

THE WRITER IN HIS TIME:
SOCIO-ECONOMIC INFLUENCES ON THE LITERARY WORK

INAUGURAL LECTURE

delivered by

Piero d'Onofrio

18 October 1984

University of South Africa
Pretoria

© 1984 P.F. D'Onofrio

ISBN 0 620 08042 6

Published by the author and
printed by the University of
South Africa, Muckleneuk,
Pretoria

THE WRITER IN HIS TIME: SOCIO-ECONOMIC INFLUENCES ON THE LITERARY WORK

One of the most striking studies in the history of criticism in recent years is Lucien Goldmann's essay on Robbe-Grillet, the father, so to speak, of the Nouveau Roman: the new novel. In this essay, Goldmann tries to relate the clinical, hyper-objective descriptions of Robbe-Grillet to the overwhelming subjection of modern man in a situation which reduces him to the passivity or to the paralysis of a "voyeur".

Goldmann's attempt reveals the perspicacity reached by a sociological approach to literature in the 20th Century in retracing the roots of a literary work to its milieu. While this type of analysis has been widely developed recently, there is a complementary one that takes the apparently opposite standpoint - that a work of art has a prophetic function. This stance is embodied in the Russian poet Ossip Mendelstam's study on Dante's Divina Commedia, written in 1925. Scholars insist in relating Dante to his time and Mendelstam follows suit, but he also analyses the range of Dante's imagination, which, though thoroughly immersed in the material world surrounding him, reaches dynamically beyond it, to give us a vision of what could be of the possible, and develops to its full extent the potential of the forms and beings of his world.

In my lecture tonight I would like to dwell mainly on the first point of view, namely that of the literary work as an historical mirror of its time with all its complexities.

The specific socio-economic conditions of a particular historic period exercise an indirect influence on the literary production of the time. This influence has of course always existed. Some works illustrate this influence directly, especially those which adhere to the realistic mode. In this regard, we can refer to György Lukacs's theory of "reflection". According to this theory, the most interesting and aesthetically perfect work of art is that which is presented as a moment of reflection and embodies the prevailing conditions of the time. "Reflection" is used in the sense that the literary work serves as a mirror of reality, with all its socio-economic implications; and by the word 'embodies', Lukacs means that the realist work of art provides typical examples which highlight the social problems and conditions of the time.

The influence of socio-economic conditions is obvious in realist literature. In less realistic works, this influence can be illustrated on two levels:

- a) The first concerns the intellectual, whose role and function are closely moulded by the cultural and economic conditions in which he lives.
- b) The second level is the formal one - where the environmental influence determines the choices made in art, which themselves

are related to the socio-economic conditions at the time in which the work is produced.

According to this theory, the realistic writer, by his own choice and inclination, attempts to present an exact mirror image of the socio-economic conditions of the world around him. Yet, the non-realist is equally affected by the changing role of the intellectual in relation to the prevailing socio-historical conditions.

Furthermore, the language, the form and the very structure of a literary work are directly related to the existing socio-economic systems.

I should like to illustrate this assertion:

A good example of the socio-economic influences on the role of the intellectual and the position of the writer, can be seen in Gabriele D'Annunzio (1863-1938). D'Annunzio becomes the interpreter of the changing position of the writer between the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th Century. He realizes that the socio-economic patterns have undergone a change, in a society where technical development and a capitalistic outlook predominate. The role of the poet and the intellectual are thus compelled to change. D'Annunzio is aware of the changes taking place around him. The socio-economic trends of the time are based on the logic of capital profits which allow a much smaller margin for the position and esteem of the intellectual. D'Annunzio is only too aware of this, and changes in his own mind the very concept of the intellectual. D'Annunzio becomes the protagonist of

the fashionable and wordly soirées in Rome as related in his book Il Piacere. In addition, he makes himself a spokesman for the ideals of the establishment in newspaper articles presenting himself as a poet, a man of action, a great lover, in short, as a man beyond the reaches of the norms of society.

In the preface to his novel Trionfo della Morte, D'Annunzio writes:

"Noi tendiamo l'orecchio alla voce del magnanimo Zarathustra... e prepariamo nell'arte con sicura fede l'avvento del...Superuomo".

"we lend our ears to the voice of the noble Zarathustra.... and we prepare the way in art for the coming of the....Uebermensch," the Superman".

D'Annunzio adapts his reading of Nietzsche to create his own doctrine of the "Uebermensch". It is a doctrine in praise of the few capable of exercising their own free will, and their right to dominate the masses by subjecting them to a standard of grandeur and pride beyond the moral and formal boundaries of society. The belief in the "Uebermensch" had been an acceptable concept in the 17th Century, and D'Annunzio set out to follow and imitate that concept. Many of his works are based on it and, as he intended to make his own life an inimitable work of art, his entire existence relied on the ideal of the "Uebermensch".

To this end D'Annunzio tried to turn his own origins into a myth: the fact that he was born in the month of March and on a Friday made people predict that he would not be an ordinary man. A legend

from the region of Abruzzi said that a person born during the month of March on a Friday would be a genius or a famous man. Taking advantage of this primitive belief, D'Annunzio spread the rumour that he was born at sea during a storm in a small fisherman's boat and that he wrote his first sonnet at the age of 10. Even his name and surname combined have a prophetic meaning: Gabriele - "the archangel Gabriel" and D'Annunzio - from the verb annunziare "to announce".

D'Annunzio's ideal was anti-realist. The "Ueberschensch" cannot remain within the boundaries of normal, everyday life, of ordinary feelings, but rather strives to express himself through exceptional personalities, who make use of a language or linguistic form that is out of the ordinary: perhaps even antiquated or technical, pompous or erudite. D'Annunzio does not want to create a series of sounds and colours that stretch beyond human sensibility; but rather to express a particular moral profile. Clearly conscious of the new position of the intellectual, D'Annunzio exalted his own image, using a number of existential character choices, to define his own new role and function. He seeks to replace lost universal values by identifying himself with Nietzsche's "Ueberschensch."

Since the prevailing economic conditions imply a series of modifications of the writer's position, the writer must in turn attempt to adapt his own position to the changing socio-economic

conditions. This idea is not altogether new: in Giovanni Boccaccio (1313-1375) we see a classic example of how changing socio-economic conditions bring about changes in the writer's existence. Fourteenth Century Italy sees a gradual shift from the superiority of the aristocracy to a new strengthening in the social position of the merchant class. The new social class brought about an essential shift in taste and sensibility, as well as a new perspective on moral and religious issues. Boccaccio adjusts to the circumstances by becoming a different type of intellectual from the men Dante and Petrarch had been. Dante, an innovator who had surpassed the limits of the poetry of his day, remained, however, within the bounds of medieval man's conception of the world, whereas Petrarch was thoroughly disillusioned with it. Boccaccio, on the other hand, is the forerunner of the Renaissance, and yields to the concept of man's freedom of choice in a more open and individualistic world.

According to an excellent essay by Walter Benjamin, the French poet Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867) was aware that his poetry had to find a market in the prevailing economic climate of the second half of the 19th century. The intellectual must not only choose a certain type of poetry that can meet the new demands of the market, but must also create a completely different image of himself. It is he who becomes the centre of attention - an erratic, eccentric person, entirely divorced from the realities that surround him and capable of attracting the approval or dislike of

his audience in some way.

Let us now consider how socio-economic conditions influence the language and the structure of literary texts. Again Boccaccio serves to illustrate this point. The Decameron offers a typical example of the narrative style of the short story of the time - that is, a number of stories, bound together by a frame, having its own particular setting and characters. This structure generates various levels of points of view within the single narrative discourse. Moreover, the setting of the stories and their basic plot draw the reader's attention to the cunning and shrewdness of the characters who are more than capable of solving the problems they come up against from time to time. This narrative structure admirably echoes the ability of the intellectual to adapt to changes in status brought about by the socio-economic conditions under the merchant class. Boccaccio is, therefore, essentially a man of his time who realized the significance of the sea-faring mercantile city-states as the new nerve-centres of an economy chiefly based on commerce. His shrewd characters are in effect the equivalent of the members of that class: quick-witted and practical in all circumstances and ready to improve their economic and social standing in the community.

The first story of the first day of the Decameron may serve as a good example. It tells the story of Ser Ciappelletto, a man of

ill repute who, nonetheless, through his shrewdness and cunning, is considered a Saint after his death and is in fact named Santo Ciappelletto.

In Boccaccio's world we are moving away from the transcendent value of the feudal age and we face, instead, the compelling charm of tolerance and worldliness. Dioneo, one of the characters of the "frame" reassures his lady companions who are concerned about the subject-matter of their tales, in the following way:

Ladies, I know as well as you, that the theme I have prescribed is a delicate one to handle; but I am not to be deterred by your objections, for I believe that the times we live in permit all subjects to be freely discussed, provided that men and women take care to do no wrong. Are you not aware that because of the chaos of the present age, the judges have deserted the courts, the laws of God and man are in abeyance, and everyone is given ample licence to preserve his life as best he may?

In a manner similar to Boccaccio, Alessandro Manzoni (1785-1873) in his historical novel, I Promessi Sposi (The Betrothed) expounds the outlook and mode of thinking of middle class individuals in and around Milan at the beginning of the 19th Century. It is a period in which the rising bourgeoisie seeks some kind of historical affirmation and is thus committed, even militarily, to upholding the

national unity of Italy and to strengthen its own position commercially and hence economically. In I Promessi Sposi, in a manner easily recognizable and appreciated by the writer's contemporary middle class readers, Manzoni manages to fuse the causes and ideals of the Italian Risorgimento. These were essentially based on nationalism and a renewed interest in cultural traditions; a specific hatred of foreigners and foreign rule and allegiance to the Holy Catholic creed. The language and subject matter of the novel are adapted to deal with this changing social, economic and cultural situation. Manzoni illustrates his ideal of political moderation and the reasonableness of nationalism through the character of Renzo, a humble artisan of 17th century Lombardy under Spanish dominion. The forerunner of the petit bourgeois of the 19th century, Renzo, through no fault of his own, is caught up in a whirlpool of events caused by the whims of his foreign overlords. He manages to overcome his handicaps and mishaps, ultimately achieving his goal of marrying Lucia, the female heroine. Manzoni's criticism of society, however, seems to concentrate on the characters representing the Milanese aristocracy of the time and, particularly, the foreign rulers. The former he sees deprived of social standing, and the latter reduced to the level of parasites; the one entangled in futile political issues and the other, engaged in arrogant pursuits of power. Manzoni, himself a member of the aristocracy, sees a new function in society in the social order that originated in the French Revolution. He becomes the

promoter of a new ideology that works towards improving the socio-political situation in which he lived.

During the 20th Century, the crisis which the novel was facing, not only in Italy but in the whole of Europe, supplies us with another significant example. The novel changes drastically: it becomes almost impossible to read, its main character is no longer a positive hero, and the traditional patterns of story-telling are no longer obeyed. The linear chronological plot, that goes from point A to a conclusion at point B, is abandoned. This phenomenon runs parallel to a well-defined social pattern. The intellectual middle class at the end of the 19th century and especially in the 20th century, to a large extent, felt left behind by the economic and political progress made during its time. The 20th century effectively heralds a period in which values are completely reversed, and where the intellectual is no longer the chief protagonist. The intellectual experiences an extreme disadvantage as a result of the stranglehold of ruthless materialism. The individual's chances of creating his own destiny are greatly diminished by the hold of monopolies and multi-national capitalist organizations. Italo Svevo's novel La Coscienza di Zeno, presents a middle class businessman who is unable to keep abreast with the economic realities of his time. In this novel, the traditional positive hero can no longer function in the changed socio-economic environment where the individual is crushed by impersonal profit-

making systems. It is not surprising therefore that, ultimately, the 20th century novel rebels against tradition and expounds the basic impossibility of writing by presenting itself as the anti-novel, reaching no conclusions and offering no solutions.

In his book, Se una notte un viaggiatore, written in 1979, Italo Calvino (1923-) is wrestling with novel writing. Even on the structural level of the plot this book shows definite signs of the influence of altered socio-economic conditions which can be attributed to the fall of the middle class. Previously riding the crest, this class finds itself handicapped by the emergence of monopolies. In this regard, I would like to come back to Lucien Goldmann's Sociology of the Novel. Goldmann slightly modifies Lucaks's theory, speaking, not so much of "reflection", as homology. He proposes sameness of relationship rather than a reflection and direct relationship between the writer and prevailing socio-economic conditions. According to this theory, the single literary work is subject to the same rules that determine the economic situation. Goldmann has outlined a literary history of the 20th century, on the basis of this relationship. The context of the 50's and 60's presents a frenetic pace in neo-capitalism. The economic situation is almost entirely controlled by powerful, industrial groups for whom all that is important is the furthering of their neo-capitalist ideals. They form a self-generating, self-justified and self-surviving system from which man has been

squeezed out, leaving him alienated and alone. The French Nouveau Roman according to Goldmann, is in direct relation with homology by revealing the complexities of the time - the neo-capitalists on the one hand, and the alienation of the individual on the other.

The influence of the socio-economic conditions on literary production begins with the writer. In writing a novel that is largely based on secular themes and existing conditions, the writer is drawing from a definite cultural background relating to the historical period in which he lives. Dante offers a convincing example of this. His poetry forms an integral part of the cultural and philosophical trends of his time. Dante's dream for Italy's political future has a fundamental effect on the Divina Commedia whose organic structure is based on definite cultural codes. This system of the Divina Commedia together with its ideologies and values are all directly linked to the socio-economic realities of the time. Let us retrace our steps to the concept of homology. Goldmann essentially advocates "parallel routes" between literature and socio-economic conditions and avoids creating any hierarchy, whereby the cornerstone would be held by the socio-economic conditions and literature would be subservient - subjected to and overwhelmed by these influences. Goldmann shows that literature retains a certain degree of independence by virtue of its own processes and structures. In conceding that these socio-economic influences cannot be altogether denied, Goldmann insists that

literature remains an entity with its own explicit systems. Today, structural and semiotic studies show that the influence of the existing socio-economic conditions is not only indirect but even respects the precise codes typical of literature. Literature expresses current socio-economic conditions through a set code of discourse which generates its own laws and referential world. In this way, a typical literary discussion can in no way be confused with a scientific debate or everyday conversation. Therefore when studying a literary text, which is based on its own set of rules, through which prevailing socio-economic conditions are discussed, we should single out the points of comparison between the non-literary conditions and these rules. Every literary work is an integral and essential part of the historical period in which it was written - by way of its language, its form, the subject and discourse and its functional role. In taking this argument further we may draw on another concept, that is Sklovsky's "defamiliarization". Sklovsky maintains that the writer attempts to name and define for the first time certain experiences on a social level. He must therefore adopt a specific language or invent the required terminology to deal with aspects of social life, which in certain instances, have long been ignored. Most of Boccaccio's ironic and humorous comments for example, operate on this level. They bring certain events to a new light. If on the one hand his work reflects the socio-economic changes brought about by the rising merchant class, on the other, through the autonomy of the work of

art and by means of the technique of "defamiliarization", he is able to draw the reader's attention to the features and peculiarities of the contemporary social milieu. In other words, he draws attention to the very changes that have taken place by means of ironic allusion to, and comparison with, preceding values.

Literary language has been intentionally created to emphasize concepts which are frequently overlooked in everyday speech.

Sklovsky denotes this as "defamiliarization" - where the common language is alienated from its general purpose and function, in order to underline new dimensions.

An illuminating example of the relationship between the text and the socio-economic conditions of the time is found in the literature of the Futurists and in particular the writings of Filippo Tommaso Marinetti (1876-1942).

The Futurists take analogy to its extreme and in wanting to set words completely free from their original meaning, they devise a telegraphic poetic style. The style is made up of a sequence of inconsistent images. Marinetti offers an appropriate example of this characteristic use of analogy, typical of Futurism:

Parole in liberta'

monoplano=balcone -rosa-rruota-tamburrrrrro-trapano-tafano

disfatta-araba bue sanguinolenza macello

ferito

rifugio

oasi

umidita' ventaglio freschezza

Words in liberty

Monoplane= balcony- rose- rrotating- drrrrrrum- drill- horse-fly

defeat- arab ox bloodiness slaughter

wounds

shelter

oasis

dampness fan freshness

Marinetti, by means of poetic devices reflects the reality of his time which is markedly a dynamic view of life. For instance, if one says: "I am a horse", the effect is more dynamic than saying "I am like a horse", because a direct relationship and association is established between the "I" and the "horse". Marinetti uses analogy because he wants to renew the linguistic form and to break with the conventions of the past, a break that reflects the dynamic force of the culture and economic activity of the time.

Cultural movement as seen by the Futurists is a search (without much success) for new means and new forms of expression for the artist in relation to himself and to the reality that surrounds him. The Futurists felt an urgent need for renewal and immense ennui for the past. The renewal of the Futurists takes place in the historical context of the progress made in science and technology. There is a dynamic surge from the socio-economic level on the part of industry and technology. It is a time where modern man takes control - a volatile, dynamic and intense man. Marinetti's analogical style in his poetry emphasizes the harmony between himself and his surroundings. He is in tune with the accelerated pace of socio-economic production, with the dynamic force of the economy and the advanced technology of the age.

Should lecturers in literature be encouraged to take a crash course in economics? Not really, but if socio-economic conditions influence literature, directly and indirectly, and if literature has its own systems and language, the student and teacher must understand to what degree socio-economic conditions influence a literary text, by way of the very system of the work itself. A knowledge of the period in which the work is written is paramount to understanding two things:

first, what type of influence the social, economic and cultural trends of the time have had on the literary work and
secondly, the reaction of literature to these influences. We are

dealing with a reciprocal action! While the literary work is influenced, at the same time, it also exercises ideological pressure on the milieu from which it derives. We must work through the historical period - keeping in mind a clear picture of the elements which characterize a specific era. We must recognize these historical and sociological features through the surface of the linguistic form.

On the other hand, we must have a clear idea of the specific function of literary discourse, in its various genres: drama, poetry and the narrative. Through these two stages - that is, from the specific reality of the literary work (with its specific language) to the historical situation, we come directly to the work itself. The text can then be interpreted as an experience that feels the effect of the prevailing socio-economic conditions and at the same time as an answer to the conditions in which it finds itself.

In conclusion, this dialectical relationship between experience and reaction makes the literary work a prophetic entity, one that paves the way to the possible worlds open to man. A modern French critic and poet, Henri Meschonnic, expresses more clearly the function of literary art:

the poet is always left with an inexhaustible mass of words and he will endlessly explore the possibilities of these words.