

A Study of Canadian Social Realist Literature

Neo-Marxist, Confucian, and Daoist Approaches

加拿大社会现实主义文学研究

——新马克思主义与儒道视角

WEI LI & JOHN Z. MING CHEN

魏莉 陈中明 著



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Preface

This monograph studies how literary and social theories have influenced and inspired English Canadian writers. The specific literary theory is realism in various forms, ranging from rural to urban and from surreal to magic. But our key focus is clearly on social realism. On the other hand, the social theories under scrutiny include Marxism, Confucianism, and Daoism. Such an inclusive approach could not have been possible a decade or two ago, of course; however, given the current 21st century globalization of all things under the sun, we can now afford to forge ahead with what used to be impossible.

It is entirely appropriate to continue our preface with a citation from another preface, since it serves fittingly not only as a theoretical foundation of, but also as a social and intellectual background to, our current study with new critical approaches. Terry Eagleton, in his recent 2008 “Preface to the Anniversary Edition” to *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, writes: “Things have changed for the better since I taught Marxist theory every week at Oxford in the early 1970s in an informal session which was not even advertised on the university lecture list, which was widely disapproved of by my colleagues, and which operated less like an orthodox seminar than a kind of refuge for ideologically battered students. Most students of literature can now expect a theory course on offer, a fact that one naturally welcomes” (vii-viii). Eagleton’s preface cited here was written in celebration of the inaugural edition of his by now well-respected 1983 book. Twenty-eight years have passed since then, and Marxist or neo-Marxist criticism has occupied a legitimate place in literary and cultural studies. In line with this development and taking a Marxist or

neo-Marxist critical approach, this book has a dual purpose.

First, it examines the effects of realism as a literary theory on a freshly-established “canon” of English Canadian works from the late 1920’s to the end of the 2009. Since the term realism may sound controversial or hopelessly outmoded in this postmodern, or to a rare few (e.g., Patricia Merivale), post-postmodern era, some words of explanation are in order. For one reason, literary trends often seem to move in a somewhat Hegelian dialectic so that the latter carries forward some qualities of the former; such a dialectic renders the site of demarcating literary movements fraught with uncertainties. Internationally, the twentieth-century literary phenomena—realism, modernism, and postmodernism—in divergent cultures overlap in time, co-exist in space, and complement one another in themes, forms, and ideologies. A glance at some of the most vocal and influential postmodern theorists may help illustrate this point. Linda Hutcheon, for instance, agrees, with another critic, that the “realist epistemology” is still a very much alive issue in “our [postmodern] culture” (74); she also accepts Lukacs’s view that postmodernism shares with realist fiction a common use of “historical events, duly transformed into facts, ...” though she advances that postmodernism makes blatantly obvious this process (*The Politics of Postmodernism* 74). Likewise, Fredric Jameson, in “Postmodernism and Consumer Society” posits that postmodernism arises in “reactions against” high modernism’s extremities and ruptures with realism, especially its ivory tower practices typified by Joyce and Proust in fiction, and Pound and Eliot in poetry (111-112). One measure of postmodernism against its immediate literary precursor is to blur or efface some key “separations” (112) between high culture and mass culture and revert to mundane, lived reality and to popular forms of literary expressions. This populist gesture recalls, not too distantly, the Brechtian-realist’s advocacy of approaching everyday subject matter in forms and language of high accessibility and intelligibility (1975). Though we have no intention whatsoever of equating realism with postmodernism, these signs of continuity are not to be brushed aside lightly.

In the Canadian context, a similar line of continuity as much as of rupture is visible. Robert Wilson in *Ambivalence*, a highly suggestive title in spite of the word’s own semantic meaning, points to the stubbornness and popularity of realism in English Canadian literature and the latter not being “receptive to

postmodernism", especially outside the non-academic circle (1990: 52-53). On a separate occasion, Hutcheon makes a strong case for realism and identifies this peculiarly Canadian phenomenon when she remarks: "... the strength of realist tradition could always be seen here [Canada]" . Her more incisive argument, however, points to the "conventions of realism" being resurrected and contested by postmodernism (*The Canadian Postmodern* 207-208) in a synthetic process (in Hegel's sense), though she does not employ this concept.

Other tangible grounds exist to justify our realist enterprise if a wider perspective is adopted; realism as a literary movement seems to be slowly making its way back to center stage in some quarters of the world. Deep down south and on the other side of the Atlantic, a significant amount of Latin American and British postmodernist work is renowned precisely because of its magic realism (an objectionable term of course) exemplified respectively by Garcia Marquez and Salman Rushdie (Soderlind 227). On the North American scene, Jameson finds it necessary to have a chapter dealing with magic realism in his very recent work on postmodernism, *Signatures of the Visible*. We are aware that the term is associated more with postmodernism than with realism in current critical discourse but as Wilson perceptively notes, some Canadian critics have tried to recuperate or incorporate this "magic realism" in the oeuvre of Robert Kroetsch (by far the best known English Canadian postmodernist) (W. H. New 1989: 290-291) into the tradition of "frontier yarn, tall tale or barnyard humour" of prairie realism (1990: 61). New's Editorial in the Spring 1993 issue of *Canadian Literature*, "Nineties Quizzes", stresses the relations between realism and postmodernism (2).

More overtly and without the ambiguity characteristics of postmodernism, some American critics (e. g. , Tom Wolfe 1989) and American Chinese writers (e. g. , Nie Hua Ling 1989), have independently of one another, hammered out loud manifestos for realism. Even Jameson, far better known as a postmodern culturist, calls for a return to a "new realism", after his previous neutral position on realism and modernism (Kellner 1989: 35). Across the Pacific, many Chinese novelists and theorists (Xu Zhaohuai and Ding Fan, for instance 1989) are also calling for a return to realism or neo-realism in wake of the Chinese postmodernity heyday observed since 1985 (Wang Ning 1993). It could safely be said that the realist spectre in different masks still hovers

somewhere globally; it is also clear that the term realism has already resurfaced though with new qualifiers. While the term (and its befitting epithets) as used under new circumstances may stand for divergent and innovative forms, approaches, and techniques, careful distinctions should be made in relation to terminology. We shall deal with the persistence of the term below and in ensuing chapters.

Unfortunately, some of the realist novels (e.g. Durkin, Carter and even Baird) to be discussed have been either neglected and/or deliberately ignored, because they do not (and cannot) fit comfortably into the selection process of literary critics or anthologists, particularly of a liberal persuasion. Granted, the rather belated study of English Canadian social realism appears undoubtedly, to the wary eyes at least, as a historical oddity; however, these un-canonical texts deserve due consideration. Larry McDonald, in "The Politics of Influence: Birney, Scott, Livesay and the Influence of Politics", presents a sobering finding. After assiduous research into nearly a dozen of "standard" guidebooks and anthologies, all purposely appended, he reaches the conclusion that English Canadian canonization has excluded, slighted, neutralized, or marginalized various texts (poetry or fiction) with socialist tendencies (434-445). Hence, part of our effort is to recuperate these "lost" or "othered" (in the expanded sense of Spivak's term, 1985) texts, and to (re)access, and (re)assess them from a new angle. Admittedly, our corpus has to be eclectic given the limitations of time.

The second principal purpose of the book is to cross discursive or disciplinary boundaries and reckon socialism^① as a sociopolitical discourse into the account of a "school" of writing—social realism, and in some exceptional cases, socialist realism. (The latter has so far been stigmatized, not without reasons, in a large portion of liberal critical discourse.) At stake are two issues. To begin with, the conventional and dominant liberal critical practice must be called into question. The cases of Northrop Frye and Wayne Booth are most illustrative. The Frye of *Anatomy of Criticism* champions pure, formalist and archetypal criticism divorced both from other disciplines and from social reality. This double negation is changed when he advocates a more open-minded critical methodology in *The Modern Century* and *The Educated Imagination* that considers, among others, Marxist and Freudian theories. In the eighties

he reaches the point where he associates art with life: "I merely stress the possibility, importance, and genuineness of a response to the arts in which we can no longer separate that response from our social context and personal commitments" (Booth 1988: 420). Booth, the eminent rhetorical guru, undergoes an even more dramatic conversion. By his own admission, he has twice been infuriated and then persuaded by Jameson's works respectively (*Marxism and Form* and *The Political Unconscious*) into taking the political seriously in his contemplation of formal or literary devices and techniques used in his two major works, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* and *The Company We Keep* (1983: 413-415; 1988: 5). The two non-Marxist critics' increasing urge to consider other subjects (philosophy, religion, politics, etc.) and their eventual courage to embrace more than the purely literary gave them both a fresh and wide ground for the exploitation of their talents.

Marxist theorists and practitioners, of course, have always been dedicated to the union of two or more discourses. Terry Eagleton has on various occasions reiterated his belief that the establishment of "English Literature" as a legitimate subject, separated from other disciplines in the Humanities such as Philosophy and History, was itself a lamentable act despite its ideological function (1981: 98; 1983: 17-53; 1990: 28-29). The reintegration of English Literature back into "the whole field of cultural practices" both reveals the political context and meanings of the literary texts (1990: 83). Similarly, Jameson's postmodern cultural enterprise embraces not only the discourses of film, architecture, video (not to mention literature as traditionally defined) at home (1991), but also literatures of the Third World to give an even wider dialectical worldview of global culture. Increasingly commanding our attention is Gayatri Spivak's ambitious literary-cultural projects to combine deconstruction with feminism and Marxism. The result has been fruitful so far, as evidenced in the essays collected in the book, *In Other Worlds*.

In the English Canadian situation, as Larry McDonald demonstrates convincingly (1987: 425), most criticism of literary-cum-political figures such as Livesay and Birney has managed to erase the legacy of socialism in their writing. The reinsertion of this legacy into our interpretation of social realism is of urgent importance. Recently, this composite view of literature and politics has been gaining ascension. In the present era of the 1990's, we find the postmod-

ern project performing an undeniable political function; Hutcheon, for one, has repeatedly defended postmodernism and particularly postmodern irony in answer to the charges of non-commitment laid by stern Marxists (1989: 2-3; 15-17; 1991: 137, 139-140, 153). Though we should not represent her ideological stance as socialist and should stress her different political agendas, her express attitude towards the political (the title of her *The Politics of Postmodernism* being sufficiently revealing) seems to signal a drastic shift in English Canadian criticism. The innocent notion that literature can be void of political implications has come under increasing fire.

In addition, the complexity involved in our critical evaluation is compounded further by the hybrid nature of social realism, a form of writing persistently haunted by the labels describing it as social history or documents (e.g. critics on Baird and Durkin). We submit that the aesthetics of this discursively mixed genre proves, understandably, to lie beyond the confines of many a definition of literary realism *per se* hitherto attempted by a large number of Canadian literary critics. Since the social realism at issue intertwines both literary and sociopolitical discourses, the pull of each constitutes a tension which tests the English Canadian social realists' literary creativity and critical consciousness. The difficulty is doubled because social realist writers, whether they work seriously or flirt playfully with socialist theory within the predominantly liberal milieu, ultimately have to make a decision and the diametrically opposed ideological magnetic fields can be so powerful that they waver in spite of themselves. For some, this trial is a blessing; for others, a curse; for all, a novel experience. It is also true, however, that the references or allusions to the Marxist narratives enrich the intertextuality of the best of social realists' works (e.g. of Durkin and Birney) to such an extent that it goes well beyond the mere Bloomian "anxiety of influence": the active and reciprocally enriching interplay between the texts and intertexts reaches a full-blown Barthesian "productivity" (Sherrill Grace 1990: 188) in the most dialogic and/or polyphonic (in the Bakhtinian sense) novels, for example, by Douglas Durkin, Earle Birney, and Hugh Garner.

Our discursive position is undisguisedly a Marxist or Neo-Marxist one—classical and contemporary. This includes not only a textual analysis of realism as a literary movement and a mode of writing from the Marxist point of view,

but also a scrutiny of the sociopolitical, economic, and philosophical factors which gave rise to and shed light on literary realism. In the current parlance, the latter stance can be re-presented as one of “Theory”, a word Jonathan Culler (1982: 4) and Jameson (1983: 112) both use for lack of an appropriate one to name the practice that is entering North American universities under the umbrella of “Literary Theory”. In the Canadian context, Hutcheon views the advent of “Theory” in more or less the same way the Chinese handle crisis; it is at once a danger, a threat, a hope, and an opportunity to the liberal humanist tradition (1988: vii). With this in mind, our project constitutes, in part, an answer to this “theoretical” challenge. Starting with Marx and Engels, founders of Marxism, we shall draw on Lukacs, Brecht, Benjamin, Sartre, and Bakhtin (exponents and developers of classical Marxism); followed by Althusser, Williams, Eagleton, Jameson (neo-Marxists); McDonald, Mathews, Steele (Canadian Marxists); as well as Kristeva, Barrett, Spivak (Marxist-feminists), to construct a Marxist or Neo-Marxist aesthetic which may be pertinent and conducive to our close examination of Canadian social realist novels. Other formal features aside, we hope the Marxist values and standards thus introduced throughout the book will foreground and illuminate such topics and themes as class and class struggle, alienation, the nature of art in capitalist society, commodification, money and power fetishism, human nature and its devaluation and deterioration, and ideology; problematize and challenge the universality, validity, and permanence of much of the existing Canadian liberal critical consensus; engage the latter in a fully dialogical exchange of ideas and world-views; and finally, strive for true and lively interpretive pluralism.

Important is the light that Marxism sheds on a number of serious concerns faced by women under capitalism: their objectification and subjugation within the family, their devaluation by default of a presence in the economic and social spheres, and their lack of political power and ideological choices. Our work not only traces one of the waterheads of Marxist writings (e.g., Engels’s) pertaining to a feminist problematic, but also constitutes a vigorous refutation of the accusation that Marxism does not or cannot lend its aid to the feminist movement as a whole. Viewed from our new angle, writers like Morley Callaghan and Philip Grove (male as they are) have portrayed women estranged by the capitalist machine, powerless and helpless. The Marxist-femi-

nist perspective can both ruthlessly reveal and cogently explain the full economic, existential impacts, political meanings, and social, material conditions that are the blind spots of the psychoanalytic (e.g. Freudian, Lacanian) approach to the individual psyche and experience; it also establishes a social psychological discourse that helps to illuminate issues besetting women under patriarchal capitalism in particular. Since the often creative re-reading and expansion of the master narratives of Marx and Engels by modern and contemporary theorists have in fact produced an impressive Marxist hermeneutics encompassing various and even conflicted views, we have taken a syncretic approach and compiled a glossary of the key terms updated to the most recent publications of 1991.

A change of critical paradigm is usually accompanied by new horizons and discoveries. From our historical hindsight, the Lukacs-Brecht theoretical rhubarb over realism and modernism stems initially from their diverging approaches. However in the long run, this Marxist inner fight proves to be less internecine than self-salvaging. Similarly, the Moi-Showalter feminist controversy concerning Virginia Woolf's corpus not only raises anew issues of methodology, a problem somehow anticipated by Auerbach's *Mimesis* (546-553), but also revives Woolf and invigorates Woolf criticism. Just as the aforementioned two debates respectively heighten our sensitivity to modernity in general and feminist modernist poetics in particular, and lead to new critical registers and concepts, so we cherish the hope that our Marxist approach and canonization may yield fruitful results or findings that are not readily obtainable through any other means. Here, we quote Sylvia Soderlind's quite succinct summary written in the spirit of genuine academic pluralism: "each methodology invents its own object, every canon is a creation of a certain way of seeing" (*Margin/Alias* 228). Needless to say, whether our hope will come true or not awaits readers' further reading. As the Chinese Marxist Mao Zedong says rather humorously about trying anything new: "if you want to know the flavour of a pear, you need only to taste it".

Having suggested our approaches, we deem it necessary to say a few words on the scope and arrangement of this book. The Introduction, drawing on the aesthetic views of Karl Marx and his followers, ventures a brief historical review of the mimetic/realist discourse since Plato, places the Marxist legacy in the tradition of Western culture, establishes a Marxist(-feminist) criti-

cal paradigm, and identifies the deficiencies of English Canadian literary criticism on social realism. Chapter Two highlights significant socioeconomic, political, and intellectual events from the 1920's to the mid 1960's and offers a broader view of relevant materials on writers not treated at length in this study. These events and the larger Canadian community of writers are related to the social realists' thematic concerns, language, imagery, and ideology; these are further explored in the third chapter by looking at the writers' own theory of social realism. The literary practice of these writers is thus viewed as conscious or conscientious, and as guided by certain shared literary tenets and socio-political beliefs.

Intended to focus on key authors writing more or less in the realist mode, or its derivative mode, only, the main body of our work generally limits itself to one or several major works by each author. Where appropriate and possible, references are also made to an author's other works to see the continuity or discontinuity in his or her artistic theory, moral sensibilities, ideological orientations, and craftsmanship. The primary works to be discussed are representative rather than exhaustive. In other words, they are in our estimation the best examples from the author's oeuvre to demonstrate the shared beliefs and praxis of social realism.

The novels under discussion are placed in an order of climax according to the writers' attitudes towards social and political commitment; not on the ostensible pattern of the general geographical movement from the west to the east, from the country to the city, nor on the discernable rough chronological scheme. We begin with Durkin in Chapter Four, which commences the process of scrutinizing specific social realist novels. Particularly, the chapter focuses on a transitional writer who shifts decidedly from rural to urban realism. Douglas Durkin is treated as both the first modern writer to approach socialist ideology and as a pioneer in presenting personal conflicts related to large-scale social and economic situations. The chapter also presents the view that though literary matters figure largely, there are two contrasting, if not contradicting, traditions of political commitment the liberal and the socialist. The socialist ideal (Leninist) is brought from Europe by the veterans like those in *The Magpie* who, together with the striking workers in Winnipeg, struggle to bring it to fruition in Canada; here we find the concepts of Engels's

“family” and “private property”, of Bakhtinian “ideas”, of Benjaminian art “in the age of mechanical production”, and of Lukascian “ideal of the harmonious man”, to be particularly useful.

Chapter Five compares Morley Callaghan and Hugh Garner in terms of social realism in the cosmopolitan setting. The emphasis is on the means by which the “ordinariness” of marginal (ized) characters and common situations is rendered intriguing; the heightened sense of law and order and of social changes; and the ambivalent or transparent ways of incorporating the socialist ideal and Utopian themes. Equally important is Callaghan’s and Garner’s more sophisticated study of how the ideas of socialism filter down to the lower class, the ordinary people, and eventually affect the middle class, or even the upper class. A classical Marxist as well as a Spivakian-Marxist treatment of class is apt, while an Eagletonian aesthetic of the particular and sensuous seems to render the ordinary not so ordinary, and an Althusserian study of ideological apparatuses and the “lived experience” helps to illuminate men’s and women’s real status in capitalist society.

Chapter Six shows some parallel developments in Irene Baird’s and Earle Birney’s novels: the integration of the individual into a larger social unit, and the conversion of a nonpolitical being to a political activist. The issue of class and class struggle is viewed as crucial to characterization, to thematic development, and to the construction of a secularized political discourse. Whereas Garner’s and Callaghan’s characters are just becoming socialists, Baird’s and Birney’s characters are already in the process or act of making revolution as best understood in the Trotskyan paradigm.^② Further, the rich intertextuality or interdiscursivity clamours for more than a traditional influence study to realize paradoxically, the Brechtian alienation effect and Lukacsian organic totality, while the rich structural or situational ironies illuminate a Barthesian disillusionment.

Chapter Seven draws an analogy between Frederick Philip Grove and Dion Carter in their skillful representation of the complex economic and industrial subject and realistic depiction of socialist-minded characters; emphasis is also put on female protagonists. In addition, the chapter delves into the Marxist concepts of alienation, history, and commodity fetishism under capitalism at work. Moreover, we see intertextually, the socialist ideal as expressed in