We’re All Bourgeois Now: Realism and Class in Alan Hollinghurst, Graham Swift, and Jonathan Coe

In this climate of Aesopian languages it is absolutely essential to reiterate that most things are a matter of class.

—Aijaz Ahmad

While “realism” has been accepted as the depository of the real, the true, and in many cases, seen as the home of class issues, this chapter explores the ways in which middle-class novelists such as Hollinghurst, Swift, and Coe have used realism as a double-edged sword that while appearing to offer a critique of ideology and class power, paradoxically offer us narratives in which class tensions are simultaneously raised and removed.

In *Modern British Fiction 1950–2000*, Dominic Head has a chapter on “Class and Social Change” that is symptomatic of how the academy chooses to speak about literature and class. Contrary to the statistics which make it clear that class divisions, inequality, and poverty in Britain are still structurally present, Head repeats the purely ideological assumption that class is no longer very important because “[t]he broad trend since [the 1950s] has been towards greater prosperity for working people, a process that undermines the economic basis of class affiliation.” While Head does cite Arthur Marwick’s data that reveals how class has “remained constant,” he goes on to give greater credence not to the sociological facts but focuses instead on the “common perception that the codes
and offices of a ruling class are being steadily dismantled, and this implies a dynamic of social leveling....”3 Significantly, Head feels that “Narrative fiction has played its part in this changing perception....”4 So, narrative fiction has fulfilled its ideological function by contributing to a “common perception” that class is “dissolving” and that the ruling class is being “dismantled” even if in reality it is not. Head’s chapter on class is also interesting for what it leaves out as much as for what it includes. While the focus on class is admirable, he moves away from the contemporary mainstream middle-class canonical authors, and shines his light on the overtly “class based” authors of the 1950s and 60s. Having covered the gentle criticisms of the English class system by Kingsley Amis, he then spends much of the chapter on John Wain, John Osborne, John Braine, David Storey, Allan Sillitoe, Barry Hines, Sid Chaplin, and Raymond Williams. I feel that the unconscious assumption is that if we are to consider “class” in the novel then we should be looking at the “working-class” novel, thereby reinforcing the idea that this kind of novel is about class, while other novels are about larger “human” issues. Half of the chapter focuses on the problems of the working-class novel, while the remainder deals with what Head calls “The Waning of Class-Consciousness” since the end of the 1960s and also with the “Rise of the Underclass.”5 Here too we continue to focus on “working-class” authors, so in addition to James Kelman and the early working-class novels of Pat Barker, he turns to the working-class realist novels of Livy Michael whose “gritty” council estate novels offer us documentary-style proof of poverty in Britain. Toward the end of the chapter we do get to consider the role of the middle-class author in all of this, but instead of staying with the present historical moment Head again moves back to the safety of the 1950s by looking at the narrow middle-class worlds of Angus Wilson and Barbara Pym. Only in the final section of the chapter, “The Role of the Intellectual,” do we arrive at a place where (for two pages out of thirty) we can finally discuss the contemporary middle-class author and class. The section opens with a discussion of the middle-class author Penelope Lively whose novels, Head feels (in line with postmodern theory) undermine the reality of class differences: “In Spiderweb (1998) Lively shows us, implicitly, that traditional notions of class have become irrelevant, and (through Stella) that the professional intellectual class is without power or discernible function in the melting-pot that has resulted.”6 So in the discussion of our own moment, the class tensions of the 1950s and