

UPTON SINCLAIR : THE CENTENARY OF AN AMERICAN WRITER

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I

UPTON Beall Sinclair was born in Baltimore, Maryland, on the twentieth of September 1878. It was the year in which Henry James published *Daisy Miller* and *The Europeans*. Emerson was still alive and only two years earlier had brought out a collection of essays called *Letters and Social Aims*. That was 1876, the same year in which Mark Twain published *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*; Sinclair would be six before Huckleberry Finn made his *début*. William Dean Howells was editing the *Atlantic Monthly* and his publications up to that time had earned him a reputation as a pillar of the genteel tradition; more than a decade would pass before Howells's work underwent the change that distanced him from that tradition more significantly than is sometimes recognized even now. When Sinclair was born Frank Norris was a boy of eight, Stephen Crane was six and Jack London was two: all of those, of course, would be dead before Sinclair was forty. It was the period that we now know as the Gilded Age. Henry George's influential *Progress and Poverty* was not published until the year after Sinclair's birth. Edison had invented the phonograph in the year before Sinclair was born, and Bell had introduced the telephone in the year before that, 1876, which was also the year in which Wagner completed *Der Ring des Nibelungen*.

Sinclair lived to the age of ninety, dying on the 25 November 1968. How many books he had written by that time not even he could have stated categorically; there is a delightful photograph of him surveying a pile of them that considerably exceeds his own height. The most recent monograph to have been written on him is based on more than sixty titles,¹ but that

¹ William A. Bloodworth Junior, *Upton Sinclair* (Boston, Massachusetts, 1977).

ignores all the pseudonymous pulp fiction written at the outset of his career. Ronald Gottesman's *Upton Sinclair : an Annotated Checklist* (1973) runs to 544 pages and even that can be augmented by many occasional pieces not listed there.

The reputation of a writer, especially one who is long-lived, is often at its lowest in the two decades following his death. There is also a tendency for a writer's posthumous reputation to be in inverse ratio to his productivity. By both of these clouds Sinclair's work is currently overshadowed, the more so because of its phenomenal range : it is not easy to categorize a man whose canon includes fiction of all kinds, drama, political propaganda, autobiography, inspirational and religious writings, books on temperance, health foods, hygiene, sex, and the economics of the film industry, as well as criticism and a children's story that Walt Disney was to turn into a popular film. When the same man has also been a prolific contributor to newspapers and periodicals, has tried his hand at publishing, and at filmmaking in association with Eisenstein, has run for the governorship of California and come within striking distance of success, he is even more difficult to evaluate, and a paper of this length must necessarily ignore far more of his activities than it includes. It will not, for example, touch at all on his "End Poverty In California" campaign of 1933 with its felicitous acronym EPIC, and many of his books will have to go unmentioned.

Since the second World War there has been a very marked increase in the attention paid to American literature on both sides of the Atlantic, but Sinclair has benefited less from this than many of his contemporaries. In his own lifetime his literary reputation was higher abroad than it was in his own country. The translations of his works into other languages must constitute something of a record : by 1938 he was able to identify "772 titles in 47 languages in 39 countries".¹ Gottesman's list of translations and foreign editions itemizes 1,183. Between the two world wars it was not uncommon for Europeans

¹ Upton Sinclair in a letter to Leslie Bliss, 16 December 1949, reproduced in Ronald Gottesman, *A Catalogue of Books, Manuscripts, and Other Materials from The Upton Sinclair Archives, The Lilly Library, Indiana University* (Bloomington, Indiana, 1963), p. 7.

to react particularly sympathetically to those American writers who were most critical of the United States. In the 1930s John Dos Passos, James T. Farrell, and John Steinbeck were far better known here as novelists than were Scott Fitzgerald or Thomas Wolfe, and Upton Sinclair had a head start on them all.

Henry James once praised the novels of William Dean Howells as being "in the highest degree documentary". The phrase is even more readily applicable to the work of Upton Sinclair, to whom George Bernard Shaw wrote in 1941 :

When people ask me what has happened in my long lifetime I do not refer them to the newspaper files and to the authorities, but to your novels. They object that the people in your books never existed ; that their deeds were never done and their sayings never uttered. I assure them that they were, except that Upton Sinclair individualized and expressed them better than they could have done, and arranged their experiences, which as they actually occurred were as unintelligible as pied type, in significant and intelligible order.¹

Shaw, it will be noted, credits Sinclair with a literary skill that others have denied him. Documentariness is not an unmixed asset to a novelist : it may make him seem prematurely dated and insufficiently imaginative. When, as in Sinclair's case, it is allied to a desire for practical involvement in the affairs of the day, and to a personality that both sought and, not always voluntarily, attracted publicity, it is the biographer rather than the literary critic whose attention is subsequently drawn to him, and to date most studies of Sinclair have focused more on his life than on his writings. Indeed, even one of the scholars who has taken him more seriously than most once summed him up as " a minor writer and a major man ".²

Now it is not my intention to exaggerate Sinclair's merits as a writer : he is uneven, he wrote too fluently for his own good, and he was insufficiently critical of his own zealous earnestness. I do, however, wish to suggest that literary critics, by neglecting him as they have or at best patronizing him, have encouraged a misvaluation of him that should, a hundred years after his birth, be capable of some rectification. To say that he is assured of a place in the history of American socialism is to

¹ Upton Sinclair, *My Lifetime in Letters* (Columbia, Missouri, 1960), p. 66.

² Ronald Gottesman, " Upton Sinclair and the Sinclair Archives ", *Manuscripts*, xvii (1964), 11.

damn with the kind of faint praise that makes my point : it relegates him to a home of causes which, if they are not lost, are nevertheless not exactly crowned with success. He deserves a better posthumous reputation than that, though it is one with which he would not have been dissatisfied. One might, with justice, extend it by saying that he has a place in the history of international socialism in our time, and he would have been even more pleased at that, but to do so is to fall into the trap of concentrating on the message at the expense of the medium and thus distorting the message itself. By no means all socialists, indeed, would place him very high in their Pantheon and some would probably disown him altogether. His own formal relationship with organized socialism was in any case very chequered. It is, however, his place in the history of literature that is in need of more urgent and fairer reevaluation at present. Arthur Koestler once said of him, " I think of no contemporary writer whose non-existence would leave such a gaping hole in the face of the twentieth century than [*sic*] Upton Sinclair's ".¹ Inelegant in its expression, it is a tribute that is sincere but too sweeping to bear full analysis here ; this paper must attempt a more modest assessment.

II

Those who write surveys of American literature will usually content themselves with a reference to Sinclair, more or less perfunctory according to the space at their disposal, as a muck-raking novelist in the realistic tradition best known for his exposure of the Chicago meat-packing industry in *The Jungle* (1906). Had he died with Jack London in 1916 Sinclair's reputation would have been higher among such scholars than it is, but such a summary is grotesquely unjust to the range of his work. Certainly *The Jungle* represented a new departure for Sinclair and perhaps the high-water mark of that kind of fiction. It deserves the credit it receives also for having stirred so much public indignation that it actually led to changes in the law, but it must be remembered that those changes related only

¹ Quoted *ibid.* p. 11.

to the standards of hygiene in the packing of meat, and did nothing to ameliorate the working conditions in the stockyards which were the real object of his uncompromising attack.

Prior to *The Jungle* Sinclair's work had lacked any clear direction. Attracted to writing by the realization that it could be lucrative, he had begun at the age of fifteen by selling jokes to newspapers and periodicals. At sixteen he had had a short story published in *Argosy* and would later claim that for the rest of his life he had never earned money by any means other than writing. Already it begins to sound like an American success story of private enterprise and individual endeavour. After graduating from City College, New York, at nineteen he began writing novels of American army life under the name of Lieutenant Frederick Garrison and, as Ensign Clarke Fitch, stories of adventure in the American navy. "Half-dime novels" he later called them, disparagingly, but by the time he was twenty-one he could claim to have written as much as Sir Walter Scott wrote in his entire life. The heroes of these early stories and the virtues they exhibited were not, of course, conspicuous for their socialism.

Sinclair's more reputable career began in 1900 with the publication, at his own expense, of a romantic novel called *Springtime and Harvest*. The next year he wrote another novel, *Prince Hagen: A Phantasy*, but it took him two years to find a publisher for it. The hold that this particular theme had on his imagination deserves discussion, for fantasy is a medium not readily associated with Sinclair, and yet he returned to this story even after the success of *The Jungle* might have been expected to have pointed him in a totally different direction. He dramatized *Prince Hagen* for production at a San Francisco theatre in 1909 and, after it had been performed, rewrote it yet again for private publication and finally reissued it in *Plays of Protest* in 1912. In all the versions the eponymous hero is the son of the Nibelung, Prince Hagen, of Wagner's *Siegfried*. Sinclair was drawn to this by his own Wagnerian enthusiasms and perhaps also by familiarity with George Bernard Shaw's *The Perfect Wagnerite* (1898) in which Shaw had suggested that *The Ring* might be susceptible to a Marxist interpretation.

Sinclair's theme is, in all its variant forms, an indictment of American business and American society but the unexpected element of fantasy persistent in all the versions keeps it closer to Grimm than to Marx.

In the dramatic version Prince Hagen is brought to New York by a poet, Gerald Isman, who in the opening act is on a camping holiday in a Quebec forest. His playing of the Nibelung theme on his violin by the camp fire summons up the Nibelung smith, Mimi, who conducts him to Nibelheim which they reach by means of a theatrically spectacular transformation scene accompanied by music from *Das Rheingold*. In return for this experience Gerald is to take the unruly Prince Hagen to the modern world so that "he might be sent to a good school, and taught the ideals of our Christian civilization". By the time the second act opens two years later Prince Hagen has dropped out from the good school and disappeared, but when Gerald's sister Estelle returns to their patrician home from what is described as a "slumming adventure" she has been much disturbed by the fascination of a Tammany Hall orator called Steve O'Hagen whose political meeting she has attended. She likens him to "a wild beast" and describes how he has attacked the power and freedom and privileges to which she is born. He has told her :

You come down here to stare at us as you might at some strange animals in a cage. You chatter and laugh and go your way . . . but remember what I told you . . . I shall be with you! You cannot keep me down!

The speech is an unexpected and vivid anticipation of Eugene O'Neill's *The Hairy Ape* from which, however, it differs in that the speaker is not a semi-articulate stoker but Prince Hagen incognito, and the gold of the Nibelungs brings him much nearer to what O'Neill's hairy ape can only dream of, the winning of the beautiful princess.

The means that Prince Hagen uses to accomplish this are, in Veblen's terms, conspicuous consumption and the prowess and exploit characteristic of a pecuniary culture. Like Veblen he has seen through the leisure class civilization of an affluent industrial society, but the Nibelung gold has given him the power to defeat that society on its own terms. Sinclair's fable,

it will be seen, creates difficulties for the audience as well as for the author. The fantasy element pulls against a more realistic discussion of the class antagonisms with which Sinclair obviously wants to deal. Steve O'Hagen, spokesman for the down-trodden, and Prince Hagen, critic of the "knavery and fraud" on which industrial civilization is founded, are characteristic Sinclairian folk heroes but Steve O'Hagen's role is compromised by the fact that he is only enacting it temporarily. The hinted virile sexuality of O'Hagen and the Prince's romantic love for Estelle are fairy-tale elements enhancing his heroic stature. This is countered, however, by the unscrupulous rapidity with which the Prince acquires the techniques of the capitalists he condemns, by his belief that wealth will buy Estelle's affection, by his ready recourse to violence in order to subdue the workers, and by his cynical "studying up on religion" in order to be able to exploit the Nibelungs as the American tycoons have exploited their employees. Such satire as is obviously intended is very insecurely controlled and threatens to recoil on the satirist. The play rests on a series of Shavian paradoxes, but it needs a Shaw to develop and reconcile them.

From another point of view it is a Victorian melodrama in which Prince Hagen is required to double the roles of hero and villain. As hero he loves Estelle romantically, directing all his effort to winning her. As villain he uses his wealth to accelerate his conquest by threatening her father with ruin unless Estelle consents to marry him: it differs from melodrama in that the father is a railroad millionaire, not an impoverished mortgage-holder, and, as Hagen is now the villain, no hero is available to rescue Estelle from this fate worse than death. Somewhat confusingly Hagen is pleading his love in conventionally romantic phrases—"I will follow you wherever you command. Only teach me how to win your love"—when Estelle states her terms: he must hand over all his power to the people. Contemptuously he dismisses "that mass of ignorance and corruption which you call the people", only to be told by Estelle, in the accents of William Jennings Bryan, "What is it that has made the people corrupt? What is it that has kept them in ignorance? What is it but your gold?" Creakingly

a socialist *deus ex machina* materializes as a messenger brings news that a bill has been passed in Congress confiscating Prince Hagen's property ; moreover, " The sources of natural wealth . . . the land and the mines and the railroad . . . are all to become public property ". Where the villain of melodrama would have slunk away snarling " Curse it ! Foiled again ! " Prince Hagen has an exit more spectacular : he asks Gerald to play the Wagnerian theme, another transformation scene reunites him with the Nibelungs, he promises to return to earth someday, Estelle stretches out her arms to him, and the orchestra " sounds the motive of Siegfried Triumphant " .

Confused as all this indisputably is, the fact that Sinclair returned to it so often over a twelve-year period implies that it held some importance for him and, for all its lumbering theatricality, the fable he creates is pertinent to much of his work. Its sincerity is characteristic of his social thinking, its dualism is characteristic of his Americanness. As an anti-social force a man with this kind of wealth is to be condemned, but as a force, none the less, making his mark on the world by his own effort, he has always compelled some grudging admiration from many Americans. The fantasy that endows a man with the unlimited resources of the Nibelung gold with which to make such a mark is not unrecognizably different from the fantasy that endows a man with a diamond as big as the Ritz. Both Sinclair and Fitzgerald condemn the self-destructive megalomania that such wealth induces, but both contemplate with some envy the power and opportunity it confers. In both cases fantasy opposes to megalomania a romantic vision of love, triumphant in Fitzgerald's story but in Sinclair's doomed. That Hagen himself is the romantic lover relates him more closely to Jay Gatsby than to the owner of the diamond as big as the Ritz, but, characteristic of Sinclair, it is socialist principle that prevents the well-to-do Estelle from accepting him, not the careless empty-headedness of a Daisy Buchanan. There is, however, a sense in which Upton Sinclair is capable, like Fitzgerald's Nick Carraway, of being " within and without, simultaneously enchanted and repelled by the inexhaustible variety of life ", and the ambivalence of his characterization of Hagen reflects

this. When Sinclair first began on the novel he was reading Nietzsche in the original German, before *Also Sprach Zarathustra* had been translated into English, and in 1902 he wrote a short piece of fiction called *The Overman*: this he did not publish until after *The Jungle* but before he dramatized *Prince Hagen*, which certainly has its Nietzschean aspects.

The dramatic weaknesses of *Prince Hagen* are self-evident, but two in particular are symptomatic. One, to which I shall return, is the unsatisfactoriness of the ending. The other is the ineffectually peripheral role that is assigned to Gerald, the poet. The Overman, in Sinclair's novel of that name, had been a musician, and the novel a glorification of the self-sufficiency of the dedicated artist. It is thus demonstrably parallel to the concept of the artist that Shaw allows Jack Tanner to develop in *Man and Superman*, a play on which, of course, Shaw was working at precisely the time that Sinclair was working on *The Overman*. Yet Gerald, in the early version of *Prince Hagen* and certainly in the dramatization even later, is very much closer to Shaw's Octavius Robinson: a romantic in the popular sense of the word, believing in beauty, truth, and goodness, and thus an anachronistic Kantian powerless in a Nietzschean world. In the play this irony is compounded by the fact that it is Gerald who literally brings Prince Hagen into that world. Sinclair had been, we know, much taken with Shelley's concept of the poets as "the unacknowledged legislators of the world": Gerald's role here seems tacitly to symbolize an awareness on Sinclair's part that the creative artist must be more directly involved in the affairs of the world before he can aspire to legislate for it, but the persistent element of Wagnerian fantasy implies a lingering regret at the claims that reality so irresistibly makes on the imagination.

Immediately after writing *Prince Hagen* as a prose romance Sinclair produced the book which, with his flair for publicity, he was successfully to pass off on the reading public of 1903 not as fiction but as the posthumous publication of the diary of a dead poet. *The Journal of Arthur Stirling* traces the disillusion and ultimate suicide of a young writer frustrated by his inability to find a publisher for his Shelleyan blank-verse drama. At

exactly this time Stephen Phillips was achieving a considerable reputation in England with dramas of that sort, but the rapid eclipse of that reputation confirms Sinclair's recognition that the form was not well suited to the age. It is tempting to suggest that Arthur Stirling's suicide symbolizes Sinclair's killing off of his romantic self the better to brace himself for the commitment to social realism that lay ahead. His attitude to Stirling, however, is not critical enough for such symbolism to have been conscious; his continued reworking of the Prince Hagen theme even after *The Jungle* implies a less than total rejection of the romantic tradition, and the socialism of his later career always had its Shelleyan dimension.

If his centenary forces on us the recognition that the nineteenth century looms more largely behind Sinclair's thinking than he or his contemporaries would have wished to admit, it may increase rather than diminish our understanding of his work and its continuing significance. Between 1900 and 1912, in that peculiarly seminal period of any writer's life, his mid-twenties to his mid-thirties, Sinclair dedicated himself to a serious career as a writer, but his search for direction is as conspicuous as his fertility and productiveness. From 1901 to 1906 he was experimenting simultaneously with romance and realism. In 1904 came an historical novel about the American Civil War, *Manassas*, conceived as the first part of a trilogy with which he did not in fact proceed; it had, however, sufficient merit to be reissued in 1959 as *Theirs Be the Guilt*. In 1906 *The Jungle* brought him instant fame as a muckraker which he reinforced with three more anti-capitalist novels in the next three years, together with *The Industrial Republic*, a non-fictional charting of the evolutionary process by which the United States might become a socialist republic within a decade. *Plays of Protest* in 1912 mined this vein in the theatre, but meanwhile, in 1911, an autobiographical novel, *Love's Pilgrimage*, gained him notoriety for the frankness with which it explored the psychological and sexual tensions contributing to the failure of a marriage. In short, by the time Upton Sinclair was thirty-five his works might have heralded a literary career in any one of at least three areas that were to be exploited vigorously by his near-

contemporaries over the next thirty years : re-fighting the Civil War and agonizing over its consequences like the Southern regionalists ; exploring, like Sherwood Anderson and others, the psychological frustrations of the relations between the sexes ; or campaigning for a new concept of social justice like Dos Passos, Farrell, or Steinbeck, the Elisha on whom Sinclair once said that he would be happy to see his mantle fall.¹

III

Another factor not yet discussed contributed to his ultimate choice of direction. Brought up a Methodist by his Southern parents, Sinclair had a strongly religious side to his character and his biographers have made much of his teenage susceptibility to the influence of the Reverend William Moir, a New York Episcopalian minister. The association between religion and the rise of capitalism has become a commonplace among social historians, but there is an even more direct association between religion and the rise of socialism. In nineteenth-century England, of course, the Christian Socialism movement had been led by Charles Kingsley, Thomas Hughes, and Frederick Denison Maurice, all of whom wrote reformist novels. Upton Sinclair soon abandoned the orthodox forms of Christian worship like other American social writers before him such as Emerson or Thoreau or, in some ways a closer parallel, their renegade Southern contemporary Moncure Daniel Conway. For all of them, however, the spirit, if not the letter, of Christianity remained very strong, and Sinclair's first full-length exploration of the links between Christianity and socialism was the novel *Samuel the Seeker* of 1910. He was to return to this theme several times. In 1922, for example, came another novel, *They Call Me Carpenter*. Here, as is often the case with Sinclair, the idea is rather better than the execution, but the urgency and sincerity are beyond question. It envisages the reincarnation of Christ in the modern world, an idea that Jerome K. Jerome had dramatized in *The Passing of the Third Floor Back* in 1908

¹ "Sinclair Salutes Steinbeck" (a review by Upton Sinclair of *The Grapes of Wrath*), *Common Sense* (May, 1939), pp. 22-23.

and that was present in the imagination of many writers at the time of the First World War : Kipling's "The Gardener" is a good example. Sinclair brings Christ to post-war New York and casts a film star in a Mary Magdalene role. She and the narrator alone accept this second coming : by the rest Christ is rejected as, in the idiom of the day, "one of these Bolshevikis". The irony Sinclair implies, of course, is that they are right in a sense different from what they intend, and that socialists may be closer to the basic principles of Christianity than are many church-goers. In his later novel *Boston* he makes the same point by allowing a character to refer to "Comrade Jesus" ; it is the point that Shaw had argued more polemically in the preface to *Androcles and the Lion* in 1915. The parallels between Sinclair and Shaw would merit closer attention, but so too would the differences.

One of these is highlighted by the extent to which *They Call Me Carpenter* is unexpectedly reminiscent of that very un-Shavian book *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*. Both have recourse to the uneasy rationalization of fantasy by setting it in a dream framework ; the assured informality of the narrator's tone as he buttonholes the reader is common to both ; but above all both books proceed from a sad anger at a civilization so blindly self-satisfied as to spurn salvation when it is offered : both, that is, are the work of frustrated idealists rather than realistic social critics. Three years after *They Call Me Carpenter* there appeared a biography of Christ that headed the best-seller list for two years because of its attempt to make that story more relevant to the twentieth century. This was Bruce Barton's *The Man Nobody Knows* ; it tried to popularize Christ as "a successful carpenter" who "slept outdoors and spent his days walking around his favourite lake", as well as being "the most popular dinner guest in Jerusalem". Sinclair's Christ is a more challenging figure than Barton's whose Americanization is completed by the claim that he was "the founder of modern business" who "picked up twelve men from the bottom ranks of business and forged them into an organization that conquered the world". It is a sad commentary on the 1920s that this bland vulgarization should have so sensationally outsold Sinclair's

impassioned attempt at satirizing the very philistinism that Barton projected.

Sinclair's religiosity influences and shapes his socialism more than he may have recognized by the idealization that it introduces. In 1899 he published in the *Metaphysical Magazine* an essay called "Unity and Infinity in Art". Its conclusion that "the true artist . . . must be the master of the realm of fact as well as of thought" might seem to prefigure his socio-realistic novels, but the whole thrust of the article is inspirational in its references to "the pioneers of humanity . . . the Priests of the Sublime" and "the modern Titan, Carlyle". Its spirituality owes something to Shelley but more to Sinclair's Methodist upbringing. One statement may seem to come strangely from the man who was to write *Love's Pilgrimage* and whose 1927 novel *Oil!* was to be banned in Boston for the candour of its discussion of human sexuality. The 21-year-old Sinclair in 1899 announces that "we have left the physical behind us. We know and care almost nothing about beauty in the nude human form" and soon "the Venus may cease to please at all". It is, surely, the muscular Christianity of his adolescence that gives this statement its confidence and accounts for the vein of prudishness that his biographers have shown as recurring uneasily throughout his life and writings.

D. H. Lawrence identified America as "The land of THOU SHALT NOT".¹ The prohibition of alcohol ushered in by the Volstead Act of 1919 and not repealed until 1933 was, however, something that Upton Sinclair positively welcomed. His father's alcoholism had ruined childhood for him and from his earliest writings through *The Wet Parade* of 1931 and up to *The Cup of Fury* of 1956 he wrote vigorously against drink, but it was religious principle as much as personal experience that dictated his attitude.

To his early Methodism may also be attributed the fascination that the idea of conversion always held for him. Indeed, it was by a process of that nature that he himself came to socialism. The kind of experience that overwhelmed Saul on the road to

¹ D. H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature* (New York, 1923), chapter 1.

Damascus would, if only it were more universal, accelerate the advent of the millennium ; it represents, in that way, the dream of an evangelist. To the man of letters, however, the notion of conversion can be more of a chimera : too uncritical a belief in its possibility may lead him to underestimate the need for rational argument and techniques of persuasion. A character sufficiently charismatic may be too easily expected to convince the other characters, and even the reader, of the irrefutable rightness of his cause. Characters who undergo this kind of emotional conversion may lose credibility : for example, in Sinclair's powerful novel about Sacco and Vanzetti, *Boston*, the readiness with which the patrician widow of a Governor of Massachusetts espouses the cause of the underprivileged and the anarchists is neither easy to accept nor adequately dramatized. On plot the effect may be even more extreme : the sudden conversion of Congress, in *Prince Hagen*, to socialist principles of expropriation and nationalization provides an end to the story that is much neater than it is believable. Like *The Jungle* the play ends with an up-beat assertion of social change for which the preceding action is an inadequate preparation. Terminating the story in that way obviates any necessity for demonstrating the efficacy and the stability of this change, but the failure convincingly to establish the process by which it has been achieved is a fault even more serious. It may be argued that, if a writer is convinced that society should change, his responsibility is to persuade others of the desirability of that change rather than to provide a detailed blueprint of the means by which it is to be accomplished, but unless he can persuade them that such change is capable of being realized he encourages them only into the blind alley of wish-fulfilment.

A belief in the possibility of conversion implies a belief in man's capacity for change, a belief in man's innate goodness, that can be more creditable to the holder's idealism than credible to the reader's experience. Thus Vanzetti can answer Cornelia, the Governor's widow, quite categorically when she asks him, "How can everybody have liberty, when maybe there are some who won't play fair?" In the pidgin-English that he speaks throughout the novel and which Sinclair, against all odds, often

succeeds in investing with an engaging eloquence, Vanzetti tells her "Is no soocha people, signora". Most people, he goes on to explain, are by nature good and, given the chance, want social justice; the others are not so much bad as sick and in need of treatment. It is the old Emersonian argument that there is no such thing as evil, only the privation of good. The events that lie ahead of Vanzetti, it might be thought, will effectively disprove this belief. For Vanzetti's enemies, it is true, Sinclair has no love. Yet in his presentation even Judge Webster Thayer emerges as self-important, malicious, prejudiced, unscrupulous, rather than positively evil. Governor Fuller is depicted as unreasoning and obstinate, too small a man even to understand, let alone to shoulder, the full burden of responsibility put upon him by his gubernatorial office. President Lowell's obstinacy is attributed to intellectual arrogance bred by the prestige of his post at Harvard and the isolation from humanity consequent upon it: Sinclair had, on the whole, no great respect for academics. These are all, however, essentially frightened men unequal to the circumstances with which they are confronted and reluctant to be at odds with the mores of their society. Even the wealthy bankers and lawyers in this novel, the much bewildered relatives of the iconoclastic Cornelia, are motivated more by self-preservation and ignorance than by real corruption or viciousness.

In 1924 Sinclair sent to Theodore Dreiser a copy of his most successful play, *Singing Jailbirds*, which dealt with a strike by the Industrial Workers of the World, the IWW. Acknowledging it, Dreiser commented, "But don't forget that the brotherhood of man—(this entirely apart from some of the co-operative phases of socialism) is mere moonshine to me. I see the individual large or small—weak or strong—as predatory and nothing less".¹ The brotherhood of man was not moonshine to Upton Sinclair: it was something in which he could believe, something in fact in which he needed to believe, because he was never blind to the predatoriness of man in modern society.

¹ Upton Sinclair, *My Lifetime in Letters*, p. 311.

IV

For many readers, indeed, the predatoriness of man might seem the central theme of *The Jungle*, driven home so relentlessly as to require the novel to be seen in the bleak context of the naturalistic tradition in American fiction. To a certain extent, of course, this is justified. Naturalism was in the air, and this paper has already tried to show that the speed and sensitivity with which Sinclair's antennae picked up what was in the air at any given time accounts in part for his continuing significance.

The Jungle might be described as a parable on the text from Henry George: "that poverty and all its concomitants show themselves in communities just as they develop into the conditions toward which material progress tends", but Sinclair gives the theme added emphasis by making his central figure a Lithuanian immigrant and contrasting the optimism of his hopes with the harshness of the American reality. Jurgis quickly learns how little freedom there is for the poor in the land of the free and comes to recognize that America is the home of the brave only in the sense that it takes bravery to live there at all if you are obliged to seek a livelihood in the squalor of the Chicago stockyards and the brutality of the meatpacking industry. The sequence is familiar: the problems and difficulties of Jurgis's working conditions, the death of his wife in childbirth because of his inability to provide proper medical attention, his victimization by the police and the authorities, the whole vicious circle that brings him back to Chicago as a tramp and an outcast to find his wife's cousin forced into prostitution and to hear from her the fate of his other friends. Naturalistic determinism is particularly apparent when, having at last acquired some money, Jurgis tries to reclaim the girl but she refuses his offer:

"I can't do anything, I'm no good—I take dope. What could you do with me?"

"Can't you stop?" Jurgis cried.

"No," she answered, "I'll never stop. What's the use of talking about it? I'll stay here till I die, I guess. It's all I'm fit for."

Like Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*, she is "a waif amid forces", a victim of the implacable predatoriness of a naturalistically-depicted society. However, Malcolm Cowley once called

attention to the essentially protean character of naturalism : " It was not at all extraordinary for naturalism to change into religious Marxism in the middle of the novel, since it has always shown a tendency to dissolve into something else " ¹ ; and so, in *The Jungle*, Jurgis is converted to socialism, enabling Sinclair to reassert the faith in conversion and sudden change that is far more characteristic of him than is the determinism of the passage just quoted.

When *The Jungle* first appeared Winston Churchill was sufficiently moved by it to publish a long two-part review commending it to the English audience.² Already the now-familiar Churchillian tones are apparent : after " a hundred pages of lively and elaborate art . . . Mr Upton Sinclair has the reader very much at his mercy. He uses his advantage to the full ". A more overt touch of irony epigrammatically points to a problem already indicated in this paper ; a summary of the plot is interrupted to allow the Churchillian aside, " Destiny and Mr Upton Sinclair still hold [Jurgis] in their grip ". The ending is also criticized : " The reader, I think, will not be satisfied " with it because " no mere economic revolution would in itself suffice to purify and ennoble " the Chicago Sinclair has so ruthlessly depicted. Sinclair himself subsequently expressed dissatisfaction with the ending, attributing its weakness to haste of composition, but it is, surely, another manifestation of that faith in the brotherhood of man for which Dreiser censured him.

When, in 1962, Sinclair published his *Autobiography* it was reviewed by, among others, the well-known left-wing novelist Howard Fast.³ Fast looked back at his younger self in the 1930s, trying to recapture his feelings then about Sinclair : " I would become irritated with the man's insufferable simplicity, his confidence in the triumph of good over evil, and his faith in the oppressed. " It is true that even the most deeply-felt of

¹ Malcolm Cowley, " Naturalism in American Literature " in Stow Persons (ed.), *Evolutionary Thought in America* (New Haven and London, 1950), p. 329.

² Winston Churchill, M.P., " The Chicago Scandals ", in *P.T.O.*, i. 1 (16 June 1906), 25-26, and i. 2 (23 June 1906), 65-66.

³ *The Saturday Review*, 1 December 1962, p. 34.

Sinclair's books, like *The Jungle*, seems predicated on the belief that if you show people as graphically as possible the way things are the scales will fall instantly from their eyes and they will be at once converted to your point of view. Yet however naive one makes that sound, the power of those books should never be underestimated. Howard Fast continued his review by an admission with which Churchill would have been in agreement and to which many readers in the 1930s would have subscribed : " I learned what no schools taught—a philosophy of social justice. You read a book by Upton Sinclair then, and you were never quite the same as before. "

V

Sinclair's centenary has been marked by a conference at California State University, Los Angeles, by the issue of a new journal devoted to his work, and by a reissue of his novel *Boston* both in the United States and in England. *Boston* was in fact first published exactly half a century ago, in 1928, the year after Sacco and Vanzetti had been executed. In these days, when there is so much talk about " the non-fiction novel " as though it were a form totally new, it is salutary to be reminded that Sinclair took a significant step in this direction as much as fifty years ago. It has been somewhat overshadowed by John Dos Passos's trilogy *U.S.A.* which is technically more innovative than Sinclair's fusion of fact and fiction but which may well itself have profited from Sinclair's experiment. Dos Passos, of course, segregates the fact from the narrative, the real from the fictitious characters, by his deft manipulation of the four distinct strands that make up his novel. Sinclair takes the bolder, if more obvious, step of juxtaposing them inextricably within the narrative so that, for example, the fictitious Cornelia meets the judge who presided over the trial of Sacco and Vanzetti, and the discussion that ensues between them focuses the issues of the novel very clearly. Again, though, these issues are fundamentally moral rather than exclusively political : thus Sinclair invents an extra defence lawyer who tries to persuade Cornelia that she can save the condemned men either by bribery or by

giving evidence on their behalf that is not entirely truthful. Cornelia's rejection of this kind of expediency is endorsed by Sinclair and explains why the novel is called *Boston*: a whole society is being indicted for its corruption and its complacent indifference to justice, above all for its class-ridden snobbery, and yet, by making his central character this enlightened but fictitious patrician lady rather than a more proletarian radical, real or imaginary, Sinclair is recognizing that Boston had, at its height, produced a civilization with values that were ethical and humane, but of which too few traces have survived into these degenerate days.

Cornelia may not be wholly credible as a character but her values and her dilemma certainly are, and it is breadth of vision rather than lack of commitment that governs Sinclair's structuring of his tale. The contrivance by which he brings upper-crust Boston into contact with the Italian underprivileged immigrant community is ultimately of less consequence than are the effects that it enables him to achieve. Foremost among those effects is the recognition that men and women of goodwill are essential to any society, even though they may be overborne by the corrupt selfishness of their peers. In the same way he presents Vanzetti as committed to social reform but not bigoted, so that he can say of him towards the end of his life, "He was gentle, he was wise, and he was dignified" and "Without weakening in the cause of his beloved proletariat, he came to understand that goodness is not a matter of class". Vanzetti may in actuality have been less of a paragon than that, but by using Vanzetti's own words whenever he can Sinclair creates verisimilitude through language and conveys an interpretation of events that is ultimately more constructive than the class antagonisms in other parts of the book might lead one to expect. There is a shrillness in Sinclair: given his convictions it would be remarkable if there were not, but *Boston* is superior to *The Jungle* in its counterbalancing of that shrillness. A quirk of translation highlights one weakness of the ending of *The Jungle*. The workers are shouting vociferously and repeatedly "Chicago will be ours!" and this is printed in upper case for added emphasis. The earliest German versions translated this literally,

but later versions, after the mid-1920s, aggrandized it to “*Die ganze Welt wird unser sein!*” This phrase, especially for my generation, has overtones of another mass hysteria, recalling the ease with which in Germany socialism could degenerate into National Socialism. It may also prompt the timely reflection that mob rule of the left is not necessarily wholly different from or better than mob rule of the right. *Boston* takes a view of power altogether more sophisticated than that of *The Jungle*. It too ends on a note of solidarity and the brotherhood of man, formulated with a somewhat didactic rhetoric, it is true, but using a verse from Isaiah to foresee a future in which the rewards of labour shall be to the labourer.

Of *Oil!*, the novel that preceded *Boston*, D. H. Lawrence said that it “seems to me a splendid big picture of actual life. What more do they want?”¹ If this praise were applied, as it well might be, to *Boston*, literary critics would probably reply that they want less matter with more art: it is over-long and in places ponderous. Yet it must be remembered that ordinary readers for several generations welcomed what Sinclair gave them with such enthusiasm that the English edition of *The Jungle*, for example, reached its seventy-third impression by 1955. Later in his life Sinclair embarked on the prodigious cycle of novels which brought his fictitious hero Lanny Budd into direct contact with all the major events and all the famous people of our century. Of course the long arm of coincidence is stretched to proportions altogether too simian in the effecting of this, but ought we to disparage too cavalierly something which Thomas Mann thought would “certainly be recognized as the best founded and best informed description of the political life of our epoch”?²

A hundred years after his birth Upton Sinclair merits revaluation by literary critics who are prepared to accept the modern view that there is something to be learnt from the study of works of popular culture as well as of high culture, or perhaps by literary critics working in close association with social historians. He belongs in American literature and also in American

¹ Upton Sinclair, *My Lifetime in Letters*, p. 333.

² *Ibid.* p. 380.

history, but perhaps, if we are talking in terms of disciplines, he would offer most scope to the scholar trained in American Studies whose approach could cross the conventional subject boundaries.

That kind of reassessment must be based on research and there are pre-eminently two libraries in the world where that research can be undertaken. One is the Lilly Library at Indiana University which acquired Sinclair's own collection of his books and papers—eight tons of it, including 300,000 pages of letters and 150,000 pages of manuscripts of books, speeches and articles. The other is the John Rylands University Library of Manchester which has acquired a collection that is wide-ranging and representative but is in some respects more useful and more accessible because it is more selective.¹ It was built up by a Londoner, Mr. Edward Allatt, whose enthusiasm for Upton Sinclair extends over more than thirty years. There is probably no other single library east of Bloomington, Indiana, where every work mentioned in this paper could be inspected, and yet this has done little more than scratch the surface of the collection in the hope of encouraging others to explore its resources more fully.²

¹ A fuller description of the collection is to be found in *Newsletter of the American Studies Library Group*, i (1978), 3 (available from Peter Snow, The Bodleian Library, Oxford OX1 3BG).

² This paper was originally given as a public lecture in the John Rylands University Library of Manchester on 8 November 1978; an exhibition of material from the Allatt Collection accompanied it and remained on display for several weeks.