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DREAMS OF A COMMON LANGUAGE

SCIENCE, GENDER AND CULTURE

Ludmilla Jordanova, *Sexual Visions: Images of Gender in Science and Medicine Between the Eighteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Harvester: Wheatsheaf, 1989), 207 pp.

Mary Jacobus, Evelyn Fox Keller and Sally Shuttleworth (eds), *Body Politics: Women and the Discourses of Science* (London: Routledge, 1989), 197 pp., £9.95

Donna Haraway, *Primate Visions: Gender, Race and Nature in the World of Modern Science* (London: Routledge, 1989), 486 pp., £40.00

‘Where is she?’:

Activity/Passivity

Sun/Moon

Culture/Nature

Day/Night

Father/Mother

Head/Emotions

Intelligible/Sensitive

Logos/Pathos

Helene Cixous’ rhetorical question about the position of ‘woman’ within the dualisms of masculine epistemology has for some time now presented feminist cultural theory with a range of possibilities and problems. They are problems only partially resolved by the postmodern urge to get beyond binary thought itself. Like de Beauvoir’s appropriation of Hegel’s Master/Slave dialectic and her analysis of femininity’s perpetual immanence in the face of masculine transcendence, like Foucault’s investigations into the ubiquitous forms of power invested in the ways in which all social relations are structured through looking, naming or classifying, these paradigms – which now form a new dominant discourse – reinforce their own authority even as they offer the means of deconstructing others.

One familiar danger is of a kind of romanticism if not outright essentialism – of investing all marginal, oppressed and deviant groups with alternative

forms of transgressive knowledge – most well known in Kristeva’s celebration of the body of the mother and of the pre-Oedipal. A second is to shift the emphasis from the excluded term set in opposition to the dominant, and to focus instead on difference itself. This too can be self-defeating – suggesting in effect that all kinds of ‘difference’ work in the same kind of way while engaging in a form of inverted projection. A homogenized (white, male, heterosexual) dominant now becomes the ultimate locus of otherness, everyone’s bad object. How, too, does one analyse processes of historical transformation without turning that process itself into an allegory of theory – a new kind of postmodern grand narrative? As Paul Hirst’s article in this journal suggested recently, one of the paradoxes of accepting the specificity of others’ cognitive codes is that it also assumes that everyone shares one’s own relativist paradigm.<sup>1</sup>

The fast-growing body of work on the making of modern science through a set of implicitly and explicitly gendered meanings intersects with these questions in quite complicated ways, and these three books mark both an important development and raise some salient issues in the light of them. That this kind of investigation is emerging in this way at this moment is itself significant. It draws on a range of intellectual strands. Feminist interest in the containment, classification and control of women’s minds and bodies within scientific discourse (particularly medicine and psychology) is nothing new, but it has often tended towards the conspiratorial: an inherently male scientific rationality and medical institution penetrate and peer into women’s passive bodies; subversion is manifested through transgressive madness or earthy womanly wisdom.

By contrast these books are resolutely social constructionist, having no truck with such essentialist positions and by implication with any politics that relies on women’s inherent closeness to nature to make their case. All draw heavily on particular strands in post-Kuhnian history and philosophy of science; but doing this raises its own set of questions. Forceful claims are made about the interdisciplinary nature of this work, how it breaks down the (implicitly gendered) ‘two cultures’ of art and science by stressing the fictive nature of scientific knowledge, the ways it extends its cognitive boundaries by metaphoric elaboration, narrative extrapolation and so on. But in positioning scientific discourse as text, as representation, are disciplinary boundaries being deconstructed or redrawn? Feminism moves into history of science, and as in all forms of radical intellectual work, takes to pieces its original object of knowledge. Nothing wrong with that, but is this work then absorbed into an already-constituted poststructuralist cultural studies, always hungry for more texts to deconstruct, and allowing some fantasied unreconstructed realist science itself to become the ultimate other?

This dilemma lurks beneath the explicit historical work in all three of these books, and emerges indirectly in different ways through the distinct kinds of feminist historiography that each represents. In *Sexual Visions* it is illustrated most clearly in the slippery status that ‘culture’ itself holds in the analysis. Ludmilla Jordanova’s explicit aim is to explore and relate the representation of sexual difference in scientific culture and ‘the assumptions such writings

contain about the gendered character of natural knowledge'. In doing this she is extending and elaborating analyses in feminist epistemology and history of science about the emergence of modern science since the seventeenth century and the character of its conceptual metaphors – metaphors which shape paradigms and 'languages of nature' and which negotiate their identity through gendered oppositions. Jordanova identifies two radically different ways in which 'women' tend to be identified with nature: as repositories of natural laws to be revealed and understood, and through their identification with passion and sensibility, as continually disrupting the rational and discoverable. The ambiguous meaning of femininity itself, she suggests, means that the male/female dichotomy (the kind that Cixous postulates) is constantly in flux.

Jordanova aims to focus on 'the culture of science', which is distinguished from scientific research and theory formation. On one level this leaves the idea of a realm in which science takes place beyond culture still intact, as culture itself is defined primarily as 'imagery of all kinds' through which concepts of gender slide between various domains (literature, political theory, art, natural history, medicine, law, etc.) yet which is nonetheless somehow seen as distinct from, and illustrative of, social practices. Jordanova is interested in tracing both continuities and transformations in 'scientific' representations of gender, and she does this by focusing on a historically wide range of specific examples: the biomedical sciences of the eighteenth and nineteenth century in France and England; the use of 'hyper-real' wax models (known as 'Venuses') in anatomy classes in late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe; the implications of Michelet's elaboration of gender as a cosmic metaphor; the interconnections between science, modernity and femininity as machine in Lang's *Metropolis*.

As its title implies, one of the central organizing arguments of the book is the centrality and ubiquity of the spectacular metaphor to the desire to know, possess and control nature that characterizes modern science. It is this voyeurism, Jordanova suggests, that underpins the gendering of scientific perception, centred as it is on the concepts of secrecy and unveiling; the 'thing' to be discovered is fascinating by virtue of its very elusiveness, the process of discovery literally and metonymically replicates the fugitive lure that is femininity itself. Jordanova is impressively sceptical of what she sees as the contemporary obsessional fascination with the sexual, which she argues often reproduces the very voyeurism it purports to analyse, but her lack of concern to investigate more thoroughly the psychic significance of her material she looks at, poses another set of problems. It means moreover that *Sexual Visions* in some respects replicates the very rhetorical devices it investigates.

For example, Jordanova draws on art history and criticism in analysing the 'Venuses' – realistic wax models used widely in anatomy classes. Both male and female models existed for these purposes – the males tending to be upright muscle men or truncated torsos, the females favouring reclining bodies in inviting poses, often complete with 'flowing hair, pearl necklaces, removable parts and small foetuses' (45). She develops her arguments about the ways in which scientific discourses mediate social meanings and practices by exploring how the models gain their authority through a set of realist-aesthetic conven-

tions, producing a self-reinforcing structure of perception. The cultural meaning of anatomy itself gains currency through these figures which are in turn formed through certain aesthetic codes. But is it surprising that this example should prompt this interpretation? There is a sense in which the object of analysis constructs the method of investigation. A similar slippage occurs in the analysis of 'gender as a cosmic metaphor' which focuses on Michelet. Michelet was 'obsessed with sexual difference . . . the nature books are permeated by a language which refers to his own life and preoccupations, conveniently acted out before his eyes in the theatre of nature' (67). He 'displayed a cosmological drive to assign meaning to everything; accordingly everything can be seen as gendered, since gender is part of a larger system of signification . . .' (73). There is a certain circularity here.

*Body Politics: Woman and the Discourses of Science*, takes the notion of the female body as social, economic and cultural discursive metonym further than *Sexual Visions*, and in doing so displays a different kind of historiographic interest in their gendered reading of scientific texts. In their introduction the editors argue that the essays 'suggest the ways in which changing material technologies – alongside and in interaction with changing discursive technologies – at once reflect and (re)construct our understanding of the contours of the feminine body . . . [which], as the prime site of sexual and/or racial difference in a white, masculine, western political and sexual economy, is peculiarly the battlefield on which struggles other than women's own have been waged' (2), particularly in debates around reproduction and reproductive technology. The central organizing metaphor of the book again lies in its title – the process of metonymic transference between the individual body and the state 'corpus'. It argues that over the last two centuries the rhetorical trope which has organized the emergence of modern science – the light of masculine science illuminating the female body of nature – is increasingly transmuted into literal practice. The essays come from a range of disciplines and theoretical positions and in the introduction this is covered by a certain conceptual vagueness; the editors wish to avoid 'lapsing into either an ahistorical essentialism or an insufficiently material consideration of the multiple ways in which the feminine body has been constructed', but in fact implicit concepts such as 'the material', 'discourse' and 'experience' vary widely in the different essays, and there remains a tension between the symbolic construction of femininity and its implications for a political strategy based on a politics of subjectivity.

Thus Mary Jacobus' 'Immaculate Conceptions and Feminine Desire' privileges the discourse of psychoanalysis in a symptomatic reading of how unconventional narratives of motherhood – Kleist's 'the Marquise of O', the problems of accounting for feminine sexuality itself suggested in Freud's *Three Essays*, and the contemporary debate around surrogate motherhood – all 'figure in a discourse of maternity that is bound to reproduce the Law of the Father' in a way that ends up by confirming its own form of teleological determinism. In 'Mid-Victorian Constructions of Female Desire', on the other hand, Mary Poovey discusses how to theorize the ways in which women have been able to enter the discourses from which they have been excluded without

being positioned outside or transgressing them, by looking at how mid-nineteenth-century debates on prostitution foregrounded the concept of feminine sexuality itself in ways that could be appropriated by middle-class women. In contrast to the 'madonna/whore' polarity of Victorian sexuality that remains in place even in post-Foucauldian histories, she argues that the prostitute was able to be seen as a victim by being aligned with rather than against the passive middle-class wife, while the fantasy of the 'lustful' prostitute might be the means through which middle-class women could negotiate their own desire. Sally Shuttleworth's investigation of mid-Victorian perceptions of menstruation takes as its starting point the homologous relation between notions of self-control and regulation in popular political economy and concepts of 'female circulation'. Both official medical texts and popular advertising shared a fearful obsession with the disruption of the monthly flow and the morbid disruption of blood mirrored the fears of unruly, insanitary urban poor, she argues; the metonymic displacement of the concerns of the social division of labour onto the female body is central to the symbolic construction of the sexual division of labour.

The problem of how to develop an alternative politics of knowledge, of how to find a language of experience within epistemological structures that doesn't simply replicate the 'rationality/intuition' or the 'essentialist/constructionist' opposition surfaces continually in this volume. Emily Martin's 'Science and Women's Bodies', for example, places a discussion of the contemporary meaning of menstruation within the framework of postmodern anthropology and the problems of cross-cultural commensurability. She reiterates the familiar critique of the deployment of vision as the paradigm of knowledge, developing instead the equally familiar model of a heteroglossia of voices. Yet she also elaborates recent debates in feminist epistemology, such as Nancy Hartsock's critique of Richard Rorty's liberal interpretation of postmodern pluralism as communication between implied equals in her discussion of how different cultural and social groups understand 'menstruation'. She stresses that one of the central dilemmas in dismantling the knowledge/power matrix in a way that has strategic uses for feminism is to break down the unproductive opposition between a monologic grand narrative on the one hand and a babble of voices that are inherently untranslatable on the other. But she ends up by arguing that each group should be able to understand menstruation in a way that is 'true' for them. 'Authentic experience' is realigned in a postmodern frame.

Moreover, the dilemma of how to align a postmodern epistemology with a feminist 'body politics' based on a liberal discourse of rights and possession is one which this volume continually encounters but is perhaps not really in a position to answer. 'If nineteenth-century discourses cast the malfunctioning organism that embodies society's ills, twentieth century discourses make the feminine body the site of its contradictory desires and social theories, including those of feminism itself' (5), argue the editors. But many of the essays, while predictably questioning the humanist subject who seeks knowledge, inevitably posit an alternative knowing subject as the ethical standpoint from which any kind of radical knowledge must spring.

Paula Treichler and Mary Ann Doane illustrate different aspects of this dilemma in their contrasting discussions of the crisis of childbirth and reproductive technology – the point at which the boundaries of a known subjectivity are most radically threatened and the language of mechanical production merges with organic reproduction in replications of and surrogates for the maternal body itself. Treichler develops an elaborate discussion of the different factors underlying the ‘crisis of childbirth’ in a highly technologized advanced capitalist society such as urban America. But the bottom line of her investigation into the different interests and processes that inflect childbirth’s varying meanings is the ‘naturalness’ of the process itself against a technologized medical intervention which is inherently other. Mary Ann Doane’s ‘Technophilia: Technology, Representation and the Feminine’ on the other hand opens with the science fiction film’s fundamental ambivalence to sexual identity, providing technological fantasies that can both undermine or reinforce any apparent certainties. She focuses in detail, however, on the ways in which representations of technology fortify conventional understandings of the feminine; and here again the argument tends to become self-fulfilling – the filmic text becomes the allegory of the theory brought to bear on it. *Metropolis* is again the prototype here of the nexus of masculine anxieties in which fears about technology articulate and are articulated through the feminine body and reproduction replaces production as the locus of an insecure modernity. Doane elaborates this analysis into contemporary fantasies of technology and the maternal body, most effectively in her reading of *Aliens* as an expression of Kristevan ‘abjection’. *Aliens* ‘represents a final fusion of the organic and the technological; the female merges with the environment itself and the mother-machine becomes *mise-en-scene*’ (169). But, like Jacobus, this work extends an already-given ontological framework rather than questioning its epistemological ground.

At times it seems inevitable that many of these essays at some level do end up by positing sexual difference grounded in the physical body as a fundamental base on which all other forms of power and identity rest, even if this is seen as the cultural construction of the ‘truth’ of the physical. This means that the argument of the book as a whole finally turns back on itself. At times the narrative of the relationship between gender and science seems continually to recapitulate itself, foreclosing other possible stories.

By contrast, Donna Haraway’s massive *Primate Visions: Gender, Race and Nature in the World of Modern Science* attempts to break with the binary model, appropriating post-colonial criticism’s concepts of multiple difference, hybridity and heterogeneity in deconstructing the colonization of nature itself. While many of the implicit arguments in *Body Politics* also surface here (one of Haraway’s chapters also appears in the Jacobus collection), it’s the proliferation and diffuseness of the paradigms that Haraway explores that makes *Primate Visions* both so fascinating and so frustrating. Haraway is intrigued by science’s ability simultaneously to dismantle the boundaries of the human even as it posits a viewing subject in the process of establishing its discourses of power. Her earlier essay, ‘A Manifesto for Cyborgs’,

resolutely refused to position technology itself as an inherently pathological master narrative by imagining the possibilities of 'post-human' identities which take apart the standpoint from which those histories are written. In *Primate Visions* it is that liminal being the primate – starting point of the narrative of human origins – that challenges the limits of what it is to be human, working at the interface of human and animals on the one hand, humans and machines on the other. 'Primates existing at the boundaries of so many hopes and interests are wonderful subjects with whom to explore the permeability of walls, the reconstitution of boundaries, the distaste for endlessly enforced dualisms', she writes. Primates gain their uncanny status through their simultaneous otherness and familiarity – they are figures around which a web of fantasies of both nature and culture are woven, making it necessary to read the primate text as a work of science fiction, 'the story of an alien species that intervenes in human reproductive politics' (5).

Like *Sexual Visions* and *Body Politics*, *Primate Visions* stresses the centrality of metaphor (particularly that of vision) in all forms of scientific understanding; and like the other books it extrapolates from paradigms already developed in cultural criticism to conceptualize discourses of science in a way that is, too, essentially metaphorical. Haraway critically surveys the four dominant models of the radical science movement: Latour's rejection of all epistemological realism; *Radical Science Journal's* too simple engagement with classical marxist categories of production and reproduction; the scientist's own discourse which remains committed to the belief that scientific knowledge is not simply about power and control and that their knowledge somehow actively translates the voice of their subjects, and finally the voices of feminism and anti-racism, which run the risk of assuming that race and gender are somehow prior social categories.

Attempting to avoid these pitfalls, Haraway turns to Said and the notion of 'primatology as simian Orientalism' in exploring how primates are forever already represented and through this become complex stories of human selves. 'Traditionally associated with lewd meanings, sexual lust and the unrestrained body, monkeys and apes mirror humans in a complex play of distortions over centuries of western commentary on these troubling doubts' (11). As with Said's conception of the 'Eastern' other, she argues, the primate image embodies powerful fantasies of origins, but here their scene is not the cradle of civilizations but the cradle of culture; 'primatology displays the western imagination of the origin of sociality itself, especially of the densely meaning-laden icon of "the Family"' (10). But in spite of the vigorous ways in which Haraway insists on the primate as the site of contested cultural narratives and meanings, the analogies she draws between other kinds of constructed 'other' identities, raises its own epistemological and political problems generated by a deconstruction of colonial power pushed beyond its own limits. Despite its drive to break down binary oppositions Haraway's analysis remains caught in a proliferating set of dualisms that nonetheless share a common code of analogy and a common concept of otherness, in which nature/culture, black/white, body/mind are still aligned as equivalents. But one of the things that

is impressive about this book is the way that it constantly displays how the otherness of the primate text challenges, while being situated within, the endless reproduction of social difference. In developing the analogy of colonial mimicry and difference it implicitly highlights its political shortcomings for the understanding of post-colonial human identity and subjectivity.

Primates, Haraway argues, exist on a range of different boundaries of knowledge – of psychiatry and zoology, biology and anthropology. They operate, too, as the node in a network of political, technological and military structures, and she explores the immensely complex ways in which different simulated environments act as theatres in which various kinds of identities and social power are acted out through twentieth-century America. In the 1920s and 1930s the ape represented a crucial link in the ‘great chain of being’ vital to the western colonial imagination; the multiplicity of different kinds of ‘monkey’ in different forms of post-colonial internationalism becomes a trope for a range of discourses on human language and family structure; the relatively large number of white women primatologists (above all Jane Goodall) generates new kinds of pastoral mythology in which the feminine acts as mediator of the nature/culture divide. The section ‘Apes in Eden, Apes in Space’, for example, investigates the desire to transcend boundaries of outer space and of cross-species communication. In the first of these monkeys in effect become cyborgs, Haraway argues – the other end of the spectrum in which simians in the ‘wild’ act out a prelapsarian human fantasy. Ham, the first monkey to be used in space exploration programmes is given a name that is both that of Noah’s only black son and the acronym for the scientific-military institution that lauched him: Holloman Aero-Medical. The attempts to teach gorillas and chimpanzees American sign language (AMESLAN) are the ultimate expression of the ethnographer’s dream of cross-cultural communication. The gorilla Koko becomes a humanized subject not only by learning communicative codes but by assimilating a whole cultural discourse – acquiring self-consciousness, making moral statements (recognizing ‘naughty’ behaviour, for example), keeping a kitten as a pet. ‘The natural and the social were both mythic spaces of origin in this structure’ argues Haraway; ‘neither led to history and specificity; in each man was coded through white woman and anthropoid apes’ (145).

Yet all this boundary crossing – of species barriers, machine-organism barriers, language barriers, earth-space barriers – do not disrupt the underlying story of compulsory reproductive sexuality, Haraway maintains. In her analysis of the interconnections between feminism and primatology she recapitulates and develops many of the arguments of *Body Politics*. The contradictions posed by female, and feminist, primatologists are precisely those straddling two structures of perception: their position as subjects within knowledge structures continually encounters the limits of their symbolic position as ‘women’ – constructs within masculine discourse. *Primate Visions*, like *Body Politics* finally deconstructs the very position from which it was written – that of feminism itself. And here its deconstructive drive runs the risk of becoming another form of boundary-policing – repressing the political urge that is its own origin in the act of investigating it.



NOTES

- 1 Paul Hirst, 'An Answer to Relativism?', *New Formations* 10 (Spring, 1990), 13–25.

*Joseph Bristow*

LIFE STORIES

CAROLYN STEEDMAN'S HISTORY WRITING

STORIES, HISTORIES

The point of a story is to present itself momentarily complete, so that it can be said: it does for now, it will do; it is an account that will last a while. Its point is briefly to make an audience connive in the telling, so that they might say: yes, that's how it was; or, that's how it could have been.<sup>1</sup>

Rarely have I been more willing to 'connive in the telling' of an autobiography than with Carolyn Steedman's *Landscape for a Good Woman*, a book which made a significant intervention into cultural studies when it was first published in 1986. *Landscape* is the exceptionally moving account of a 'good' working-class mother seen through the eyes of her loving but partly estranged daughter. The daughter – Steedman the narrator – attempts to open up a space in which the connected stories of both women can be told together on their own terms and made to seem as if they were true. Or, more correctly, it is Steedman's project to identify the means through which she might disclose the truth inhabiting her own and her mother's life stories. Oscillating between memory and desire, between the past of a working-class childhood and the present (academic) context of writing, *Landscape* is a book frequently punctuated by moments of hesitation and reflection on how a life story may be truthfully represented. *Landscape* provides the best starting-point to grasp the extraordinary ambitions of Steedman's wide-ranging and substantial body of work – a body of work which is acutely aware of the narrative frameworks in which it chooses to operate.

I have written this essay because Steedman's unusual work has brought up several questions for me about 'stories' – in the widest sense – that are not being addressed adequately in other areas of cultural theory. Her history writing and experiments in autobiography have encouraged me to reconsider many of the tenets of British cultural studies in the left-humanist tradition stemming largely from Raymond Williams' often misunderstood engagement with the cognitive capacities of feeling. In many respects, my involvement with Steedman's wide-ranging studies in labour history, children's writing, and autobiography forms part of a broader reinvestigation of traditions of cultural analysis that have taken place since Williams' death in early 1988.

Several studies of Williams' substantial canon have subsequently appeared. In the thirty years that passed between the publication of *Culture and Society* (1958)<sup>2</sup> and his untimely death, it is fair to say that many of the touchstones of Williams' writing have been treated with suspicion. At a time when, in the course of the many rereadings of Freud, the human subject has been intermittently fading, or alternatively dispersed into postmodern fragments, or, as in Foucault, practically dispensed with altogether, it has been difficult to estimate the value of such seemingly vague things as 'experience' and 'emotion'. These latter two words, the staple diet of a much-maligned empiricism, have been targeted as the dangerously universalizing concepts underpinning liberal humanism. Given the post-1960s surge of antipathy against humanism, Williams' work has sometimes been conflated with a 'Left-Leavisism', discounting his radical difference from Leavis' moral mission to spread well-trained, civilizing feelings among the ill-educated masses. By contrast, Steedman's books, often drawing on the resources of Williams' thought, take humanism very seriously. And it must be emphasized that what she has to say does not attempt to universalize feelings or speak of some abstract human condition. Instead, her research, which has its basis in socialist feminism, takes up Williams' concern with lived experience, and looks at the historical, political, and, above all, narrative forces which give shape to forms of life. In what follows, I begin by considering the distinctions she draws between story and history in relation to working-class autobiography; I then move on to consider the politics of emotion in connection with Williams' concept of 'structure of feeling'; and, finally, I make a few remarks about the uses of literacy. Throughout, my concern is with Steedman's unswerving attention to the ways in which life writing can bring its writers to the point of understanding how their lives have been already narrated – according to a prefigurative script. Steedman never loses sight of how writers may develop skills to rewrite the life script in which they find themselves. To put it simply: her work considers questions of agency and political change through processes of literacy.

Steedman places a continual emphasis on storytelling, and her concept of what constitutes a story is a very broad one indeed – not just restricted to fiction in the conventional sense of the word. Here, story has considerable scope and amplitude. At its most general (and perhaps nebulous), it relates to the narrative forms through which human lives are lived and made intelligible. Since autobiography is the most explicit manifestation of how people can represent their lives to themselves in narrative form, Steedman is often preoccupied with this genre. Yet Steedman's sustained interest in how these narrative structures or life stories may be theorized extends to other kinds of writing – such as stories created by children and working-class men and women. These are writings rarely taken seriously for the complexity of the rhetorical devices they use. Highly attentive to the linguistic, psychological, and formal properties of these life stories, Steedman displays an enduring concern with the ways in which practices of writing can bring writers to a position where they can acknowledge how their lives have been *narrated*, and how, on the basis of this understanding of how a life story is created, they

can work towards a politicized reading of their worlds. Although many writers – writers of slave narratives, for example – have long recognized the potential of autobiography to function as an instrument of political change, Steedman's own consideration of stories stands out because of its distinctive methodological concerns.

*Landscape* is a compelling book because it situates its lives (Steedman's, her mother's, and those of many working-class women), not outside the writing, in an exterior reality, but *within* it. The book is unusual because it is both a work of lifewriting and the story of its own ambiguous relation with the tradition of working-class autobiography which it is both extending and arguing against. Dissatisfied with the stereotypical depiction of women in the celebrated life story of the working-class 'scholarship boy', Steedman is offering her 'landscape' as a feminist reply to the rather static 'Landscape with Figures' sketched out by Richard Hoggart in *The Uses of Literacy* (1957)<sup>3</sup> – a book, it is worth remembering, that has a very misleading title. Hoggart's account of working-class life in the north of England hardly concerns itself with literacy at all. To counter the singularity of vision in the pictures put together by Hoggart and Jeremy Seabrook (in his *Working-Class Childhood* (1982)),<sup>4</sup> *Landscape* deploys a piecemeal structure to interweave several narratives about lifewriting where both terms – life and writing – thematize one another. This book discusses the assumptions that underpin the kind of lifewriting offered by Hoggart and Seabrook in the very process of writing about its own two lives. In other words, *Landscape* performs several functions: it examines how the working-class life story has conventionally been told; it then tells its own story; and finally, it scrutinizes how its autobiographical reflections have been framed.

In *Landscape*, Steedman's aim is to see how two lives, her own and her mother's, relate to altogether broader narratives of family, of gender, and of class, and to work out where exactly these two women stand in the picture. Both have very much a 'landscape' of their own, with needs and desires that have been routinely excluded from traditions of both male working-class writing and forms of radical politics. Steedman claims that her book is not only 'a book about stories', it is also 'a book about *things* (objects, entities, relationships, people), and the way in which we talk and write about them . . . it is about people wanting those things, and the structures of political thought that have labelled this wanting as wrong' (23). This wanting – by which she means her mother's longing for the products of consumer capitalism of the 1950s – has, at times, been condemned as one of the worst illusions the working classes can labour under in their sad assimilation into bourgeois culture. Steedman wants to explain the reality of this longing, and reclaim its meaningfulness in the lives she describes. Her book, therefore, also analyses a certain kind of desire – a desire to tell how a story of desire might be told. The ambitions of *Landscape*, then, are many, and it is a measure of its success that it nears fulfilling almost all of them.

Placed side by side, *Landscape* and Steedman's other main writings – *The Tidy House* (1982), *The Radical Soldier's Tale* (1988), and *Childhood, Culture and Class in Britain* (1990) – reveal that her working life as both a labour

historian and a primary school teacher has produced an innovative politics of reading and writing.<sup>5</sup> Each of these books looks at how various life stories are continuously told, modified, and retold within those larger narratives which may be read as binding a particular culture together. By analysing how narrative devices shape perceptions of reality, Steedman intends to strengthen the interpretative tools with which the production of little respected narratives may be understood for the great wealth of historical meanings they can generate.

The relations between stories and histories have been taken up by a number of academic disciplines. One might reasonably imagine that this set of relations would form a central part of English studies, even in its most conventionally 'humanist' forms, since English stakes one of its largest claims on fiction: the most obvious province of storytelling. Yet English studies has persistently failed to make connections between stories and histories, for complex institutional reasons. Fixated on the formal elements of textuality, literary studies still often finds little or no space for the historical and sociological analysis of how narrative structures are implicated in other discourses (such as education, medicine, and the law) which serve to regulate people's lives. Nor has this academic discipline made much room for investigations into working-class writing and the reality such writing tries to shape. (The main studies of working-class autobiography have noticeably been produced by labour historians. David Vincent's *Bread, Knowledge and Freedom* (1981)<sup>6</sup> is a key reference work here; Steedman regularly draws on its important findings.) However, in Britain, literary studies has, to say the least, undergone something of a transformation in recent years. It has been up to varieties of feminist criticism, British cultural materialism, and the American New Historicism to address the repression of the social in orthodox critical practices. Steedman's preoccupation with stories is unusual because she approaches questions of narrative from several vantage-points: research by educationists and sociologists on language acquisition and literacy, and by labour historians, such as Vincent, on working-class culture.

There is a further field of inquiry which addresses the question of how and why certain narrative forms may be used to tell the story of the self, and that, of course, is psychoanalysis, whose key narrative structure is the case-study, and whose discoveries Steedman often draws on. Yet psychoanalysis as both institution and discourse has rarely engaged with the lives, let alone the voices, of working-class women, although it has, however, been a site of great significance for feminist inquiry, and it must be said both that psychoanalysis frequently enters into the study of child development, and theories of literacy certainly feed into investigations of working-class writing.<sup>7</sup> Steedman's writing, therefore, occupies an uncharted territory where narratives of an institutionally underrepresented kind are brought under the scrutiny of analytic tools drawn from disciplines with which the former are rarely placed in conjunction.

As a theoretical concept, story alone will not fully account for the lived meanings of the narratives under analysis. As Steedman insists, the story has to be taken up and situated within a broader field of reference, hence the

distinction she makes between story and history: 'Once a story is told, it ceases to be story: it becomes a piece of history, an interpretative device' (*Landscape*, 143). In other words, a story is over once its reasons for being told have been comprehended, and thus its historical significance understood. Although stories so often seem bound to the comforting realms of leisure and common sense (these are the stories we all know, love, and live by), they inevitably contain a history. The more skilled we become at understanding the history involved in these very broadly defined stories the more able will we be to identify the ideological function of narratives – how they designate a place for us within their structure of telling. This question concerning the narrativization of lived meanings has been addressed by a number of cultural analysts. Alan Sinfield has considered the usefulness of discussing how lives are represented, and thereby rendered intelligible, as stories:

The contest between rival stories produces our notions of reality, and hence our beliefs about what we can and cannot do. That is why governments seek to control what is written and said, especially when rendered insecure by war or some other difficulty. . . . The stories through which we make sense of ourselves are everywhere. In the media, they are not just in the articles and programmes labelled 'fiction' and 'drama', but in those on current affairs, sport, party politics, science, religion, the arts, and those specified as education and for children . . . . I am not quite sure that 'story' is the right term – it sounds rather informal, inconsequential; perhaps 'narrative' would be better, but I don't want its connotations of strategic organization. . . . I use 'story' (and 'representation') to accommodate patterns of common sense alongside formal pronouncements, and to avoid prejudging adequacy. In oppositional work this has the advantage of throwing all systems, however authoritative, back to first base so that their claims may be re-evaluated.<sup>8</sup>

Story, then, has analytical limitations since it may appear to lack specificity. That said, it draws attention to the need within cultural theory to investigate exactly how human lives are *told*, and, just as important, how human lives are *read*. This double commitment to the writing and reading – the narrative articulation – of lives suggests something more than addressing ideology, which has been the main vehicle for understanding the consolidation of dominant meanings within culture. Although strands of Marxism, notably those filtering through the work of Louis Althusser, stress that ideology is a 'lived relation', there is at times a tendency within Marxism first to identify contradictions (often those which underpin 'common sense'), and then pass off their powerful grip on everyday life as the conspiratorial mystifications of the ruling classes. That, at its most caricatured, is the dream of Marxism as science. Rarely do current forms of Marxist cultural analysis see themselves as a narrative locked within a particular logic that prefigures their progression. Varieties of Marxism-as-science are often in danger of losing sight of how the contradictions of everyday life are meaningfully (and not just mindlessly) *lived*. An alternative appeal may be made to humanist traditions within

Marxism, which find their ground, not in theories of political economy, but in a feeling of injustice (capitalism is wrong because we *feel* it is wrong and, equally, *rationalize* it as wrong). It is within this tradition of socialist humanism – a tradition attached to emotional values – that Steedman's stories are activated.

Stories, then, can bring us to the point of change because they can provide us with politically informing emotions. But before proceeding to a discussion of the place of feelings in socialist thought, it is worth considering briefly where the question of emotions lies in relation to other areas of critical inquiry – particularly those which attend to highly sophisticated forms of reading and writing. Although post-structuralist thinking (in all its manifestations) has language at its core, it has not directly situated itself within a politics of literacy. This is a noticeable omission in a field of inquiry which offers a radical concept of 'writing' (after Derrida). Should we seek to disengage – as proponents of deconstruction sometimes suggest – from the compulsions of narrative altogether?<sup>9</sup> The contrast between methods drawn from post-structuralism and socialist humanism is an instructive one. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's remarks on reading and writing are relevant here, especially as they form part of a discussion of the 'remaking' of history:

How are historical narratives put together? In order to get to something like an answer to that question, I will make use of the notions of writing and reading in the most general sense. We produce historical narratives and historical explanations by transforming the socius, upon which our production is *written* into more or less continuous and controllable bits that are *readable*. How these readings emerge and which ones get sanctioned have political implications on every possible level. . . . Writing and reading in such general senses mark two different positions in relation to the many-strandedness of 'being'. Writing is a position where the *absence* of weaver from the web [i.e. the text: the fabric] is structurally necessary. Reading is a position where I (or a group of us with whom I share an identificatory label [i.e. as a post-colonial critic]) make this anonymous web my own, even as I find in it a guarantee of my existence as me, one of us. Between the two positions there are displacements and consolidations, a disjunction in order to conjugate a representative self.<sup>10</sup>

Spivak deploys, as always, a strategically difficult syntax, which puts its operations under a particularly attentive deconstruction (and thus affronts, in her words, the complaints of 'clarity-fetishists').<sup>11</sup> Her often abstruse writing refuses simple assimilations, and so may seem resistant to quotation. However, her remarks are worth citing because they indicate how the 'guarantee' of political identification is held within a tension between how it is *read* and how it is *written*, and the interpretative manoeuvres that take place between both of these mobile positions. Spivak's writing is also unusual with respect to the fields it operates within, since it demonstrates an enduring concern with pedagogy and the transmission of reading and writing skills. Yet Spivak's work, and that of deconstruction in general, is remote from the concerns of

Williams and Steedman because it is not humanist. Deconstruction, following psychoanalysis, elects to speak, not of empirical feelings, but of abstract desire – its displacements and condensations; the complexity of its tropes. It has no interest in the sympathies or sentiments that define a sense of community or class. In this respect, deconstruction does not inquire into the politics of emotion, and so, working back to the quotation above, it seems hard to understand exactly how Spivak's 'representative self' might come to experience itself as 'representative'. By comparison, Steedman's work, making similar observations about how the self is situated within the devices of reading and writing, has a fascination with those moments of interpretation (or identification) that may, for example, move us to anger or to tears.

*Landscape* is instructive here. It contains several highly emotive episodes which are there not just for the sake of their capacity to induce a powerful response. They are there to make us think as well. One of them depicts Steedman's father taking her as a little girl into a bluebell wood. There he kindly picked some flowers for her, only to be interrupted by an irate forest-keeper who shouted at her father for violating the land. The keeper rudely snatched the flowers, throwing them back on to the ground in a rude attempt to humiliate her father. Steedman tries to infer the full significance of this life-shaping memory, which forms part of an analysis of her father's marginal place in the family household, and clearly indicates the divisions of class that cut through her childhood experiences:

My father stood, quite vulnerable in memory now. He was a thin man. I wonder if I remember the waisted and pleated flannel trousers of the early 1950s because in that confrontation he was the loser, feminized, outdone? They made him appear thinner, and because of the way the ground sloped, the forest-keeper, very solid and powerful, was made to appear taller than him. In remembering this scene I always forget, always have to deliberately call to mind the fact that my father retaliated, shouted back; and that we then retreated, made our way down the path, the tweed man the victor, watching our leaving.

All the charity I possess lies in that moment. Any account that presents its subjects as cold, or shivering or in any way unprotected recalls the precise structure of its feeling. (50)

Here is a moment ostensibly framed within a psychoanalytic context. But the self-analysis that revives this memory is not there to loosen some kind of repression but serves to invoke Williams' 'structure of feeling'. This is by far the most significant term Steedman takes from Williams, and it is used to describe the movement between the specific incident (the bluebell wood) and the general emotion it arouses (pity; 51). Importantly, Steedman's memory is not upheld as an authentic moment of being. Instead, it serves to show how the emotional power of narrative can, once understood, make sense of history. It is this process – learning to comprehend how narrative makes life experience intelligible – that stands at the centre of *Landscape*. In this way, the memory has to be felt and thought at once.



To make feeling thought and thought felt: this is the double demand of Williams' 'structure of feeling'. This at times vague formulation, which he first began to theorize in the early 1950s, has often been misread as a notion of unmediated contact between the subject and reality. Peter Middleton has shown how and why Williams' key term has been misunderstood, particularly in relation to forms of sociology that assume that the cultural analyst is a detached observer, one not entangled in the everyday trappings of 'experience'. Although Williams places a central emphasis on the workings of ideology, his interest is always in the comprehension of social processes from *within* – that is, where people make the meanings of their lives within defined cultures. As Middleton argues: 'The *concept* of experience he would . . . accept as in part an ideological illusion, but what he wants to retrieve is a recognition of the life processes, the praxis, that precede analysis.'<sup>12</sup> Williams' subject, therefore, is not the universal subject of Lockean empiricism. Instead, his experiencing subject is situated intersubjectively within a structure that is dynamic, and which can only be understood by way of what it means to participate in a culture. By 'structure of feeling', Williams is, as he states in *Marxism and Literature* (1977), 'talking about characteristic elements of impulse, restraint, and tone; specifically affective elements of consciousness and relationships: not feelings against thought, but thought as felt and feeling as thought: practical consciousness of a present kind, in a living and interrelating community'.<sup>13</sup> Elsewhere, in *Towards 2000* (1985), Williams writes of the feminist, peace, and ecology movements as ones which have at times been mistakenly dismissed as emotional (and therefore irrational) by conventional Marxism:

It is in what it dismisses as 'emotional' – a direct and intransigent concern with actual people – that the old consciousness most clearly shows its bankruptcy. Emotions, it is true, do not produce commodities. Emotions don't make the accounts add up differently. Emotions don't alter the hard relations of power. But where people actually live, what is specialized as 'emotional' has an absolute and primary significance.<sup>14</sup>

Given that emotion is conventionally placed beyond the bounds of reason, this is a somewhat unorthodox position to hold. However, as Steedman's writing demonstrates, to try to think and feel in this way can engage emotions which may be processed in order to redefine how life stories may be historically understood. Feelings, such as pity, can be placed within an interpretative framework, and bring about a change in consciousness.

Stories, such as Steedman's, that are consciously fashioned by structures of feeling do and must change, since they recognize the historical processes that inevitably rewrite them. To reiterate, the point of *Landscape* is to show how the agents of historical change exist *within* those narratives which articulate a culture. The book brings Steedman face to face with herself as one who has been able to find her place in the 'landscape'. Yet it is the question of whether this is the right place to take up that troubles Steedman right to the end of *Landscape*: 'Where is the place that you move into the landscape

and can see yourself?' (142). In other words, how can we come to *know* and *feel* that a 'representative self' has been positioned correctly in this space of belonging or community when it is also necessary to recognize that this position is doubtless provisional, subject to realignment, rewriting and renewal? It would seem that it is in the *process* of trying to make such a position possible that a new kind of politics can be glimpsed. No one story can ever exclusively account for how or where we are situated within our 'landscape'. Life stories are always open to revision and repositioning, and one life can never be comprehensively told by any one narrative. And even if our stories may be different from one another's, the potential to tell our own ones is part of a story that we all share. The difficulty is, of course, that some stories currently function as the only legitimate accounts of what it means to have a place within the world (this is the gist of Sinfield's remarks above). By examining narratives by women, children, and the working classes, Steedman certainly does not wish to recuperate them in order to make monuments out of them. It is not her intention to elevate one kind of story over another. She does not want her own 'landscape' to become *the* 'landscape', a model for all others:

I must make the final gesture of defiance, and refuse to let this be absorbed by the central story; must ask for a structure of political thought that will take all of this, all these secret and impossible stories, recognize what has been made out on the margins; and then, recognizing it, refuse to celebrate it; a politics that will, watching this past say 'So what?'; and consign it to the dark. (*Landscape*, 144)

This typically fractured, hesitant sentence implies that Steedman is searching after a radical politics that will give everybody the chance to grow conscious of how life stories are told, and may be modified to revolutionary ends. There is, to repeat, no interest here in self-aggrandizement. Instead, the most significant retellings of a life story occur when identifications of class and community are drawn up. *Landscape* tries to put this politics into practice. So, too, do her three other main studies. The remainder of this essay examines Steedman's approach to storytelling in relation to primary school pedagogy and labour history. The overriding concern here is with the structures of feeling within the examples Steedman analyses.

#### CHILDHOOD, CULTURE, AND CLASS

It can be said that during the nineteenth century the state of childhood came to be understood as an extension of the self: an extension in time, into the future, and an extension of depth and space, of individual interiority – a way of describing the place lying deep within the individual soul: always a lost place, but at the same time *always there*: (*Childhood, Culture and Class*, 256)

Steedman returns time and again to childhood, which would seem for her to remain an inadequately theorized phenomenon, largely because its meanings are tantalizingly beyond the reach of adults. Childhood is somewhere that has, by definition, been left behind by adults and yet which often beckons our return. On the closing page of *Landscape*, she remarks that the stories we make our own are formed on the 'borderlands' – marginal places that bear witness to 'the irreducible nature of our lost childhoods' (144). Childhood, then, marks out a special site of community that expands across all other social divisions. It is a place where we all can remember to have been, and, no matter how reluctantly, have had to desert. Everybody has been a child. Childhood is where we are socialized, and, most importantly for Steedman, where we learn to read and write, and thus begin to make verbal sense of ourselves and the world around us. It is, moreover, the place where we were once supposedly innocent, before the corruptions of life set in. At least, that has been the resonant meaning of childhood in Europe since the late eighteenth century. It follows that childhood often figures as a realm of considerable longing. The lost child who dwells within in every one of us has remained there, abandoned, for over two hundred years. Psychoanalysis inevitably forms part of that post-Romantic yearning for the recovery of the drama of childhood where the earliest perceptions were set in place, and whose effects persist, in displaced forms, into adulthood.

The sense of a lost personal past is one of the main considerations in *Childhood, Culture, and Class*, a study of the radical educationist, Margaret McMillan (1860–1931). By recognizing this shared reality of childhood, McMillan devised narrative techniques to bring about political change, and such change was achieved through the rousing of emotions:

One particular legacy of early-nineteenth-century Romanticism within Western societies has been the establishment of the idea of childhood as an arena of self-knowledge lying within each individual. The specificity of McMillan's quest for her own lost childhood (a quest that has been seen as one of the organizing principles of the life story as told in Europe since the late eighteenth century) is that she reorganised and reasserted her own past not just in autobiographical accounts, but also within the life of others: poor children, working-class children, the 'children of the dark area'. The body of theory that arose from McMillan's work with children was adopted by both ILP [Independent Labour Party] and Labour Party policy. Some of it also entered the statute books in the form of various enactments between 1906 and 1920 in the development of state policy on childhood. (10)

McMillan wrote numerous instructive fables about deprived children. These need not be dealt with in any detail here. The point is, her stories of childhood are often sentimental, entirely in keeping with the emotive treatment of the child in religious society tracts of the nineteenth century. McMillan's stories aimed to elicit sympathy, and they had the power and compassion of earlier conversion narratives (perhaps the most potent discourses of feeling to

circulate in modern Europe). McMillan's extensive canon is not confined to childhood stories, although her work is centrally involved with the meanings of childhood. She is perhaps best known for *The Life of Rachel McMillan* (1927), the biography of her sister, a distinguished worker in the area of child health. (Rachel McMillan was among the first generation of trained health visitors.) Here, once more, it is storytelling which accomplishes political ideals. *The Life* recalls how Rachel McMillan's socialism was brought alive after reading one of the most sensational stories to rock the 1880s: W. T. Stead's 'The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon' (1885).<sup>15</sup> Stead, an investigative journalist, wanted to find out for himself the painful truths about the sexual exploitation of young women. He reported his actions when he posed as a 'white slaver', trafficking British girls to continental brothels. It was a story that would have its own specific effects, not only making Stead's career, but also ensuring that the Criminal Law Amendment Act (1885) was passed. (This law, among other things, raised the age of consent for girls from thirteen to sixteen.) McMillan, then, knew only too well the political power of storytelling, and her sister's life was to prove exemplary in this respect.

Yet, as Steedman demonstrates, McMillan was writing about something other than her sister's life. *The Life of Rachel McMillan* proves central to *Childhood, Culture and Class* because it is here that Margaret McMillan can be seen to be inventing her own, rather than her sister's, biography. From a wealth of historical evidence, Steedman observes how McMillan moulds her sister's life to explain her own personal history. Attentive to factual discrepancies and implausible details (such as McMillan's recording of conversations that could never have taken place between the sisters), Steedman argues that she is not interested in whether McMillan's biography of her sister, Rachel, is accurate or not. Instead, it is the question of why McMillan was using her sister's life story to account for a particular political consciousness that is important:

It was neither Rachel's story nor Rachel's subjectivity that was figured in the pages of the book [*The Life of Rachel McMillan*]. Rather, it was Margaret's inside and outside that was written here; and the *point* of the life story that McMillan thus constructed was to explain a politics, to give it genesis, purpose, and meaning. The 'Rachel' of *The Life of Rachel McMillan* was therefore a figure, a trope, whose function as a representation of privacy and subjectivity was to allow a story of political action and political achievement to be related. (32)

McMillan's project, it seems, was similar to Steedman's own: its primary intention was to link the personal with the political through a storytelling device. Just as McMillan writes about her sister to explain the genesis and meaning of a conversion to socialism, so too does Steedman find a model through which that story of political change can be understood. This is not to say there is a neat symmetry between McMillan's and Steedman's works but, read alongside one another, they partake in a socialist practice of writing that believes it can alter people's lives for the common good. In concluding

her study, Steedman turns her attention once again to the structures in which this story has been told:

The account has been presented as a form of history, and that presentation must be viewed as its own rhetorical device, allowing the writer to present a plot that seemingly *had* to be shaped in a particular way, according to what the documents used for its composition authorised, or what they forbade. The writer of any kind of historical narrative can always present herself as the invisible servant of archive material, as merely uncovering what already lies there, waiting to be told. It is as well that the reader of this current study is alerted to the fact that the historian is able in this way to appropriate to him- or herself the most massive authority as a storyteller. (245)

At the centre of these final theoretical reflections, Steedman expresses a concern about the confusions that can set in when this notion of storytelling seems to blur the question of historical objectivity. History, she argues, is not to be told 'in any old way' where one 'version is just one among many equally valid possibilities' (245), and thus relativistic; rather, it is the 'pre-figurative' (249) elements of that history that determine its narrative organization. Storytellers may become agents of political change once they apprehend how their stories have been historically prefigured.

In Steedman's work, these prefigurative elements take clearest shape in her first and probably best-known study of writing practices, *The Tidy House*. This is the story of a story created by three nine-year-old working-class girls, Carla, Lindie, and Melissa at an English primary school in the mid-1970s. (The children's story is called 'The Tidy House'. Details of plot and structure will not be dealt with in detail here.) It is an experimental book, which includes a generous amount of historical and theoretical information to help readers work through the meanings of the children's story. As an account of children as writers, the book still, to this day, stands more or less alone. *The Tidy House* is, in itself, a remarkable example of innovative writing practice. It is structured as follows: first, the girls' very inventive story is set within the context of the primary school curriculum, and provided with a preliminary reading; this is then juxtaposed to a number of nineteenth-century women's accounts of child raising and to several transcripts of Victorian working children; and these comparisons are finally placed next to theories of language acquisition and development. Facsimiles of the original text plus transcripts of the discussions that took place between the children and their teacher while the story was being composed are also included. History, theory, and practice are brought together.

Moving in these different directions, *The Tidy House* is surely an unconventional account of children as writers. Although studies of child language development – in terms of vocabulary, tense, and grammatical organization – have much to say about expected attainments at specific ages, it is Steedman's intention to show how such studies fail to understand the way written code

is used by children to explain the world to themselves. Steedman, therefore, sets a different model of inquiry in place:

It is not the language that they [the children] employed, nor the relationship in syntactic terms, of the written to the spoken, that is of essential interest in 'The Tidy House'. Writing, as far as the children were concerned, seemed to be viewed by them as the adequately wielded tool that allowed them to explore much broader and more important questions. The dialogue of which the story is largely composed may in fact tell us practically nothing about the relationship of speech to writing in children of five to twelve; it tells us rather about a social environment in which dialogue has a status and power that the children particularized, not because they could articulate that power, but because they had spent nine years observing its facts. Quite simply, this text offers evidence that people talking to each other, and the effects that this talking had, was the most important and powerful event that the children had ever witnessed. (90)

Reporting patterns of speech they were acquainted with, and developing narrative strategies they were learning from story books, the girls, as writers, were explaining how they had come into the world, not biologically (although they knew how babies came into the world), but socially. In other words, their story is about parents and children, and how and why children are thought and felt to be desirable, and the problems that ensue for parents having to look after them. In their story, the desire for children is tellingly exposed as a form of inevitable resentment. The story discloses how children form part of the social and sexual expectations surrounding the lives of working-class women who both want and yet cannot always afford to have children. In the course of writing *The Tidy House*, Carla informs her teacher 'if you never had no children you'd be well off, wouldn't you? You'd have plenty of money?' (168). This child knows exactly where she is situated within the economic matrix of the family.

*The Tidy House*, needless to say, is neither a documentary nor a social survey. It is a story, and, through its lively use of dialogue, brings its imaginary working-class household to life. In what is a complex narrative – in view of the social system it lays out for interpretation – Carla, Lindie, and Melissa have the opportunity imaginatively to become all the different characters who form part of their social world but whom they have also, importantly, invented – and thus made in their own terms. This process of collaborative storytelling enabled the girls great mobility in their identification with the different protagonists in their highly eventful drama. They 'were able to be male babies and irritated mothers both at the same time'. Steedman adds: 'holding together and synthesising two opposing views in their narrative, they were able to articulate contradictory feelings about their future in a way impossible for children who cannot use written language' (129). As we read through the accelerated movements of this text (sex and babies seem to come almost all at once), it is possible to see how the figure of Carl, the naughty little boy who messes up the tidy house, is very much a problem in this

world of would-be domestic bliss. *The Tidy House* discloses great awareness of the means through which boys try to gain power in their families, particularly over their mothers. The story, therefore, provides the beginnings of an analysis for the girls of their social environment, and it signals, too, in its implicit questioning of the family set-up, how their lives might be imagined differently.

It is, in fact, on that note that Steedman closes the door of *The Tidy House*. Her conclusion ponders Carla's own development, pointing to the strengthening of this writer's skills in a variety of dramatic styles. One of Carla's songs, 'Flower Lady', written in the same year as the story with Lindie and Melissa, tells the tale of a lady 'who was sad because she had no friends', and so she sings a sweet song: ' "My name is Flower Lady./You may like me" ' (156). It may well be that this is 'both a comment on, and a liberation from, the tidy house' (156) – the prison from which Carla was on the verge of seeing some kind of escape. Steedman remarks that although a few working-class women have, during the past century, described how something shifted in their lives, and so enabled them to see the possibility of change, their writing still fails to explain how this change was achieved. On the basis of *The Tidy House*, it would appear that it is in the way we might learn to interpret our lives as stories that new narrative opportunities might come to light. It is the process of becoming literate and articulate storytellers that we can understand how our lives have been represented for us and how, by virtue of that, we might represent them more positively for ourselves, and it is in her study of John Pearman that Steedman extends this argument about the ways in which life writing can bring about political changes in the life which is being written.

#### USES OF LITERACY

*The Radical Soldier's Tale* is Steedman's most detailed investigation into the questions of literacy arising from the practice of life writing. It is a comprehensive edition of the 'Memoir' of John Pearman (1819–1908), a freethinking member of the uniformed working class. Pearman spent his working life first as a soldier during the Sikh Wars of the 1840s and then as a policeman in Buckinghamshire from 1857 onwards. As a radical, he was often troubled by the forms of legal authority which it was his duty to execute. Steedman provides a very full introduction to, and a transcription of, all 271 pages of Pearman's strikingly thoughtful 'Memoir', which was probably composed during 1881–2 – a period of some historical importance because it marked a revival of republican politics in Britain, and thus offered Pearman a set of counter-cultural arguments with which he could interpret the systems of oppression surrounding his everyday working life. There is no need to go into the precise details of his life as a soldier and policeman here. Instead, the most important consideration is Steedman's approach to understanding how Pearman developed a writing practice in which his own life story could become intelligible to himself. At first glance, the 'Memoir' may seem to be

the work of a half literate and somewhat simple man struggling in vain to understand fundamental questions of human life (religion, power, freedom, and so on). Examining Pearman's complex relation to varieties of secularist thought, particularly those advanced by republican newspapers, Steedman shows that Pearman was a working-class intellectual who maximized what tools he had for comprehending his world. For all his spelling mistakes, and syntactic incoherence, he was most certainly a strenuous thinker who, in the course of writing his life story, gradually came to recognize how he might create alternatives to official ideologies:

John Pearman's political analysis was bound, indissolubly, with his need to understand himself as part of a social world. He used everything he had access to by way of analysis. The 'Memoir' is witness to his search, which is a more general and enduring one, for a politics that will allow entry to forms of feeling and thought not officially delineated; that will recognize people's need to express what they know about themselves, and the world that has made them. (*The Radical Soldier's Tale*, 103)

Pearman's 'Memoir' is informative because half way through its painstaking account of soldiering and policing it makes a decisive shift from narrative to interpretation, from story to history. It reveals that in the process of life writing Pearman grew strongly aware of a pressing contradiction in the concept of discipline. The more he wrote the more he came to understand that the story he was recording of his days in the army simply did not square with the exercise of the law in the police constabulary where he was stationed. Although Pearman had very fond memories of his time in India, admiring 'the ordered beauty of a great army ready for battle' (128), he came to see that the laws he had to administer as a constable wrongly served the interests of the ruling classes. He claimed to 'like Law' (236) but was disturbed by the way 'man as Prostituted that [God's] Law and made artificial Laws to suit his own purpose' (192). Much of the 'Memoir' thereafter is given over to his examination of the need for, and the abuse of, the 'Law'.

Steedman's introduction adopts a number of positions to contextualize the 'Memoir', and it is impossible to reproduce all of them. Comparisons are made with other soldiers' stories; extracts from the secularist *National Reformer* are placed next to Pearman's contemplation of socialism and atheism; and conclusions are drawn about how Pearman's reading may be inferred from the idiosyncrasies of his writing. Since Pearman was a policeman, note-taking was central to his daily work. It is the question of Pearman's writing practice that stands at the centre of Steedman's explication of the 'Memoir', and it is around this question of literacy that she applies pressure to the link between theories of language development and cultural studies in *The Tidy House*. Throughout, Steedman respects her subject as a highly literate man, given the circumstances of his class and education. By closely examining Pearman's text, Steedman wishes to discover 'that psychological process that we see at work in the composition of the "Memoir" that is itself historical evidence of the workings of a culture, and of the uses an individual made of it' (65). In



order to accomplish this, Steedman shows how in the 'Memoir' Pearman was strengthening his skills as a writer, as one who was in the process of discovering that writing was not purely the transcription of speech but a system with its own rules. Grammatical errors, dialectal forms, and phonetic spellings are set against Pearman's increasing control of rhetorical questions and imperatives, and his greater syntactic cohesion. Just as Pearman's narrative reaches a point where it converts into a form of interpretation, so too, it would seem, the transcription of speech shifts towards a much more controlled manipulation of the written code.

As these skills increase, Pearman approximates a position where he can – if only momentarily – place himself historically within his own story. This is the crucial interpretative moment Steedman identifies:

look at the difference of the Start in life our Queen had a noble start compare that with the Gutter Children of the earth and look at the start they surly have nothing to thank God for. Now by a Close Calculation of the birth rate it would take about 65 generations form the time of the Christian era to the present time to produce our Queen. . . . Now it would take the same number of generations . . . to produce me and when I look back for only the past two generations of my Family what an amount of temptations we have to endure to avoid and to look at what our parsons Calls sin to git a chance to live while Queen and the Lords & Dukes fare of the best, the poor Children of this – Carrupt earth can get for them (232–3)

'To produce me': this phrase marks the culmination of Pearman's self-realization as a writer. Perhaps, at this juncture, he has moved into that 'place' which situates him in his 'landscape'. He is in control of his writing because he can apprehend how he has been written. Put another way, he now can interpret how his own life has, as a narrative, been prefigured (through generations of injustice). Here the radical soldier recognizes how he, as the agent of his tale, has historically been told.

This discussion has involved restating Steedman's arguments at some length. Yet, when reviewed in this manner, it is possible to see that Steedman's recurring emphasis on literacy has much to say about processes of radical politicization – how a writer arrives at a decisive point of change. That moment of radical enablement should not be magnified as the final outcome of a long personal struggle. It is more likely to be the start of rewriting the life story, and for a better life at that.

As Steedman's writing reveals so clearly, there are many different levels on which writers can evaluate their place in the sentences they have made about themselves. Steedman's skills as a primary school teacher and a labour historian have placed her in a special position to clarify what the *uses* of literacy are, and might be. The issues she raises are especially urgent at a time when conservative forms of thinking have exceptional influence on school curriculum planning, both in Britain and the United States. A book such as E. D. Hirsch's *Cultural Literacy* (1987)<sup>16</sup> stakes a particularly unbending claim on

the instrumental importance of standard knowledges that must always be set in place to secure national identity. Both Hirsch's prescriptions and those of the Kingman and Cox reports (1988, 1989)<sup>17</sup> on the teaching of English in England and Wales demand a restrictive uniformity of interests – that is predictably white, middle-class, and male. Documents such as these go a long way towards dismantling advances in child-centred learning: a pedagogy attending to individual needs. It is never worth forgetting that conservatism asserts the rights of the individual but, simultaneously, requires all individuals to be the same. Proponents of a common culture frequently forget that we do not all share the same aspirations about the uses of literacy because we may claim to own a culture clearly in opposition to the dominant. Since culture is, so to speak, subculturally divided, it is vital that the curriculum face up to those divisions, and give all learners the chance to find a range of forms in which they can articulate their own values of class and community. The classroom – often one of the most restless and imprisoning environments we ever have to settle into – needs to be a place where we can write our own stories on our own terms, at whatever stage of our lives. It is also a place where students and teachers can begin listening to, and learning from, one another – to the point where everybody can interpret the historical and psychological dimensions of the life stories they have produced. Post-structuralist thought has made us especially cautious about monumentalizing the subject. But now, drawing on humanist traditions within Marxism, we may have to reconsider Williams' structures of feeling to locate our 'representative selves'.

#### NOTES

- 1 C. Steedman, *Landscape for a Good Woman* (London: Virago Press, 1986), 22. All further page references are included in the text.
- 2 R. Williams, *Culture and Society 1780–1950* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1958).
- 3 R. Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy: Aspects of Working-Class Life, with Special References to Publications and Entertainments* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1957).
- 4 J. Seabrook, *Working-Class Childhood: An Oral History* (London: Gollancz, 1982). Most of Seabrook's working-class portraits follow an all too familiar stereotypical tradition of 'life-as-a-repeated-pattern'; for example, his eighth chapter opens as follows: 'Jerry Walsh was born in 1920. He lives in a maisonette, an enclave of new building scooped out of a gap in a decaying Victorian suburb of North London. The housing development is a series of identical blocks in dark red brick, with staircases of concrete, bleak and functional. Inside, however, the flat is a surprise. Mr Walsh has painted all the walls with a scene of beechwoods, so that it looks as though he is living in the middle of a forest' (91). In this rather predictable piece of prose, the working-class individual (inhabiting a squalid underworld: Victorian, decaying), would appear to be attempting to reconstitute his 'natural' origins (a painted forest; a pastoral scene). Taking this form of representation on trust, Seabrook makes his point about the urban alienation of the working classes without considering exactly what kind of *lived* (rather than, as here, lifeless or synthetically lived) experience is at stake.
- 5 Steedman's main works are *The Tidy House: Little Girls Writing* (London: Virago Press, 1982), *Policing the Victorian Community* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), *Landscape for a Good Woman*, *The Radical Soldier's Tale: John Pearman*,

- 1819–1908 (London: Routledge, 1988), *Childhood, Culture and Class in Britain: Margaret McMillan, 1860–1931* (London: Virago Press, 1990). All page references are included in the text. Unfortunately, I have not found space here to incorporate three of Steedman's essays on primary school practice: 'Prisonhouses', *Feminist Review*, 20 (1985), 7–21; '“The Mother Made Conscious”: the historical development of a primary school Pedagogy', *History Workshop*, 20 (1985), 149–63; and '“Listen, how the caged bird sings”: Amarjit's song' in Steedman, C. Urwin and V. Walkerdine (eds), *Language, Gender and Childhood* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985), 137–63. Nor do I explore the specific uses of psychoanalysis in Steedman's writing; on this, see L. Marcus, '“Enough of you, let's talk about me”: recent autobiographical writing', *New Formations*, 1 (1987), 83–8. The question of Steedman's work in the context of working-class autobiography is investigated by Raymond Williams: see 'Desire', *London Review of Books*, 17 April 1986, 8–9, reprinted in *What I Came to Say* (London: Hutchinson Radius, 1989), 30–5.
- 6 D. Vincent, *Bread, Knowledge and Freedom: A Study of Nineteenth-Century Working-Class Autobiography* (London: Europa, 1981).
  - 7 I am thinking here specifically of Jacqueline Rose's remarks in 'Femininity and its Discontents' (first published in *Feminist Review*, 13 [1983], 5–21): 'Psychoanalysis in fact continues to be one of the few of our cultural institutions which does not professionally discriminate against women, and which they could even be said to predominate. This is not of course to imply that the presence of women inside an institution is necessarily feminist . . . it is the case that the first criticism of Freud made by Melanie Klein can be seen to have strong affinities with later feminist repudiation of his theories': *Sexuality in the Field of Vision* (London: Verso, 1986), 85. See also T. Brennan (ed.), *Between Feminism and Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1989).
  - 8 A. Sinfield, *Literature, Politics and Culture in Postwar Britain* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 23–4.
  - 9 I am reminded here of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's comments on Jacqueline Rose's work: 'I do want to insist that when it is understood [as Rose understands it] only as a narrative, deconstruction is only the picture of an impossibility that cannot help any political position': 'Feminism and deconstruction, again: negotiating with unacknowledged masculinism' in Brennan (ed.), *Between Feminism and Psychoanalysis*, 208. Spivak emphasizes here, as in many of her other essays, that deconstruction poses the question of a 'bind' (more simplistically understood as a conceptual double bind) or 'impasse' (in the path of all truth-claims) that must be faced up to in theoretical inquiry. Furthermore, Spivak's writing demands to be seen not as solely deconstructive but many other things as well: feminist, post-colonial, Marxist.
  - 10 Spivak, 'Who claims alterity?' in B. Kruger and P. Mariani (eds), *Remaking History*, Dia Art Foundation, Discussions in Contemporary Culture, no. 4 (Seattle: Bay Press, 1989), 269–70.
  - 11 Spivak, 'Feminism and deconstruction', 206. Spivak is no doubt attacking those detractors who would claim her style is unhelpfully obscure. There remain considerable problems around the authority-strategies of such self-consciously difficult writing as hers.
  - 12 P. Middleton, 'Why structure feeling?', *News from Nowhere*, 6 (1989), 52. Terry Eagleton has been one of the most attentive readers of Williams, and criticizes, at length, Williams' 'Left-Leavisism' and his trust in the gradualism of a 'long revolution' which diminishes the possibility of a decisive 'rupture' from the old order: see *Criticism and Ideology: A Study in Marxist Literary Theory* (London: Verso, 1986), 21–43.
  - 13 R. Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (London: Oxford University Press, 1977), 132.
  - 14 Williams, *Towards 2000* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1985), 266.

- 15 W. T. Stead, 'The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon', *Pall Mall Gazette* (July and August 1885). For a detailed analysis of the scandal revealed by Stead, see D. Gorham, 'The "Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon" re-examined: child prostitution and the idea of childhood in late-Victorian England', *Victorian Studies*, 21 (1978), 353-79.
- 16 E. D. Hirsch, *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs To Know* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987).
- 17 Department of Education and Science, *Report of the Committee of Enquiry into the Teaching of English Language: Appointed by the Secretary of State under the Chairmanship of Sir John Kingman* ('The Kingman Report') (London: HMSO, 1988); *English for Ages 5-11: Report of the English Working Group* ('The Cox Report 1') (London: DES/WO, 1988), and *English for Ages 5-16: Report of the English Working Group* ('The Cox Report 2') (London: DES/WO, 1989). For recent assessments of these documents, see P. Brooker and P. Humm (eds), *Dialogue and Difference: English into the Nineties* (London: Routledge, 1989).