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John Manifold: Realist Writer

In the last thirty years, the old Sartrean denigration of socialist realism as a “boy meets tractor” pantomime has been brought under serious scrutiny. Since the pioneering work of Australia’s Sheila Fitzpatrick and Katerina Clark, a whole generation of scholars has returned with a revisionist lens to reconstruct the ideas and practice of this form of writing. Of particular interest is the scholarship treating it as a genre “without shores”: a global formation of writers working in close connection across different fronts of struggle.¹ The comparative analysis of writers as diverse as Tillie Olsen, Sembene Ousmane, and Gabriel Garcia Marquez has yielded some fascinating lessons about the conventions and subversions of socialist texts in the mid-century. It has also raised a competing model to Pascale Casanova’s “World Republic of Letters,” showing that a literary globe existed that we might call the “Second World Republic of Letters,” with its geographical centre in Moscow but its circumference nearly everywhere.

Australian writers played an important role in the development and maintenance of this cultural front. Not only did they participate in the various world congresses of leftwing and progressive authors; they also sought to create a model of literature equal to the problems besetting their own country. In this way, they represented a continuity with the formal seriousness of modernism but deployed towards explicitly political ends. The Realist Writers Group, which boasted chapters in Brisbane, Melbourne, and Sydney, organised individual agitators into a body both responsible to the working-class movement and committed to literary innovation. These groups could count among their ranks Frank Hardy, Dorothy Hewett, and Ralph de Boissière, and their members would form the editorial board for *Overland*, still published today. Australian criticism, breaking free of its “metaphysical” bias in the 1990s, has also turned to a reappraisal of homegrown “dun-coloured” realism, and critics like David Carter and Nicole Moore have

¹ Evgeny Dobrenko and Thomas Lahusen, *Socialist Realism Without Shores* (Duke University Press, 1997).

produced excellent work on the novelists working inside and around the various writers' groups working inside and around the Party.²

The same can't really be said for the socialist poets. The first president of the Brisbane Realist Writers Group was John Streeter Manifold, a writer who had spent time in England during the 1930s and Africa during the War. A self-proclaimed classicist and literary eccentric, he fits in uncomfortably with the other socialist writers. But he *was* a realist. It's not as easy to understand what this means in verse as it is in the novel. To appreciate his work, and how it fits into the Second World Republic of Letters, we need a criticism sensitive to the simultaneous demands of poetry and politics. This means putting Manifold and his fellow Australian Realists into the rhetorical context of three decades' argument about the nature of socialist writing, from 1925 to 1955. This was a debate into which Manifold was thrown by his editorial and writerly contribution to English leftwing letters, by his wartime experience, and by his homecoming. His sense of the global context gave him an anchor for his interventions into the unique political landscape of Australia in the 1950s. In fact, questions derived from his apprenticeship in the literary discourse of socialist internationalism shaped his poetic output. This experience made of Manifold an author who strove to bring the "edges" into view of the "centre": to connect the most far-flung parts of an activist geography. It also left him at the margin of local debates, trying to fold the "edge" of prosodic theory back into the general thrust of literary discourse in the Party.

² "Dun-coloured realism" was the famous pejorative levelled by Patrick White in his "Prodigal Son" essay from 1958. For the "metaphysical" problem, see John Docker, *In a Critical Condition* (Pelican Books, 1984), 83–109. For criticism focusing on the realists, see David Carter, *Always Almost Modern: Australian Print Cultures and Modernity* (Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2013), and David Carter, *A Career in Writing: Judah Waten and the Cultural Politics of a Literary Career* (Association for the Study of Australian Literature, 1997). See, also, Nicole Moore, "The Novel at Arms: Rereading Australian Midcentury Realism," in *The Cambridge History of the Australian Novel*, ed. David Carter (Cambridge University Press, 2023); Nicole Moore, "Hidden Journey from Australia to the Second World," *Journal of World Literature* 7, no. 4 (2022): 533–55; and Nicole Moore, "Making a Literary Working Class in the Cultural Cold War: The Australasian Book Society," in *The Bloomsbury Handbook to Cold War Literary Culture*, ed. Greg Barnhisel (Bloomsbury, 2022), 307–324. Finally, see Paul Adams and Christopher Lee, eds., *Frank Hardy and the Literature of Commitment* (Vulgar, 2003).

It is with the aim of reading Manifold better that I am restoring him to the status of “realist” in this essay. But he is also an important instantiation, or synecdoche, of a struggle that had global importance in the mid-century. His example, as with that of many others, flies in the face of the standard story about realism as an abdication from formal experimentation or literary innovation. As Carter has pointed out in many places, conditions that are often perceived as “ideologically stifling” by non-political critics were actually extremely “productive” aesthetic foils for many of the writers at the time.³ The decisions of form, content, and structure that animated Manifold’s strange oeuvre were made as part of one writer’s efforts to adapt the requirements of the world revolution to a local context. The apparently quaint ballads and sonnets for which he is known today were products of his attempts to settle the most difficult questions of the status of literature and were often the result of earnest and serious conversations with comrades in the Party and the writing groups. It is for criticism today to evaluate whether his answers to these questions made sense at the time, whether Manifold carried them off with any success, and whether he offers the modern political writer any kind of model.

The Second World Republic of Letters

Though there has been some fascinating work in Australian criticism on the relationships between local writers and the Soviet sphere, the exigencies of biography and of local literary history have meant that less attention has been paid to the broad international context of socialist literature.⁴ The movements made by Manifold towards and through realism were directed by the international politics of literature in the interwar and postwar periods. The prime mover in this shift was

³ Carter, *Always Almost Modern*, 207–208.

⁴ Moore has, for instance, traced Dorothy Hewett’s 1958 trip to the Soviet Union (Moore, “Hidden Journey from Australia to the Second World”), and Carter has reconstructed Hardy’s and Manning Clark’s respective journeys (Carter, *A Career in Writing*, 170–177). John McLaren, Carter, and Allan Gardiner have all examined De Boissière’s struggles to navigate the local contexts of Trinidad and Australia in his international career. See John McLaren, *Writing in Hope and Fear: Literature as Politics in Postwar Australia* (Cambridge University Press, 1966), 36; Carter, *Always Almost Modern*, 202–214; and Allan Gardiner, “Striking Images: Ralph de Boissière’s Australian Socialist Realism,” in *Rereading Global Socialist Cultures After the Cold War*, ed. M. Keith Booker and Dubravka Juraga (Bloomsbury, 2002), 165–81.

the various proclamations and suggestions made by groups of writers and politicians in the Soviet sphere of influence.

In the years after 1917, the demands of socialist writing developed through the exigencies of practical politics. Debates in the first decade of the Russian Revolution sought to establish the appropriate place of “realism” and the strictness of the “proletarian” predicate in determining which writers the state would support. The early years saw a struggle between Vladimir Lenin, who promoted the old idea that the proletariat were the inheritors of all world culture, and those like Vladimir Mayakovsky and Anatoly Lunacharsky, who believed in a radical break with tradition.⁵ After the death of Lenin, the sectarian Russian Union of Proletarian Writers (RAPP in the Russian acronym) turned to a more “genealogical” understanding of what made writing “proletarian” and waged war on any writer who came from a “bourgeois” background.⁶ As Sheila Fitzpatrick has argued, this war was hugely successful, and writing turned out to be “the only profession where it could be claimed that Communists achieved power during the Cultural Revolution [1929-1931] almost entirely as a result of their own efforts.”⁷ RAPP and the Komsomol (Communist Youth League) used their sway in the Soviet literary industry to ensure that only writers who came from the proletariat and were self-consciously Communist were considered writers proper.

While the circle of acceptable Soviet writing was shrinking, however, the “borders” that marked out the world of socialist writing were expanding. In the first year of the Revolution, Maxim Gorky and Lunacharsky had helped set up the Institute for World Literature, which became a major institution in the 1920s.⁸ The “International Conferences of Proletarian Writers” in 1927 and 1930 led to the creation of MORP, the International Revolutionary Writers Union.⁹ This union

⁵ Rossen Djagalov, *From Internationalism to Postcolonialism: Literature and Cinema Between the Second and Third Worlds* (McGill-Queens University Press, 2021), 53.

⁶ Djagalov, *From Internationalism to Postcolonialism*, 54–55.

⁷ Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Cultural Front: Power and Culture in Revolutionary Russia* (Cornell University Press, 1992), 136–37.

⁸ Maria Khotimsky, “World Literature, Soviet Style: A Forgotten Episode in the History of the Idea,” *Ab Imperio* 3 (2013): 121.

⁹ Djagalov, *From Internationalism to Postcolonialism*, 56.

was radical and liberatory in its politics, in line with the support for anticolonial movements during the Comintern's "Third Period," and drew from a growing body of global proletarian literature. At the Kharkov conference of 1930, for instance, 120 writers from twelve countries attended. Meanwhile, as we will see later on, journals and literary groups cropped up across the globe.¹⁰ For the first time in history, the possibility presented itself of a globally united front of writers, moving across all continents and committed to a common goal. As Michael Denning says in his *Culture in the Age of Three Worlds* (2004), this "novelist's international" made proletarian literature into "both a movement and a mode, a formation and a form."¹¹

The tensions between the internal situation in Russia and its cultivation of foreign partners culminated in 1934, at the first congress of the Soviet Writers' Union. Here, the problem of maintaining a clear line while including "artists coming over to join the proletariat" was resolved by the construction of a revolutionary form sensitive to different local conditions.¹² Gorky and Nikolai Bukharin agreed on the "advanced" state of Soviet literature, which was tasked with affirming the commitment of the workers to the construction of socialism within the Union. This explained why all the novels were about people who fail to resolve a problem of social organisation by themselves, but then are able to do so when they appeal to their comrades.¹³ Karl Radek, however, pointed out that the same conventions were not appropriate for countries yet to have a revolution of their own. Nor were the bulk of modernist experiments, nor even the old critical realism of the nineteenth century. Instead, Radek encouraged socialist writers abroad to "seek out the main phenomenon" in the "totality" and to find the "typical in the individual."¹⁴ This would require different narrative structures and forms in different contexts.

¹⁰ Djagalov, *From Internationalism to Postcolonialism*, 56–57.

¹¹ Michael Denning, *Culture in the Age of Three Worlds* (Verso, 2004), 60.

¹² Karl Radek, "World Literature," in *Soviet Writers' Congress 1934*, ed. by Maxim Gorky et al., trans. H. G Scott (Lawrence and Wishart, 1977), 175–78.

¹³ For an analysis of this structure in the Soviet Novel, see Katerina Clark, *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual* (Chicago University Press, 1981), 159–76.

¹⁴ Radek, "World Literature," 181.

This new formula was taken up by the domestic and international writers' unions, and writers carried it back to their own countries to begin thinking through its implications. The Left Book Club run by the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) and the Party's various literary magazines were organs for disseminating ideas and experimenting with the developing form. Similar organisations cropped up in the Americas, in Japan and China, and in parts of Africa. This sense of a shared literary structure survived into the Popular Front era, despite the replacement of MORP by the "Association for the Defence of Culture" in 1935.¹⁵ During the 1930s, there was a struggle across international lines to define how revolutionary literature might attune itself to properly local issues and tasks: how the geographical "edge" might be brought into the "centre" of struggle. There was a long debate in Europe and the Caribbean over the merits of Surrealism, associated with André Breton and Leon Trotsky, and over the more orthodox prescriptions of Gorky, György Lukács, and Louis Aragon. At the heart of the question was whether, on the one hand, literature should try to free itself and the mind (Surrealism's "Revolution of the Spirit") as a precondition of political liberation or, on the other, the reality of ideology and the exigencies of political organisation meant that literature should put itself at the service of the Party (Socialist Realism proper).¹⁶ The careers of people like Aimé Césaire and Hugh MacDiarmid show that it was possible to move between these positions. In the case of the "Affaire Aragon," one person's acceptance of the precedence of political over cultural revolution could have far-reaching implications for the movement.¹⁷

Even when writers accepted the "socialist realist" line, they continued to draw from different palettes. Their approach varied with their national context, and the old modernist dream of a properly global literature seemed with the socialists to

¹⁵ Djaglaov, *From Internationalism to Postcolonialism*, 52.

¹⁶ See C. G. Geoghegan, "Surrealism and Communism: The Hesitations of Aragon from Kharkov to the 'Affaire Front Rouge'," *Journal of European Studies* 8, no. 29 (1978): 14.

¹⁷ See Peter Kalliney, "Colonial Intellectuals and the Aesthetic Cold War," in *A History of 1930s British Literature*, ed. Benjamin Kohlmann and Matthew Taunton (Cambridge University Press, 2019), 379. In this "Affaire," Aragon reneged on a promise to Breton to defend the Surrealists at an International Congress of Revolutionary writers and instead tried to bring them under Communist supervision. This re-drew the cultural lines of struggle in the international movement.

have reached some kind of fruition. As Carter has pointed out, “the issue of how to write a socialist or communist novel was still very much an open situation,” at least until the late 1940s.¹⁸ Authors like Mulk Raj Anand might, for instance, move from a Joycean exploration of the inner subjectivity of a low-caste Indian boy in *Untouchable* (1935) to a diagnosis of failed strikes and revolutions through the eyes of a low-class Indian boy in *Coolie* (1936). Writers like Tillie Olsen and George Oppen might use poetry to deconstruct itself, connecting the founding repression of reality in bourgeois aesthetics to the ideology that underpins capitalist reproduction. At the same time, there was an intense focus on the distinctly national context of writing, which in many cases forced a re-evaluation of what “realism” really meant. In a rather famous example, Haitian writer Jacques Stephen Alexis would argue at the Premier Congrès International des Écrivains et Artistes Noirs in Paris in 1956 that even magic or the “marvellous” might fit into socialist realism. “Le réalisme sociale,” he contended, “conscient des impératifs de l’histoire prône un art human par le contenu mais résolument national par sa forme.”¹⁹ For the Haitian, national literature included the work songs and folktales of the people, which themselves reflected a “magical” relationship to reality. An effective realism in the region would have to take this “marvellous” into account.

Writers in the global socialist orbit, then, were faced with a complex set of choices. On the one hand, they had to decide whether the revolution of the mind preceded that of the state. If they accepted the “realist” line, they were expected to remain sensitive to the changing realities of their own domestic politics while also staying abreast of international events. To keep up with developments and see how other comrades were solving the problem of form, they attended international congresses like the ones in Kharkov or Paris, and they read publications like Moscow’s *International Literature* or New York’s *New Masses*. Even with the end of the Popular Front and the War, leftwing writers in their individual countries continued to walk the double line of a nationally conscious internationalism.

¹⁸ Carter, *Always Almost Modern*, 176, 207.

¹⁹ “Socialist Realism knows the imperatives of history require an art which is human in its content but resolutely national in its form” (my translation). Jacques Stephen Alexis, “Du Réalisme Merveilleux des Haïtiens,” *Présence Africaine* 8–10 (1956): 267.

Manifold and Vers Réaliste

By the time Manifold moved back from England to Australia in 1949, he had more than a decade's experience in this gymnastic. Having become affiliated with the Communists at Cambridge in the mid-1930s, he threw himself into party work after his graduation. He was particularly active in the book clubs and helped with the editing of the various journals. Manifold was asked by Randall Swingler to help develop a replacement for the hugely popular *Left Review* when it folded in 1938. *Poetry and the People* was a victim of the War and never saw the light of the day, but the idea of popular political poetry had already infected the young writer.

Indeed, by working with Swingler, Manifold joined a formation that had a direct link to the socialist orbit of letters and a definite position on existing debates. *Left Review* had sponsored the idea of working-class writing in Britain and sought to develop the kinds of infrastructure that would allow for these writers to develop their craft and find an audience. This meant that there was something of a populist strain to their publication, which insisted less on talent than the creation of a genuine proletarian writing. Theirs was not unlike the “proletlit” line of the Soviet 1920s. But they also pursued a kind of Left nationalism that was more in line with the political culture of the Popular Front era. Indeed, the *Left Review* crew were somewhat infamous for their sponsorship of the “Little England” line, in which writers were sent to find a suppressed democratic tradition in the country.²⁰ The Frontist attempt to collaborate with liberal and democratic-socialist writers didn't always work, as these latter were often put off both by the general ideological line of the magazine and by the willingness to publish less polished work.²¹ Still, their “Controversy” column provided a place for writers within the movement to debate important questions of leftwing writing. In a particularly well-known exchange, Alec Brown argued with MacDiarmid about whether language should be

²⁰ Steven Matthews and Keith Williams, introduction to *Rewriting the Thirties: Modernism and After*, ed. Steven Matthews and Keith Williams (Longman, 1997), 28–30.

²¹ Adrian Caesar, *Dividing Lines: Poetry, Class and Ideology in the 1930s* (Manchester University Press, 1991), 204.

proletarianized or “high” literary language belonged as much to the proletariat as to other important classes in history.²²

One vector of influence that would remain important to Manifold from his English period onwards was Jack Lindsay. The son of Norman Lindsay, Jack had moved to England in 1926 and joined the CPGB in the late twenties. He moved from an early interest in poetry to the novel and spent the 1930s trying to develop a model for popular historical fiction. *1649: A Novel of a Year* (1938) is paradigmatic of his formal innovations, using the montage and statistical information pioneered by John Dos Passos, but with a hearty, folkish cadence of narrative.²³ His efforts to bring a Marxist sense of history into literature separated him from the more vogueish, modernist leftists, but secured his place among the *Left Review* crowd. In fact, the very first edition of *Poetry and the People* featured a collaborative essay from Lindsay and a young Manifold on the importance of the ballad tradition as a source for vital political verse.²⁴

Through his work on these magazines, Manifold was brought into debates about socialist literature, on the Continent as well as in the British Isles. As Aragon, above all a poet, became the most famous communist writer in Europe, his words came to hold similar weight to those of Gorky and Lukács. The “realist” mode definitively displaced the “surrealist” at the Paris Congress of 1935; and in that year Aragon started to write pamphlets about the practice of *réalisme socialiste* in poetry. He championed the use of regular, rather than free, verse (though his personal distinction was between the *compté* and *non-compté*) as a means of creating *vers réalistes*.²⁵ After the fall of France, he turned decisively to the patriotic and popular, defending the use of old verse-forms and rhyme-schemes. The socialist writer was to take these established poetic institutions, like rhyme and metre, and adapt them to the present. During the years of occupation, his published verse carried introductory essays, like “La Rime en 1940” and “Arum

²² Caesar, *Dividing Lines*, 205.

²³ Leo Mellor. “The Documentary Impulse,” in Kohlmann and Taunton, *A History of 1930s British Literature*, 260.

²⁴ Caesar, *Dividing Lines*, 211–12.

²⁵ Lucille Becker and Alba Della Fazio, “The Versification Techniques of Louis Aragon,” *French Review* 38, no. 6 (1965): 740.

Virumque Cano,” in which he called for the exploration of novel forms of rhyme, adequate to contemporary speech, like the “rime enjambée” or “rime complexe.” Like Guillaume Apollinaire before him, Aragon sought to rejuvenate French verse by drawing new sounds into the older forms.²⁶ Importantly, he pointed to popular song as a possible font of inspiration for sonic play. Manifold seems to have taken these lessons seriously.

During the war, the young poet served in Africa and Europe, where he was involved in the interrogation of the Royal Hungarian Army and the Nuremberg trials. He also wrote poetry, which was collected into *Selected Verse* in 1946. The poetry of this period mixes political satires on England and war songs with a powerful sense of Australian tradition. True to his collaboration with Lindsay, many of these works are in ballad form and reflect the sounds of popular song. There are many interesting things about the early volumes of Manifold’s verse. Unlike the “Thirtese” of some of his socialist contemporaries, his writing is clipped and controlled, making use of forms like the sonnet or terza rima.²⁷ This brings him away decisively from the modernist or surrealist experiments and towards Aragon. Manifold also follows the French forebear in using poetic form to explore the very nature of the connection between poetry and politics. The discipline of the sonneteer becomes in his hands a metaphor for the discipline of the military unit, for the machine, and even for the comradeship of the Communist cell. He is certainly a proficient technician. His understanding of the relationship between the thematic exposition of the octave and the prosodic inversion in the sestet makes of his sonnets unique statements of sensuality and concept. An example is “Ration Party” (1946):

Across the mud the line drags on and on;
Tread slithers, foothold fails, all ardours vanish,
Rain falls; the barking N.C.O.’s admonish
The universe more than the lagging man.

²⁶ Becker and Della Fazia, “The Versification Techniques of Louis Aragon,” 735–36.

²⁷ “Thirtese” is the slur that Manifold uses to describe Stephen Spender’s style in his review of Spender’s *Collected Poems* for *Meanjin*. John Manifold, “Review: Stephen Spender’s *Collected Poems*,” *Meanjin* 15, no. 1 (1956): 111.

Something like an infinity of men
 Plods up the slope; the file will never finish,
 For all their toil serves only to replenish
 Stores for tomorrow's labours to begin.

Absurd to think that Liberty, the splendid
 Nude of our dreams, the intercessory saint
 For us to judgment, needs to be defended

By sick fatigue-men brimming with complaint
 And misery, who bear till all is ended
 Every imaginable pattern of constraint.²⁸

There are some clever tricks and gymnastics here. The enveloping rhyme in the quatrains is slanted in a way that suggests motion up the indomitable slope. Movement through time is heralded by the asyndeton of repeated lists and the judicious use of the semicolon. It's in the relation between the two parts, however, that Manifold shows his streak of intrigue. Here, the first three lines of the sestet anchor a humorous subversion of the fairly serious mood of the octave. The absurdity of it all—a regular refrain of war poetry—is achieved by the bathetic treatment of symbol and image. But the final tercet moves beyond this absurdity to suggest something utopian. The men bear “every imaginable pattern of constraint” until “all” is ended. This could point to a determination to take the war beyond military and towards class goals.

Indeed, it's the politics that make Manifold's verse interesting. On its own, his technical prowess is not only insufficient: it is suspect. The last work in *Selected Verse* is a Petrarchan sonnet, which skewers the moral vacuity of hired killers. “For the Mercenaries” plays on themes of patriotism, making a sort of secular political pride the condition for justified violence. It reads like many Communist poems written during the early 1940s, particularly after Operation Barbarossa brought the Soviet Union into the fighting and transformed the effort into the Great

²⁸ John Manifold, *Collected Verse* (Queensland University Press, 1978), 70.

Patriotic War. But there is more to Manifold's sonnet than a quasi-Gorkian appeal to some political "myth":

Forget your regions for a Touareg country
That has no function but to floor a tent,
That has all roads for its indifferent entry
And borders always further on in front,

Forget and do your duty—to suppress
The young and evil for the old and rotten—
Do not make friends, do not expect, do not
Count on remembrance. We have had our lesson.

There is a lot to lose; we must be rid
Of our allegiance—we are not for either;
Of our expectance—it will only wither;

Of sympathy—each instant takes its tithe.
Let your achievement be your only myth,
And kill with nothing but a craftsman's pride.²⁹

The first quatrain, while extremely clipped in its rhythm, suggests by the slanting of the alternating rhymes ("country"/"entry," "tent"/"front") that formal symmetry is under examination here. In fact, the first tercet introduces a theme of indifference which could as readily describe the formalist or classicist as it does the titular mercenary. They are to "rid" themselves of allegiance, expectation, and sympathy, carrying out their task in a kind of moral vacuum. The product of such a political agnosticism is that their only "myth" will be the "achievement" of their work. The same could certainly be said of Manifold's fellow poets that had yet to answer the patriotic call. The analogy is secured when he makes clear that the pride of the mercenary is the same as that of the "craftsman" in the last line, suggesting that craft alone is a rather pathetic excuse for a poem's existence.

²⁹ Manifold, *Collected Verse*, 72.

Beyond pure classicism, Manifold is seeking at this time for an active poetry, one which will move the listener. His belief in the use of older structures, like sonnet or villanelle, is founded on the Aragonian need for poetry that can, through the mnemonic power of prosody, become thoroughly popular. The socialist poet, says Manifold in the satire “A Hat in the Ring,” may have his work rejected by the mercenaries of pure form, but “quote his work in pubs, and none will jeer.”³⁰ The problem for the poet in the war years and thereafter is to create a verse which does not dwell in craft, but puts itself at the service of the movement: a socialist-realist verse. It is this which guides his various experiments over the last years of the 1940s and after his return to Australia.

Realism at the Edges: Australia

This ideal of popular poetry followed Manifold back to Australia in 1949. In Brisbane, he joined the local branch of the Communists, which was enjoying unprecedented popularity at the time.³¹ Writers had played a central role in growing the party during and even before the War. The 1930s was a high period of leftwing letters, with activists like Judah Waten forming journals like *Strife*, the New Theatre running progressive plays by local writers, the Fellowship of Australian Writers providing institutional heft and coverage for local socialist authors, and John Morrison and Alan Marshall helping to found the popular local satellite of Gollancz’s Left Book Club, the “Left Book Club News.”³² Party-affiliated writers and artists had also created groups to read, debate, and consult on new works of socialist literature, and these clubs boasted nearly 4,000 members nationally in the later years of the decade.³³ When Manifold returned, his first task was to help to revive these initiatives. The Brisbane Realist Writers Group, formed in 1950 on the model of its Melbourne forebear (the latter founded in 1944), had the dual tasks of helping existing writers to hone their craft and adapt to changing political realities and of cultivating the talents of working-class members who

³⁰ Manifold, *Collected Verse*, 39.

³¹ Stuart Macintyre points out that the National party had about 20,000 members at the end of the War, which would end up being the height of their fortunes. Stuart Macintyre, *The Reds: The Communist Party of Australia from Origins to Illegality* (Allen and Unwin, 1998), 412.

³² Carter, *Always Almost Modern*, 170.

³³ Macintyre, *The Reds*, 324.

were interested in becoming writers. The group met every Wednesday and spent alternating weeks listening to lectures and workshopping manuscripts. In this way, many of the finest works of the Australian 1950s were collectively developed.³⁴

Most of these were novels. But the debate on the form of those novels was heated. As Jack Beasley, an activist in the CPA throughout the period, points out in his memoir of the period, authors searched “feverishly” for the right form, with pressure from a Party leadership which had for the first time begun to take questions of literature seriously.³⁵ Though there were the makings of a domestic tradition for socialist models—Waten, Katherine Susannah Prichard, and Dymphna Cusack, for example—the debates at this time were intimately connected to those happening abroad. Moore has pointed out that the arguments between Lukács, Bertolt Brecht, and Theodor W. Adorno which plagued postwar socialist letters across the world were repeated in Australia in the 1950s and 1960s. She finds in Carter’s threefold definition of the tasks of Australian socialist realism—to expand the scale of fiction to invoke vast historical movements, to foreground conventionally excluded subjects, and to juxtapose documentary, novelistic and political discourses—traces of the Lukácsian theories of “totality” and of the reconciliation of “form” with “life.”³⁶ At a technical level, some of the most popular books of the time are based on the models of “reportage” or “agitational realism” pioneered by the English and American writers of the 1930s. They rely on “participant observation,” with most authors spending time in a given profession and then doing more objective research to create a narrative that was both accurate and rousing.³⁷ Hewett worked at a cotton mill in Sydney to write *Bobbin Up* (1959), and de Boissière constructed *No Saddles for Kangaroos* (1964) out of his experiences at the Holden factory in Melbourne. These books tend to take place in urban centres, focusing on the struggles of industrial proletarians; they are written in clear prose, often making use of a collage technique and a double-narrative framing device. There was an appreciable shift in the content of

³⁴ Rodney Hall, *J. S. Manifold: An Introduction to the Man and His Work* (University of Queensland Press, 1978), 127.

³⁵ Jack Beasley, *Red Letter Days: Notes from Inside an Era* (Australasian Book Society, 1977), 179.

³⁶ Moore, “The Novel at Arms,” 340–41.

³⁷ Gardiner, “Striking Images,” 168.

these works over the 1950s, as a formally conservative and politically oppositional, “Zhdanovist” definition of socialist realism came to replace the erotic “Revolutionary Romanticism” of earlier periods.³⁸ But Hewett’s novel, with its rich sensitivity to the texture of life and language in the working-class Sydney suburb of Alexandria, showed that there was still plenty of room to move within this framework.

While Manifold’s work in the 1950s is rather different to that of the novelists, it still shows the influence of the Realist Writers Group. His themes in the period remained those of a sort of bucolic populism, combining an Aragonian attention to older forms and a *Left Review*-style interest in the National democratic tradition. The turn to a sort of cultural nationalism was not one that Manifold made alone—it was the flavour of the postwar period both in Australia and abroad.³⁹ As Allan Gardiner points out, such a focus was fashionable among Communists in the postwar period, as writers tried to “define the national character in terms of democratic values.”⁴⁰ Manifold’s poetry continues to dwell on rural themes and to activate the old demotic tradition of the bushman. Indeed, he spent much of the 1950s compiling bush ballads and setting them to music. He worked through the period to justify this position within the movement. He explains, in the first edition of *Overland* in 1954, that the kinds of anarchistic radicalism familiar from the work of bush poets like Banjo Patterson should be of interest to anyone who “believes in the worker-farmer alliance,” then a strategic goal of the Party.⁴¹ Certainly, there was little controversy around this attempt to write works that resonated with the people or could be sung and committed to memory. As Vance Palmer said to Frank Davison in a letter from the time, “the Party’s recent interest in the Folk suits [Manifold] right down to the ground, and he’s a popular figure at union smoke-nights with his guitar and his ballads.”⁴²

It was, in fact, the nature of these works as poetry that was controversial. The status of verse as a medium for propaganda was by no means settled at this time

³⁸ Beasley, *Red Letter Days*, 172; Carter, *Always Almost Modern*, 172–76.

³⁹ Moore, “The Novel at Arms,” 342.

⁴⁰ Gardiner, “Striking Images,” 166.

⁴¹ John Manifold, “The Banjo,” *Overland* 1, no. 1, (1954).

⁴² Hall, *J. S. Manifold*, 128.

among the comrades. Manifold had complained at the lack of a poetry policy in the Party's various publications (first the *Realist Writer* and then *Overland*), which had made his role as editor rather difficult.⁴³ The anti-poetic attitude was encapsulated in one of Hewett's reviews of Manifold's work, in which she proclaimed that he had "failed" as a political poet and that political poetry should, on the whole, be avoided.⁴⁴ On the other hand, one of the consistent refrains of internal Party criticism through the 1950s, coming from officials as important as the party Secretary J. D. Blake, was the necessity of avoiding the errors of "formalism."⁴⁵ Manifold, very much on the "edge" of the party's cultural production as a writer of formally conservative verse, took to the pages of various periodicals at the time to defend his use of the old mechanisms and the importance of shape in poetry. The theory of form which he develops in the mid-1950s unites the classicism of his earlier verse, the romanticism of some revolutionary writers, and the realism of socialist content. In a review of Stephen Spender's poetry for the second number of 1956's *Meanjin*, he argues that form is the public component of a poem: "the 'form,' unlike the 'content,' is a highly social thing. Audience is as much concerned in it as poet; and the poet who is at one with his audience—Lorca, Paterson, Dryden—seems to solve formal problems on the whole more easily than the poet who is not—Mallarmé, Baylebridge, Shelley."⁴⁶ The socialist poet is not supposed to disavow the formal structures of poetry and speak only in plain prose, but to find those rhythms of expression which best resonate with the people. Manifold's formalism goes beyond the purely aesthetic, helping the audience to metabolise the synthesis of the poet's wit and their chosen content.

While Spender does not reach this acme of absorption in his audience, Manifold identifies writers who *are* capable of such integration in an earlier review of the *Freedom on the Wallaby* (1953) anthology of popular Australian verse. This volume is successful, for Manifold, because of the way that it has been taken up by a popular audience. This reception is not in *spite* of its politics, but *because* of them. The successful political poet finds something which really makes their readers tick and communicates it in a memorable way. Somewhat ironically, he

⁴³ McLaren, *Writing in Hope and Fear*, 53.

⁴⁴ McLaren, *Writing in Hope and Fear*, 52.

⁴⁵ Beasley, *Red Letter Days*, 181.

⁴⁶ Manifold, "Spender's *Collected Poems*," 112.

points out that Hewett's ballad "Clancy and Dooley and Don McLeod," about the Pilbara strike of 1946, was known from Western Australia to Sydney. He claims to have heard dockworkers singing it on the Brisbane River. It is this sense of poetry going to places "where it does not generally penetrate" that most excites him.⁴⁷

Realist poetry, for Manifold, involved getting a world-historical and popular content into some recognisable and shareable form. In *Nightmares and Sunhorses*, which was compiled in 1959, one can see how he went about this. The sense of the democratic tradition is still there, with the standard songs about outlaws and bushmen. But there's a new attempt to bring the past and future together in a vital present. "Kiley's Run Revisited" invites Banjo Patterson to help us become the "common owners" of the legendary farm, now privately owned by a Yank. "Lawson's Birthday" imagines a phone-call between the old socialist poet and his chums and comrades left living in Australia, who update him on the state of the struggle. One of the particularly interesting devices in this piece is a collective voice that declaims the poem to an old hero of the movement, a voice used to create a sense of a common popular subject:

We're the Faces In The Street, mate; we're the Army Of The Rear;
We're the Blokes You Wrote It Down For; quite a mob of us is here[.]⁴⁸

This kind of interpellation, which makes the workers in general the mouthpiece of the poet, is not unlike other socialist poetry; we might think of Langston Hughes's act of corporate identification in "Let America Be America Again" (1936). But whereas Hughes's poem has the individual poet saying that he is one with various other oppressed people, "Lawson's Birthday" creates moments of antiphony that allow for a whole pub's patrons to speak the lines together.

Manifold's attempts to politicise this subject are, perhaps, a little obnoxious. The loose appeal to the future on which he ends the poem is formulaic and might not have passed muster among the hardier workers. But it is interesting to see the way

⁴⁷ J. S. Manifold, review of *Freedom on the Wallaby: Poems of the Australian People* (1953), edited by Marjorie Pizer, *Meanjin* 13, no. 1 (1954): 147.

⁴⁸ Manifold, *Collected Verse*, 86.

that he connects the form of the piece to politics, continuing the technical experiments in meta-poetic critique that he began in “For the Mercenaries”:

Someone here may catch a couplet of it, someone there a rhyme,
 Someone else a single image—just a skerrick at a time!
 All dispersed, that mighty ballad! You can glean it grain by grain
 From your workmates, from your comrades, from a stranger in the train;
 But it cannot be assembled, cannot reach its final stage,
 Till united we inscribe it on tomorrow’s virgin page.⁴⁹

The ballad is not the poem written down on the page, but the poem brought together in the polyphony of its collective recitation. The fact that this poem is not complete without some kind of change in historical conditions also connects Manifold (probably unconsciously) to the socialist epic of Hugh MacDiarmid, who saw his own poems as requiring for their fulfilment the arrival of a revolutionary society capable of unifying all of human knowledge. The idea of the poem as a challenge to politics issues in a negativity and a virtuality that opens verse to history in interesting ways.

This connection between poetry and the historical process is carried forth into the later parts of *Nightmares and Sunhorses*. The twelve sonnets making up “Red Rosary” (1959) commemorate different revolutionary events. Great technical pieces in their own right, their seriality invites the reader to look into the connections between, say, the Chinese revolution and Simón Bolívar’s coming to Haiti, to get a sense of how it all hangs together. Indeed, the poems are subtended by a strong sense of using the detail to show the Radekian “main phenomenon” in the totality of phenomena. This aspiration to the whole is most apparent in the centrepiece of *Nightmares and Sunhorses*: “The Ballad of ’17 and ’53” (1959). This poem links the storming of the Winter Palace to the nineteenth party congress of the Community and Public Sector Union. Manifold uses the slogan of “Peace, Land and Bread” to chart the achievements of the Soviet Union in eradicating conflict, landlessness, and poverty. While such content would ring theatrically hollow after Khrushchev’s secret speech in 1953 and the invasion of Hungary in 1956, Manifold still manages in the poem to create a tightly woven hypothetical

⁴⁹ Manifold, *Collected Verse*, 86.

structure, embodied in balladic octometrical lines. Here is an attempt at creating a singable, popular form with a direct connection to the general structure of the world as Manifold and the movement saw it.

The first section introduces the slogan in the context of the Revolution, raised by Lenin alongside the demand for “Soviets plus electric power.”⁵⁰ Next to him, a “younger man [...] black-moustached,” sets about “Organising Bread, imposing Peace and divvying-up the Land.” In the second section, the slogan is inverted to represent the threat of the White Guard and their revanche: “Famine—Serfdom—War.” The third section takes us to the nineteenth congress, where Joseph Stalin solves all three problems. Aping the Chairman’s speech, Manifold tells us how the grain problem “has been settled.” “[I]t seems they can create” land itself, the poem exclaims, referring to the swamp reclamation projects and, perhaps, the reforestation of the Urals.⁵¹ In 1953, then, the first two “promises” of the revolutionary slogan have been fulfilled. The poem makes a contemporaneity of history, connecting the whole Soviet experience by a single narrative and making of the Russian experience a single historical achievement.

But Manifold is also sensitive to the requirements of struggle in his own country. True to the local demands of realism, he connects the story of the Soviets to the political present. “Land” and “Bread” are certainly still important, but it is “Peace” that is the talk of the day. Indeed, at this point in time, the Communist Party was caught up in the postwar initiatives of the Comintern, which put at the centre of the struggle the necessity of peace between the Two Worlds and the end of the Cold War. From 1952, it was expected that writers would focus their efforts where possible on building the Peace movement across classes. In the “Ballad of ’17 and ’53,” Manifold uses history as the anchor for this alliance, connecting the peace established by the Soviets in Germany with the need for a world rid of war. In the opening of the third section, he asks whether his reader has “to be reminded who it was that took Berlin.” From there, he moves out to the level of principle.

Peace? They made it, and they’ll keep it; they can tell what Peace is for:—
Peace is not the ABSENCE merely, but the OPPOSITE of war—

⁵⁰ Manifold, *Collected Verse*, 92.

⁵¹ Manifold, *Collected Verse*, 93.

Not the simple diminution of your chance of being killed,
But production and creation and the chance to learn and build!⁵²

It is this dream that Manifold believes should guide the political actions of those in the Australian movement and should inspire the unconvinced to join with them. It is their task to establish the “opposite” of war in their own country, and this means supporting the country which won world peace. This mixture of virtuality and history, of popular form and vast political scale, is the product of Manifold’s experiments in *vers réaliste*. It’s on such terms that he should, despite Hewett and others’ rejection, be estimated as a socialist poet.

Conclusion

In his poems, Manifold connects the reality of Australian politics to the global movement for socialism. In a way, he performs exactly the feat that we have set for ourselves here as critics: to put national writing in the context of the Socialist Republic of Letters and bring the “edge” into the “centre.” If attempts to connect Australia to international modernism, in the form of Max Harris’s *Angry Penguins*, were foiled by the conservative literary establishment, it was the socialist writers who kept alive Australia’s connection to the world. Realism, with its suite of formal inventions and means for opening something as hermetic as lyric to history and politics, was perhaps the most obvious heir to European modernism in this country. Certainly, it sustained the most interesting writers of the 1950s in Australia, when “High” modernism was flourishing in America.

Being part of a global conversation doesn’t guarantee the quality of one’s own intervention. Manifold still needs to be evaluated before he is congratulated. I think it’s fair to say that Manifold’s verse of the 1950s is a considerable achievement from a technical point of view. Managing to create a poetry that was public, historical, and politically engaged without sacrificing much of his verbal intensity is no small feat. It’s less clear that such poetry passes the central political test. While the ballads that Manifold helped to preserve became genuinely popular, and his own work was at one time maybe heard at union smoke nights,

⁵² Manifold, *Collected Verse*, 93.

that popularity dwindled quickly after the 1950s. He remained an edges-dweller up to and beyond his death.

On this measure, it might be said that the whole Realist Writers Group was a failure. Their poetry is hardly found on tradies' tongues; nor are their novels known to any but the most precocious proletarians. Their readership today is generally an academic one—maybe a hobbyist clique at best. But we have to put their task into its rhetorical context. By their own standards, their sort of agitational literature should have ceased to be relevant once its *political* task had been completed. Well, that wasn't particularly successful either. The *Realist* collapsed, *Overland* renounced its erstwhile Stalinist conscience, and the Party itself folded in the Nineties. Reading novelists like Hewett and Hardy today, we aren't moved to indignation or to action, so much as to a kind of nostalgia for a time in which writers really believed in something. In a way, they have become images of a democratic past, much like those that they refused to use in their own work.

Manifold is a different case. By virtue of that strange faculty of poetry that Wordsworth believed allowed it to be read infinite times, there's a freshness and relevance to his work not always found in the novels. We might not have so roseate a view of Old Joe or Comrade Ivan as did the optimistic balladeer, but he captures in his poems a sense of history that is both rich in precept and open enough to encourage action. Like some of the other important postwar socialist poets (Nazim Hikmet, Pablo Neruda, Amiri Baraka), he finds mechanisms to open the local historical and political present to the totality: to find the "main phenomenon." He also discovers in the balladic line a medium for the kinds of effects courted by Aragon in French and a kind of verse that regular people might commit to memory. It is worth, I think, fossicking his silt to find the secret of golden socialist lyric today.