The political “impact” of fiction

Can a novel start a war, free serfs, break up marriages, drive readers to suicide, close factories, bring about a law change, swing an election, or serve as a weapon in a national or international struggle? These are some of the large-scale, direct, social and political effects which have been ascribed to certain exceptional novels and other works of narrative fiction over the last two hundred years or so. How seriously should we take such claims?

In their crudest form, assertions of this kind are obviously naive, oversimplifying the complex ways in which literary texts can be said to “work in the world” and oversimplifying, too, the causal processes required to account for a major social or political change. But is it possible to modify or refine such claims in the light of contemporary theory and historical research so that the mechanisms by which each text has engaged with the political forces of the time are adequately described? This book explores that general question through the close examination of five works, from several different countries and periods, for which remarkable direct political effects of one kind or another have been claimed. It is an inquiry both at the level of theory (in what sense, and by what mechanisms, might literary works conceivably be said to start wars, swing national opinion, and so on?) and at the level of history (what evidence can be gathered on the influence which a particular fictional narrative has had in a given place and at a given time?).

The first two works studied, Ivan Turgenev’s *A Sportsman’s Notebook* and Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (both published in volume form in 1852), are probably the pieces of narrative fiction for which the most spectacular claims have been made. It was Turgenev’s boast, echoed later by many historians and literary critics, that his *A Sportsman’s Notebook*, a
collection of short stories or sketches rather than a novel, was directly responsible for convincing Tsar Alexander II to abolish serfdom in Russia. And it was Abraham Lincoln, no less, who addressed Harriet Beecher Stowe, when they met in late 1862, with the words: "So this is the little lady who made this great war" (the American Civil War). Although Lincoln probably did not mean his words to be taken at face value, many politicians and historians in the years that followed independently attributed to *Uncle Tom's Cabin* a major role in bringing about the war and thereby hastening the abolition of slavery.

Ignazio Silone's novel *Fontamara* (1933), the third work studied, is remarkable not only for the fact that it is claimed to have played a significant role in turning around the broadly favorable opinion of Mussolini's Fascism still held by large numbers of political commentators in the United States and Europe in the early 1930s, but for having achieved several more, distinct, politically significant receptions since its first publication, including in Italy during the Second World War and in Third World countries in the postwar period.

In the case of Alexander Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* (1962), whose publication Khruhchev personally authorized to further his discrediting of Stalin, it is not a question of the novel's having achieved a specific reform (as Solzhenitsyn complained, the labor camps continued to operate fairly much unchanged) but of its having engaged in an extraordinarily dramatic way with the mechanisms of power of a relatively closed political system.

I doubt that the publication of any previous work of narrative fiction has engendered quite such immediate and dramatic reverberations on the level of international relations as the fifth work I examine, Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* (1988). Readers of this book will know of the street protests, resulting in deaths, in several cities in Muslim countries; the demonstrations by members of the Muslim immigrant communities in Britain, Canada, and other western countries at which copies of the book were burned; the repeated calls made to devout Muslims by the Ayatollah Khomeini and, since his death, other Islamic religious leaders to "execute" Rushdie for blasphemy; which were followed, in turn, by counter-protests from western countries including the temporary withdrawal from Teheran of the heads of diplomatic missions of all the European Community countries; the killing of several individuals associated with translating, publishing, or defending the book, and so on. (The story took further twists in 1993 with the bombing of a hotel in Turkey where a publisher intending to bring out a Turkish translation of the novel was staying and the wounding of the novel's Norwegian translator.)

Of course, the mere fact that these events have followed the publication of *The Satanic Verses* does not necessarily mean that they should be thought of as causally connected consequences or effects of its publication. Indeed, the issue of the extent to which Rushdie can be held responsible for those events is, itself, a hotly debated topic. Unique though the case of *The Satanic Verses* might seem, it actually exemplifies a broad problem about causality which is common to all the works I shall be examining. When we talk loosely of the political impact of a novel, that metaphor implies that effects have followed from its publication by the simplest causal connection, like ripples moving outwards when a pebble is tossed into a still pool. It must be immediately obvious not only that Rushdie's novel possesses a quite un-pebble-like complexity as a cultural object but that the political pool into which it was tossed was already extremely turbulent. Much the same point would have to be made about each of the other works I shall be examining and the historical moments at which they first appeared. *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, for instance, appeared in the Soviet Union at precisely the time of the Cuban missile crisis. This leads many commentators to a contrary oversimplification, according to which the literary work is treated as having no causal value, being no more than a symptom of an historical change already under way.

"A good book ... is a force a tool a weapon to make the dreams of today become the reality of tomorrow," wrote Roger Garaudy. In several of the cases I shall be examining, the image of the fictional narrative as a weapon in a continuing struggle, a weapon for hitting at some institution or for striking a blow in favor of an oppressed group, will be seen to have considerable validity — *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as a weapon against slavery, *Fontamara* as a weapon against fascism, for instance. In his review of *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, Cyril Connolly declared that "it is a blow struck for human freedom all over the world." The particular aptness of the metaphor lies, however, in the fact that fictional texts, like other sorts of weapons, may be seized and used to serve the causes of different parties in a conflict and even, as we shall see, in several different conflicts.

The issue of *The Satanic Verses* as a weapon (and, at least as important, whose weapon and in which conflict) is as contentious as every
other issue surrounding this remarkable novel. While there can be little doubt that Salman Rushdie did intend certain episodes in the novel as satirical attacks on religious and political bigotry in general and the Ayatollah Khomeini in particular (and Margaret Thatcher, the racism of the British police force, and numerous other targets) he nevertheless strenuously and, to me, convincingly denies that it intended to be an attack on Islam itself. (Making a somewhat similar distinction, Harriet Beecher Stowe insisted that her novel attacked slavery but not Southerners. Most Southerners, however, were not convinced.) At a certain point, however, authors' political intentions — which, like authorial intentions in general, are in any case ultimately unknowable — in a sense become irrelevant, as groups of readers willingly or unwillingly appropriate the text for their own purposes. Writers have no means of limiting, let alone absolutely determining, the readings to which their works will be subjected. (I shall be examining in some detail the surprising discrepancy between Turgenev's apparently diletantist intentions in writing *A Sportsman's Notebook* and the political seriousness with which it was subsequently interpreted.)

The openness of many fictional texts to quite widely divergent readings by distinct groups of readers, especially groups which differ in nationality, religion, gender or class, will be a recurrent theme of this book. And, as much contemporary literary theory makes clear, there is no reason to think of any of those readings as necessarily mistaken. *The Satanic Verses* has of course been read quite differently by Muslim and non-Muslim readers (as well as by different Muslim groups — though this point is usually ignored). The existence of several different constituencies of readers for some fictional works is an issue which is rarely examined. When I come to discuss Silone's *Fontamara*, for instance, I shall detail the significant political differences between the readings of it by American, Italian, and Third World readers. Many of those who have protested against *The Satanic Verses* (some of whom have died during demonstrations against it) have, it is well known, not read the novel — indeed refuse to read it on conscientious grounds — and base their protest on hearsay. Even in this respect, Rushdie's novel is not unique: southern anger against *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was probably fiercest amongst those Southerners who refused to read it. It will be one of the odder features of my book that, in at least these two cases, it will be necessary to study the impact of a fictional text on the political attitudes of nonreaders of the work.

In the eyes of many Westerners, *The Satanic Verses* only became a weapon of any seriousness when certain Islamic fundamentalist leaders made it into one. They, it is suggested, appropriated the novel and turned it into an instrument of terrorism against the tolerant, rational pluralism of the West. The deficiency in this argument is that it takes no account of the historical relationship between the West and the Muslim nations of the Middle East, which is characterized by gross inequalities of power and, on the side of the West, by an almost uniform ignorance, indifference and/or fear towards Islam. So, whatever Rushdie's intentions, it has been convincingly argued by, among others, Edward Said, that his novel offered to the West an opportunity for the further denigration of a religion and culture already at a disadvantage. More generally, it is true that any serious assessment of the political "impact" of any work must focus on the effects it has had on an already existing power relation.

The extent to which works of narrative fiction may be thus largely appropriated by a dominant political discourse is remarkable. George Orwell made clear that he intended in 1984 to denounce, from the perspective of a democratic socialist, the totalitarian features of both Soviet communism and western capitalism. Nevertheless, his novel was exploited, during the 1950s at least, almost exclusively as a source of propaganda material against any form of socialism, supplying terms like "Newspeak," "Thought Police," and so on for use in antisocialist newspaper articles and speeches. As Isaac Deutscher wrote: "A book like 1984 may be used without much regard for the author's intention. Some of its features may be torn out of their context, while others which do not suit the political purpose which the book is made to serve, are ignored or virtually suppressed."

None of this means, of course, that *The Satanic Verses* has not also been appropriated as a weapon in several struggles by those fundamentalist Shi'ite leaders who have called for Rushdie's execution. Such attempts at antagonistic appropriation and exploitation of a narrative work are not so rare as might be supposed. As I shall be showing in a later chapter, proslavery Southerners sought to use *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as a rallying point for southern feeling against the North almost as much as abolitionists used it as a propaganda weapon against slavery. Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel, like Rushdie's, became, one might say, a piece of ambiguously located cultural territory over which conflicting parties claimed authority, a borderland, vulnerable, as such territory always is, to skirmishes, provocations and downright violent conflict.

Nevertheless, just as an author's intention may, on occasions, seriously misfire, so, too, may the attempts of those who consciously try to
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seize control of a literary text for their own political purpose. Since the instrumental political use of a work of literary fiction usually involves a narrow, even closed, reading of the text, it sometimes happens that the text opens out in ways which do not suit the interests of those who were seeking to appropriate its meaning to their sole use. As Nikita Khrushchev found, when he approved publication of One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich for the purpose of discrediting his Stalinist opponents in the Presidium, narrative fiction sometimes resists such opportunistic rough handling and blows up in the face of those who attempt it. Those who seek to appropriate the meaning of a literary work cannot necessarily impose that exclusive reading on other readers any more than the author can impose his or her intended meaning.

It should by now be clear that the title of this book, The Power of the Story, is deliberately provocative. Certainly, on one level, it is a study of the kinds of power which a number of exceptional works of narrative fiction are claimed to have exerted at moments of major political change. Nevertheless, it attempts to reframe those claims in terms of statements about the nature of the engagement each work achieved in an historical situation where certain patterns of distribution of political power already existed. Eventually it asks whether publication of that work facilitated, was a catalyst in, any shifts in the distribution of power.

My attitudes to many questions will doubtless emerge in the course of this book, but I feel I should make clear here my commitment to two issues, which I see as having considerable intellectual, educational and political implications. First, I aim in this book to demonstrate, in my own way of working, the necessity of integrating literary theory with critical practice, of constantly applying and testing theory on concrete historical instances, if theory is not to remain remote and hermetically self-contained, and if criticism is not to be theoretically unsound. Precisely because the particular pieces of narrative fiction examined here are, in one way or another, extreme cases, they severely test, and demonstrate the limitations of, the various theoretical approaches applied to them. Secondly, I am committed to writing in a nonessentialist way about a subject that I believe to be intellectually demanding and politically significant. So, while I hope that I shall satisfy academic readers that I have developed convincing and — in some ways, quite new — arguments, that I have reflected the latest scholarship in a number of academic fields, that I have documented my sources of evidence carefully, I am also determined that this book should be accessible to a wider audience. By avoiding obscurantism and mystification, I hope that this book will serve to empower general readers, with no great previous knowledge of literary theory, in their thinking about just how, in some extraordinary instances, works of literary fiction have had a measurable effect in shaping political attitudes and events.

Narrative as a "primary cognitive instrument"

One way of defining the subject of this book is to say that it poses questions about how fiction relates to history, and specifically about the problem of locating certain kinds of fiction in history. It asks how social and political history can be written which takes due account of the role played by some exceptional works of narrative fiction in shaping particular political outcomes. It therefore begins with the simple reminder that novels and historical writing are both forms of narrative, both instances, among many other possible instances, of the universal human practice of storytelling. Whether in the form of dreams, myths of origin, memoirs, reports of scientific experiments, evidence given in court, tribal genealogies, novels, histories, printed or electronic news, economic predictions, biographies, folktales, soap operas, annual reports of corporations, feature films, diaries, erotic fantasies, medical case histories, or strip cartoons, there is no getting away from storytelling.

A number of thinkers have seized on this point over the last twenty years, among them Roland Barthes, who stated that "the narratives of the world are numberless ... narrative is present in every age, in every place, in every society; it begins with the very history of mankind [sic] and there nowhere is nor has been a people without narrative ... narrative is international, transhistorical, transcultural: it is simply there like life itself." Even so, most commentators do not hold on to this recognition for very long, hurrying on to examine in isolation just one of the traditionally acknowledged narrative forms. Only occasionally do students of literary narrative pause for a moment to peer over the fence they have built around their chosen field. So Jonathan Culler ends a closely argued article on the analysis of literary narrative with the comment that "we still do not appreciate as fully as we ought the importance of narrative schemes and models in all aspects of our lives." And Thomas M. Leitch ends his recent book, What Stories Are: Narrative Theory and Interpretation, with the suggestion that the great neglected question about narrative is "what stories do." I aim to respond here to the challenges implied by both statements in that I examine the question of
what certain fictional stories may be said to have “done” in terms of “narrative schemes and models” which cut across the traditional boundaries between the many forms of storytelling in which we are constantly entwined. I shall attempt to define just how each may be said to have “worked in the world” — using the term “worked” in all its possible senses: labored, succeeded, functioned, produced, fermented, and so on.

Storytelling, it must be recognized from the start, is always associated with the exercise, in one sense or another, of power, or control. This is true of even the commonest and apparently most innocent form of storytelling in which we engage: that almost continuous internal narrative monologue which everyone maintains, slipping from memory, to imaginative reworking of past events, to fantasizing about the future, to daydreaming.

Such internal storytelling is the radar-like mechanism we use to constantly scan the world around us, by which we give order to, and claim to find order in, the data of experience. If we cannot narrate the world in this everyday manner, we are unable to exercise even the slightest degree of control, or power, in relation to the world. It is our internal narrative faculty that makes it possible for each of us perpetually to construct and reconstruct our sense of ourselves as individuals, located socially and in time and space. Just occasionally, that narrative faculty fails for a moment — the traveler wakes in a hotel room in a foreign city and for a brief time is unable to construct any recollection of the immediate past, and so has no idea where he or she is, nor any anticipation of the day to come. Few moments are quite so bewildering.

One of the essential functions which such everyday telling of stories to oneself performs is that it enables us to discard massive quantities of material which we deem to be unimportant. In allowing us to exclude so much of our experience, it permits us to retain just a few items which we regard as significant, which have “point” for us. As Jean-François Lyotard paradoxically asserts, narrative is, in some respects, a mechanism for consuming the past, for forgetting. In this sense, too, it involves an exercise by the narrator of a form of power, a sorting and reckoning-up of experience. Such storytelling, it should be emphasized, relates just as much to the future — to hopes, fears, plans, and alternative scenarios — as it does to the past.

It has been suggested by a number of recent thinkers that narration may, indeed, be the most fundamental of all human psychological operations. Fredric Jameson, for example, describes it as “the all-informing process ... the central function or instance of the human mind” and

Hayden White observes that the word “narrate” derives from the same Sanskrit root gnā as the Latin and Greek words for “know.” The implication would seem to be that there is, perhaps, no “knowing” which does not involve “narrating.” And to assert that one “knows” something is to assert a kind of power over it. Louis O. Mink, a philosopher of history, develops this point, by arguing that “narrative is a primary cognitive instrument — an instrument rivalled only by theory and by metaphor as irreducible ways of making the flux of experience comprehensible.” And, while most modern scientists assert that they have left behind the fanciful storytelling of their predecessors in favour of rigorous “scientific method,” some philosophers of science, P. B. Medawar for instance, insist that there is no such thing as scientific method and that a scientist is, above all, a person who “tells stories.”

Our psychological dependence on storytelling is perhaps best illustrated by the fact that most mental disorders, from amnesia to phobias, and from obsessive compulsions to schizophrenia, can be interpreted as breakdowns in the individual’s capacity to construct and appropriately weave together the whole repertoire of internal narratives. It is widely recognized, for example, that criminals who are repeatedly caught and convicted for similar offences characteristically lack the general capacity to foretell accurately the consequences of their (and probably other people’s) actions. They are poor at telling stories about the future. James Hillman, the psychotherapist, says more generally, “those who have a connection with story are in better shape and have a better prognosis than those to whom story must be introduced ... to have ‘story-awareness’ is per se psychologically therapeutic.”

Storytelling is, of course, more commonly thought of as a communication between (at least) two people, narrator and narratee. In fact the simple definition of story offered by the literary theorist, Barbara Herrnstein Smith, is “someone telling someone else something that happened.” It involves, then, an interactional process, an assertion of power not only over the matter shaped into narrative but over the audience for the story. As Ross Chambers expresses it, “to tell a story is an act, an event, one that has the power to produce change, and first and foremost to change the relationship between narrator and narratee.”

Storytelling, indeed, is probably the prime mechanism by which we negotiate our way through the more demanding moments of our daily lives. We use stories to explain, to persuade, to justify, to propose, to accuse, to deny guilt, and so on. And, inevitably, such interaction by
storytelling operates within already established contexts of power. Chambers, again, declares, “narrative mediates human relationships and derives its ‘meaning’ from them ... consequently, it depends on social agreements, implicit pacts or contracts, in order to produce exchanges that themselves are a function of desires, purposes and constraints.”

The metaphor used fruitfully by Chambers to describe the process by which a story exercises power over the narratee is “seduction.” The significance of the seductive nature of narrative is that the point of a story is established, indeed imposed on the narratee, in terms of the story’s whole narrative form and development. So, for instance, it is much harder to counter a racist story (whether it purports to be a factual record of personal experience or a simple joke) than it is to demonstrate the nastiness and inaccuracy of more direct forms of racist statement. Narrators of racist stories will often simply deny that their story has racist implications, or insist that “it’s just a story,” or respond with “but I’m only telling you what happened.” It is usually impossible to invalidate such a story by pointing out logical faults or statistical errors as one can with more abstract observations about, for example, the unwillingness of a particular racial group to do hard work. To counter the racist point of a story, it is necessary to combat the story in its totality. In fact listeners are often caught up in a story before it becomes entirely obvious that its point is racist or sexist. Chambers argues that a story typically has “the power to control its own impact through situational self-definition.” In other words, storytellers are seldom required to make explicit the presuppositions on which their story is based — and the story’s “point” may also remain implicit.

**Storytelling and social change**

Much recent discussion of narrative has brought together evidence and argument to suggest that storytelling serves in general to reinforce an existing social order, existing power structures. Robert Scholes, a literary theorist, explores the notion that “traditional narrative structures are ... part of a system of psychosocial dependencies that inhibit human growth and significant social change.” Robert Anchor, a theorist of history, argues that all storytelling contributes to the reproduction of dominant ideology: “historical narratives, no less than fictional narratives, always serve in one way or another, to legitimize an actual or ideal social reality.” Louis O. Mink observes that narrative is central to the social

transmission of culture, “storytelling is the most ubiquitous of human activities, and in any culture it is the form of complex discourse that is earliest accessible to children and by which they are largely acculturated.”

Evidence for such an argument is available in every field of storytelling. The part played by folktales, with their active young male heroes, passively beautiful maidens waiting for their prince to come, and wicked older women (stepmothers and witches), in acculturating young people to stereotypical gender roles has been very well documented. The process by which news stories in the media purport to inform mass audiences, but function at least as much to form them in attitudes which conform to orthodox and politically conservative social conditions, has also been fully examined. It is, likewise, not difficult to show that the annual reports of corporations are usually framed to tell the story of the previous year in a way which suggests that the corporation’s health is entirely (and appropriately) defined by the interests of shareholders and management rather than those of the labor force, or that tribal genealogies perform the function of legitimating the dominant position of certain individuals or castes within the tribal organization.

Most work on this issue has been done in the historical field, where many (though by no means all) thinkers would agree with Nancy Whittier Heer’s broad claim that “historiography functions in any political system to socialize the coming generation, to legitimate political institutions, to perpetuate established mores and mythology, and to rationalize official policies.” Hayden White has argued that historians construct the stories they tell around a moralizing “point,” yet propagate, and often actually subscribe to, the illusion that they have merely uncovered stories which were somehow objectively there. Feminists and activists from working-class and oppressed racial groups have demonstrated that history, as traditionally conceived, has excluded from its narration elements which would have given that narration a very different point — or, indeed, it has suppressed entire stories (“herstory”, for instance) which might have been told. Historical writing by and large privileges the experience of the dominant class, race, and gender by failing to record the experience or perspective of subordinate groups.

The processes by which storytelling performs such a conservative, legitimating function are readily defined. Storytelling, it is argued, is a fundamentally reductive (as well as seductive!) process. It mystifies our understanding by giving a false sense of coherence and comprehensiveness to a selection of scattered events. Moreover every story necessarily
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operates in terms of one or another set of pre-existing (social) conventions — whether those of the folklore, or the television news report, or academic historical writing, and so on. Linguists Edward Sapir and B. L. Whorf have argued that all human utterances are constrained by the inherited language available to the person uttering them. Not only is it impossible to express any concept that one's language is not structured to express, but the language of each society or social group even places limits on what members can perceive and think. This leads Sapir and Whorf to the aphorism that people do not speak languages, rather languages speak people. Similarly it may be argued that every piece of storytelling (even including stories one tells to oneself) is constrained by the storytelling codes or conventions available to the teller — conventions which are rooted in a particular historical situation and operate in relation to a particular social formation. So a further aphorism can be proposed: people do not tell stories, rather stories tell people.

A number of theorists, among them the philosopher Jean-François Lyotard, have, moreover, recently coined the useful term "metanarratives" (or "grand narratives") to denote certain overarching sets of religious, historical, and political assumptions structured in narrative terms: the belief in, for instance, decline after a golden age, or the expectation of a last judgement, or of reincarnation, the vision of history as progress or emancipation, and so on, the entire range of narratives which have functioned at certain times as legitimating frameworks shared by whole societies. They are controlling narratives of which the individuals and groups who live within them are not even perhaps consciously aware, though every lesser narrative bears the imprint of the metanarrative.

Metanarratives can, in general, only be fully identified after they have ceased to be fully effective.

Evidence for the argument that stories typically perform acculturating, mystifying or legitimating roles is, of course, massive and readily visible in every social arena: the schoolroom, the bar, the mass media, the hospital, the commercial world, the justice system, and so on. But are these really the only roles stories can perform? Both common sense and recent experience suggest many ways in which storytelling may also be disruptive, progressive, liberating.

To tell a previously "untold story" is an act which can be extraordinarily disruptive to the existing social order. This is perhaps most vividly illustrated by the work done by journalists in telling of events which governments or other kinds of authority want to keep hidden, such as the Watergate affair or the Iran-Contra scandal. Equally important, and disruptive of an existing power relation, are the actions of those women in western societies who have, in recent years, felt able for the first time to recount stories of incest and other sexual abuses to which they have been subjected. The psychological discomfort of feeling prohibited from retelling to others a story one regularly tells to oneself is well recognized. To tell such a story, especially, in the first instance to other women who have undergone the same experience, allows abused women to attribute blame appropriately (especially to stop blaming themselves), to raise their collective consciousness of gender issues, and eventually to convince a wider public of the existence of this large-scale, long-term social problem. Most importantly, once (potential) abusers realize that such stories are now "tellable," some, at least, are discouraged from continuing to abuse because of the criminal and other sanctions to which telling makes them subject. Telling untold stories may, in certain circumstances, positively empower oppressed people and diminish the offensive power of their oppressors. (Strictly speaking, as Hayden White has shown, there is no such thing as an untold story, since a story does not exist until it has been told.) So-called "untold stories" are stories whose elements are being shaped into narrative form for the first time, or stories which have previously only been told internally by people to themselves, or told in private, or, as frequently occurs, told but subsequently suppressed.

There are many recent examples of historians who have contributed to a radical transformation of dominant ideology by writing history which includes factual material or perspectives previously excluded. The history of the United States has been rewritten by Mary Frances Berry and others in a black, rather than a white, key. The story of the Industrial Revolution in Britain has been told by E. P. Thompson from the perspective of agricultural and industrial workers, rather than that of the bourgeoisie. The history of western literature is being rewritten by Ellen Moers, Dale Spender and many other feminist critics in a woman-centered, rather than man-centered, form. Feminists have also demonstrated the empowering effects of exposing young children to folktales and other stories with characters who offer a wider variety of role-models for boys and girls than were previously available.

Study of previously untold stories leads to the recognition that storytelling is a fundamentally competitive activity. Whereas most stories are covertly competitive, in the sense that, as we have seen, their telling suppresses alternative or contrary emplotments of the same events, there
are many social situations in which we expect to witness overtly competitive storytelling. Probably the most vivid example of overt competition in storytelling in a formally sanctioned setting is provided by the criminal courtroom, where, in the Anglo-American adversarial system at least, prosecution and defense tell alternative stories of the same series of events. The summing-up and judgement with which the trial ends not only indicate which parts of each story the judge found well-formed and convincing but tell a third story which purports to narrate “the truth” of the matter and, because it is backed by the institutional power of the judicial system, entails serious practical consequences (a conviction or not, punishment or not). There are many other situations in public life where overtly competitive narratives are displayed in a framework which is supposed to facilitate decision-making. So, for example, city planners will offer a set of competing scenarios for the introduction of a rapid transport system, so that city councillors — and, hopefully, the public — may choose between them. By and large it seems true that the very act of making overt the competitive nature of the narration is progressive.

The claims which have been made for the political effectiveness of all of the first four works I examine here include assertions that they have told for the first time a story which had previously been suppressed: A Sportman’s Notebook is supposed to have told previously untold stories about serfdom, Uncle Tom’s Cabin about slavery, Fontamara about Italian Fascism, One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich about the labor camps. The case of The Satanic Verses is much more complicated.

There are a number of other ways, in addition to the telling of untold stories, by which narrative can act in a productively disruptive way. Ross Chambers argues that the seductive character of narrative makes it, by its very nature, noncoercive and, indeed, a tool for use against coercion: “Such seduction, producing authority where there is no power, is a means of converting (historical) weakness into (discursive) strength. As such, it appears as a major weapon against alienation, an instrument of self-assertion, and an ‘oppositional practice’ of considerable significance.” The question then remains as to whether oppositional practices of this kind are merely tactical, in the sense that they achieve a temporary advantage without disturbing the underlying power relation, or whether they are strategic acts which really upset the existing structure of power. (Incidentally, I believe Chambers overstates his case in suggesting that the seductive character of narrative means that it tends generally to be a tool against coercion. I shall argue that while the seductive force of storytelling may on occasions be used for oppositional purposes,

it has much more often been used, like seduction in its literal sense, to reinforce a relationship of dominance. There are, sadly, many more misogynist than feminist anecdotes and many more racist than anti-racist jokes in circulation.)

Frequently in societies I am familiar with (and my guess is that this is a very nearly universal social practice), the telling of one story will trigger the telling of other stories by other members of a group, which illustrate the same theme or respond to the same question. Such sequential storytelling usually has a competitive element to it, involving “capping” a story that someone else has just told with another: my story is claimed to be more dramatic, or more extraordinary, or funnier than yours. The sociolinguist, William Labov, has done some remarkable work in collecting strings of stories told by members of clearly identifiable communities in, for instance, Harlem, to whom he has posed questions such as: “Were you ever in a situation where you thought you were in serious danger of getting killed?” (Many fictional literary works — Boccaccio’s Decameron is a wonderful example — imitate this naturally occurring pattern whereby stories develop in strings. The ten stories of each day of the Decameron, after the first, illustrate a new theme, defined at the start of the day. So all the stories of Day Four, for example, relate to “loves which ended disastrously.”) The broad social function of such story strings may be seen as generally conservative, communicating traditional wisdom or widely held concerns or beliefs (life is perilous, love often does end disastrously, and so on). But it is clear that, in certain circumstances, the telling of a different kind of story (often a previously untold story) will trigger the telling of other stories of the same kind and a new, highly charged consciousness and solidarity will be created on the basis of the aggregation of similar stories, which results in a degree of empowerment of people who previously saw themselves as isolated and powerless. This typically occurs in therapeutic, consciousness-raising groups.

Several of the novels studied here are said to have triggered important episodes of linked storytelling among their readers. In the case of Uncle Tom’s Cabin, this included not only the circulation among white Northerners of a vast number of additional stories, oral and written, factual and fictional, about the horrors of slavery, but the writing and publication in the South of many anti-Uncle-Tom novels, depicting slavery in a rosy light. One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich opened a previously closed door, prompting other former camp inmates to tell friends and a wider public for the first time of their experiences. In both cases, it is in
this capacity to trigger related stories among a vast readership that the political force of the work has been located. The notion that certain fictional narratives serve to promote a kind of group (even mass) therapy among their readers is one that will recur in this book. The Satanic Verses is, however, a special case which, it will be argued, has, for the moment at least, provoked mass responses (and not only amongst Muslims) which are almost wholly nontherapeutic and dysfunctional.

A number of theorists, as has already been mentioned, see the reductive character of narrative as always and necessarily tending to inhibit human growth and social change. Some psychologists, on the other hand, make the very simple point that human beings require the reductive force of narrative if they are to make any sense of the world on an everyday basis. As Richard Bandler and John Grinder say (and their observation applies equally to individuals and to social groups) "when human beings create their linguistic models of the world, they necessarily select and represent certain portions of the world and fail to select and represent others." Some narrative reductions, they point out, may lead to creative action, while others limit or immobilize those who subscribe to them. The main processes by which people create defective models, they suggest, are inappropriate generalization, deletion and distortion. So, for instance, an individual may generalize from an unhappy experience in the past to construct a narrative model of the future which shows that experience being infinitely repeated.

Bandler and Grinder's main interests are in the behavior of individuals and small groups, but their ideas have great relevance, also, to the narratives by which larger groups, and even whole societies, live. Their account of the role of the psychotherapist, for instance, which is to "challenge and expand the impoverished portions" of their clients' defective narrative, has a good deal in common with the definition many political activists might give of their role in society at large. Once it is seen that narratives are functional only in relation to particular moments (whether personal or historical) and that they are (or should be) in a constant state of renewal, their reductive quality need no longer be feared.

Psychotherapists of different persuasions not only start from radically different primary narratives (in terms of which they account for functional and dysfunctional psychological development) but adopt quite different narrative strategies in their face-to-face therapeutic encounters. At one extreme, Freudian analysis involves a long series of consultations in which the patient is prompted to recount memories, dreams, and fantasies, which the analyst retells as he/she interprets them. In Roy Schafer's words: "The analyst establishes new, though often contested or resisted, questions that amount to regulated narrative possibilities. The end product of this interweaving of texts is a radically new, jointly authored work or way of working." At the other extreme, the brief therapy interventions of, for instance, Milton Erickson, require only quite limited narrative probing into the conscious or unconscious world of the patients who are typically interviewed as a couple or a family. The interactional therapist of the Ericksonian type comes quickly to the formulation of a "metanarrative" which captures the circular, self-sustaining, yet destructive nature of the patients' current behavior patterns. (This use of the word "metanarrative" runs precisely counter to Lyotard's use of the same term, in that it refers to a conscious attempt to escape the limitations of a confining narrative.) Nevertheless, change is not attempted by acquainting clients with this metanarrative (since the self-sustaining nature of the doublebind they are in would cause them to resist the insight it would offer) nor is any major alteration of behavior recommended. The therapist's intervention involves, instead, the insertion of some new, often quite small, provocative, even paradoxical, element into the narrative presented by the clients. Clients who attempt to follow this prescription frequently discover, not only that they cannot sustain such an absurd charade, but that their old, dysfunctional pattern of behavior has been permanently disrupted.

The process underlying such a maneuver, that is, the formulation of a metanarrative which escapes the limitations of existing narratives and yet makes possible a small intervention in those narratives to disrupt them in some crucial way, is readily identifiable also in certain kinds of political activism. The use of passive resistance or civil disobedience in the service of a wider political philosophy parallels the paradoxical nature of the intervention described above particularly closely. Partisan struggle against occupying forces and guerrilla activity against colonizers have likewise often achieved massive change with the judicious use of very limited resources. Even jokes about authority figures, and political cartoons, satire and other forms of story against oppressive regimes, have, in certain circumstances, and despite their clandestine nature, undermined the credibility of their targets to a quite devastating degree.

I shall be suggesting in the case studies which follow that, whilst some of the works I deal with may be said to have had an effect on political behavior patterns by means akin to the prolonged, wide-ranging and gradual processes of the Freudian analyst, others have exercised extraor-
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ordinary leverage in a particular historical situation, through an intervention which appears on the surface, like Erickson's, almost irrelevant to it.

In order to approach more directly the question of just how fictional texts may be said to contribute to political change, I need now to focus my attention more narrowly on the theoretical problems which arise when the terms "literature" and "power" are brought together. Nevertheless, it will be noticeable that a number of the issues which have come up in this brief discussion of storytelling in its broad sense will recur in a different guise in what follows.

The great writer as alternative government?

It is a curious thing that, in liberal democracies, the word "power" is used more frequently than any other by publishers and reviewers to indicate, and invite, approval of a work of narrative fiction. Glancing at the covers of paperback novels on just a single shelf in my local bookshop (novels written by authors whose names begin with the letter R), I found the following phrases, all of which were either quoted from newspaper or magazine reviews or written by the publishers themselves: "stirring authenticity and power," "powerfully claustrophobic," "powerful and tender first novel," "powerful writing which evokes the rancid and decayed inner-city setting so strongly you can almost smell it," "a superbly written first book...few contemporary writers can have evoked so powerfully the temper and texture of the ocean."

This flooding of popular critical discourse with the term "power" does not, of course, indicate a widespread belief in the capacity of narrative fiction to "change the world." The use of "power" in these examples indicates little more than approval of the novel's capacity to involve and move the individual reader emotionally. Indeed the term is so devalued as to imply a denial that narrative fiction can exercise power in a wider social and political sense. Received opinion in most liberal democracies has long been that fictional writing involves an unproblematic personal communication from author to reader. To the extent that the major writer exercises "power" over the reader, this is seen as a legitimate, educative influence, with the writer conveying generalized human truths and the reader becoming, by reading, a better human being. As Tolstoy says, "the role of the reader or critic is to listen respectfully to the voice of the author as it is expressed in the text."3 The notion of the writer's "power" is a curious blend of the medieval concept of the authority of the classical writer with the respect for inspired genius that derives from romanticism. On to this conception of the writer's power has been grafted, however, a notion of authority which derives from theories of liberal constitutional government. Just as it is assumed that the individual citizen concedes power to the government in some kind of social contract, so it is assumed that the reader submits willingly to the authority of the writer, thereby authorizing the writer's power over him or her. Power, as usual in a liberal democracy, is treated as individual and unproblematic, rather than collective, structural, and problematic.

Two important corollaries follow from this: a) there is no public acknowledgement that literature plays a role in the maintenance of existing power structures and b) literature is seen as incapable of playing a seriously disruptive role within such a society. Fictional works may be deemed "offensive" or "indecent", but in that case they are not "literature." If, in a liberal democracy, a piece of imaginative writing seeks or achieves social or political influence that goes beyond such a limited conception of its proper power, it must either be nonliterature masquerading as literature or a literary work being manipulated and misused for nonliterary, propagandist purposes. This assumption, that serious social or political influence is not to be expected, or even desired, of a literary text, is nicely illustrated by the phrasing of the article on Harriet Beecher Stowe in the Literary History of the United States edited by Robert E. Spiller and others. Its author, George Whicher, does not deny that Uncle Tom's Cabin evoked a tremendous response in the United States, "the words set down by her hand appeared to convulse a mighty nation," but he quickly undercuts this statement by adding the general disclaimer that "in spite of the enormous vogue of Mrs Stowe's novel, it is doubtful if a book ever had much power to change the course of events."44 These comments trap Harriet Beecher Stowe from two opposite sides: either her work did not change the course of events (because literature by definition can't) or it did, in which case it isn't literature!

In overtly authoritarian states whose form of government does not rely on liberal bourgeois conceptions of constitutionality, such as Russia under the Tsars or the Soviet Union under Stalin, these assumptions are entirely reversed. Literature is required, by a combination of censorship and patronage, to contribute to the maintenance of power as constituted at the time. The government's insistence on retaining tight control over what is written and published reflects the belief, which is most often shared by the regime's opponents, that fictional writing possesses an extreme potential for disruption. So the critic, Vissarion Belinsky, writ-
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In the 1840s of the situation of poets and novelists in Tsarist Russia, declared that "the public is right, for it looks upon Russian writers as its only leaders, defenders and savours against Russian autocracy, orthodoxy and nationality." One hundred and thirty years later, Solzhenitsyn echoed Belinsky's optimism about the oppositional effectiveness of the writer of literary fiction when he had a character in his novel, *The First Circle*, state (and one can be sure that this reflected Solzhenitsyn's personal opinion), "for a country to have a great writer . . . is like having another government." In his Nobel Speech of 1970, which makes extraordinarily grand claims for the political influence of literary fiction, Solzhenitsyn adds the assertion that "literature . . . nurses and preserves [a] nation's lost history, in a form which is not susceptible to distortion and slander." 

There is, of course, a considerable naivety about Solzhenitsyn's position. While fiction can tell stories untold by history (the story *Uncle Tom's Cabin* told about slavery, for instance) such fictional stories are just as subject to "distortion and slander" as history itself. Literature, I shall be seeking to demonstrate throughout this book, is always embedded in structures or networks of power. Consequently it is never *either* as impotently marginal as Whicher asserts, or as independently powerful and incorruptible as Solzhenitsyn suggests. What is true is that the widespread expectation in a society that literary works either can, or cannot, play a significant political role is largely self-fulfilling. Whereas in some countries, readers weigh every word in a literary work for its possible political implications, in other countries, readers remain insensitive to political allusions which are very thinly veiled. (A rejection note for *Animal Farm* sent to George Orwell by one American publisher simply stated that there was currently no market for animal stories!) 

The question which will be posed in several of the cases I shall be examining is whether a fictional work can be said to have exercised significant disruptive power against a large scale oppressive form of power (serfdom, slavery, fascism, Stalinist terror). This question requires that I now address directly the issue of what is meant by 'power.'

Concepts of power

Debates about the nature of power have, of course, raged for centuries among philosophers, who have been joined in the last hundred years or so by thinkers from the newer disciplines of political science and sociolog-

ogy. I take an unashamedly eclectic approach to theory in this field, as also in the area of literary theory, being unconvincing that any of the theorists whose work I have met has developed a framework which makes other theories superfluous, and believing that most theoretical perspectives offer valuable insights for the purposes of my present enterprise.

It is widely agreed that slavery, fascism, patriarchy, and many other forms of oppressive power relations can usefully be grouped together as "asymmetric" relations. All imply inequality, control, dependence, and actual or potential conflict. The power relation involved is typified by the notion that one group has power over another. As Max Weber wrote, power, in this sense, may be defined as "the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his [sic] own will despite resistance." Nevertheless, such power can rarely be described in simple individual terms and recognition of the structural nature of power becomes essential. Frank Parkin, for instance, writes of power as "a concept or metaphor which is used to depict the flow of resources which constitute the system." Political philosophers have argued vigorously in recent years about whether it makes better sense to view human beings as mere bearers of structural power (Nicos Poulantzas) or as having a degree of independence as agents within power systems (C. Wright Mills and Ralph Miliband). Such concepts are relevant to the present study, firstly because it asks what roles certain works of narrative fiction have played in relation to pre-existing structures or systems of power, secondly because it examines the extent to which it is appropriate to talk of writers and readers as exercising power independent of the social, institutional and discursive systems within which they operate.

Several recent theorists have proposed modifications to traditional thinking about power as an asymmetric relation. Perhaps it is a mistake, for instance, to think of power as a single system. In his later writings, Roland Barthes developed a concept of power as multiple, all-pervading, and infinitely resistant to attack: "And yet, what if power were plural, like demons? 'My name is Legion,' it could say; everywhere, on all sides, leaders, massive or minute organizations, pressure groups, or oppression groups, everywhere 'authorized' voices which authorize themselves to utter the discourse of all power: the discourse of arrogance .... Exhausted, defeated here, it reappears there; it never disappears. Make a revolution to destroy it, power will immediately revive and flourish again in the new state of affairs."
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This view appears to admit of no possibility either that nonoppressive forms of power could exist or that oppressive power might in any way be undermined or reduced. Michel Foucault in one sense develops and in another sense counters these arguments by declaring that power can only be analyzed as something which circulates or functions in the form of a chain: “It is never localized here or there, never in anybody’s hands, never appropriated as a commodity or piece of wealth. Power is employed and exercised through a net-like organization. And not only do individuals circulate between its threads; they are always in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising this power.”

This is a very subtle and, in certain respects, fruitful account. For instance, it illuminates the situation of a man who is in a subordinate position in class terms but who exercises brutally oppressive power over his wife. Nevertheless it should not be allowed to obscure the commonsense observation that power is overwhelmingly concentrated at certain points of the network, rather than others.

An important feature of most descriptions of power as structure or network is the notion of “ideology” as developed by thinkers within the Marxist tradition (especially Gramsci and Althusser), and as elaborated and transformed by other thinkers including, notably, recent feminist theorists. “Ideology” in this usage denotes the way in which the dominance of a given social group is maintained not only by coercion, but by the manner in which its interests are built into all social institutions and into the very discourses (the ways of talking, writing, even thinking) of the whole society, including the oppressed groups. As Marx and Engels wrote, the ruling ideas of an epoch “are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships grasped as ideas.” So, the law, religion, the education system, the mass media, and so on, whilst they give the appearance of being independent bodies of ideas and social practice, are all, in fact, “ideological forms” which essentially reflect and contribute to sustaining the fundamental economic, race and gender relations. Working-class people, women and colonized or enslaved racial and national groups unwittingly learn patterns of thought — stereotypes about their own group — which serve to intensify their own (and each other’s) subordination by making it seem natural.

Narrative and Power

English language has been literally man made and ... it is still primarily under male control ... This monopoly over language is one of the means by which males have ensured their own primacy, and consequently have ensured the invisibility or ‘other’ nature of females, and this primacy is perpetuated while women continue to use, unchanged, the language which we have inherited.” (Her point is well illustrated by the number of times in this book that I have, in passages quoted from academic writers, inserted “sic” to draw attention to the use of exclusively masculine pronouns and possessive adjectives in contexts where women as writers, as readers, or even as human beings were thereby made invisible.) Roland Barthes, in a lecture shortly before he died, went so far as to declare in the most general terms that “language — the performance of a language system — is neither reactionary nor progressive: it is quite simply fascist.”

These, then, are some of the threads spun by thinkers concerned with describing power as an asymmetric relation. Many theorists and activists, however, have felt the need to identify and develop concepts of power which are distinct from the oppressive concepts of power which predominate in colonial, postcolonial, class, and patriarchal relations. Socialists envisage a radical political and economic transformation which will construct a society founded on collective or communal power. Anticolonialists struggle towards self-determination for their people. Modern conceptions of power as nonoppressive derive from a long and wide-ranging tradition of political philosophy going back to Plato which sees power as implying, not control and competition, but communal achievement. Within this tradition, power is a “collective capacity,” or, as Hannah Arendt has expressed it, “the human ability to ... act in concert.” There is a good deal of disagreement within and between activist groups about whether power as “collective capacity” is merely a goal to be aspired to, with the path to that goal frequently necessitating the use of power as “asymmetric relation” — the position taken by many socialists and anticolonial fighters — or whether it is essential for the means employed to be always informed only with power as “collective capacity,” never oppressive power — the position taken by Gandhian pacifists and many anarchists and feminists.

Indeed, it is feminists who have, in recent years, probably articulated most clearly their rejection of the prevailing concept of power as an exclusively “asymmetric relation.” As Toril Moi expresses it, “feminism is not simply about rejecting power, but about transforming the existing power structures and, in the process, transforming the very concept of
power itself." Hélène Cixous develops this argument by distinguishing what she calls "masculine" and "feminine" forms of power (making clear, however, that she does not mean that men always operate in terms of masculine power or women always in terms of feminine power). Masculine power, she says, is "always and only a power over others. It is something that relates back to government, control, and beyond that, to despotism. Whereas if I say 'women's powers,' first it isn't one power any longer, it is multiplied, there is more than one ... and it is a question of power over oneself, in other words of a relation not based on mastery but on availability."

Cixous's positive notion of multiple power, it should be noticed, runs directly counter to Barthes' notion of the multiplicity of oppressive power. Similarly, Julia Kristeva counters Barthes' notion of language as "fascist" by arguing that it is better understood as a arena of conflict. While, in many societies, everyone uses the same language, different groups within the society have different interests which intersect in language. While it is in the interests of the dominant power group to ensure that language operates only "univocally," that is, conveys single, fixed meanings, which allow no space for dissenting thought (let alone action), subordinate groups will always manage to introduce a "polysemic" (multiple) quality into the construction of meaning. Language is therefore, according to Kristeva, not merely a reflection of existing social relations, but a productive area of struggle.

**Theories about literature and power**

Theorists have taken up a great variety of positions on the question of the relations between literature and power, literature and ideology. It was, not surprisingly, in the works of Marx and Engels that the earliest, major theoretical challenge was offered to the liberal model of the interaction of author and reader as a personal communication, unproblematic in terms of power. In the first place, they demonstrated that, whereas bourgeois ideology would have it that literary works are conceived in isolation by inspired individuals and offered directly to the waiting world, in fact literary works are products of labor which is constrained by essentially the same set of power relations, economic and otherwise, as other forms of labor. As such, literary works are produced, marketed, distributed, sold, exported and imported, kept and discarded, within the context of national and international economic (and political) systems. Fictional writing is processed, at different stages, by the mass media (in both advertising and criticism), the law (in censorship), and the education and library systems. (This means that it is necessary for me, in the present book, to examine the power relations implicit in every aspect of the production, rhetorical structure, distribution, and consumption of each of the works I am studying.)

A second relevant observation of Engels is that a text's political meaning is not determined by its author's conscious political stance or intentions for the work. So, he argued, a great novelist like Balzac, writing in a period in France at which economic and political power was shifting rapidly from the aristocracy to the bourgeoisie, could not but reflect in his novels the inevitability of that shift, even though, in conscious political terms, he opposed it. The capacity to represent the underlying social forces of the historical moment is therefore, for Marx and Engels, the great "power" of literature. Engels developed this point by arguing that any attempt by a fictional writer, such as Zola in the 1880s, to hasten or lead the coming to power of the emerging class (in Zola's case, the proletariat) is "tendentious writing" and doomed to failure. Lucien Goldmann, a Marxist writer in the 1960s, followed a parallel track in arguing that the validity of a work of art may be judged by the degree to which its structure embodies the world vision of the social class or group to which the writer belongs — with Goldmann, too, the criterion is the extent to which the work demonstrates "the way things really are." While there are major theoretical difficulties about any argument which depicts art as, in any simple sense, "reflecting" life, it remains the case, as psychotherapists well know, that "if people define situations as real they are real in their consequences." It will become clear in the case studies that follow that the impact of several of the works I study resulted from the fact that readers in large numbers read them as conveying vital new information about social and political conditions, even if subsequent readings make clear that they mirrored reality in a distorted or incomplete manner.

A number of theorists, both inside and outside the Marxist tradition, explore the notion that literature may perform a positively empowering or liberating role. For Bertolt Brecht, theater and literature were capable of exercising a strongly subversive function. While he avoided simplistic conceptions of art as reflection, insisting that "if art reflects life it does so with special mirrors," he nevertheless saw the empowering possibilities of literature as lying in its capacity to reveal hidden realities to the oppressed class (in other words, to tell untold stories), by: "laying bare society's causal
network / showing up the dominant viewpoint as the viewpoint of the
dominators / writing from the standpoint of the class which has prepared
the broadest solutions for the most pressing problems afflicting human
society / emphasizing the dynamics of development ...”

To achieve this, Brecht employed what he called “alienation effects”
which, rather than inviting the audience to become absorbed in his plays
as illusions, would regularly break the continuity of the action, insisting
that the audience reflect actively on what was happening and being said.

The problem of literature and power is illuminated by a further theo-
retical development within the Marxist tradition. Pierre Macherey
argues that, far from constituting rounded, coherent unities, literary
texts are essentially fragmentary, self-contradictory, distinctive for what
they omit as much as for what they include, and are therefore capable
of working on our ideological experience, distancing us from its illusory
qualities. Whilst literature cannot operate outside ideology, it can
demonstrate the limits of ideology by offering scattered, diverse, and
conflicting meanings. Literature can thus be seen as yet another arena
for struggle.

Macherey, along with other literary theorists, Marxist and non-
Marxist, has moved away from assumptions about the unity and stabil-
ity of the meaning of a literary text and the centrality of the writing
process towards an assertion of the instability of literary meaning and
the importance of the reading process. Interestingly, these theories are
actually developing the cultural implications of Marx’s statement that “a
product becomes a real product only by being consumed. For example
a garment becomes a real garment only in the act of being worn; a house
where no-one lives is in fact not a real house; thus the product, unlike a
mere natural object, proves itself to be, becomes, a product only through
consumption. Only by decomposing the product does consumption
give the product the finishing touch.”

It is the “consumption” of the fictional text, the reading process,
which German and American reception theorists have focused their
attention on and while the reception theorists have been criticized by
Marxists, and others, for failing to confront the problem of power and
the fictional text, in my view they have, often unwittingly, illuminated
the problem in some very important ways and I make considerable use
of their insights in the studies that follow. Wolfgang Iser, for instance,
argues that the fictional text “should be understood as a combination of
forms and signs designed to guide the imagination of the reader” and
that the interaction of text and reader involves “the prestructuring of the
potential meaning by the text, and the reader’s actualization of this
potential through the reading process.” Iser’s choice of the word
“guide” for the action of the text on the reader’s imagination makes the
relationship seem unproblematic in terms of power (indeed, in this
sense, Iser takes a very traditional, liberal position), but it requires only
a moment’s thought to see that it disguises a very strong interaction.
Another writer has described the act of reading in these terms: “Here I
am thinking a thought which manifestly belongs to another mental
world, which is being thought in me just as though I did not exist.”
The formulation proposed by an American reception theorist, Lowry
Nelson, illustrates this point more fully: He suggests that the fictional
text is most usefully regarded as being like a musical score, or the text of
a play, which must be “performed” if the work is to be realized. He elab-
orates the notion of “a reader’s role written in the text as part of the
fiction, to which the existential (real-life) reader, in order to become an
adequate or ‘optimum’ reader, must conform, thus playing a role, be-
coming a collaborator, an accomplice.”

The relevance to the discussion of politically loaded texts, such as
those under consideration here, of the terms “perform,” “collaborator,”
and “accomplice” will be obvious. The text requires a form of participa-
tion from the reader (as Chambers’ term “seduction” suggests) and, as
well known in the fields of education and psychotherapy, active role-
playing can be enormously influential on the person doing it. Reading,
it may be argued, is capable of promoting the same kind of more or less
permanent change in readers which psychotherapists tell us therapeutic
role-playing sometimes produces in their clients: the radical reframing
of a familiar situation. (This accounts for the familiar remark: “After
that I could never see it in quite the same way again.”) This sense of the
term “reframing” is defined by Paul Watzlawick and his associates as
follows: “To reframe ... means to change the conceptual and/or emotional
setting or viewpoint in relation to which a situation is experienced and
to place it in another frame which fits the ‘facts’ of the same concrete
situation equally well or even better, and thereby changes its entire
meaning.” (This notion of reframing can be seen, in turn, as having a
good deal in common with Thomas Kuhn’s account of how radical
breaks in scientific thinking occur, with the substitution of one explana-
atory paradigm with another.) It is noteworthy that one of the claims
that have been made for the political effect of Uncle Tom’s Cabin is that
it brought about a complete “reframing,” or reconceptualization, of

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slavery in the minds of a large proportion of the northern white population of the United States. Similar claims are made for some of the other fictional works studied.

Inviting the participation of the reader as an accomplice is (like "seduction") an act which has very different connotations in terms of power, according to the location within existing power structures of the person doing the inviting and the person who is invited, as well as the form in which the invitation is made. (The case of, at least nominally, all-powerful Tsar “performing” A Sportsman’s Notebook as “collaborator” or “accomplice” illustrates this point particularly vividly.) It is, of course, possible to refuse an invitation to perform a literary work, by refusing to read any further. Another reception theorist, Susan Suleiman, has posed the very interesting question as to whether it is possible for a reader to continue reading and yet avoid a full collaboration with the value system implicit in a work of fiction. She argues that a kind of reading is possible which involves the reader in a full performance of the text, yet with an “ideological dissent,” a recognition of “certain formal devices as masks for the novelist in his [sic] role as a manipulator of values.” The seducer is thereby unmasked.

This argument has been further developed, and given great importance, in the work of feminist literary critics who describe themselves as “reading against the grain” of texts, usually by men, which they find offensive to women. Kate Millett, for instance, picked up the novels of male writers, D. H. Lawrence, Henry Miller, Norman Mailer, and others and then, rather than collaborating with their particular forms of male erotic fantasy, demonstrated their profoundly misogynist character. This notion of the assertive, disobedient reader who refuses to acknowledge the authority of the author and his text is seen as a crucial weapon against patriarchy, but is of course transferable to opposition against other forms of oppressive power. Such critics are insisting on the subversive power of the reader of (or against) distinctly nonsubversive texts, turning the text into a weapon to be used against the interests of the oppressive group it would otherwise serve (in somewhat the way that teachers of martial arts instruct their students to turn around the force of an attacker). This formulation attributes an independent power to the reader (feminist critics use the term “the resisting reader”) which has great significance in the present study. Resisting reading may well involve disobeying not only signs within the text, but disobeying signs erected around the text by publishers, reviewers, educators, and so on. Some intriguing cases will be documented of “reading against the grain” by Southerners who came across Uncle Tom’s Cabin in the 1850s, and by former camp guards who wrote to tell Solzhenitsyn about their interpretations of One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich. The case of The Satanic Verses will once again prove to be the most problematic: have Muslims claiming to be offended by Rushdie’s novel misunderstood it (as the author and many of his defenders argue) or willfully read against its profoundly anti-Islamic grain (as they, themselves, argue)?

The literary text as “theatre of a production”

Nevertheless there are many kinds of literary theory which deny that fictional works have a (single) “grain” which the reader is invited to follow. Theorists of various schools emphasize what they variously call the “multivalence” or “polyvalence” (reception theorists), or “openness” (Umberto Eco), or “polysemousness” (Barthes and Kristeva) of fictional texts. In Barthes’s words, the text is no longer to be considered as “the product of a labour … but the very theatre of a production where the producer and the reader of the text meet: the text ‘works,’ at each moment and from whatever side one takes it. Even when written (fixed), it does not stop working, maintaining a process of production.”

For some theorists, “openness” is one of the distinguishing characteristics of literary texts. The reception theorist, for example, assert that it is in the very nature of fictional texts that they offer “a multiplicity of varying, contrasting and, to a certain degree, mutually exclusive strands of meaning … which stand on an equal footing as far as their validity is concerned.” Other theorists, Eco for instance, emphasize the difference between texts which are relatively “open” to multiple interpretation and those which are relatively “closed.” And it has become a commonplace of discussion amongst politically engaged novelists and critics over the last thirty years or more that, to be politically progressive, to contribute towards upsetting the monolithic certainties of an oppressive political system, a literary work must be formally complex, even ambiguous.

The ramifications of the argument about the “openness” of literary texts run in a number of different, in some cases quite contrary, directions, all of which have some importance for the kinds of study undertaken in this book.

The reception theorists, on the whole, depict the reader as possessing relative autonomy to select amongst the “mutually exclusive strands of
meaning in the text.” Meaning is, one might say, “negotiated” between text and reader. Some reception theorists, however, emphasize that each reader’s capacity to generate meanings from a text is constrained, not only by the nature of the text itself, but by the “syndrome of expectations” the reader brings to the text. That syndrome of expectations is, in turn, determined by the reader’s particular linguistic experience, experience in dealing with texts, and individual emotional, social, and cultural experience.\(^3\) Most reception theorists are unwilling to acknowledge how closely their concept of a “syndrome of expectations” parallels the Marxist and feminist concepts of “ideology” and so miss its relevance to the discussion of literature and power.

On the other hand, a line of argument about the relative openness of fictional texts developed by some reception theorists has great usefulness in the examination of how a particular fictional text has “worked in the world.” Interesting studies have been undertaken, especially by Manfred Duraz, of the broad shifts in interpretation which occur when a fictional work is read in another country than the one in which, and for which, it was written. Duraz has shown, for instance, that while West German critics of Günter Grass’s story, Ballad of a Baderdog, viewed it (rather unfavorably) as a literal depiction of political events in their own country, “American critics interpret the story right from the beginning in a nonliteral way: for them it is a veiled portrayal in parable form of domestic political events of a specifically American kind.”\(^4\) I shall be showing, in a later chapter, how Ignazio Silone’s Fontamara, conversely, achieved remarkable political influence in the United States in the mid-1930s because its American readers interpreted it as being a very literal, concrete rendering of life under Mussolini’s fascism, whereas readers closer to Italy read it much more metaphorically. And, as we have already seen, differences of interpretation between cultural and religious groups have played a major part in the disputes over The Satanic Verses. In fact, the political importance of shifts in interpretation of a fictional work as it crosses national, cultural, and religious frontiers will be a recurrent theme of this book.

Then there is the issue of shifts in the reception of the fictional work over time. It is Hans Robert Jauss who has explored this question most fully. He argues that what occurs is an ongoing “dialogue” between a work and successive groups of readers, in which the work provides new “answers” to new generations of readers, because they, with their different syndromes of expectations, read it with different “questions” in mind.\(^5\) Where the “power” lies in this formulation (and what kind of power it might be) is not easy to decide. It is almost as if the reception theorists regard the text as a multipurpose resource (a kind of versatile power-tool?) which later readers may use in ways they choose on the many situations in which they find themselves. Some illumination of this issue on the empirical level will occur when I examine the complex histories of the reception by different social groups, in different countries, and at different historical moments of, in particular, Uncle Tom’s Cabin and Fontamara. What one can be sure of is that the wonderfully grand and simple image of how literary works supposedly convey their message across time and national boundaries, which Solzhenitsyn expressed in his Nobel Speech, does not accurately reflect the complex processes involved. Solzhenitsyn declares that literature has a miraculous facility: “that of overcoming differences of language, custom and social system, and conveying life experience from one whole nation to another. And this national experience, painfully built up over many decades by one nation, when conveyed to a second nation which has never had it, can perhaps save it from taking an unnecessary, mistaken or even ruinous path ... There is another immensely valuable channel along which literature conveys human experience, in condensed and authoritative form: from one generation to another.”\(^6\)

Solzhenitsyn’s position contrasts strongly with that taken by a large number of politically active writers and critics over many decades who have identified the political force of fictional texts as lying precisely in their ambiguity and openness, which, they say, tends to disturb the certainties of totalitarian political systems. The productive energy of the text is associated with a concept of power as collective, multiple, and subversive of oppressive forms of power. Elio Vittorini, Italian author of the richly ambiguous anti-Fascist novel Conversation in Sicily, developed a particularly attractive formulation of this argument. He accounted for his complex and elusive style, not only by referring to the need to fool the Fascist censors, but by insisting on his desire to reject as authoritarian any writing “in which the truth is administered to the reader from on high, under the technical fiction that the writer is demiurgic, the center of the the world, the spirit, God” in favour of writing which is “democratic, dialectical, conjectural.”\(^7\) In a totalitarian regime, to use words in a way which allows for a variety of conflicting interpretations and responses is to cast serious doubt on the regime’s own handling of language. (This line of argument ties in interestingly with the proposal of the Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin that the novel is, because of the very mixed character of the language it uses, by nature a “dialogic"
Some feminists have developed this argument in important ways. Hélène Cixous grafts ideas about the text as open and productive onto her own account of masculine and feminine power to develop the notion of “feminine writing.” Feminine texts are those which “split open the closure of the binary opposition and revel in the pleasures of open-ended textuality.”

This argument, that “openness” in fictional texts (and for that matter “openness” in reading strategy) necessarily tends to foster power as “collective capacity” and undermine power as “asymmetric relation,” is a very attractive one. But when tested in the case studies which follow, it will be found to need considerable qualification. Without anticipating the detail of my findings, I can say here that, in examining the apparently progressive political impact of a number of fictional works, I am struck by the fact that, on some occasions, it is a relatively closed reading that has given the work its political sharpness, its persuasive quality. (As the interactional psychotherapists and guerilla fighters know well, an apparently reductive intervention may be most effective at inducing change.) More generally, it needs to be said that any discussion of how specific literary texts might have contributed to social and political change has to take account of the context in which the work was received and of the way in which it actually meshed with the current situation and preoccupations of its readers.

It is in the work of Roland Barthes and the poststructuralists that the issue of the productive openness of literary texts is taken to its furthest extreme. Barthes, we have seen, usefully describes the literary work as “productive” of meanings; it might be expected that he would have extremely relevant things to say about how the energy of literary texts converts into political power. In my view, however, his arguments on this topic lead down what is nearly a blind alley. His oracular statements are expressed in such absolute terms that they sometimes obscure as many important issues as they reveal.

In his seminal essay “Theory of the Text,” Barthes defines the productive working of texts as a kind of infinite, erotic, combinative, self-referential play of meaning, and he concludes: “the signifier belongs to everybody; it is the text which, in fact works tirelessly, not the artist or the consumer.” Vaguely democratic though that sounds, Barthes avoids locating the work done by texts in an historical context and so avoids relating his theory of textuality to issues of power. Indeed, having, as I said earlier, developed a concept of power as all-pervading, multiple and uniformly oppressive, and a concept of language as fascist, Barthes, in a characteristic intellectual back-somersault, argued, in the same lecture, that literature, because it is capable of employing language in infinitely playful and self-reflexive ways, is a “permanent revolution of language” which somehow evades power. He calls literature “this satulatory trickery, this evasion, this grand imposture which allows us to understand speech outside the bounds of power” (my italics). This not only goes against the broad argument I have advanced so far about the intimate relationship which will always exist between narrative (including literary narrative) and various forms of power, but surely contradicts Barthes’s own conception of power as totalitarian and ubiquitous. There is another level on which Barthes and practitioners of deconstruction are frequently — and to my mind rightly — criticized, but which I can refer to here only in passing. The kind of brilliantly rich and playful reading which Barthes proposed is profoundly elitist, because it is only available to readers with not only his richness of intellect, but also his economic and educational privilege and leisure. At the same time, it can be said that it actually diffuses any political energy the text may be capable of by splitting it — just as the force of a big river is diminished if it divides into a hundred streams. My interest is in seeing what sorts of meaning large numbers of people of quite varied educational and economic background have found in certain fictional texts at moments of acute historical — and sometimes personal — stress. I could not disagree more with the novelist and critic Luce d’Eramo, who declared that “the critic’s job is to penetrate a book, forgetting everything else, otherwise one’s judgement of a book would change if one read it in prison or on holiday.”

The role which a work of fiction may play in the complex mechanisms of social and political power is eventually determined precisely by the circumstances in which it is read, and often — to come back to Barthes — by the constraints on playful reading which they impose.
This line of argument brings together Macherey's notion of gaps in, and fragmentariness of, the text with the reception theorists' conception of the text as containing mutually exclusive strands of meaning. The idea that an author may, by transmitting a double message, establish a kind of conspiratorial, subversive relationship with the activist section of his or her readership, while satisfying the rest of the readership (including censors, reactionary publishers, and reviewers) that the work conforms to the demands of the dominant ideology, is, of course, not only relevant to works by women, as will become clear in the studies that follow. A variation on this argument, which I develop particularly in relation to *A Sportsman's Notebook*, suggests that a text capable of being read in somewhat divergent ways may actually contribute to unifying, for political action, groups who have previously thought of themselves as distinct and even opposed, because they see it as constituting common ground between them.

**Fiction and history**

It will be very evident that I have, until this point, avoided reiterating the traditional distinction between supposedly factual storytelling (history, journalism, biography, the writing of a diary, medical case-histories, and so on) and supposedly fictional storytelling (folktales, feature films, jokes, novels ...). This has of course been deliberate and some of the reasons for it will already be obvious. It has been the argument of much of the historical theory I have been referring to that all historical writing is in large part fictional, not only in that historians sometimes get their facts wrong, but also because the facts they "get right" are only given shape and meaning in the telling. At the same time, what we call narrative fiction is, in large part, factual, not only in that much of its content refers accurately and recognizably to real places, times, objects, events, but also because much of the interest of fictional stories derives from the fact that readers perceive them to be accurate representations of real human and social processes. Louis O. Mink expresses it very simply, "histories are full of things that are not so, just as fiction is full of things that are so."

This, naturally, does not mean that no distinctions can be made between history and narrative fiction. History and overtly fictional narratives make different claims on, and contracts with, the reader. A history is required not to include material that the historian knows to be untrue. There is no such obligation on the writer of fictional narrative.

**Narrative and Power**

Historians must provide, or be able to provide, evidence for the accuracy of their stories. Fictional writers do not. It is assumed that a historical narrative should be compatible with, and complement, existing historical narratives on the same topic — otherwise one or other must be invalid. We make no such assumption about the compatibility and complementarity of, for instance, novels. Most importantly, while many elements in a fictional narrative will be factual, it is also the case that, as Louis O. Mink again states, "for fiction, there is no claim to be a true representation in any particular respect" (my italics). I shall suggest that it is just this slipperiness of narrative fiction, the uncertainty of the claims that any work of fiction makes on its readers, that provides a key to understanding the social and political influence of which it is capable.

The argument about the closeness of history and narrative fiction is by no means just a theoretical nicety. It is also a practical question of how people actually use historical and fictional narratives. Most people (and not just naive or poorly educated people) derive more of their sense of the history of other countries over the last two hundred years from reading novels (and watching films) than they do from reading the works of historians. It would be absurd to deny that large numbers of educated people have obtained most of their knowledge of French society in the 1830s from Balzac, their sense of Russia in the 1840s from Gogol and Turgenev and of Victorian England from Dickens and George Eliot, their understanding of the United States in the 1920s and 1930s from Dos Passos and Steinbeck, their grasp of the Soviet Union under Stalin from Solzhenitsyn, and so on. We derive general impressions of living conditions of different classes, forms of social interaction, political processes, all of which we take to be typical of the period and place, from the fictional narratives we read, despite our awareness that most of the characters and events included in the story did not exist outside it. Moreover, we check the reliability of these impressions against our reading of historical narratives — normally (but not always) giving precedence to the histories where there is conflict, but otherwise treating the fictional narrative as a complementary source of historical information.

This book is concerned with a still stronger kind of interaction between narrative fiction and history. It looks at the extent to which fictional narratives have (through their publication, distribution, and consumption) served as significant agents in social and political history. And it asserts that there is a need to write history in a way which acknowledges the role of particular fictional texts in causing social and political change (in addition to the more diffuse structural role of literature as an institution).
The Power of the Story

Collective human action is, in very large part, shaped by the interaction of, even slippage between, such diverse narrative forms as religious and national metanarratives, written history, collective memory, shared fantasies about the future, and so on, all of which have fictional elements in them. Conscious decision-making about the future is inevitably done in relation not just to anticipatory narratives about what is necessary, desirable, or possible for the future, but to the many forms of retrospective story which serve to tell us where we have come from and who we are. To the extent that literary fiction contributes to social and political change, it does so primarily in terms of its interaction with other significant forms of human narrative. It works by complementing and aggregating with the narratives of other kinds (particularly history and imaginative anticipation) from which political and social action primarily derives, or in competition with them by a process of capping or reframing or disruption. In some striking instances, narrative fiction may insert a new provocative element into one or more of the controlling metanarratives of a particular society and so contribute to radical change by a process which might be termed mass psychotherapy.

I made clear, early in this chapter, that I would be eclectic in my use of critical methods deriving from a wide variety of theoretical schools. It will be evident by now that, in the studies that follow, I shall, likewise, be taking a thoroughly relativist position in treating the question of literature and power (to the disappointment of some readers and the satisfaction of others). In examining the circumstances of the publication and reception of each of the narrative works that I study, I try to identify some of the many, complex large- and small-scale forms of power in operation at the time. I suggest, in each case, the extent to which the narrative text should be seen as a mere channel through which major structural forces have worked and the extent to which independent power can be attributed, at different points and in different ways, to the author, to the text and to groups of readers, as well as to the many agents who mediate between texts and readers. I aim to show that the political productivity of relatively open and relatively closed texts (as of relatively open and relatively closed reading) is much more dependent on historical circumstances than is generally supposed. And I am particularly interested in tracing both continuity in, and shifts of, political effects from the same work over a period of time.

To anyone who is skeptical about the assertion that narrative fiction, in certain circumstances, plays a central role in the lives and political thinking of ordinary people, I recommend the earthy reminder provided in a letter to Solzhenitsyn by a reader of One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich living in the Ukraine, who wrote to the author: “In Kharkov I have seen all kinds of queues — for the film Tarzan, butter, women’s drawers, chicken giblets and horse-meat sausage. But I cannot remember a queue as long as the one for your book in the libraries.”

Narrative and Power

NOTES TO CHAPTER 1

1. One of the earliest, and best known, examples of a novel which is claimed to have exercised a massive, direct, social influence is Goethe’s story of hopeless love, The Sorrows of Young Werther (1774), which is said to have so stirred the feelings of a whole generation of young readers all over Western Europe that a number were recorded as committing suicide in imitation of its lovesick hero. Of a very different kind is the impact claimed for the novels of Dickens and Charles Kingsley, which have been credited with contributing, through the exposure of some of the social evils of mid-nineteenth century Britain, to the most important pieces of reform legislation enacted in the latter part of the century. Perhaps the most specific (and best-documented) claim for a novel’s leading to significant legislative change relates to the publication in 1906 of Upton Sinclair’s The Jungle, which, through its depiction of the lives of workers in the Chicago meat-packing industry, is reliably said to have been instrumental in ensuring the passage of the Pure Food and Drug Act in the U.S. Congress a few months later. (See Ronald Gottesman, “Introduction” to Upton Sinclair, The Jungle [New York: Viking Penguin, 1985]: 24. A curious knock-on effect of the widespread anxiety about the health risks associated with canned foods provoked by The Jungle was the immediate collapse of whole communities based on canning quite remote from Chicago — including those in my country, New Zealand. See Dick Scott, Seven Lives on Salt River [Auckland: Hodder and Stoughton, 1987].) The equally specific impact claimed for the French edition of Arthur Koestler’s Darkness at Noon in early 1946 is that, through its representation of the supposedly corrupt essential logic of communism, it directly contributed to the defeat of the French Communist Party in a crucial referendum later that year (see Gorowany Ross, “Darkness at Noon and the ‘Grammatical Fiction’ in Astride the Two Cultures: Arthur Koestler at 70,” ed. Harold Harris [London: Hutchinson, 1975]: 118). While Koestler gloated in his novel’s apparent political influence, George Orwell, had he lived to see it, would almost certainly have been much less pleased at the way in which his 1984 served the United States and its allies, in the first decade after its publication, as a propaganda weapon against all forms of socialism. In the area of gender politics, Fay Weldon has described Marilyn French’s novel, The Women’s Room (1977) as “the kind of book that changes lives” (cover of Sphere paperback edition, 1978) referring not just, in a general sense, to the way in which it introduced feminist ideas and arguments to a wider readership of English-speaking women than was reached by more theoretical feminist works, but to the plentiful anecdotal evidence that reading The Women’s Room gave some women the courage they needed to leave unsatisfactory marriages.


18. Chambers, Story and Situation: 211.


26. For a good account and assessment of the work of Sapir and Whorf in this field, see George Steiner, After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation (London: Oxford University Press, 1975): 87-94.

27. See, especially, Lyotard, The Postmodern Condition.


34. Chambers, Story and Situation: 212.

35. For discussion of this broad question, see Michel De Certeau, “On the Oppositional Practices of Everyday Life,” Social Text 3 (Fall 1980): 3-43.


38. Bandler and Grinder, The Structure of Magic II: 156.


42. See, for instance, Luisa Pannaggi’s discussion of jokes and satirical comments which circulated in Mussolini’s Italy, “Oral Memory of Fascism” in Rethinking Italian Fascism: Capitalism, Populism and Culture, ed. David Forgacs (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1986): 185-196.


54. For a discussion of the concept of ideology which is both acute and readable see Janet Wolff, The Social Production of Art (London and Basingstoke, 1981): 49-70.


60. Toril Moi, Sexual/Textual Politics 148.


74. Watzlawick et al., Change 95.


94. Mink, “Narrative Form as a Cognitive Instrument”: 130.

95. Mink, “Narrative Form as a Cognitive Instrument”: 130.

96. See Chapter 5.