

THE DAVID HUME INSTITUTE



THE NOVELIST'S VIEW  
OF THE MARKET ECONOMY

ALLAN MASSIE

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ALLAN MASSIE has been described as Scotland's finest living novelist, and works such as *The Death of Men* and *Augustus* have received wide acclaim. He also writes regularly on political affairs in *The Sunday Times*. Both of his professional interests are represented in this Hume Occasional Paper.

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## FOREWORD

This occasional paper is the result of a challenge to the author to offer The David Hume Institute a lecture on a daunting theme. To Allan Massie, well-known novelist and political commentator, the challenge proved irresistible. His lecture, delivered in the autumn of 1987, was a memorable occasion, with the author delighting a rare Edinburgh amalgam of lawyers, economists and literary figures.

The Institute does not support any political position and is not committed to the views of any of its authors. This is not a ritualistic disclaimer, for Mr Massie's views excited some controversy among his audience. At the same time, those who have expressed disagreement with his position have coupled their remarks with admiring references to his style, wit and insight. The Institute is glad to have the opportunity of allowing a wider audience access to his stimulating ideas, and it has therefore printed the text of his lecture as it was delivered.

Alan Peacock  
*Executive Director*

## THE NOVELIST'S VIEW OF THE MARKET ECONOMY

by

Allan Massie

The novelist's view of the market economy is like a horse with six legs; there's no such animal. This is obvious enough. One cannot even find a representative novelist. Some - chiefly, but not exclusively American - have believed in the Romance of Business. You can find this characteristic also in Balzac. Others have looked forward with enthusiasm to the Collectivist dawn and hence to the abolition of markets. And many, perhaps the majority, have been less interested in the economic life of their characters than in their emotional or social life. The admirable *Guide to Proust*, compiled by Terence Kilmartin, has a chapter on Themes, and there under Stock Exchange we find only two entries: M's stocks and shares; and Norpois's advice on his portfolio I 489-490, and Peculiar credulity of the Stock Exchange - sensational war-time rumours III 762. We know from other sources that Proust took a close interest in the management of his own financial affairs but, despite this, these two entries are all the attention which the author of the greatest novel of this century can give to the Stock Exchange.

Yet of course novelists can't ignore economics. If Balzac, after a discussion of his own involved and generally lamentable financial affairs, said, 'But now let's talk of something important. Who should Eugénie Grandet marry?', we are nevertheless deeply and properly interested in the question of where characters' money comes from. For one thing it affects the way we see them. Anita Brookner, one of our most admired novelists today, made, I thought, an error in her most recent novel, *A Friend from England*, when she had the sudden wealth of one family depend on winning a football pool. Of course people do win football pools, but this seemed to me an insubstantial and frivolous basis for what was in part her treatment of the effects of wealth.

In an essay entitled 'The Myth of Catastrophe', George Watson began with a picture of Cyril Connolly and George Orwell, both, among other things, novelists, watching the bombs raining

down on London: one said to the other, 'That's the end of capitalism.' At this distance in time it is hard to see why they should have thought that the effect of bombs supplied by Krupps falling on buildings of which the ground landlord was either a duke or a city company should be the end of capitalism; but of course the notion that capitalism was, to use a phrase now fashionable in another context, in terminal decline was common in the 1930s, and many novelists faithfully shared this - as events have shown - unreflective view.

Despite all the evidence of market activities in the ancient, medieval and Renaissance worlds, most people would still (I think) place the beginning of the capitalist age sometime in the eighteenth century. And it is convenient for me to accept this, if only because, despite evidence of many precursors, we would also date the novel from the same time. That is to say, the market economy and the novel have marched side by side. R. H. Tawney, an idealistic Socialist of the William Morris persuasion, wrote a famous book, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*, in which he established to his own satisfaction the connection between certain forms of militant, especially Calvinist, Protestantism and the development of the capitalist ethos. I say to his own satisfaction, for I understand that, among historians, Tawney stocks are very much a bear market - down in the cellar with few takers, as Wodehouse put it (not speaking of course of Tawney), but his views were very influential for a long time; and since the novel has also been called 'a Protestant art form', which in origin it largely was, and in outlook has in many respects remained, there is at least a plausible connection between Puritanism, capitalism and the novel. In parenthesis I might say that the justification for regarding the novel as a Protestant art form is that, like Protestantism, the novel tends to reject any authority imposed from outside or *ex cathedra*. It depends on individual judgment, and, whatever his personal predilections, the novelist is likely to speak from an opposition stance - a matter to which I shall return.

In the eighteenth century, novelists showed no hostility to the market economy or capitalism or the bourgeois revolution - three phrases which, in the circumstances, it may be allowable to use rather loosely. On the contrary, writers like Defoe and especially Richardson and our own Smollett were inclined to favour bourgeois morality and to deplore aristocratic morality. Richardson's great novel, *Clarissa Harlowe*, which few of us have read, but which was Napoleon's favourite, is essentially a defence of middle-class virtue assailed by upper-class vice.

That was the way the world was moving. It was summed up perfectly by Sir Walter Scott. A certain reading of Scott may have inspired the gentry of the American South with a pattern of aristocratic behaviour - so much so that Mark Twain considered

Scott responsible for the American Civil War - but Scott had a lucid intellect and kept, in his novels if not in his life, his feet firmly planted. And he had Bailie Nicol Jarvie in *Rob Roy* say to young Francis Osbaldistone: 'But I maun hear naething about honour - we ken naething hear but about credit. Honour is a homicide and a bloodspiller, that gangs about making frays in the street; But Credit is a decent honest man, that sits at hame and makes the pat play.'

Could you ask for a clearer exposition of the moment of transition from the economy of the sword to the economy of the ledger?

But, I warned you, the novel is an opposition art. It is subversive, whatever the political outlook of the novelist when he is not writing. It seeks out - and exposes - human foibles, and it loves to find them among those in authority.

The eighteenth century was still, by and large, an aristocratic age in Britain; the nineteenth was bourgeois. Even the court became bourgeois - nobody was more bourgeois and more contemptuous of the aristocracy than Victoria and Albert. Political economy - a bourgeois notion - was elevated into a god. The classical economists and the utilitarian philosophers instructed men in how society should be organised, or rather in how it should be left to organise itself. The nineteenth century was the Golden Age of the Free Market.

At the extremity of that world, the novelist could record its working dispassionately or even with approval. Reading Mark Twain's *Life on the Mississippi*, Orwell reflected that "'This is how human beings behave when they are not frightened of the sack." ... The State hardly existed, the churches were weak and spoke with many voices, and land was to be had for the taking. If you disliked your job you simply hit the boss in the eye and moved further west; and moreover, money was so plentiful that the smallest coin in circulation was worth a shilling.'

But that was America and frontier America at that. Things were different on this side of the Atlantic. Here the novelists, bourgeois to a man or woman, were soon discontented with bourgeois society, more aware of its faults than of its virtues. Scott of course, with his sagacity and wonderful sense of felt life, had known and demonstrated that every stage in the historical process involves loss as well as gain. Much that was fine in the old agrarian society of aristocrat and peasant - or in the Highland society of chief and freebooter - was destroyed in the new mercantile-industrial age. The most famous experiment in the market economy undertaken in Scotland, the rationalisation of the Sutherland estates, otherwise known as

the Clearances, may be taken as an example, though it didn't, I think, form the subject for novels at the time. But novels have been written about it since: by Neil Gunn, Fionn McColla and Iain Crichton Smith; and not one of them is favourable to the 'intelligent' - I hope you can hear the inverted commas - 'intelligent' response of the Duke's men of business to the demands of the market. On the contrary, all deplore the inhumanity of the enterprise and all lament the destruction of an established communal way of life. And I may say that only this year a curate's egg of a novel, crude and clumsy in some respects, deeply moving in parts - *A Kist of Sorrows* written by David Keir Cameron - was published by Gollancz. Dealing with the clearance of a group of crofters on an Aberdeenshire hill in the late nineteenth century, it follows the Gunn, McColla, Crichton Smith line precisely. There is no sense that the market view of life can be justified.

I have indulged in a bit of fast-forward and must now rewind.

Novelists tended to respond to the new society that the market was bringing into being in three ways. The first two favoured the old aristocratic order, the third didn't. I say this hesitantly because these categories are crude, overlap and are in essentials inadequate. But I hope I can make it clearer, and establish my position.

Comedy was one response. However fluid Victorian society was - and there was great social mobility - it flowed around a firm structure of class and manners. On the whole novelists allied themselves with the established order. This is not to say that they necessarily favoured the old aristocracy, who are roughly handled by both Dickens and Thackeray. But the pretensions of social *arrivistes*, that is of those who by industry or fortunate investment in the expanding economy had risen in the social scale, are treated as matter for bitter comedy. There was nothing new in this - you can find it in Shakespeare and other Elizabethan dramatists - but it was more common, simply because the number of people rising from one class to another had increased. And novelists, on the whole, were unsympathetic to their pretensions.

The second response was nostalgia. The industrialisation of Britain was often ugly and always disturbing. It was natural for sensitive people to recoil from its consequences. The ugliness was not only physical, it often seemed moral. The flight from industrialism became a feature of nineteenth-century fiction. In Scotland, this found expression in the Kailyard, essentially a pretence that the Industrial Revolution had never happened, that Scotland was made up of *douce wee towns*, where the most important question was finding a suitable wife for the minister. In England it took the form of the idealisation of the English countryside, often by writers who had little

experience of it or whose experience was really suburban; the countryside of week-enders.

Such novels did not really represent a rejection of the free market, or any hostility to it; but they did deny it. They pretended it hardly existed. They were the work, often, of *rentier* capitalists, able to ignore the source of their income. This was the attitude of mind of writers even if they supported themselves principally by their pen; it was the attitude of those with whom they identified themselves. At the highest level of art, you can observe Henry James withdraw himself, with a nervous and genteel disdain, from the source of his characters' fortune. For an impassioned delineation of the virtue of old money and the vulgarity and vice of new money, I would direct you to that underrated writer Ouida, whose most substantial - and in many ways marvellous - novel, *The Massarenes*, while castigating the decadent aristocracy content to sponge on the new plutocrats, treats the principal character, Billy Massarene, the great financier who works the markets of the world, with considerable understanding, even sympathy, but ultimately as someone less than fully human.

And this romantic-nostalgic attitude persists well into the twentieth century. At a low level you have a popular novelist like Dornford Yates, constructing a myth of a beautifully landscaped south of England, where the aristocratic virtues are assailed by the hideous forces of the modern age, which have come to be represented by Socialists as well as by Jewish financiers. This is not essentially a different picture from that offered at a higher level by Evelyn Waugh. The ordered and decent beauty of the old aristocratic order is under attack. The Marchmains, Rex Mottram tells Charles Ryder, 'are rich in the way people are who just let their money sit quiet.... Do you know how much they're overdrawn? Jolly near a hundred thousand in London.... Ninety-eight thousand last November. It's the kind of thing I hear ...'. Charles, the young prig, a *rentier* himself, doesn't like this sort of talk. He rejoices instead in the Burgundy: 'It seemed a reminder that the world was an older and better place than Rex knew.' But this is, for Waugh, what the free market economy has led to: the destruction of hierarchy, the rise of Rex Mottram and the demolition of Marchmain House to make way for a block of flats. And it will lead to worse: Socialism and a world made fit for Hopper who 'though himself a man to whom one could not confidently entrust the simplest duty, had an over-mastering regard for efficiency, and, drawing on his modest commercial experience, he would sometimes say of the ways of the Army in pay and supply and the use of "man-hours": "They couldn't get away with that in business."'

Distaste for business is a feature of this outlook. P.G. Wodehouse was a man of the utmost industriousness, capable of

giving points to the most diligent of diligent apprentices - in this rather like Dickens - but - like Dickens again - he could imagine no more agreeable existence for his favoured characters than being happily married, and doing nothing. A job in Wodehouse is always something to be regarded with horror, and is generally pretty absurd too. And the same may be said of Dickens - one can't really believe in the novels that David Copperfield wrote. The object of life, it seems for many English novelists, is to escape the treadmill of gainful employment.

After all this, it may come as a relief to read a defence of bourgeois society offered by John Buchan: 'You idealize the working-man, you and your kind, because you're ignorant. And when you run down what you call the middle-classes that do three-quarters of the world's work and keep the machine going and the working man in a job, then I tell you you're talking havers. Havers.' The speaker is the retired Glasgow grocer, Dickson McCunn, and he is addressing an English public-school-educated poet with Socialist leanings, but such defences are rare enough, and I would remind you that, according to Buchan's prefatory note to *Huntingtower*, Mr McCunn was himself descended from Bailie Nicol Jarvie.

My affection for Dickson McCunn - one of the most satisfying characters in fiction - has led me into a digression, which I won't follow further by tracing his connection with Rob Roy through 'the auld wife ayont the fire at Stuckavallachan'.

Instead, *revenons à nos moutons*, as the judge said in the French farce.

The third response to the society of the market economy originated in the 1840s and was the most formidable. In that decade, 'The Hungry Forties' of the historians, which was also the decade of the Communist Manifesto, and the commencement of *Das Kapital*, that notable piece of historical fiction, the market economy entered a period of strain - perhaps the first of its great slumps. And people looked at the world that industrialism and the market economy had created, and didn't like it. Perhaps the most influential book was not a novel - it was Carlyle's *Past and Present* - but the decade saw a spate of novels dealing with the Condition of England. There was Mrs Gaskell's *Mary Barton* and *North and South*, Kingsley's *Alton Locke*, Dickens's *Hard Times* and Disraeli's *Sybil*. It was the future Conservative Prime Minister, who had entered Parliament as a Radical, who pointed out that 'England is two nations: the rich and the poor'. Mrs Gaskell's *Mary Barton*, one of the first novels to have a cast of working-class characters, was bitterly attacked by the Manchester mill owners when it appeared.

*Hard Times* was not in fact published until 1854 but it came out of the forties, and this was the picture of industrial

England which it significantly offered. This is Coketown:

'It was a town of red-brick, or of brick that would have been red if the smoke and ashes had allowed it; but as matters stood it was a town of unnatural red and black, like the painted face of a savage. It was a town of machinery and tall chimneys, out of which interminable serpents of smoke trailed themselves for ever and ever, and never got uncoiled. It had a black canal in it, and a river that ran purple with ill-smelling dye, and vast piles of building full of windows where there was a rattling and trembling all day long, and where the piston of the steam-engine worked monotonously up and down, like the head of an elephant in a state of melancholy madness. It contained several large streets all very like one another, and many small streets still more like one another, inhabited by people equally like one another, who all went in and out at the same hours, with the same sound upon the same pavements, to do the same work, and to whom every day was the same as yesterday and to-morrow, and every year the counterpart of the last and the next. These attributes of Coketown were in the main inseparable from the work by which it was sustained. Against them were to be set off comforts of life which found their way all over the world, and the elegancies of life which made, we will not ask how much of, the fine lady, who could scarcely bear to hear the place mentioned. The rest of its features were voluntary, and they were these.... The jail might have been the infirmary, the infirmary might have been the jail, the town-hall might have been either, or both, or anything else, for anything that appeared to the contrary in the graces of their construction. Fact, fact, fact everywhere in the material aspect of the town; fact, fact, fact everywhere in the immaterial. The McChoakum child school was all fact, and the school of design was all fact, and the relations between master and man were all fact, and everything was fact between the lying-in hospital and the cemetery, and what you couldn't state in figures, or show to be purchaseable in the cheapest market and saleable in the dearest, was not, and never should be, world without end, Amen.... A town so sacred to fact, and so triumphant in its assertion, of course got on well? Why no, not quite well. No? Dear me.'

That quotation has been a long excursion, but apart from the fact - with apologies for the word - that you are much better off listening to Dickens than to me, it is necessary, I think, because you will nowhere find a more cogent depiction of the case against the Industrial Revolution and hence the market economy. For Dickens, whatever the theory - and he was far too intelligent a man not to have understood the theory - the

result was dehumanising: there, in Coketown, before his eyes, society had been created working monotonously up and down, like the head of an elephant in a state of melancholy madness.

The forties passed away, prosperity returned, the country boomed. G.M. Young, the historian, entering imaginatively into the mind of a printer on £3 a week in 1860, had him reflecting that 'England was the greatest country in the world; the richest, the most powerful, the most enlightened.... We were still on the upgrade, and every year we were getting richer and more powerful, more enlightened and more humane'.

A novelist might be less certain. What's it all for, he might ask? Certainly the country had emerged from the wretched forties, but Dickens, the greatest, the most poetic and ultimately most representative novelist of the age, found himself, more and more, in his last and finest novels, doubtful, pessimistic and identifying with the marginal man, the superfluous man, identified even in Russia by Lermontov thirty years earlier, the sceptic dandy and outsider. Why, these sympathetic characters might even question the doctrine of work. When in *Our Mutual Friend* the industry of the bees was commended to Eugene Wrayburn, his reply was that they rather overdid it, and he couldn't see the point anyway. And Dickens - there can be no doubt - was on his side.

Still, as the country grew richer, as the economic system seemed manifestly to be working, criticism was muted, or pushed to the margin. That doesn't mean to say that the market economy was regarded as benign. On the contrary it was often portrayed as essentially fraudulent. Take Trollope, for example. He is often regarded as a comfortable and comforting writer, this industrious fox-hunting mid-Victorian clubman who scribbled for two hours every morning before undertaking his work for the Post Office: could anyone be more comforting? Well, of course he is, often. Harold Macmillan used to read him between Cabinet meetings and I have always felt sympathy for the bishop who declared on the wireless that his ideal of relaxation was to snuggle up in bed with his favourite Trollope.

But he isn't always comforting, not by a long chalk. His finest novel is called *The Way We Live Now*. It might, with a little updating here and there, still be the way we live now, and it offers a picture of society and the market that is sharp and bitter.

At the centre of the novel is Augustus Melmotte, Esq, a figure of the same stamp as Mr Merdle in *Little Dorrit* and Ouida's William Massarene; that is to say he is the rogue financier who bullies, bribes and blackmails his way into society and Parliament, and becomes, however fraudulently and in the end insubstantially, a power in the land.

Of Melmotte 'It was said that he had made a railway across

Russia, that he had provisioned the Southern army in the American civil war, that he had supplied Austria with arms, and had at one time bought up all the iron in England. He could make or mar any company by buying or selling stock, and could make money dear or cheap as he pleased'. Of course things were said on the other side: 'that he was regarded in Paris as the most gigantic swindler that had ever lived', for instance; but so deeply had the desire for easy riches bitten into the fabric of English life, that this was disregarded and we find Melmotte taken widely at his own valuation.

Enter Mr Hamilton K. Fisker of Fisker, Montague, and Montague, a brash American. His partner Paul, the surviving Montague, is a decent enough young Englishman but no match for Fisker. Mr Fisker has a project. It is to build a railway from Salt Lake City to Vera Cruz on the Gulf of Mexico. Well, not precisely that:

"If you could realise all the money" [said Paul - this is to be done by selling a flour mill at Fiskerville, California] "it wouldn't build a mile of the railway." Mr Fisker laughed at him. The object of Fisker, Montague, and Montague was not to make a railway to Vera Cruz, but to float a company. Paul thought that Mr Fisker seemed to be indifferent whether the railway should ever be constructed or not. It was clearly his idea that fortunes were to be made before a spadeful of earth had been moved.... "We hold three million dollars of the stock ourselves.... We take them at par, of course, - and as we sell we shall pay for them. But of course we shall only sell at a premium."

Mr Fisker's great object is to persuade Melmotte to take a hand. "If you gave yourself to it, heart and soul, Mr Melmotte, it would be the finest thing that there has been out for a long time. There would be such a mass of stock!" Mr Melmotte, though first objecting that 'people wanted to go from New York to San Francisco, and I don't know that they do want to go to Vera Cruz', nevertheless comes in and becomes chairman of the London directors.

Later Paul Montague expresses his doubt to Melmotte about the way the business is being carried on. Melmotte tells him not to rock the boat. "Gentlemen who don't know the nature of credit, how strong it is, - as the air - to buoy you up; how slight it is, - as a mere vapour, - when roughly touched, can do an amount of mischief of which they themselves don't in the least understand the extent."

This is a long way from Bailie Nicol Jarvie's view of credit as 'a decent honest man that sits at hame and makes the pat play'. It is, of course, you may rightly object, the seamy side of the market that Trollope is revealing: if Melmotte were alive

today - and in one incarnation or another he is - he would be an asset stripper rather than a promoter of bogus companies. As it is, he is the literary forerunner of the conscienceless capitalists of Eric Ambler's pre-war thrillers or the Sir Marcus of Graham Greene's *A Gun for Sale*, or Krogh in *England Made Me*.

Trollope's view of the market economy may seem unjust and inadequate. Obviously it is. But that is how it struck a decent, acute, conventional novelist. It offered an invitation to greed and deceit. *Radix malorum est cupiditas*. That was how he saw it.

With the twentieth century we enter a time when novels might be written and were indeed written from a Socialist point of view; that is, by people who had been persuaded by the cruelty and inefficiency of *laissez-faire* to look to a new economic system. I don't propose to look at these for the moment, but rather at two books, both very critical of the market economy, written from no secure position whatsoever. After which I shall try to examine the reasons for this persistent hostility of the artist to the capitalist system.

The first is *The Man of Property*, the first book in what came to be known as 'The Forsyte Saga'. Galsworthy's gifts as a novelist were decidedly limited, but in his depiction of the Forsytes he achieved something of enduring value. The Forsytes, after two generations of upward mobility, have arrived at a position of the utmost solidity. They can reduce everything to cash terms; property is their god.

June Forsyte, a young rebel, tries to persuade her Great-Uncle James to build a house in the country - she is, you will remember, engaged to an architect.

"Why?" began James in a fluster. "Buying land - what good d'you suppose I can do buying land, building houses? - I couldn't get four per cent for my money...."

"What does that matter? You'd get fresh air."

"Fresh air!" exclaimed James. "What should I do with fresh air?"

"I should have thought anybody liked to have fresh air," said June scornfully.

'James wiped his napkin all over his mouth.

"You don't know the value of money," he said.'

James, one learns later, was much disturbed. He felt as though someone had threatened his right to invest his money at five per cent.

The Forsytes, obsessed with property and the return on their property, have made themselves arid and philistine. They are incapable of what I suppose we must call human relations. Soames

Forsythe - it is the theme of the first novel - has in effect bought his wife, and regards her as his possession, eventually forcibly claiming what he would call his marital rights or, as we should now say, raping her.

Galsworthy is fairly confused here. It doesn't really seem to have occurred to him that Irene behaves pretty badly in the marriage herself - allowing herself to be bought in the first instance; and of course he is quite wrong in thinking that to regard your wife as property was a consequence of capitalism. Wives were far more securely property in the pre-capitalist world and in those parts of the world which had not yet been touched by capitalism. Indeed, it was capitalism which by its economic demands had begun the emancipation of women. But whether what Galsworthy believed was true or false is immaterial to the subject of this talk.

The Forsytes apply the same market standards to works of art. 'What'll it fetch at Jobson's?' is their cry. Soames is a great collector of paintings. In later books when Galsworthy has begun to sentimentalise him - or perhaps to understand him better, to be fair to him - we are given to understand that he derives aesthetic pleasure from them. But in this first book, it's a matter of their market value. That's what art means to the Forsytes.

It is tempting to talk about D.H. Lawrence as being one of the authors of George Watson's 'The Myth of Catastrophe'. But Lawrence, as someone who intermittently at least wanted everything to smash up and start anew, is too extreme for my purpose, his rejection of modern civilisation too complete. I might only draw attention to a sentence which appeared in the first draft of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*: 'By the time the *Untergang des Abendlands* - Spengler's *Decline of the West* - appeared, Clifford was a smashed man.' The connection is obvious.

Instead, however, I will turn to Christopher Isherwood's second novel, *The Memorial*. Isherwood came from a well-to-do Lancashire family - cotton manufacturers who turned into gentry - and was himself educated at Repton and Cambridge. *The Memorial*, sub-titled 'Portrait of a Family', was first published in 1932, and I don't think Isherwood ever did anything better. Later he would dabble with communism, but, writing this at a time when capitalism seemed to be cracking up, he offers no prescription, merely a diagnosis of an England where, as Auden put it in one of the plays they wrote together, 'nobody is well'. Selfishness, frivolity, snobbery, indifference to the condition of the poor: Isherwood charges his bourgeois family with all this. There is hardly any need to attack the vices of the market and what it delivers; its failure is only too obvious. It is no longer delivering enough. The heroic character - also incidentally the only one in the novel with

whom Isherwood doesn't succeed - is constantly overcome by weariness: 'Eric was weary - weary to the bone. He was weary of the Hall, of Cambridge, of London, of himself, of everything and everybody. He was too tired to be unhappy - except by starts. And now he'd got to work. He was always working. He was getting round-shouldered and his head continually ached.' To such straits had the contemplation of capitalism brought him.

A year or two later (though earlier in the novel), 'It was a lovely afternoon. He had vaguely intended a walk in the Park. But bright, clean Kensington with its nursemaids and old ladies, so prim and cosy and well-to-do - no, Eric was still haunted by the memory of a Welsh village. The strangely compact blocks of cottages, like the keyboard of a piano, mounting the hill. The sombre and motionless headgear of the pits. Men lounging in groups at corners. The rain-drenched landscape. The grey sodden sky....'

It is ninety years since *Sybil*, but England is still two countries, the rich and the poor: eighty since *Hard Times*, but Coketown is still - it seems - the same.

And this is not an English phenomenon or a British one. The crack-up resounds all over Europe. In France there has been a long tradition of writing about those whom Hugo called 'the wretched of the earth'. No one anatomised industrial society more thoroughly than Zola; no one exposed the stifling hypocrisy of the bourgeoisie with a colder ferocity than that arch-bourgeois Flaubert. Even in America, despite the Horatio Alger school of individualist uplift, the frontier has closed by 1920. Even in Scott Fitzgerald's glittering world, where the rich are different from you and me, we can hear the rumble of the revolutionary tumbril; Fitzgerald always described himself as a sort of Marxian. Hemingway in his early Nick Adams stories seemed to revive the individualism of the frontier, but it wasn't Mark Twain's *Life on the Mississippi*, and by the time he came to write that dense and nervous Depression novel, *To Have and Have Not*, the message is that individualism has failed, capitalism has failed, and 'a man alone ain't got no bloody chance'.

For something more sinister still has happened. The rogue financier has disappeared and been replaced by the faceless corporation. It is as if the market has taken on a life of its own, as if Frankenstein had indeed created and liberated his monster: here is John Steinbeck in *The Grapes of Wrath*. A squatter's house is about to be demolished:

"It's mine. I built it. You bump it down - I'll be in the window with a rifle. You even come too close and I'll pot you like a rabbit."

"It's not me. There's nothing I can do. I'll lose my job if I don't do it. And look - suppose you kill me? They'll just hang you, but long before you're hung there'll be another guy on the tractor, and he'll bump the house down. You're not killing the right guy."

"That's so," the tenant said. "Who gave you orders? I'll go after him. He's the one to kill."

"You're wrong. He got his orders from the bank. The bank told him: 'Clear these people out or it's your job.'"

"Well, there's a president of the bank. There's a board of directors. I'll fill up the magazine of the rifle and go into the bank."

"The driver said, 'Fellow was telling me the bank gets orders from the east. The orders were: 'Make the land show some profit or we'll close you up.'"

"But where does it stop? Who can we shoot? I don't aim to starve to death before I kill the man that's starving me."

"I don't know. Maybe there's nobody to shoot. Maybe the thing isn't men at all."

Maybe not; it's taken some time to reach that conclusion, as it took Harry Morgan a long time.

But meanwhile, as a monstrous parody, America had been running a parallel illicit market and even this had started to get organised.

In the film *Scarface* one gangster says: 'We're gonna get organised. Running beer ain't a nickel game any more. It's a business and I'm gonna run it like a business.'

Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler both drew attention to the way the mob imitated legitimate business, and Graham Greene as a film critic actually evolved a historical parallel from one line in *The Maltese Falcon*, though he placed it misleadingly, I should say, in pre-market economy times. Hearing Bogey say 'it's feudal' he drew a comparison between the gangsters and the robber barons of the middle ages; like many seductive parallels it was based on a false premise for what Bogey actually said was 'it's futile'.

Now, at this point, as Orwell and Connolly observe the bombs fall on London and contemplate the end of capitalism, one might ask: why? Why do so many of our novelists seem to have felt such hostility towards the market economy? Or, if you like, why did they get it so wrong?

Some historians and journalists of course agreed with them, but others got it right, as I think we can say, seeing that catastrophe hasn't taken place, seems indeed to have been postponed indefinitely, and seeing that on the whole, with the odd hiccup here and there, the market goes on delivering the goods.

So, for instance, this from the middle of the nineteenth

century:

'We too shall, in our turn, be outstripped, and in our turn be envied. It may well be, in the twentieth century, that the peasant of Dorsetshire may think himself miserably paid with twenty shillings a week; that the carpenter at Greenwich may receive ten shillings a day; that labouring men may be as little used to dine without meat as they now are to eat rye bread; that sanitary police and medical discoveries may have added several more years to the average length of human life, that numerous comforts and luxuries which are now unknown, or confined to a few, may be within the reach of every diligent and thrifty working man. And it may then be the mode to assert that the increase of wealth and the progress of science have benefited the few at the expense of the many, and to talk of the reign of Queen Victoria as the time when England was truly Merry England, when all classes were bound together by brotherly sympathy, when the richer did not grind the faces of the poor, and when the poor did not envy the splendour of the rich....'

And you can read novels - not, I'm glad to say the best novels, which tell you just that. But Macaulay, complacent optimistic Macaulay, interpreted his age rather better.

Or take this, a hundred years later. It is A.J.P. Taylor:

'Literature, according to historical convention, reflects contemporary life and reveals its spirit.... To judge from all leading writers, the barbarians were breaking in. The writers were almost alone in feeling like this, and it is not easy to understand why they thus cut themselves off.... By any more prosaic standard this was the best time mankind, or at any rate Englishmen, had known.'

So how do we try to understand this which is not easy to understand? George Watson attributes the lack of interest shown by writers of the thirties in Keynesian ideas of reform, or any other, to 'some deep ideological prejudice'.

But this can only be true up to a point. What caused the prejudice? Why did so many bourgeois individualists spit on the world that nurtured them? After all, the novelist is a property owner himself; his novels are his copyright; and it's noticeable that novelists, whatever their family background, tend, if they have any success at all, to come to live middle-class lives. And the market sustains them. It has, ever since it got going two hundred years ago, made many of them rich. Scott made a fortune by his writing, lost it in the Ballantyne publishing business, and retrieved his position by his pen. Dickens was a fantastic success; George Eliot got £7,000 for *Romola*, the copyright reverting to her after six years, and

some £9,000 for *Middlemarch*, equivalent to six-figure sums today. And so on: if the picture of the novelist starving in a garret is true to life, so is the picture of a successful one, wallowing in the stuff. Maugham lived in the greatest style in the Villa Mauresque; *Forbes Magazine* regularly lists novelists among new millionaires; Norman Mailer has to make - what is it? - three-quarters of a million dollars a year to pay alimony and school fees, and succeeds in doing so; and we all know that, according to the former Deputy Chairman of the Conservative Party, the shortest way from the dole queue to great wealth is by the writing-desk, and countless chat shows and signing sessions.

Of course many novelists are aggrieved property owners. They feel cheated and obstructed by publishers. Their title to their property too often seems merely nominal. They suffer from dilatory payments, unfair competition from public libraries, hack reviewers - in how many other businesses are products routinely reviled - and so on. But I think it is going too far to explain the critical attitude to the market economy, which I have endeavoured to trace, by this sort of stuff.

It is more tempting to attribute it to the nature of bourgeois society itself. Certainly novelists have poured scorn on its characteristic faults. They have suffered - or many believe they have suffered - from its Philistinism. It has been exposed by Flaubert and Henry James, for example. And that there is something in this, I don't doubt. All artists have felt themselves in some way outcasts, Ishmaels viewed with suspicion by the *douce bourgeois*; and, like many exiles, they have turned bitter. Because they purvey a product the real value of which cannot - they know - be measured in financial terms - otherwise the former Deputy Chairman would be the best novelist we have today - they can't find themselves in full sympathy with the market which makes that its test.

There is some truth in this, but it won't do. You come back for instance to Dickens. Why was he, whom the market loved, so critical of the market economy?

I think there are two reasons and they both relate to the novel rather than the novelists. First, as I have said, the novel is an opposition art. It is, inevitably, among other things, a criticism of society and the way we live now. In a market economy, it will criticise that. It may even advocate or seem to advocate a reform of society which the novelist himself would find uncomfortable if he had to experience it. But in such a society - in the Soviet Union - what does the novelist do? Why, he speaks up for individualism, or religion, and, if he can get away with it, he criticises, pillories, the state. In the market economy he draws attention to the distortions and cruelties of the market; in a collectivist one, to the

absence of markets; that is, of choice.

And the second reason is that the novel is by its nature a humane art. The novelist devotes himself to trying to breathe life into imaginary creations. He writes of the bonds and discords between human beings. The novel has a horror of the abstract, and the novel deals with the details of individual life. The moment when James Forsyte wipes his napkin over his mouth and says 'You don't know the value of money', is a moment when James is precisely and vitally seen.

Now the market is concrete enough in its effects, but it is also abstract and rarefied. It deals in long periods of time and wide swathes of country. Its morality is claimed, but is not always apparent. Adam Smith tells us that enlightened self-interest will work for the general good; he points to the importance of sympathetic association as softening the hardship of economic laws. But I think it is fair to say that market economics is prepared to take a grand philosophical view of human life: one man's loss may indeed be another man's gain, and some must suffer that others - and eventually - society as a whole may grow rich. But the novel tells of individual people and the effect of experience on them; and that alas is often horrible. Dickens, as I have said, was a very intelligent man. He could perfectly well understand the arguments which justified the philosophy of *laissez-faire*, but he couldn't blind himself to its effects. Of course, chimneys had to be cleaned, Kingsley said, and sending small boys up them might well be the most cost-effective way of doing so; but was it the most humane, was it the most Christian?

And that word introduces the other point of division. Market economists can pretend that man is only an economic animal, just as some political enthusiasts would have us believe he is an altogether political one. Society depends on the creation of wealth, but it depends on other things too, and sometimes the creation of wealth may make it impossible for these other things - human sympathy, love, the religious sense, art and beauty - to flourish. And the effect of wealth on the individual and those he lives among is not always either admirable or pretty. These are things that novelists are concerned to point out.

I have almost finished. I come back as I so often do to Walter Scott and his awareness, expressed throughout his fiction, that nothing that happens is altogether for the best. The Duke of Wellington, I would remind you, said that a battle lost was sad, and a battle won not much better. That sentiment finds its way more easily into novels than into takeover bids.

I stopped - cravenly you may think - at 1940 as Orwell and Connolly predicted the end of capitalism. It didn't happen, but capitalism was modified by Keynes and the welfare state, and

what did novelists do? Did they celebrate? Not precisely: Orwell wrote *1984*; Waugh wrote that novel lament for a lost order and a lost cause, his 'Sword of Honour' trilogy - a Jacobite novel, you might say; and in the fifties came a wave of novels reviving the picaresque form in which young heroes strove to escape the ordered safety of welfarism. The young Kingsley Amis was seen as a rebel against the established order of civilisation - Mr Maugham called *Lucky Jim* 'scum' - but it was soon apparent that Amis's target was the restrictive society protected by the controlled economy.

And now? Now, we have new themes. Muriel Spark was, of course, ahead of the field. Money, she has a character say in *The Hothouse by the East River*, is how it is done; and in the world today where money has escaped or almost escaped its base connection with metal or even paper, when it flashes in some utterly mysterious manner across the telescreens of the world, making this man a millionaire and that a pauper, with a truly monstrous irresponsibility, when Frankenstein's monster has turned electronic, the novelist is likely again to find a target in its dehumanising effect. Why do I say likely? Our most brilliant young novelist, the younger Amis, Martin, has already published a novel simply called *Money*, which is about the delusory cheat, the fool's gold of electronic wealth or plastic wealth, about the realisation that credit is no longer 'a decent honest man, that sits at home and makes the pat play'. Though he does sit at home, in front of his telescreen. And on a less metaphysical note, I reviewed earlier this year a novel called *Diary of a Yuppie*, which took an admirably stern and critical moral view of the desire for wealth and power and the conduct that desire may provoke. The author was no outsider, no Marxist, but Louis Auchincloss, one of the finest of American novelists, himself - incidentally - a New York corporate lawyer.

Finally, if I may end on a personal note, which may sum up my argument. I work as both a journalist and a novelist, writing among other things a column about public life in a Sunday paper. These two activities can be harmonised, but they are nevertheless inconsistent. Let me give a hypothetical example. The sacred cow of Scotland is Ravenscraig. Now it may be that the market economy will work in such a way that Ravenscraig becomes an insupportable burden, and that a decision would be taken to close it. Writing my column I could justify and probably support that decision. All businesses have a natural life, and when this is artificially prolonged, they can only be maintained at the expense of other enterprises. But writing a novel I would be on the side of the steelworkers; I would be aware of the human suffering, of the despair men would feel who knew they might never work again, of families who saw their way of

life, to which they were attached by habit, cruelly uprooted.

This is why the relationship between the market economy and the novel can never be other than uneasy. The first is utilitarian; the second poses the questions 'What is happiness? What is right conduct? What is the end of life?' It is aware that the creation of wealth involves destruction of something else. This is also why the market economy needs novelists and other artists: to remind people that there is more than one kind of wealth, more too than one kind of impoverishment.

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