are simply self-evident, his literary history makes inappropriate historical judgements about the works it identifies. That is, the judgements which Kettle makes once again tell us more about his view of nineteenth-century problems in society than they do about the views of the Victorian novelists.

The next significant Marxist account of the social-problem novels was a long and detailed essay by John Lucas. Entitled 'Mrs Gaskell and Brotherhood', it was contained in another influential work of literary history, *Tradition and Tolerance in Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, a book of essays by John Goode, David Howard and Lucas published in 1966. Lucas begins his account of the social-problem novel with a definition familiar from Kettle's work: a social-problem novel is a novel which 'includes among its definitive concerns a conscious attempt to solve what are seen as problems'. Lucas adds the important rider that 'the reduction of the living complex to a problem comes to the fore only when whatever political attitude is implied in the recommendation takes over as a shaping force in the novel'.³⁴ The terms are vague, but the drift of his essay seems to follow Kettle's argument; like Kettle, Lucas seems to be suggesting that the distinctiveness of the social-problem novel resides in the prevalence of an author's political, rather than imaginative, judgements. Indeed he sees the two existing in a virtual contradiction to each other, believing that an attention to the political 'is bound to get in the way of the novelist's exploration of his characters' lives and interrelationships; demands will be made on plot and theme which must damage the novel's essential freedom, its integrity'.³⁵ It is clear that Lucas is defining integrity in terms of an artistic or literary imagination – a caveat which, as I shall argue, is important to bear in mind when viewing his work in relation to Marxist theory in general. The basic premise of Lucas's argument, then, is that there are two ways to approach problems in society – one via the imagination or literary conscience, and the other via the political. At first sight it may appear that Lucas is doing little more than reworking the oppositions to be found in Kettle's argument, for Kettle had also suggested that a preoccupation with what he called 'the social and political' inevitably led to the marginalisation of 'the emotional and artistic'. Moreover Lucas repeats Kettle's critical verdict that an attention to the political at the expense of the imag-

inative has unfortunate consequences – it is the principal cause of the ‘failings’ of the novels. All these points are familiar from Kettle’s work; where Lucas is new, however, is in his attempt to explain *why* this alleged ‘failing’ occurs so consistently in social-problem novels.

It might be helpful to note in passing that Lucas uses the terms ‘political’ and ‘imaginative’ in a very restricted manner: he uses ‘political’ to refer to a particular party-political position – to what he calls ‘stock political attitudes’.³⁶ Such attitudes are later defined more exactly as the recommendation of a brotherhood of united interests which could provide a solution to social problems. The term ‘imaginative’ (or literary) on the other hand is defined purely negatively: it refers to ways of thinking which reject or transcend the limitations of party-political ideology. Lucas argues (like Kettle and Williams before him) that in social-problem novels, a predictable political analysis – those ‘stock political attitudes’ – ‘takes over’ from a literary or imaginative integrity, and he characterises the moment of this ‘political takeover’ rather melodramatically as a ‘retreat from the abyss’, or a bridge over ‘imaginative lacunae’. Lucas’s reliance upon rhetoric is significant, for it takes the place of a sustained argument. Both the ‘withdrawal’ described by Williams and the ‘lack of involvement’ noted by Kettle imply a notion of authorial choice or agency; it is suggested by both Williams and Kettle that the opposites of withdrawal – engagement and involvement – were possibilities consciously and deliberately rejected by the social-problem novelists from the outset. Lucas’s more dramatic vocabulary, with its echoes of apocalypse (‘retreat from the abyss’), points to a very different situation, one where an intellectual critique was initially begun, but then abruptly halted. Lucas appears to be proposing that a rejection of a dominant ideology (for this is what ‘stock political attitudes’ amount to) is initially contemplated; at some point in the novel, however, the author finds that such a stance is intolerably difficult or dangerous, and then retreats into the safety of conventional views.

The phrase Lucas uses to describe this situation is a ‘split between intention and achievement’,³⁷ where ‘intention’ appears to mean the decision to contest a dominant ideology and ‘achievement’ appears to mean the final endorsing of it. Moreover, what is important for Lucas is the precise moment in the novel when this split occurs. Crudely put, the later the retreat from the ‘abyss’, the better Lucas finds the novel: indeed the best works in the sub-genre

are those where intention most fully 'contradicts' achievement. So Lucas admires Mrs Gaskell's *Mary Barton* where a disjunction between intention and achievement seems to occur about mid-way through the novel; but he criticises Dickens's *Hard Times*, a work whose attitudes – its 'achievements', that is – are allegedly 'pre-determined' from the outset. Lucas identifies these disjunctions by reference to changes in the formal conventions which a writer employs. For example, he argues that *Mary Barton* is composed of two different styles or kinds of formal devices: documentary realism in the first half of the novel (which he admires), and melodramatic devices in the second half (which he criticises). The split between intention and achievement – the 'retreat from the abyss' – occurs at exactly the moment when realism gives way to melodrama. In the case of *Hard Times*, Dickens's 'predetermined attitudes' are identified with his highly metaphoric style, particularly his descriptions of Coketown. Given that Lucas connects (what he judges to be) valuable or appropriate responses to problems in society (the initial 'intentions' of the writers) with the imaginative faculty, it may seem odd that he appears to be critical of those elements in a novel which are most insistently fictional – those elements, that is, which draw attention to the novel's status as an artefact. However, the paradox disappears once we realise that he is using the term 'imaginative' in a wholly evaluative way. As I explain in more detail later, it simply refers to those ideological positions with which he himself agrees; importantly, it has no reference to the literary or imaginative criteria of the Victorians themselves. There are of course some difficulties with this line of argument. First, it is by no means self-evident that the devices of realism are inherently more or less 'literary' (or imaginative) than those of melodrama; and second, it is not clear that the Victorians valued realism and melodrama in these terms anyway. These difficulties notwithstanding, Lucas's final task in his essay is to explain the causes of the split between intention and achievement. Once again we are given a rather general explanation: it turns out that middle-class novelists draw back from the 'abyss' when they realise that to question the dominant bourgeois liberal ideology, particularly the belief in 'progress', is to undermine the middle-class's '*raison d'être*'.³⁸

In contrast to Kettle and Williams, Lucas's essay certainly provides a more detailed and sympathetic account of the constraints under which mid-Victorian novelists worked. Williams's loose

and problematic terms 'structure of feeling' and 'structure of meaning', and Kettle's general allusion to 'ideological developments' are, in Lucas's essay, refined to the more manageable notion of 'stock political attitudes'. Indeed there is also some attempt to engage with the Marxist concept of ideology. Unfortunately, however, what is absent from Lucas's argument is anything which resembles an explanation of those 'imaginative resources' which possess the potential to oppose the dominant ideology. As I suggested above, Lucas tends to define 'imagination' only negatively: it is the opposite of 'stock political attitudes'. In practice, Lucas's essay specifies as 'imaginative' and 'honest' anything which coincides with his own (Marxist) analysis of nineteenth-century social problems; anything which fails to do so is characterised as a 'stock political attitude', and its alleged presence in the novel is attributed to the latent bourgeois liberalism of the novelists he discusses. In such a scheme, the most valuable social-problem novels turn out to be those whose authors are most ambivalent about their own class interests: those, that is, who indicate the greatest disquiet with the appeal to nationhood made by nineteenth-century bourgeois politics – the 'brotherhood of united interests'. Here we can see the limitations of Lucas's opposition between the imaginative and the political, for it turns out that the kind of understanding which is described as imaginative is in itself no less political than 'stock political attitudes'; and to identify it as 'imaginative' (a term ironically derived from a pre-Marxist Romantic tradition) is to suggest, rather misleadingly, that the imagination exists in, or has access to, a realm outside politics and history – that in some unproblematic way it embodies a 'truth' which is simply 'there' and which Victorian novelists (for political reasons) chose to ignore. This turn in Lucas's argument is thus ironically reminiscent of the attitudes of F. R. Leavis. Leavis, whose own definition of the relationship of life to literature was instrumental in provoking the hostile Marxist reaction of the 1950s and 1960s, had also asserted that literature (or, more loosely, the imagination) has the potential to provide an understanding which goes beyond politics, and that it thereby achieves some kind of privileged access to 'life'. The chasm between Leavis and Lucas of course lies in their different definitions of what is to count as 'life'. We ought to note, however, that neither definition is one which would necessarily coincide with the mid-Victorians' own views on these matters.

The fundamental difficulty in Lucas's account exists in the different and contradictory ways he conceives of the opposition between his two different modes of thought – the political and the imaginative. So political thinking ('stock political attitudes') is accounted for in historical terms: that is, it is produced by a dominant ideology in the nineteenth century. By contrast 'imaginative' thinking appears not to be historically located; it seems to belong to a category of intellectual activity which is individual and is thus free from social constraints and historical determination. The relationship of such a category to literary works is vexed, for the whole idea of a non-social novel is not an easy one to grasp, and it rather tends to contradict a central premise of Marxism, that works of art, like every other human activity, are socially produced. In fact the dilemma here is not one confined to Lucas's work: a central theme in Marxist theorising in the 1960s was the problematic relationship between the concepts of ideology and of social determinism. Briefly, the central question in this debate was how an ideology can be resisted. If ideology is determining, then resistance to it must come from a non-ideological realm. The problem for Marxism (and particularly for Marxist critics interested in art and literature) was that the identification of such a realm with works of art tended to imply that art itself is non-social; but the whole idea of non-social explanations of human products or human phenomena is precisely what Marxism rejected. One disappointment of Lucas's argument is his failure to make any reference to these larger debates.³⁹

In practice, of course, Lucas's account avoids confronting these and similar problems by implying that imaginative thinking is either simply the 'truth' or that it offers an unmediated access to it. Such a view amounts to saying no more than that the imagination represents a particular way of thinking about society which Lucas approves of, and to which he holds. In this 'sleight of hand' there is a strong suspicion of what the American philosopher Richard Rorty has called 'doxography' – the reconstruction of nineteenth-century history in terms of the analogies which can be made with modern, twentieth-century views. A typical strategy of doxography is to evaluate the work of past writers in terms of their ability to answer questions defined from a modern (that is, late twentieth-century) point of view. Moreover, underlying such a practice is an assumption that there are fundamental conceptual continuities across large historical periods. It is precisely these views which Lucas appears to hold, for he assumes that the imaginative thinking

which he values as the 'truth' – a radical way of contesting nineteenth-century bourgeois ideology – was available to the social-problem novelists and their readers in *more or less the same way* as it is available to him, and that therefore those Victorian readers and writers who eschewed it were either intellectually limited or morally dishonest. Indeed Victorian novelists are criticised in exactly these terms throughout Lucas's essay: some social-problem novels, he argues, are characterised by their 'failure to deal honestly with social experience'; more precisely, the 'retreat from the abyss' represents 'a failure of imaginative honesty [and] ... the writer's unwillingness to follow the implications of his given situation through to the end'.⁴⁰ (The use here of the terms 'honest' and 'honesty' is, of course, highly significant in that it assumes a criterion of truth – analogous to the 'facts' or 'concreteness' mentioned by Williams and Kettle – which Lucas presents as a given, but which he never feels constrained to justify or defend.)

A modern reader might feel that Lucas's assumption that his own understanding of social problems was available to the Victorians, and that there were conceptual continuities between the mid-nineteenth century and the 1960s, should at least be demonstrated. Of course some Victorian social concepts may have survived into the twentieth century (it would be odd if they had failed to do so); but we need to know exactly *which* concepts these are. More importantly, we also need to know how the status of those concepts changed. It might be the case that the Victorians, like Lucas, possessed a concept of 'class-consciousness', but it is quite possible (and indeed likely) that to employ such a concept in the intellectual climate of the 1860s meant something very different from employing it in the 1960s. The term 'socialism', for example, has been in use in British culture since the early nineteenth century, but its meanings and significance have changed profoundly over that period of time. In this respect, it is not really helpful to think in terms of large-scale conceptual continuities, because the meaning, significance and status of concepts undergo constant modification in relation to other social, political, cultural and intellectual developments. These points aside, there is a further and much more obvious drawback in Lucas's account. His essay consistently demonstrates that *his* analysis of social problems is simply absent from mid-Victorian fiction – at least it is not present in any sustained or committed way. Lucas never considers the (perhaps too obvious) possibility that the Victorians do not reproduce his

views because those views were simply not available to them or that they did not formulate social problems in the same way as he does. Lucas's 'truth', like Williams's and Kettle's 'life', is exactly the opposite; it is not *the* 'truth', nor can it be assumed to be the *Victorians'* 'truth'. Simple though this observation may sound, it opens up a new way of investigating the social-problem novels, and a new way of valuing them. Rather than trying to be proto-Marxists and failing, the social-problem novelists might have had very different ambitions which they pursued in ways which were successful in their terms. The split which Lucas identifies between 'achievement' and 'intention' may simply be the result of a mischaracterisation of nineteenth-century novelists' intentions (of the way they formulate problems in society), in turn the result of an anachronistic reading of certain aspects of mid-nineteenth-century intellectual culture.

It might be thought that the kind of history which Lucas practised is now rather dated, and that more sophisticated forms of Marxism developed in the 1980s and 1990s would perhaps have avoided some of its inconsistencies. It is all the more disappointing, then, to find that one of the most prominent and sophisticated of recent materialist critics, Regenia Gagnier, in her account of nineteenth-century working-class autobiographies, *Subjectivities* (1991), simply repeats the basic tenets of the Williams-Kettle-Lucas line of argument. She suggests that the account of social problems given by Victorian realist novelists is deficient because it is limited by its middle-class or bourgeois ideology; however, she attempts to give a new authority to this familiar case by framing it within that she calls the 'technical terms of structuralism and narratology':

In middle-class fiction, when a crisis of irreconcilability occurs between two classes (e.g., 'masters and men' find their interests irreconcilable), and the plot logically threatens violent conflict, it is redirected from class conflict to romantic love and Christian charity. This plot redirection is concomitant with a narratological event called *suture* – when the viewpoints of the implied author, the characters, and the intended readership gradually converge at the point of closure ... The implied author's views are sutured with (or become 'seamlessly' indistinguishable from) model characters', and that identification sutures with the interpellated reader's, to create an ideological view of 'reality'. In the fiction I

have been discussing, the convergent viewpoints of author, character, and reader hold that social conflict can be resolved by acceptance of hierarchy and philanthropy rather than economic restructuring, or that the human spirit can survive any amount of material deprivation.⁴¹

The unproblematic use Gagnier makes of categories such as 'middle-class fiction', 'class conflict' (which later shifts to 'social conflict'), 'acceptance of hierarchy', 'economic structuring' and 'material deprivation' is typical of the approach established by Williams, Kettle and Lucas. Once again, it makes no distinction between those concepts which are exclusive to twentieth-century literary critics (and which have been derived from a specific twentieth-century interpretation of Marxism), and those which were available to, but for some reason not used by, nineteenth-century novelists. For Gagnier's criticisms to make both historical *and* political sense we need to know whether the nineteenth-century novelists in question analysed their society in the same (or analogous) terms as their twentieth-century critics: that is, *did* writers such as Gaskell, Dickens, Disraeli, Kingsley and Eliot define deprivation exclusively in terms of material wants? Did they see social conflict and class conflict as synonymous terms? Did they share a certain twentieth-century view of the primacy of the economic, and the conviction that problems in society should be resolved by reference to social structures. If the answer to any of these questions is 'no' – that is, if there is no simple conceptual continuity between nineteenth-century novelists and late twentieth-century Marxist literary critics – then the critical accounts of this group are telling us nothing more profound than the fact that nineteenth-century social-problem novelists did not analyse society in the same way as a modern Marxist might. Hence the contradictions and confusions perceived in their works may simply be the result of assuming the novelists were answering questions which they never actually posed. The Marxist claim that to offer 'philanthropy' or 'Christian brotherhood' rather than 'economic structuring' as a solution to social problems is politically reactionary *only* has force if mid-nineteenth-century writers can be shown to have understood but rejected the concept of 'economic structuring'. If the whole idea of economic structuring was simply alien or unavailable because of the way in which economics and economic policy was understood at that time, then it is difficult to see how the absence of any refer-

ence to it can constitute a political, or indeed, an ideological move on behalf of the writer.

II

I have suggested that both ahistorical and political accounts of the social-problem novels depend upon various kinds of anachronism, and that their accounts of these works tell us more about the values of modern critics than they do about the Victorian novelists. I have also argued that in placing the social-problem novels within history, the process of historical explanation must be much more sensitive to the specificities of the intellectual world within which Victorian writers themselves operated. In particular, it is necessary to appreciate that the 'reality' addressed by Victorian novelists was not necessarily the same as the 'reality' which modern critics describe; consequently, the problems which the Victorians perceived may not coincide exactly with the problems which modern critics identify in nineteenth-century society. There have been two further kinds of accounts of the novels which at first sight seem to use the sort of methodology I am advocating in the sense that they both appear to place a much stronger emphasis on historical contingency. The first kind I loosely described in Chapter 1 as 'contextualist', including in it the work of critics such as Louis Cazamian, Kathleen Tillotson, Sheila Smith and John Holloway. The accounts by the first three all have strong affinities with each other: so Cazamian is cited by Tillotson, and Tillotson and Cazamian are, in turn, cited and used by Smith. What marks them out is their attempt to explain a distinctive period of nineteenth-century literary history which is best exemplified by the social-problem novels. So all three accounts define their work chronologically: Cazamian's interest is the period which he defines as '1830-1850', for Tillotson, it is the '1840s', and for Smith, 'the 1840s and 1850s'. (It is worth observing that the tidiness of these dates might make us suspicious of their historiography, for historical causation rarely arranges itself so neatly.) Raymond Williams's *Culture and Society* was also an attempt to describe the social-problem novels in terms of a larger literary history; however Cazamian, Tillotson and Smith distinguish themselves from Williams by the scope and detail of their work. All devote book-length studies to their subject; and all make use of a number and

variety of historical documents in order to substantiate their arguments. Cazamian's, Tillotson's and Smith's accounts can also be read as forming a historical narrative in themselves – a narrative about how contextualist literary history should be written, for although there are important continuities between all three accounts, there are also important differences. As we shall see, Tillotson attempts to modify Cazamian, and Smith to revise both of them. By contrast, John Holloway is not part of this narrative; his interest is not in describing a period of literary history, but rather in accounting for a single novel, *Hard Times*. However, I have chosen to discuss Holloway at the end of this section because he shares many of the historiographical principles of contextualist critics, and he also provides an important commentary on them.

Cazamian's study *Le Roman social en Angleterre: 1830–1850* was the first work of literary history to identify the social-problem novel (or to use Cazamian's terms, the 'social novel with a purpose' or '*roman-à-thèse*') as a special sub-genre in Victorian fiction, one produced by 'a new emotional and intellectual response to the subject of social relations on the part of English society in general, and the middle class in particular'.⁴² First published in France in 1903, Cazamian's work remained highly regarded for a number of years; in 1954 Kathleen Tillotson referred to it as the 'standard survey of the field'. In 1980 Sheila Smith also acknowledged its importance as a 'pioneering' study, although she had reservations about some of the details of its argument.⁴³ To continue to take seriously a work now almost a century old (and itself almost Victorian) may strike the modern reader as odd. After all the ways in which we 'do' history and 'do' literary criticism have changed almost beyond recognition since 1903. As I have indicated, modern historians (whether literary or otherwise) will hardly ever mark off historical periods (such as 1830–1850) with such adroitness or finality; indeed social historians tend to see the phenomenon with which the social-problem novels allegedly engage – industrialisation – as a group of much more complex and more contradictory processes than Cazamian allows. For example, rather than Cazamian's 'Industrial Revolution',⁴⁴ modern historians tend to talk of a variety of industrial changes as part of a process of industrial development which continues to affect Western industrial societies and which predates the nineteenth century by a considerable time. Moreover, within this large account, the details of local history are now given much more significance: so the industrial history of Manchester is seen to

be quite different from that of, say, Birmingham. Finally, the work of social historians such as Dorothy Thompson has led us to revalue in dramatic ways the politics of the middle years of the nineteenth century.⁴⁵ In simple terms, the 'documentary' qualities which Cazamian finds in social-problem novels will be quite different from those which a modern historian might consider to be relevant to understanding industrialisation. Why, then, treat a work from 1903 as anything other than a historical curiosity – that is, as a document which demonstrates the limits of early twentieth-century thought?

Part of the answer lies in the publication history of Cazamian's work. In 1973 – that is, some seventy years after its first appearance in France, and seven years after Lucas's and Lodge's essays – Martin Fido produced an English translation of *Le Roman social en Angleterre* under the title of *The Social Novel in England: 1830–1850*.⁴⁶ Interestingly, the case which Fido made for his translation was not that Cazamian's work was an important historical document, but rather that it had a continuing significance as criticism. Indeed Fido hoped his translation would make the work available to a wide English-speaking audience. In his Foreword, he acknowledged that Cazamian's account was undoubtedly dated, and he suggested that its critical limitations 'to some extent, set it back in the period when it was written'. Fido had reservations not only about Cazamian's 'sources', but also about his approach to his subject, describing it as 'sufficiently un-English to present us with some difficulties'. In particular those difficulties related to Cazamian's interest in 'grasping broad movements and sweeping intellectual trends' – a mode of enquiry which, Fido suggested, resulted in some unreliable critical judgements. These caveats notwithstanding, Fido went on to argue that the book's 'essential meaning' was still valuable, and that as a whole it 'remains a work of great importance, the standard study of its subject, and one whose view of Victorian fiction could well be allowed more influence than it has normally been granted in England'. 'Our understanding of Dickens, Disraeli, Mrs Gaskell and Kingsley', Fido argued, 'is enhanced' by Cazamian's 'terms'.⁴⁷ As I suggested above, it is important to realise that Fido was making this claim for the significance of Cazamian's work seven years *after* Kettle's, Williams's, and Lucas's accounts of the social-problem novels. In fact Fido refers to this Marxist tradition, but he does so in ambiguous terms, praising its description and assessment of individual novels as 'cogent', but suggesting that it

offered no overall thesis about their historical determination – about, that is, the ‘thought of the society that produced [them]’. It is on these grounds that, according to Fido, Cazamian ‘comes into his own’ for he describes the ‘intellectual movement linking one book to another’.⁴⁸ At this point it might be objected that Fido’s criticism of Williams, Kettle and Lucas was misplaced in that it misunderstood Marxist historiography; more specifically, Fido perhaps failed to realise that Marxism understands ‘intellectual trends’ in terms of ‘ideology’ rather than ‘ideas’ – that is, in Marxism, the concept of ideology presupposes a notion of historical causation which Fido implies is missing from Williams’s, Kettle’s and Lucas’s accounts. However, such a qualification, while it may be perfectly correct, does not necessarily invalidate Cazamian’s thesis, nor indeed Fido’s claims for it. A more appropriate question to ask would be whether the kind of historical determination which Cazamian describes is a more useful one than that offered by Marxist critics.

Given the limitations of Marxist historiography which I described earlier, and my suggestion that a useful account of the social-problem novels needs to attend to the specificities of the intellectual world within which the Victorians operated, Cazamian’s emphasis on ‘intellectual trends’ may seem to promise much. Unfortunately, in practice it promises much more than it delivers. His argument is that the period between 1830 and 1850 saw the development of a new kind of response to social problems, one which he terms (rather clumsily perhaps) ‘the idealist and interventionist reaction’. Opposed to this new response was the (equally clumsily named) ‘rationalist movement and individualism’.⁴⁹ Cazamian argues that the fiction of the period can be explained (and should be judged) in terms of this opposition. So, on the one hand, there are novels which are characterised by their rationalist intellectual trend – ‘utilitarian novels’; and on the other, there are works which endorse interventionism – the ‘interventionist novels’. Within this framework ‘utilitarian novels’ are criticised as ‘feeble’ while ‘interventionist novels’ are described as ‘rich’. Cazamian goes on to define interventionism as ‘a positive attempt by the individual or the community to improve social relations’; for a novel to be ‘truly a part of the interventionist movement, then its author must expressively have demanded positive action, either from the State, or organised institutions, or private persons’.⁵⁰ An informed reader would immediately guess (as Fido fails to do) that

the principal agents identified by Cazamian (the State and organised institutions) and the criteria judging their efficacy (interventionism) belong more to the social history of France at the turn of the twentieth century than to Britain in the 1840s. Indeed the very opposition which Cazamian isolates is more appropriate to French than to British history.

In nineteenth-century Britain individualism and interventionism were not mutually opposed categories; rather the opposite. As I shall argue in more detail in the next chapter, a kind of social atomism underwrote nearly every British response to social problems, regardless of whether they were radical or reactionary, interventionist or *laissez-faire*. More particularly, 'Christian socialism', the doctrine which Cazamian categorises as interventionist and therefore anti-individualist, quite openly depended upon an atomistic model of society, one in which the agency for social change was *individual* moral responsibility. Interestingly, Cazamian traces the origins of 'interventionism' to English Romanticism and the growth of philanthropy: the first he describes as helping define a notion of 'conscious human brotherhood' and the latter is paraphrased as meaning 'social duty'.⁵¹ Once again, however, Cazamian fails to understand that both Romanticism and philanthropy placed great emphasis on the autonomy and agency of the individual: that is, neither endorsed a sociological understanding of society which is a characteristic of French social thought, one where the 'social' is considered to be something more than the sum of the individuals in society, and where social change involves structural changes, rather than changes in the individual conscience. In simple terms, Cazamian fails to see that the intellectual culture of Victorian Britain was profoundly different from that of nineteenth-century France; and that the essential point of difference was the virtual absence in Britain (until the late decades of the century) of any tradition of sociological thought. Hence in Britain, unlike France, the definition of social responsibility (or intervention) was completely compatible with (and in many cases defined by) an emphasis on individual responsibility. Cazamian's failure to recognise this connection is illustrated most dramatically by his description of Thomas Carlyle as offering a 'sort of aristocratic, Christian, State socialism'.⁵² In fact the most dominant feature of Carlyle's thought is an extreme authoritarianism underwritten by a Puritan individualism which advocates an unwavering attention to the individual 'moral self'. Carlyle's work is the paradigmatic example of a British

thinker who combines both a hostility towards *laissez-faire* politics and a deep distrust of the whole conception of the state with a determined emphasis on individual moral responsibility. It is an odd sort of intellectual history which sees Carlyle's criticism of society possessing more in common with 'State socialism' than it does with 'individualism'. Like so many of the other critics I have discussed, Cazamian's fundamental error is his failure to realise that the very terms which he uses to describe the past – 'individualism' and 'interventionism' – are themselves historically determined: they meant one thing to Cazamian, and quite another to the Victorians.

Having identified the intellectual trends which he alleges are characteristic of mid-Victorian Britain, Cazamian proceeds to discuss what he calls the 'literary essence' of the works, defining 'literary' in terms of the accuracy of their representation of social matters. Hence successful literary works are those which produce a 'convincing demonstration of the social conditions which they offer'.⁵³ At this point any number of questions spring to mind. So we might ask: what is the criterion for determining whether or not a demonstration is 'convincing'? Cazamian's answer is confusing, for he appears to adopt contradictory positions. At one point he states that this judgement is to be based on a modern (political) understanding of what would count as a proper response to Victorian social problems: good novels are novels which convince 'us' – the modern (in his case early twentieth-century) reader. So, for example, Cazamian notes that the 'literary merit of the works [social novels] is in proportion to the special interest they have for us'.⁵⁴ By contrast, in a later passage he argues that our concern should be with the Victorians' own judgements about literary value, suggesting that the aim of the study is 'to find the information on social problems and proposals for their solutions with which social novels persuaded *their readers*'.⁵⁵ Moreover this confusion reappears in the critical methodology which Cazamian adopts.

He outlines four areas of historical enquiry: first, 'the psychological make-up of the novelist' which (a little implausibly, we might think) Cazamian suggests 'offers us a key to the state of public feeling'; second, an examination of 'fictional characters in light of the fact that they were drawn from reality, and were accepted as realistic by the public'. Third, there is the study of 'the public who gave the book its success'; here, Cazamian argues, 'novels are as

valuable as any external evidence in our assessment of these people'. Fourth and finally, the critic should take 'a quick glance at writings which are "social" in the same sense, and whose consequences were parallel and similar'.⁵⁶ In each of these four areas what is to count as evidence for the understanding of a particular historical event is determined by modern judgements, whether they are about 'psychology', about what comprises 'reality', or about what defines an appropriate definition of the 'social'. Cazamian is unaware of this confusion in his work, mainly, one suspects, because he does not allow for the possibility of historical relativism – in other words, he does not see that there is a difference between the way a modern historian might understand the past and the way that the past was understood by those who lived at the time. Hence those multiple distinctions between modern modes of thought and Victorian modes of thought which I have been insisting upon are simply elided or ignored in Cazamian's work. We can see this process of elision most clearly in his assumption that there is a realm of absolute moral value which defines the key concepts of his history: so the 'interventionist' or 'idealist' approach just *is* 'right'; and the 'individualist' or 'rationalist' approach just *is* 'wrong':

[Social science] offered an exceptionally clear and lucid exposition of society, and of the necessary principles and consequences of individualism. But its field of vision was narrow, and excluded the truths of sensitivity, organic social relations, human sympathy, charity, and moral or religious responsibilities. On the other hand, we find social consciousness ... Here the perception of reality was clouded by compassion, yet for all its vagueness it was more complete, and marked by a sympathy for suffering which found an echo in the observer, and led to individual or collective relief work.⁵⁷

Ironically Cazamian's explanation of the concepts which he uses makes it abundantly clear that his principles of evaluation are historically contingent, rather than absolute. The criteria which determine his judgements are manifestly derived from contemporary (that is, 1903) French social science. As I suggested earlier, a contrast between the individual good and the communal good is neither self-evident nor inevitable; but it is revealing that such a contrast was in fact made much more consistently in French social

science in the last decades of the nineteenth century than it was (or has been since) in Britain. In mid-Victorian Britain, the common good tended to be defined in terms of the sum of individuals' good – or rather, as with modern Conservative thought, there was seen to be a continuity between the individual's good and what was good for society as a whole. More importantly, this was true for virtually all shades of social thought in mid-Victorian Britain, for Christian Socialists as much as for Utilitarians. Cazamian, then, like the Marxist critics I have described, offers anachronisms in the place of history; he too judges the success of the social-problem novels by reference to his *own* understanding of Victorian social problems. The only substantive difference between them is that his explanatory paradigms are derived from French social thinking of the early twentieth century whereas those of Williams, Kettle and Lucas come from British socialism of the 1960s.

As I have suggested, Fido's claim that he was rescuing *Le Roman social en Angleterre* from obscurity was exaggerated. Literary critics interested in the social-problem novels had continued to keep Cazamian's work in mind; and Tillotson's attempt in *Novels of the Eighteen-Forties* to write the literary history of the period acknowledged the importance of Cazamian's work. But like any historian, Tillotson was also keen to define the distinctiveness of her project, and this required that she also show distance between Cazamian's work and her own. The way in which she managed to walk this tight-rope is instructive. Rather than engage with the details of Cazamian's research, or with the substance of his thesis, she chose instead to contrast the nature of his project with her own. The key distinction she makes is between the work of the 'literary historian' and that of the historian 'of society or of ideas'.⁵⁸ As a literary historian, Tillotson is interested in describing changes in the forms of literary representation; in this particular instance, her subject is the development which she alleges took place in the English novel in the 1840s. In this decade, she suggests, the novel became the 'dominant' literary medium largely because it began to embrace more serious and socially engaged subjects – topics of contemporary public concern. This process in turn led to an 'extension' of the novel's field, particularly into the realms of geography and class, and to a formal preoccupation with factual documentary detail – with what Tillotson calls 'exactness'.⁵⁹ Interest in working- and lower-middle-class lives, seriousness of purpose, settings in the unfamiliar geography of the industrial northern towns and a

preference for the techniques of realism – for Tillotson all these features appear to make social-problem novels paradigmatic examples of these changes. Indeed she singles out *Mary Barton* as one of four novels which best illustrate this transitional moment in the history of the novel.

At this point it is worth while bearing in mind that Tillotson's literary history depends upon a larger knowledge of social and intellectual history, for without it she would be unable to recognise the interest in contemporary social issues which allegedly distinguishes the novels of the 1840s from those of the 1820s or 1830s. In her view, social or intellectual history provides the 'context' by which changes in the form of fiction can be measured and explained. It would seem, then, that Tillotson is invoking a necessary relationship between literary history and social or intellectual history. However, as I suggested above, perversely Tillotson wants to see the work of literary historians (that is, of those like herself) and the work of social historians (in her view, of a critic such as Cazamian) as separate activities, involving distinct skills and ambitions:

Whatever the problems for the novel as an art, there is no doubt that the novel gains something in prestige, is redeemed from mere entertainment, when it reflects the urgent preoccupations of its time. The accuracy and value of this reflection, the particular relevance of the 'topics' of *Sybil*, *Yeast*, and *Mary Barton*, to their 'day' of 1845 to 1858 and their immediate influence, are questions too large to be considered here, and are perhaps more appropriate to the historian of society or of ideas. To the historian it would also be important to explain why the rapid emergence and multiplication of such novels should belong to the forties and not to the thirties; he might see them as delayed fruits of Reform, as arising directly from the Commission Reports, as part of the instinctive barricade against revolution; he could perhaps relate them to the impulse towards revelation, exposure, prophecy; to the more articulate or more fearful conscience of the time. The literary historian must be content simply to range them alongside other works of their decade as *Past and Present*, Elizabeth Barrett's 'Cry of the Children', and Hood's 'The Song of the Shirt' and 'A spade, a hoe, a bill'; yes, and alongside 'Locksley Hall', *The Princess*, and *The Bothie*.⁶⁰

Tillotson is suggesting that literary historians are concerned with *evaluations* of the forms which literary works take, while social historians are concerned with *why* works take the particular forms which they *do* take. In order to maintain this separation, Tillotson has to assume that evaluation has no necessary relationship to explanation. So, in terms of the social-problem novels, the determination of their literary value (achieved by 'ranging' them alongside other contemporary works) has to be quite unrelated to the question of the accuracy of their historical reference. The difficulty here is that Tillotson's argument appears to undermine the kind of literary history which she sets out to write. If it is really the case that an assessment of the accuracy of a novel's representation bears no relation to an assessment of its literary value, then it is difficult to see the reasons for a literary history which defines a group of novels precisely in terms of their commitment to what Tillotson had earlier called 'exactness', for the concept of exactness requires a knowledge of how a work is produced – of its historical circumstances. The confusion arises because Tillotson assumes that the relationship between literary history on the one hand, and the identification of its subject-matter, literary works, on the other, is entirely unproblematic: in her view, historical enquiry merely 'contextualises' a group of works already identified and valued. The function of historical knowledge is only to explain the forms and features of these works, and it has no bearing upon judgements about their literary value. In the terms I used earlier, historical knowledge can tell us why a work came to be the way it did; but it cannot tell us how we should value it. Unfortunately this view of the relationship between historical knowledge and literary judgements is self-defeating. If literary history is to matter – if it is to be an area of enquiry distinct from history proper – then it *must connect* historical knowledge with literary value. We can see the limitations of Tillotson's position very clearly in the extended discussion of *Mary Barton* in Part II of *Novels of the Eighteen-Forties*.

Tillotson's evaluation of the novel is based upon a judgement about its 'artistic integrity', which is in turn defined by reference to what she calls a 'unity of theme and tone'. She identifies as the 'true theme' (the solution to social problems) 'the persistence, against all odds, of humanheartedness', and she sees in the story of John Barton a successful (because unified) presentation of this theme. Where (for Tillotson) the novel is less convincing is in

Mary Barton's story which dominates the second half of the novel, but whose relation to the general theme is 'too weakly developed'. In Tillotson's eyes, Mary's story possesses new 'thematic possibilities' but they are only 'roughly suggested'; they are improperly incorporated into the novel's overall design, thereby compromising its unity.⁶¹ She implies, then, that the value of *Mary Barton* lies not in the validity of the idea of 'humanheartedness' itself, nor in its appropriateness to the particular problems in society Gaskell identifies.⁶² Rather, it is merely the way this notion is presented which is important. So *Mary Barton* would (and could) have been a better novel (nearer the 'scale and quality' of the other works Tillotson selects) if Gaskell had only been able to maintain the narrative focus on John Barton. Tillotson's separation of literary judgement from historical knowledge commits her to understanding thematic unity solely as a formal issue, where decisions about form (the ability to achieve a 'thematic unity') are not related to the specific subject-matter of the novel and therefore not contingent on historical circumstance. Indeed it is for this reason that she can claim that the 'greater artistic integrity' of *Mary Barton* (as opposed to *Sybil*, *Yeast* and *Alton Locke*) 'raise[s] this novel beyond the conditions and problems that give rise to it'.⁶³ The unfortunate result, though, is to force a separation between the particular way Gaskell thinks about problems in society (her arrival at the notion of 'humanheartedness') and how these thoughts are expressed in her novel. The shortcoming of Tillotson's literary history is that she does not (and cannot) see that there might be a necessary connection between the forms of literary representation and the historically contingent ways a mid-nineteenth-century novelist could have understood problems in society. More importantly, Tillotson cannot therefore either explain why literary representation (as opposed to government Blue Books or the arguments of statisticians or political economists) might have been particularly useful for exploring contemporary problems in society. In simple terms, she cannot convincingly explain why *Mary Barton* came to be written at all, and why therefore the sub-genre of social-problem novels (or the 'social' novels of the 1840s) ever appeared.

A similar situation occurs in Sheila Smith's work, but for slightly different reasons. Smith's *The Other Nation* (1980) is perhaps the most thorough and detailed of the 'contextualist' accounts of the social-problem novels. The title refers to what Smith terms 'the poor', and her subject-matter is in fact rather broader than in other

accounts, for her book is about the representation of the poor in a selection of novels taken from the mid-nineteenth century, only some of which are the social-problem novels. Smith does not directly claim that novels about the poor themselves constitute a distinct sub-genre of Victorian fiction; indeed she has no interest in the kinds of issues which had been raised by Williams, Kettle and Lucas in their debate about the usefulness of terms such as 'social novel', 'industrial novel' and 'social-problem novel'. In this sense a defining feature of Smith's work is that its affinities lie not with Marxists and structuralists whose work dominated critical thinking in the 1960s and 1970s, but rather with an older generation of critics. As I suggested, it is Tillotson's *Novels of the Eighteen-Forties* (whose influence is acknowledged in the Introduction) which is closest to Smith's work in conception and tone; and it is Cazamian, rather than Williams, Lucas and Kettle (who are hardly mentioned) with whom Smith engages.

At first glance, Smith's aims seem modest and straightforward: 'I am not trying to survey all the novels written about the poor during the period,' she claims, 'but to examine selected novels treating different aspects of poverty and with different degrees of aesthetic achievement.'⁶⁴ Later she comments that 'my subject is the extent to which the poor could be "known" ... by these novelists of the 1840s and 1850s, and the nature of their imaginative response to this persistent fact of Victorian society'.⁶⁵ My discussion of Tillotson's and Cazamian's work should have alerted the reader to the kinds of assumptions at work in Smith's project and the kinds of questions which it poses. On what grounds are novels to be 'selected'? On what grounds is 'poverty' to be interpreted? And on what grounds is 'aesthetic achievement' to be judged? The way these questions are answered in its turn determines what Smith means by the phrases 'could be known' and 'imaginative response'.

The main strategy of Smith's book is to compare fictional representations of poverty in selected novels with what she calls 'reality' or, in the terms of one of the chapter headings, 'Naked Fact'. Indeed, the most striking aspect of Smith's book is the sheer number and variety of documents which she draws upon to reveal the 'reality' or 'facts' of Victorian poverty: they include periodicals, contemporary photographs, drawings and paintings, government reports and commissions, and broadside ballad-sheets. In this respect Smith's history is very different from those of Tillotson and Cazamian in that it is much more broadly based and much more

strongly supported by evidence. It has the feeling of immediacy and authenticity, and the reader has the impression of being given access to the same social world as that inhabited by the Victorians. Like other critics, though, Smith also finds that most of the novels she discusses, despite their commitment to factual detail, consistently fail to express what she terms the 'essential reality' of Victorian poverty.⁶⁶ The phrase 'essential reality' is important and should alert us to the possibility that simple *quantity* of information is not the issue; rather it is the interpretation of the facts – their 'essence' – which matters. It might be the case that Smith's interpretation of contemporary documents is not the same as that of the Victorians – her interpretation of the 'facts' may not have been the same as the Victorians' interpretation of them. (Indeed the Victorians themselves may have had competing interpretations of the facts.) Smith's failure to appreciate this distinction between the identification of information and its interpretation leads her to search for a reason why, despite their obsession with facts, the novelists fail to get at the 'truth'. And so she has to explain why they do not interpret the evidence – why they do not see 'the essential reality' – as she does. The reason she gives is a strangely familiar one, for like John Lucas, she attributes the shortcomings of these mid-Victorian novels to a failure of 'imagination' – or more specifically, to a failure of the 'Romantic imagination':

But often, in the novels I have been discussing, the appearance and environment of the Other Nation are recorded with detailed accuracy yet fail to create symbols expressive of the elusive essential reality. Quentin Bell, discussing Holman Hunt, comments on the disturbing effect of his fidelity to detail combined with his lack of imagination. Of 'The Triumph of the Innocents' he writes, 'the very sincerity of Holman Hunt's desire to believe and the ruthlessness with which he does in fact observe, makes the failure more painful and more obvious' ... The same is true, in varying degrees, of all the novels under discussion, apart from *Hard Times*.⁶⁷

Smith, like Tillotson, resorts to a non-historical explanation for the discrepancy between her views and those of the Victorian novelists. Ironically that explanation once again turns out to be derived

from a Romantic ideology, for it assumes that the novelist (or more precisely, literary art) has access to a privileged perspective on the world. The difficulty with this concept (as we also saw in Lucas's work) is that the faculty of the 'imagination' has to be conceived in ahistorical and transcendental terms. In other words, the very feature which turns out to distinguish the novelist (from what Smith calls the 'man of science') is itself not amenable to historical explanation: indeed it is not even subject to the contingencies of history. Such a situation leaves the literary historian with a real dilemma; if history cannot explain the very feature which distinguishes Smith's subject-matter – literary works – then what do we need such literary history for? The enormous amount of documentary evidence which Smith assembles is certainly valuable in providing details about elements of Victorian social life; what is missing, however, is an accompanying intellectual history – that is, an account of the concepts or ideas by means of which the Victorians interpreted or understood those social complexities, those 'naked facts'. As the next chapter will indicate, the 'facts' about poverty or unemployment, or whatever, were not in dispute. The difficulty for the Victorians lay in their inability to convert those facts into a coherent story or narrative. Importantly, that difficulty in turn was not the result of any personal or imaginative failing, but rather a consequence of the particular ways in which the Victorians understood their world – of what I call their 'conceptual set'.

The dilemma exhibited in Smith's and Tillotson's work, that of the relationship between social and intellectual history, and therefore between historical or 'contextual' knowledge and literary judgements, was the concern of an essay written earlier in the 1960s by John Holloway. Holloway was not concerned with the social-problem novels as a sub-genre of Victorian fiction. His interest (as was the case with Lodge and Leavis) was confined to explaining only one work, *Hard Times*.⁶⁸ Nonetheless it is because Holloway shares some of the historiographical principles of the contextualist critics that I have grouped him with them. However, his understanding of literary history, apparent from the opening paragraph of his essay, is subtly but significantly different from that of Cazamian, Tillotson or Smith.

Writing in 1962 (that is, after Tillotson but before Smith), Holloway begins by making an important observation about the social reference of the novel. Noting what he terms the 'now

familiar knowledge' that *Hard Times* is a novel concerned with 'Utilitarianism', he goes on to suggest that:

the ideas and attitudes which that word [i.e. Utilitarianism] most readily calls up today prove not to be those which were most prominent in Dickens's own mind or own time; and to trace the exact contour of significance which ran for Dickens himself, as he wrote the book, through the material he handled, will turn out to be a more than merely historical accumulation of knowledge: it determines the critical position which one must finally take with regard to the novel.⁶⁹

At first sight such a statement seems to go to the heart of the matter, for it recognises the importance of precisely the issues consistently ignored or misunderstood in the work of the other contextualist critics: Holloway, that is, realises in the first place that the meaning of certain terms is historically contingent. So in the instance which he cites, Dickens's understanding of 'Utilitarianism' cannot be assumed to be the same as that of a twentieth-century critic. Second, and perhaps more significantly, Holloway also argues that a knowledge of historical contingency – in this case, a knowledge of Dickens's understanding of Utilitarianism – is a necessary prerequisite of an evaluation of the novel. Indeed at this point his meaning could not be clearer: in direct contrast to Tillotson, Holloway states that such knowledge, far from being 'merely historical accumulation' (the stuff of Tillotson's 'historian of society or ideas') actually '*determines* the critical position which one must finally take'. Here, then, we seem at last to have an acknowledgement of the interrelationship between literary judgements and historical knowledge; we seem, that is, to have a rationale for literary history.

Holloway argues that the 'Utilitarianism' which Dickens has in mind, and which is the target of his satire, is not the large-scale theory of 'social welfare and reform' associated with writers such as James Mill and his son, John Stuart Mill, but rather 'something less far-reaching, and much more mundane and common-place'. 'In *Hard Times*,' Holloway claims, 'Utilitarianism largely means "Manchester School" political economy', the chief characteristic of which, according to Holloway, is a 'naïve enthusiasm' for 'facts' and 'statistics'. The contrast which Holloway draws is between what he calls 'Utilitarianism' seen 'philosophically' (i.e., that

proposed by Mill senior and junior), and 'Utilitarianism' reduced to 'arithmetic' (i.e., that proposed by the Manchester School).⁷⁰ Holloway identifies figures such as J. R. McCulloch and Charles Knight, today considered to be of 'minor' significance, as representatives of 'arithmetic Utilitarianism'; and in the portrait of Gradgrind and his school Holloway sees explicit and pointed references to them. For example, he argues that in books such as McCulloch's *Principles* and his *Descriptive and Statistical Account of the British Empire*, 'one may find both what sets the scene for Dickens's novel, and what brings one back to some of the attitudes ... depicted in it'.⁷¹ The importance of this alleged distinction between Dickens's understanding of 'Utilitarianism' (based on McCulloch) and that of (say) John Stuart Mill, is revealed in Holloway's surprising claim that the morality of *Hard Times*, far from representing values of enlightenment and imagination (as earlier critics had argued), is in fact rather 'Philistine', and at times even 'vulgar'. In this respect the limitation of the novel, in Holloway's eyes, derives not only from the narrowness of its interest in the impoverished and naïve arithmetical Utilitarianism, but also, and more damningly, from its endorsement of some of the attitudes of those 'middle-class Philistines' which it is supposed to be attacking. 'All in all', Holloway concludes:

Dickens stood much too near to what he criticized in the novel, for his criticism to reach a fundamental level. This is not a matter of his having a balanced view of the whole situation as between manufacture, labour and capital; but of his sharing the somewhat naïve enthusiasms, and with them to some extent the brusque middle-class hostilities and presumptions, of those whom he thought he was criticizing.⁷²

In general terms, then, Holloway accuses Dickens of being anti-intellectual and of having a limited and rather reductive grasp of what were very complex moral issues – issues which were ironically addressed more profoundly and more seriously, and with greater integrity, by those writers whom modern critics had traditionally (but mistakenly) believed to be the object of Dickens's satire – that is, the philosophical Utilitarians such as James Mill. Holloway uses terms such as 'shallow', 'vulgar' and 'Philistine' to characterise what he terms Dickens's 'quality and development of mind'; and he goes on to explain how these intellectual weaknesses

are revealed in various aspects of the novel's plot and structure. Finally, and unsurprisingly, Holloway attributes Dickens's alleged lack of 'insight' to his class position.

Holloway's account of *Hard Times* uses a wealth of historical detail, much of it about minor and now forgotten works (such as McCulloch's *Encyclopaedia*), to challenge our modern assumptions about this novel. Moreover, Holloway goes on to use that detail in order to revalue it; for him (and here he differs from Tillotson and Smith) the literary historian and social historian are one and the same. Is it the case, then, that Holloway provides us with a historical method which overcomes the shortcomings which I have located in the work of the other contextualist critics? Despite the promise of Holloway's research, the answer has to be equivocal. In recovering the historical context of *Hard Times*, in his attempt to 'trace the exact contour of significance which ran for Dickens himself', Holloway omits one important consideration. He tells us which ideas may have been available to Dickens, but he tells us next to nothing about the status of those ideas. As a consequence he cannot tell us with any certainty the significance of Dickens's use of them. So we encounter a shortcoming similar to that of Smith's book. Holloway is either unable (or unwilling) to extend his understanding of historical contingency to cover ideas of status and authority: put bluntly, he does not adequately distinguish between the *status* of ideas, concepts, or ideologies. Of course at one level, Holloway has a great deal to say about the status of ideas about Utilitarianism which were current in Dickens's time: his essay is full of evaluative words such as 'naïve' (to describe a reliance of statistics) and 'enlightened', 'emancipated' and 'comprehensive' (to describe 'philosophical' Utilitarianism). Importantly, however, these terms are *interpretations* and not descriptions; we do not know whether they reflect Holloway's views or those of the Victorians. Whether or not his identification of two kinds of Utilitarianism is correct, it is possible to imagine a situation in which they had very different values placed upon them. So, for example, in the eyes of the Victorians, there may not have been any contradiction between valuing the writing of John Stuart Mill and the work of McCulloch; alternatively, their work may have been valued quite differently from the ways suggested by Holloway. Holloway may judge McCulloch's work to be 'vulgar' and 'naïve', but it is not self-evident that McCulloch was considered so by many Victorians. At one point Holloway seems aware of the problem and comments

that McCulloch's *Principles* was 'the standard work until Mill's book of the same name replaced it'.⁷³ One is tempted to observe that if McCulloch's writings were indeed so highly valued by middle-class Victorians, and (more importantly) if a reliance on statistics was not at that time considered 'naïve', then Dickens's satire would have had a rather different significance for Victorian readers than it does for Holloway. It may for that matter have indicated the very opposite of what Holloway sees as Dickens's Philistinism or reactionary, middle-class complacency. To put this observation in more general terms, it is difficult to see how both the satire and its target can be normative.

This question of status, considered in historical (rather than modern) terms is important, for a failure to take account of it leaves Holloway (in spite of his explicit acknowledgement of the problems inherent in writing history) in a position which is really quite similar to that of Tillotson and Smith. In the end, the impressive historical information which he marshals lacks significance, for if Holloway cannot tell us what it meant in the 1850s for Dickens to allude to this or that contemporary work, then he will not be able to persuade us why we need to know about it now. In fact a judgement that the morality of *Hard Times* is shallow, vulgar or Philistine does not necessarily depend upon knowing that Dickens was satirising the work of a minor political economist rather than that of Mill. On the contrary, we can judge the work in such a way for a much more basic reason. We are perfectly capable of seeing Dickens's conception of moral dilemmas in terms of an opposition between facts (a reliance on statistics and arithmetic) and fancy (a reliance on the creative imagination) to be a crude one. The question of the exact identity of the target of satire – that is, with whom ideas about facts and statistics were to be associated – is not necessarily related to a *modern* appreciation of the work's moral validity. But it is wholly relevant to our understanding of the Victorians' appreciation of its moral worth. I suggested earlier that for Holloway the novel failed in two ways: in his modern, twentieth-century view, the satire did not go far enough and, second, the target of the satire was itself ill-chosen. We can now see more clearly the paradox which Holloway's use of history produces, for the failings which he identifies are in fact incompatible: if his first judgement is valid (that the satire does not go far enough) then the object of the satire must be considered important, otherwise the question of the degree of Dickens's criticism, and hence the

significance of the novel itself, would not be a matter of any critical interest whatsoever.

III

The final kind of account of the social-problem novels is represented by Catherine Gallagher's *The Industrial Reformation of English Fiction* (1985), a work which, as I suggested in Chapter 1, can be loosely described as 'new historicist' in character. Gallagher's book is easily the most detailed, complex and ambitious account of the subject yet written. Her point of departure, like that of the contextualist critics whose conclusions she attempts to contest, is a group of novels which are defined in terms of their response to a particular historical phenomenon which she refers to as 'industrialism'. However Gallagher does not simply take as her subject-matter the accuracy of the various representations of industrialism in narrative fiction; instead she is concerned with the relationship between what she calls 'the discourse over industrialism' and the novel form. This distinction between 'industrialism' and 'the discourse over industrialism' is far-reaching, for it has to do with the difference between the ideas and ideologies which the processes of industrialism generated and the actual processes themselves. About the latter Gallagher has little to say; she claims that an 'attempt to specify the ultimate sources or purposes of the discourse in either a history of material production or an account of a unitary, bourgeois class consciousness would be either futile or distorting'.⁷⁴ This strategy might strike 'contextualist' critics as inevitably leading to vagueness, for one of its consequences is to threaten to inflate her subject-matter to the point of intractability. Certainly her book contains very little of the kind of historical detail marshalled by Sheila Smith. Instead she discusses works by writers who in her view established or represented important intellectual paradigms for the understanding of industrialism (although, as I have noted, Gallagher never tells us in any detail what the phenomenon of industrialism actually amounted to).

Briefly, Gallagher's argument is that the 'state of the novel' underwent significant changes between the first (1832) and second (1867) Reform Bills and these changes can only be understood when viewed in relation to the 'discourse over industrialism'. Importantly, and in keeping with the general trends of new histori-

cism, the relationship which Gallagher envisages between this discourse and the formal properties of narrative fiction is a 'reciprocal' rather than a determining one:

The discourse over industrialism led novelists to examine the assumptions of their literary form. Reciprocally, the formal analyses in this study enable a new understanding of the discourse itself, for the formal structures and ruptures of these novels starkly reveal a series of paradoxes at the heart of the Condition of England Debate.⁷⁵

It is worth noting that the distinction between text (the novel) and context (historical background) which underwrites contextual accounts of the social-problem novels is completely dissolved in such an argument. For Gallagher, novels are not explained by history; rather, they are a part of it. The distinction is easier to see once it is understood that Gallagher is using the term 'discourse' in a special sense, one which distinguishes it from the realm of ideas or from the realm of ideology:

I assume there is normally some sort of tension between ideology and literary forms, but that forms are nevertheless also historical phenomena, parts of those transideological structures that are here called discourses. I am using 'discourse' to designate both what is said on a particular subject (for example, the actual contents of the Condition of England Debate) and the largely unstated rules that govern what can and cannot be said. Discourse exists between and within ideologies, thereby creating the coherence and legibility of ideological conflict. Literary forms often disrupt the tidy formulations and reveal the inherent paradoxes of their ostensible ideologies. However, I try to demonstrate the [*sic*] the ruptures thus created are neither the automatically subversive result of all truly literary treatment nor the timeless effect of all textuality. Rather, the formal and ideological transgressions and deviations described here are elicited by and recontained within the logic of the larger historical discourse.⁷⁶

As my description of 'political' and 'contextualist' accounts has shown, historicising the social-problem novels tends to produce two mutually opposed explanations of literary forms: either they

are seen to be ideologically determined, or they are understood to exist beyond the contingencies of history. Gallagher's historical method appears to be designed to avoid this dichotomy, for she implies that the concept of 'discourse' allows her to explain literary forms as historically contingent but (at the same time) not ideologically determined. Such a proposal might sound winning. It certainly has its advocates among modern new-historicist critics, and it may seem to present a more systematic connection between literary value and historical knowledge. But what exactly is 'discourse'? In the passage which I have just quoted, it designates both 'what is said on a particular subject' ('the actual contents of the Condition of England Debate') and 'the largely unstated rules that govern what can and cannot be said'. However, this explanation is rather disingenuous, for it raises more questions than it answers. We might, for example, object that 'what is said' will not be self-evident. 'What is said' literally means every utterance (written and oral) about industrialism (whatever that is). Of course, most of this information is recoverable, but some is not. Moreover, of those utterances which we can recover, only some matter. 'What is said', then, turns out to be anything but what was actually said; it turns out to be a selection made by time and by the historian. 'What is said', in other words, in effect means those things which the historian notices and finds interesting and significant. We can then go further and ask: what values define 'significant' and 'interesting'? Is the hierarchy which defines these terms derived from the values of the Victorians or from those of the modern historian? Because it tries to dissolve the whole idea of hierarchy, the concept of discourse does not permit these questions to be broached in any straightforward way. However, it may seem that Gallagher has precisely this issue in mind when she speaks of 'the largely unstated rules that govern what can and cannot be said'. But what sort of rules exactly does she mean? (And how do we know them if they are 'unstated'?) Are they conceptual, ideological or political? For example, were debates about industrialism in the mid-nineteenth century restricted because certain ideas or concepts (such as, say, Keynesian economics) had not yet been formulated or invented – in other words, because they were simply unavailable? Or, were debates about industrialism restricted by political interests so that the operation of power materially prevented certain ideas being expressed (by, for example, the various formal or informal mechanisms of censorship which were in place in

Victorian Britain)? Or, were debates about industrialism restricted by ideological interests; that is, was the hegemony of a particular way of thinking about industrialisation associated with (and restricted by) a particular interest group? These categories are not mutually incompatible, but they are certainly not identical, and in order to understand the relationships between them we need to employ the two further concepts, those of status and authority, which I have already alluded to in the context of Holloway's work. Gallagher's notion of discourse tends to elide these sorts of distinction; more importantly she omits to acknowledge that what she calls discourse will be composed of ways of thinking which possess a quite different status, and so a quite different social authority. The relevance and real purchase of these questions will become clearer when we look at the details of Gallagher's research.

Gallagher maps the 'discourse over industrialism' via what she terms three intellectual 'controversies': 'the nature and possibility of human freedom', the 'sources of social cohesion' and 'the nature of representation'.⁷⁷ In her view the first of these controversies is focused by a conflict between 'determinism' and 'free will', the rhetoric of which Gallagher locates in debates about slavery. Her argument concerns what she terms the 'worker-slave' metaphor where discussion of the rights and freedoms of slaves was extended to include the industrial working class. Gallagher locates her second controversy, the 'sources of social cohesion', in a debate about the relationship between the public and the private; this relationship, she suggests, provided an alternative arena in which to resolve the conflict between determinism and free will. Gallagher suggests that if free will could not be exercised in the public (and so socially determined) industrial work-place, then perhaps it could operate within the private and protected world of the family, and the family in turn might then act as the catalyst for social change. Gallagher's third controversy is less easy to explain succinctly, for her argument is often subtle and sometimes difficult to follow. It concerns aspects of the nineteenth-century debate about political representation which took the form of what she calls a 'discontinuity between facts and values' where the domain of 'facts' represents 'what is', and the domain of 'values' represents what 'ought to be'.⁷⁸ Moreover this opposition between facts and values maps on to the opposition between the public, market-orientated industrial world (facts, or 'what is') and the private domain of the family (the repository of values, or of 'what ought to be'). Hence in Gallagher's

view, the debate about the 'right relationship' between facts and values represents yet another kind of critique of industrialism. Each of these three intellectual controversies is characterised by what Gallagher calls 'ideological disjunctions' which in turn are exhibited or mirrored in the novels in terms of certain 'formal disjunctions', that is, in inconsistencies or contradictions in characterisation and plotting. Moreover, Gallagher sees each controversy as appropriate to a different group of novels: so the first controversy 'explains' *Helen Fleetwood*, *Mary Barton* and *Alton Locke*; the second, *North and South* and *Hard Times*; and the third, *Sybil* and *Felix Holt*.

Gallagher's argument is difficult to summarise easily, and the complexity of her book might leave the reader perplexed as to why there is such a disjunction between the apparent simplicity of the novels themselves (few readers – then or now – have difficulty in understanding them) and the detail and intricacy of the information required to appreciate them. The main reason for the complexity relates to Gallagher's use of the concept of discourse, for it allows her to discuss and yoke together a range of heterogeneous ideas and texts without considering the relationships (of status and authority) between them. So we might ask, for example, why are the controversies which Gallagher isolates – about the nature and possibility of human freedom, the sources of social cohesion and the nature of representation – the most important ones? To the British reader, these concerns seem to belong more to mid-nineteenth-century America than they do to mid-nineteenth-century British culture.⁷⁹ Moreover, they seem no more particularly concerned with mid-nineteenth-century industrialisation than, say, with late eighteenth-century industrialisation (in fact, most of the terms of political debates in the nineteenth century were derived from the work of eighteenth-century political philosophers). These cautions suggest that there may have been other controversies about industrialism and politics – that is, other aspects of the 'discourse over industrialism' – which Gallagher has excluded from her study. There is a further reservation concerning the imprecision of Gallagher's account. Gallagher maps her three controversies in a broadly chronological order. The implication is that the relationship between them is successive. Moreover she wants to see a particular controversy answering to a particular group of novels; however, as she herself admits, the novels do not answer to such a simple chronology. Gallagher's explanation for this discrepancy is revealing. For example, she justifies grouping together *Sybil* and *Felix*

Holt, novels 'widely separated in time', on the grounds that 'they participate in one debate, the debate over the franchise, and they draw on a single tradition of thought about representation that persists throughout the nineteenth century ... [T]hese two political novels will be analyzed here as parts of a continuous discourse'.⁸⁰ However, if this discourse *was* continuous throughout the century, then why did other social-problem novels not engage with it? And why, if the discourse is continuous, do we not find similar kinds of novels being written in the 1870s and 1880s? Why was the facts/values debate appropriate to Disraeli's understanding of industrialism, but not to Kingsley's? Why did Disraeli not formulate his politics in terms of the 'slave-worker' metaphor, or the public-private, family-society dichotomy? A more general way of stating this difficulty would be to ask what exactly *is* the relationship between the intellectual controversies Gallagher identifies and the processes (that is, industrialism) which she alleges they explain? The failure to address this question in turn prevents her from providing a convincing account of the *nature* of the relationship between the way a problem in society is articulated and the kind of solution offered to it. Of course Gallagher will claim that these are not issues which interest her; unfortunately, though, her failure to attend to them leaves us with a history emptied of causality, and therefore not really a history at all – or at least not a history that is of much use.

Throughout this chapter I have argued that the fundamental problem for literary history is the articulation of a *dynamic* relationship between historical knowledge and literary judgements. In the end Gallagher's historicism turns out to be no more helpful in this task than any of the other accounts I have considered. By collapsing the categories of literary and documentary identity into the all-encompassing term 'discourse' she denies us the possibility of understanding how exactly the two might be related. Nowhere is this clearer than in the large claim Gallagher makes for her thesis: that the 'antitheses encountered as formal paradoxes in the industrial novels are finally, at the supersession of the entire discourse, transformed into a much more general antithesis between society and its literary representations'.⁸¹ For this information to be of use, the *literary* historian needs to know not only why the 'entire discourse' was superseded, but also the role which literary representation played in it. Unfortunately it is just this kind of explanation which the premises of Gallagher's thesis prevent her from providing.