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Fred Inglis

Reading children's novels: notes on the politics of literature

'English, an academic discipline in the training of a teacher' *English in Education* 4 2 1970

This paper is intended as a case study. I have outlined elsewhere the framework within which such a study might go forward. Reading children's novels offers the kind of inquiry which teachers in training (or, as they say, in-service) might undertake. In this article I shall try to show that reading fiction is a social and cultural transaction which must take account of the total context within which our act of valuing must also take place; I shall go on to discuss the transaction between reader and author which occurs when one reads fiction; and I shall conclude by way of illustration with a detailed examination of the novels of Rosemary Sutcliff.

Children's novels, after only about 250 years of novel writing in English and only about half of these including attempts to write specifically for children, represent an already developed and recognizably peculiar area of fiction. To read them closely and intelligently is to launch a sustained and collaborative inquiry into the institutionalized fantasy which fiction is. It is a social, sociable, heavily conventional means of exploring and defining our fantasies and their relation to our realities. Even though we tend to read novels in a rather isolated, absorbed way, we are immitigably engaged in a social and cultural transaction – with the author *and* with the sense we have of our social identity. Consequently to study fiction (and, being teachers, to study children's fiction) is to stand at the intersection of various perspectives, and to stand there in an attempt to sort out some bearings, bearings which will help chart the main question of human and conscious teaching – where does the essential life of a society flow? Where is full life in the present maintained? Whereabouts does our culture renew and transmit itself? It is (I have suggested) within

the lines of collaborative response to these challenges that we may recover some living community in intellectual life and in our education. There is no knowing of course whether the area of life which we choose will reward inquiry, but even if we return with a bleak and desolate report – 'no life there' – we know to that extent better where we are. We are then able to take bearings as to value and significance from a more precisely drawn map of our culture. Clearly we don't expect children's fiction at the present time to justify such a negative report. Clearly, too, there appear to be many familiar routes into the territory. We know, now, how to handle and weigh out fiction. Well, that is right. We must begin where we can. But this familiarity of material may be itself deceptive, for there are accents, procedures and sightlines that I propose to take up which modify our literary-critical appraisals in radical ways. When however I name two of those which may help – social psychology and politics – it is not in any easily fashionable spirit. The utterly subversive challenge posed by English studies in England since the death of *The Calendar of Letters in* 1926 and the inception of *Scrutiny* in 1932 has been against a narrowly positivist and empirical philistinism; that is, a refusal to see that there are areas of experience which cannot be measured.The sharpest, most unaccommodating voice posing the challenge has been that of F R Leavis, no doubt among the greatest minds of his, of our, time.

I mention his name because his genius resides in the life's work which *demonstrates* the inadequacy of narrowly positivist thought and thought which judges value by number. That work registers a rare sense of responsibility towards these essential meanings and values of a society which can only renew themselves in the lives of individuals yet which contain and go beyond these lives. It seems to me that this challenge to 'Scientism' is, in spite of the blind and dreadful advances which the enemy has made since 1930, gathering some modest momentum. We are at a point in history at which the terrible evils of industrialization are declaring themselves most rawly and when the need for new and invigorated forms of thought is most urgent. At a time when there is widespread recognition that we must redraw the boundaries of our intellectual properties (curriculum (curriculum reform) English studies provide us with a grammar and a vocabulary which will permit such redistribution. The language of English studies allows us to raise matters of life and death with dignity and conviction. It has permitted its students to draw connections between a work of literature and its genesis in a society. But its own historial genesis equipped it with a number of reach-me-down stereotypes about reading fiction and ways in which fiction gets written – in Marxist language, the systems of production – which are cramped and ungenerous. If we come to children's fiction without at first being in too much of a hurry to read as critics we may see what familiar critical remarks are dismissive but

see Seymour Betsky's article *Universities Quarterly* winter 1969

inappropriate. Now I am absolutely clear that, responsible as we are to the life of our society in its fiction and in its children, we must at some stage get our value judgments right about children's fiction, as about adult fiction. But to report accurately from this segment of our culture requires a novel series of procedures. In a muddled way we recognize this. We come to read children's fiction with an eye on our specifically literary notions of a communicable tradition. At the same time we keep at the back of our minds vaguely pedagogic notions of psychological and linguistic development. And even more vaguely, sociological echoes of stratification theory and class bias in literature drift somewhere across our imaginations. Each of these preoccupations rises at times to the top of our consciousness. Half of our feelings, tangled in psychology, conscientiously anxious cliches about class differences and subcultures, and that rather half baked, soft middled, low keyed humanitarianism which passes for a value system amongst English teachers, pushes us towards saying, 'let the child find and choose his own books in his own good time; my books aren't necessarily his books.' The other half, under the impulse of the great tradition and the moralism which as index of the strength of English studies so widely penetrates school, university and college teaching, pushes us on to say, 'Here are fine books; read them; they'll do you good.' The tension between a vivid sense of social justice and individual values and a no less keen response to a continuing tradition and a common destiny is the source of our moral (and teaching) energy, as it is of many contradictions and confusions. To see this is to abandon the arid dichotomy between 'child and subject-centred teaching', which in turn gives rise (on the left, as it were) to a lot of rather canting rhetoric about the privacy of the child, and on the other side (the right) to the stiff lipped defence of set readers, *explications de texte* and salutary hard work on the notes.

The complex forces come into subtle and irresistible play when we, as teachers and students, decide to read children's fiction. We shall be reporting from a segment of our culture – children's experience – to which we give a quite unprecendented attention. We are now at a high point of enthusiasm in the study of children's experience, a point which would have looked to its earliest instigators, Blake, say, or Rousseau, manic in its intensity. To understand and to judge this state of affairs is to say something of final importance about ourselves and the meanings we give our lives. It is to face a question of which the political resonance is as deepseated as it is inescapable: what is the life of an individual child worth? Or to put the same question in another way: what is the life of an individual children's novel worth?

This question serves as our point of departure. It leads naturally to those more general ones which, as I have mentioned earlier, might serve as the focus for an intellectual community, the centre of reference by which

different concerns align their perspectives. Questions such as: 'How does our culture renew itself? Where is it alive or dead? What religious or political direction has it?' Study of this sort, having a positive centre and a positive intent in the sustenance and replenishment of a common culture, provides for children, students or teachers the conviction which our work must have if it is to mean anything more than the degraded images of self interest conventionally available in late capitalist society.

II

I would like to suggest a frame within which to perform the work. And again I'd refer to the sketch I have set out elsewhere and am here trying to exemplify.

We are making an effort to describe the total context within which a fiction has its genesis and is read. We need therefore a sociology of knowledge. That is to say, we want in what will be an inevitably patchy way to understand the interplay between the elements of our study: between reader and author, reader and his social experience, author and *his* social experience. We try to see how they know (or read) what they know (and read). In trying to perceive these contexts we must draw on vocabularies and stand in positions which have been unfamiliar. We cannot, no doubt, have read everything; but some errors of interpretation and value are corrigible. Team teaching can mean many awful things, but the least it can mean is that we shall learn from what other approaches to a shared experience can tell us. The second stage of adequate cultural inquiry is to relate what we study to our ideas of social and moral change. If the first stage concentrates (in reading fiction) on the expectations of authors and readers towards each other, the second stage may roughly be said to apply itself to the experience shared and what each contributor makes of it. It is here that we raise explicitly political questions about the relation of the shared experience to its society, and questions too about the discrepancy between what the author makes of his experience and what the readers make of it in their various ways. A further effort at detachment is needed in order to throw into relief the fact that we are adults appraising the significance of these forms of cultural life – these children's novels – partly on our own terms but partly on children's. That is to say, we must know in as inclusive and searching a way as possible what it means to us to invite children (as children or as incipient adults?) to read these books and not others. And as we become conscious of the need for this knowledge, our intention must then be as Leavis says 'to make fully conscious and articulate the sense of value which "places" the book', to bring to an unusually developed intensity the specific gravity of the work, its moral weight. This is the final stage of a continuous process and of course it penetrates the whole enterprise. Not that the value judgment is itself anything to settle for finally; like any judgment

F R Leavis
The Common Pursuit
Chatto 1952
Penguin 1969

worth having it is subject to 'testing and retesting and wider experience'. Nor is it, as by this stage of my argument should be clear, a matter of simply deciding whether the book is any good. What we hope to have done instead is to provide as rich an account as possible of the context within which the work occurs and within which our act of valuing must also take place. We cannot, at this time of day, ascribe a timeless value to a work or see it with the eyes of God. The work and our judgment of it exist within coordinates of time and space. This is absolutely not to say that acts of valuation lose themselves in a meaningless jumble of relativist signals, any more that it is to say we can make arbitrary contemporary meanings out of past works. But we find in literature what we need. We take from literature what we are looking for. The integrity rests in being sure that what we are looking for is there. In talking of the nature of English studies and their indispensable centrality at the present time, Leavis writes elsewhere of the relevance of studying Eliot. Eliot, a supremely great poet in spite of his omissions and misvaluings, offers an exceptional example of a mind reading the English literature and history of the past in order to see what they can do for the present. The disciplined study of what Eliot made of the seventeenth century (and of Dante) both as he records it in his criticism and as his thought transpires in his poetry supply for the student in a school of English 'the living principle, the creative and unifying principle of life, made strongly active as I'm suggesting it should and could be, (which) will affect every patch in the total field of work and make all the difference.'

F R Leavis
TLS
29 May 1969

I am proposing that our special interest as teachers in the significance of fiction for children provides us with a strictly comparable inquiry. Obviously, studying Eliot is not a qualitatively comparable activity to

A Charles Keeping illustration for *The Lantern Bearers* (OUP)

studying a children's novelist, but both offer ways of testing the creative life of a society and both require, at different points, different kinds of specialist guides. Studying children's fiction is more like studying bestsellers than it is like studying Eliot, but such inquiry is a necessary part of a civilized education. Understanding a culture constitutes a strenuous effort to resist the evils of specialization, themselves the products of an accelerating technology, and this means in turn carrying our efforts to understand into many areas of cultural life, and carrying them there in liaison with other specialists. 'Down these mean streets a man must go.' Well, the streets I propose to go down aren't very mean: amongst the houses of fiction I intend to visit only Rosemary Sutcliff's. At the same time I would like to maintain liaison with a student of literature who keeps up his politics, and beforehand it is timely to summarize what a social psychologist tells us about the transaction between readers and their authors.

III

'Reader and Author' *Experience into Words* Chatto 1963

'Considered Experience: the invitation of the novel' *English in Education* 2 1 1967

'The Notion of Escape in Fiction and Entertainment' *Oxford Review 4* 1967

'The Bond with the Author' *Use of English* May 1971

see also 'Psychological Processes in the reading of Fiction' *British Journal of Aesthetics* 2 1962

I can claim no originality for the stage of the inquiry described here. But originality is beside the point. What follows is a summary of a group of notable papers by Denys Harding.

Harding starts out from the main premise that reading a novel is an inescapably *social* action. Our response (and children's) to situations in a novel is instantly evaluative, though the value judgment may change with time. For the novel *(les nouvelles)*, perhaps more than any other artistic form, makes nonsense of the distinction between literature and life. Novels cannot ever be said , as it were, to lie along a scale at one end of which is raw, day to day living and at the other heavily stylized and diagrammatic novels like Ivy Compton-Burnett's, or semantic jokes like *Tristram Shandy* or overelaborate, occasional verse like the 18th century pastoralists. If we are faithful to our experience, we surely recognize that novels occur to us much in the same way as gossip, anecdotes, large areas of conversation, even larger areas of experience in which we take part as onlookers. Think how readily we watch a couple of people, or a group, in some kind of conflict. As we watch them we come to a complex evaluation of what has happened, guessing at what some people feel while others make their feelings explicit in words or gesture. Similarly, when a colleague or friend tells us some piece of school or college gossip, we instantly range ourselves sympathetically with various sides in (say) a dispute, not only feeling *with* our friends but also *against* other factions yet able at the same time to imagine one's opponents' feelings and in our sympathy feeling *for* our friends as well as with them feeling protective, irritated, surprised. Thus we are socially involved in such events, even in gossip across a cup of coffee. The nature of this involvement is not just analogous to the involvement we feel with the characters in a novel; it is at many points coincident. In either

situation we are never 'mere' or passive listeners or spectators; our range of interest may extend or modify itself as a result of what we watch. We never see only a reflection of that range thrown back at us. Our psychology is endlessly busy, moving swiftly from reality to memory to fantasy and back to supposition. We constantly imagine, evaluate and discard possibilities other than those in front of us, and we perform this astonishingly rapid filtering and sorting operation during a dialogue with our interlocutor and the rest of his audience. If he is really there in front of us relating what the prefect said to the head, the dialogue is spoken aloud, and our reactions to the story, our appeals to the other listeners and our interjections into the story become part of the total experience which we recollect and weigh up. A similar dialogue is going on when we listen to an author, even a dead one. We hold a silently evaluative conversation with him and make it clear by our appeals to other readers in discussion that we are looking for endorsement of our responses. ('This is so, isn't it?' 'Yes, but. . . . ') Even if we never attend a formal discussion we still make the appeals to a shared and social context of experience, as we read. At the same time therefore as we respond to, sympathize with, like or dislike characters in a narration, we see them alongside the author, as *his* voice selects and distorts and renders. Even very small children are sometimes aware of this refracted relationship with the people in the story. They ask 'Was it really true (or are you having me on?)' or 'why does it say that?' Quite often, for example, Beatrix Potter or A A Milne break the storytelling convention, or give it a double focus within the tale itself. Even a four or five year old can be quite clear that fiction is 'a convention for enlarging the scope of the discussions we have with each other about what may befall' (Harding's words). So a four year old knows that Peter Rabbit is naughty in ways that he may be naughty, but is in danger of much more drastic reprisals – becoming a rabbit pie for Mr MacGregor. The four year old, like the adult, discusses with the author his imaginary and offered judgments, and may well reject them, either out of an intense sympathy or by being bored. The discussion with the author, and the subsequent discrimination, will be according to the limits of more or less advanced criteria.

These processes are immediately recognizable. It is important to remember that they are not truistic. English students and teachers at all levels have for so long made such confident play with very different models of the psychology of reading that there needs to be an explicit challenge made. Conventional teaching accounts of reading behaviour deploy as their essential concepts 'vicarious experience', 'identification', 'escape', 'light entertainment', 'wish-fulfilment', 'fantasy'.

But a novel is *not* vicarious experience; it is reported and (perhaps)

imaginary experience. We do not 'identify' with the characters; we respond in complex ways with, to, and for them out of the framework of all our prior experience, literary or not. No reader imagines that his alleged desires are gaining actual satisfaction. Rather, what is happening is that his desire for affection or romantic love, for adventure, prestige or cheerfulness defines itself in a new context. The reader discusses with the novelist the possibilities of giving his desires statement in a social setting. This is not to say that the level of such discussion may not be embarrassingly low, nor that the desires themselves may not be horrifying. But this is not at all the same as saying that the reader identifies with a character and lives through vicarious experience. We are not satisfying our desires in any fiction (obviously including TV); we are defining them and it is worth remarking that to relinquish one's desires, fantasies and aspirations is to give up hopes for oneself as a free man and in a profound sense to release one's grasp upon life.

As a function of our humanity, then, we constantly imagine entry into other people's lives and derive from these excursions an extension of what we imagine to be possible in life. We do this with snippets of overheard conversation or glimpses through half-curtained windows, with three-line paragraphs in *Titbits*, or the evening paper, with fragments of news on TV or radio. (E.g. the tiny story in *The Guardian*, 23 November 1970, reporting the floods in Pakistan, which described six small children who floated the waves for three days in a wooden box. We need no more information to be sympathetic with their experience.) These scraps alert us to human possibilities, trivial or important, which have occurred to other people but knowledge of which develops, refines *or* coarsens our personal maps of humanity and our own significance upon them. To an expanding degree as we experiment with more adult and intelligent literature we live through the same process. Our study of the cultural life which flows through a novel must therefore include our imaginative estimate of what the novel means to the life of its various readers. If the novel is institutionalized fantasy, what do we learn of that society which at the first hand generates the fantasy in an individual writer, and at the second takes the new work back to itself and makes it part of ongoing social experience? Perhaps I can go over this social psychology again before laying another scanning grid across the inquiry.

1 Reading a novel is a social transaction.
2 Novels or any fiction are a continuous part of social experience.
3 Reading a novel is very similar to being an onlooker of human actions.
4 We do not 'identify' with characters in a novel nor live through wish fulfilment; we respond to a total situation which may clarify or confuse our wishes.
5 Reading novels, like any other experience, is evaluative.

6 In our rapid and elaborate processes of evaluation, we understand ourselves to be considering new human potentialities in the company of the author.

Last a further note on the idea of 'escape'. I cannot now discuss the multifoliate purposes to which we put our reading – quite literally, what are the uses of literacy. But I suggest that the idea of escape is often too happily used in the condemnation of what are obviously poor works of literature. We may 'escape' from our immediate world into a much darker and more horrifying one; 'escape' may be narcotic or reassuring. When we escape with the most intense relief into a novel, it may be that the novel is a relief because it is much more intelligent and rewarding than the tedious staff meeting from which we have 'escaped'. We regularly need respite when repairs (or repression and evasion) can go on. Thus we cannot say any work is necessarily a form of 'escape', though we can say a good deal about its quality. We can speak censoriously of escape as regression only when the activity is self deceiving, a deliberate manipulation of our humanity in order to alter feelings without altering conditions, a pursuit of a fraudulent solace in which we purposely retreat from our usual level of cultural interest and stamina.

IV

These last remarks may too often be fired blank at teachers and parents reading children's literature. For it is necessarily true that the present flowering of children's literature is, in its genesis and sociology, an adult product: the conditions of production, distribution and consumption are created by adults. It seems to me further true that the enthusiasm amongst many adult readers for for Alan Garner, Henry Treese, William Mayne, Philippa Pearce, Rosemary Sutcliff and the rest is often a disguised taste for *Kitsch,* for the thoroughgoing, rank, tasty meat and gravy of an old fashioned bestseller. For reasons which are surely part of our study a number of intelligent adults may be said in their wholesale enthusiasm for some children's novelists to be reading well below their proper standards. This is best exemplified in the extraordinary popularity and badness of J R R Tolkien (most of all when he writes allegedly *for* adults), but I am taking the altogether more distinguished Rosemary Sutcliff for my example. One opens any of her novels at random, and finds at once these late Gothic resonances, the misty accents and landscapes of an iambic rhetoric which wrings the solar plexus of all those of us brought up on Rider Haggard, Kipling, Stevenson, Scott and Sir Henry Newbolt:

Rosemary Sutcliff
The Eagle of the Ninth
OUP 1954

> They looked back when they had gone a few paces, and saw him standing as they had left him, already dimmed with mist, and outlined against the drifting mist beyond. A half-naked, wild-haired tribesman, with a savage dog against his knee; but the wide, well-drilled movement of his arm as he raised it in greeting and farewell was all Rome. It was

From *The Lantern Bearers* (OUP)

the parade-ground and the clipped voice of trumpets, the iron discipline and the pride. In that instant Marcus seemed to see, not the barbarian hunter, but the young centurion, proud in his first command, before ever the shadow of the doomed legion fell on him. It was to that centurion that he saluted in reply.

Then the drifting mist came between them.

Rosemary Sutcliff
Dawn Wind
OUP 1961

Listen to her fatal mastery of plangent cadences:

> The murmur of prayers in the Latin tongue reached him in the quiet. It was the first time that he had known a Christian place of worship since the summer when his world had fallen to ruins. He remembered all at once the grey stone preaching cross in the hills, and behind all the silence of the service the deep contented drone of bees in the bell heather; he remembered, as he had not remembered them for years, Priscus and Priscilla, who would have shared their cloak with him . . . . Slowly the sore hot place of his heart grew quiet within him.

Think of her boldly drawn villains, men born straight into the dynasties of B Sapper's Carl Peterson, Buchan's Dominic Medina, Baroness Orczy's silkily impassive French inquisitor:

> 'Ah yes, I had forgotten that you both contrived to come alive, together, out of that fight.' Vadir's light eyes flicked him, like the careless flick of a whiplash, and came to rest on the long white spear-scar that ran out of his torn sleeve. His pale brows rose a little, and the mobile mouth lifted into a half smile. 'I have never seen you stripped. How many scars the like to that one are there on your back?' he asked softly. 'Or can you perhaps fly faster than a spear?'

The doglike subordinates, taciturn, resourceful Men Friday, Chingachgook, to the hero's Natty Bumpo (a part of Rosemary Sutcliff's development is the story of the subordinate-become-hero in *The Lantern Bearers*):

> Esca tossed the slender papyrus roll on to the cot, and set his own hands over Marcus's. 'I have not served the Centurion because I was his slave,' he said, dropping unconsciously into the speech of his own people. 'I have served Marcus, and it was not slave-service . . . . My stomach will be glad when we start on this hunting trail.'

Remember the commanding simplicity of the dramatic climaxes in the novels: Aquila's lighting the symbolic beacon on Richborough tower in *The Lantern Bearers*: the death of the villain Vadir on the god's horse in *Dawn Wind*; the return of the Eagle in the middle of the initiation rites in *The Eagle of the Ninth*. Behind these moments stand Kipling's memorable tableaux (the late Imperial subalterns of the Wall in *Rewards and Fairies*, the powerful evocation of Sussex in July right through *Puck of Pook's Hill*) and before him the great nineteenth century melodramatists – Walter Scott, Marie Edgeworth, Charlottle Bronte, the early George Eliot – the scaffold scene in *Adam Bede*, the flood in *The Mill on the Floss*; supremely, the master of such moments, Dickens: the death of Bill Sykes; the house split down the middle in *Little Dorrit*. Lady Dedwick in Tom-all-alone's; Sidney Carton's execution; Magwitch recaptured; on and on, an incomparable rollcall.

In a much smaller way, of course, Rosemary Sutcliff stands in this line. Now there is no doubt that a great novelist commands as part of his qualifying equipment a popular rhetoric – Lawrence is the great example of this century. But Rosemary Sutcliff's muted trumpets do not have the orchestration of an authentic popular voice; one can hear in most of the examples the prose ring with a certain wistfulness; a faded, regretful glimmer plays over its surfaces and rhythms, and her popularity amongst schoolteachers seems marked more by a need to hear these antique harmonies again rather than by a fully mature response to a great gust of elemental feeling – the kind we respond to in Mrs Dombey's death, that astonishing combination of horror, prurience, pathos and magnificence.

> 'Mamma!' said the child.
> The little voice, familiar and dearly loved, awakened some show of consciousness, even at the ebb. For a moment, the closed eyelids trembled, and the nostrils quivered, and the faintest shadow of a smile was seen.
> 'Mamma!' the child cried, sobbing aloud, 'Oh dear Mamma! Oh dear Mamma!'
> The doctor gently brushed the scattered ringlets of the child aside from the face and mouth of the mother. Alas how calm they lay there; how little breath there was to stir them!

> Thus, clinging fast to that slight spar within her arms, the mother drifted out upon the dark and unknown sea that rolls round all the world.

The collusion of writer and audience which we need to study in the case of a children's novelist is perhaps explicable by comparison with Dickens, but only in a very much more local way. Yet this is where we might start by comparing Rosemary Sutcliff to bestsellers of the past, and by defining her relationship with a certain social group, a group which contains but goes beyond her audience. For the explanatory relationships between society and culture are not *only* a matter of content. We shall of course learn a great deal by drawing up a system of the typical features of bestselling or popular literature or of the characteristics of a social system. But we shall learn more about the life of a society (and its unnoticed deaths) by trying to see the nonconscious structures which shape a writer's work and are the inescapable product of his having written within the framework of a particular social group. When I say *nonconscious* this does not mean *subconscious*.The English mode of criticism tends to overestimate the individual in understanding the significance of a work of literature. Thus we undertake the utterly fruitless business of charting the influences of one writer upon another. Such studies see meaning as linked only to biography and psychology. In addition we must scrutinize the contexts of a novel for its significant structure, the shape of which fixes the arc of a writer's gesture, much as it determines the inflections of everyday speech. To understand the situation of a present day, liberal-spirited teacher with a training in the humanities and a struggling sense of history is to understand the genesis of Rosemary Sutcliff's novels. It is also to draw in the heavily political overtones of any literary study. For such an imaginary teacher finds in these novels the grander chords which seems to have been extinguished in the universe of adult novels – to have been absent indeed in modern literature since the death of Yeats. But there is a need still to hear those notes struck which have gone mute in the rest of literature, to find a prose which moves with ceremony and amplitude, with a portly courtesy and forgotten grace. I cannot help it if this analysis comes near the complaints of letters to *The Daily Telegraph* – 'The age of chivalry is dead'; Rosemary Sutcliff is the best of a mixed group of writers who register objection to a gaunt and toneless language, inept as to rhetoric, graceless as to manner. These writers have no academy to sustain them, and their only set of beliefs is that pale, anxious and rinsed-out liberalism which is the best most of us can do by way of a contemporary world picture. What therefore comes through as the strongest impulse to feelings is often an intensity of loss and regret, not bitter but intensely nostalgic for the the sweetness of a youth and a landscape intolerably vanished (it does not seem to me partial to suggest that the recognition of loss finds its equivalence in either the rancour or the level distaste of so much adult literature and that the obverse of these feelings is a gladness and a generosity which can find no expression amongst the mean and poisioned images of life an in industrialized and capitalist landscape). Rosemary

Lucien Goldrann 'The Sociology of Literature: status and problems of method' *International Social Science Journal* XIX 4 1967

Sutcliff invokes time and again great images of an organic literature – pure water, oak, ash, may, blackthorn, a cleansed and abundant landscape; sorrel, heart's ease, eglantine, laurel; wren, nightingale, lark; honey bees, fresh milk, woodsmoke. At moments her over-descriptive prose begins to sound like a catalogue of Habitat living – the scrubbed tables, the sheepskin rugs, the scoured flags. But this country lore is another symptom of a disinherited present. She appeals to a symbolism which is largely destroyed and she does so because she needs to disbelieve in the reality of that destruction. The appeal is one detail of the significant structure of her novels. It signals that relation in which she stands as the most telling representative of children's novelists to a certain body of ideas – the ideas of an amorphous and lumpen-intelligentsia with a strained notion of social function, a confused but tenacious responsibility towards a theory of social justice and towards national high culture, whose only fixed points of reference are certain principles of personal relations and individual privacy best expressed in the way they treat their children. Rosemary Sutcliff's novels define the response of such a group to the loss of the English landscape both in itself and as a symbol of one version of Englishness; they further define a powerful and unfulfilled longing for a richer moral vocabulary and an ampler, more graceful and courteous style of living such as at the present time can only be embodied in a stylized past; the novels go on to sort and clarify an absent centre in the lives of so many of the social group whose structure of beliefs, economics, aspirations, moral rhythms and intellectual effort she embodies. The novels reconstruct a moral authority carried by the idea of the metropolis (Rome) and become ritual in the archaic and beautiful system of allegiance, fealty, gesture and rite which characterizes the tales. To uphold the authority gives meaning to men's lives, and this meaning is conveniently discoverable in epic battle. It is a tautology to say that the tribal ceremonies and ritual battles appeal to adolescent readers. That is my whole point. She writes of these experiences because they express for her (and her social group) in the only available language an adequate response to the times.

For the group of Roman-British novels *are* an adequate response. The attitudes I have summarized add up to a powerfully conservative and elegiac view of history. But there is much more to be said for the courage and moral stamina of liberal ideology. The history of the twentieth century has not left it unmarked. Rosemary Sutcliff's novels are also stained deeply by a profound sense of the possibilities of change, of an unknown future, not finite nor apocalyptic, but with a subtle, palpitating play of alternatives deriving from its past. Even though in the early *Eagle of the Ninth* and *The Silver Branch* the young heroes take it for granted that loyalty is unquestioning and *any* usurper morally outrageous, the heroes themselves suffer and change. In *The Lantern Bearers* the presence of violent change is the theme of the book, and the bitter suffering of the hero is the rendering of a writer who knows the refugees' experience of post 1933 Europe. This

C Walter Hodges illustrated *The Eagle of the Ninth* (OUP)

novel makes Rosemary Sutcliff's gradual search explicit in its title. Aquila is much less confident, much more morally adrift than the earlier heroes. He registers a strong sense of historical dialectic: of forces in shifting conflict and collision, the new direction of which is the necessary result of social contradictions.

Rosemary Sutcliff
The Lantern Bearers
OUP 1959

> 'I sometimes think that we stand at sunset,' Eugenus said after a pause. 'It may be that the night will close over us in the end, but I believe that morning will come again. Morning always grows again out of the darkness, though maybe not for the people who saw the sun go down. We are the Lantern Bearers, my friend; for us to keep something burning, to carry what light we can forward into the darkness and the wind.'
> Aquila was silent a moment, and then he said an odd thing. 'I wonder if they will remember us at all, those people on the other side of the darkness.'

This note is the prelude to *Dawn Wind* in which we see the politics of change clear their lines a little. For the second time the hero is forced into slavery, and the subjugation and cruelty of the twentieth century gets onto the page. This hero does not escape brutality in order to fight against it from the other side; he lives through it to win a new sort of identity, a balance of uneasy forces meeting yet another new interruption from an unknown ideology. What he emerges with, in its slight, stoical, bruised way, is a positive response to the new dawn, the determination to make a life, of sorts, more or less where he is. The compromised, sufficient victory marks the end of its base-born hero, loses itself in (for our purposes) *coups de theatre*, though there are signs that the author may be moving towards more specifically adult historical fiction.

V

I have tried to indicate the political nature of literature by brief reference to a single writer. In this argument I have suggested that to account for a politics of literature we have to go further than inward study of the work. By politics I have meant not just the obvious clash of generals and rulers, the sanctions and punishments, the conflict of freedom and slavery, the wars and parleys which we are already familiar with in folktale. (To make my point, I would say that Tolkien's novels are not about politics at the explicit level at all: they represent an exercise in the politics of an amnesiac nostalgia.) The political structure of Rosemary Sutcliff's novels, or of any novels, is provided by the system of responses to a given historical situation at the time they are written. An individual appraisal of a writer is a help, but what is needed is a key explanatory insight. Georg Lukacs offers it, in his concept of *The Historical Novel* as the major form born in response to the dialectic of modern industrial history. 'Social reality is always reconstructing earlier process of structuration.' The authenticity of the historical novel reposes in the successful expression and diagnosis of this movement. Rosemary Sutcliff is an honourable

George Lukacs
The Historical Novel
Merlin Press 1962
Penguin 1969

representative of her tradition struggling with the idea of change in our time. The decency and limited range of her politics mean that in some ways she speaks up for a largish and not unimportant group of people. The fact that she writes for children and is widely read by teachers further means that her politics are those most likely to go into circulation at any level above that of wage bargains and productivity settlements. She cannot, as Leavis unforgettably tells us Dickens does, 'see how the diverse inter-playing currents of life flow strongly and gather force here, dwindle there from importance to relative unimportance, settle there into something oppressively stagnant, reassert themselves elsewhere as strong new promise'. She is writing too simply to maintain tension between multiplicity and organization. She doesn't allow sufficient life to the characters she condemns, and there is therefore no radical criticism within her own work of what she affirms. There is little occasion therefore to study the meanings – moral and political – of antagonisms within her novels, which is what gives range and tragedy to a larger work. But her position as a children's writer makes her a figure peculiarly worth our attention if we would read our own cultural bearings with any accuracy. She is a writer of undoubted grace and strength. She rewards the searching treatment I have attempted. And having read her, we find that she has spoken up in the present-day accents of the unkillable member of our society since 1800, the Liberal intellectual woman.

F R Leavis
Lectures in America
Chatto 1969