

**Narratives of Class and an Old/New Class of Narratives**

*Upward Mobility and the Common Good: Toward a Literary History of the Welfare State.* Bruce Robbins. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2007. 304 pp.

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<1> Bruce Robbins' *Upward Mobility and the Common Good* is a generous and ambitious book — broad in its historical, literary, and theoretical reach; broad-minded in outlook; great in its potential influence on our understanding not only of a variety of nineteenth- and twentieth-century texts, but also of the welfare state, its origins, and our own investment in it. *Upward Mobility* is also *about* ambition and generosity and the surprising ways in which they work together in the modern state and our stories about it.

<2> Perhaps, though, it would be more accurate to say *a story*. For Robbins' starting premise is that many of the texts we have traditionally sorted into quite different classes become "richer and less predictable" (xii) if we instead recognize them as belonging to one class and comprising a "long and largely hidden tradition" (8), an "archive" (1), or what Robbins only tentatively labels a "genre," of upward mobility stories, stories that have much to teach us about the ways in which social "class [itself] has been and continues to be experienced" and understood in, through, and even *as* narrative (2, 17). Acknowledging that such narratives exist "as early and as far abroad as one cares to look" (13), Robbins limits himself — for good reason — to the genre's nineteenth- and twentieth-century, Anglo-American and French, permutations. The works of fiction, autobiography, and film he explores nonetheless range widely, from Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* (2005), *Good Will Hunting* (1996), and the autobiographical writings of Pierre Bourdieu, Nuala O'Faolain, Richard Rodriguez, Carolyn Steedman, and Paul Willis to Honoré de Balzac's *Le Père Goriot* (1834), Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations* (1860-1), and George du Maurier's *Trilby* (1894) — just to name a few. The ultimate result of Robbins' omnivorously "impressionistic" approach is not an exhaustive history or genealogy of the genre (13), but rather an archaeology or anatomy of its deep structure, affective dimensions, and socio-political implications.

<3> One great pleasure of the book is its unexpected textual juxtapositions and readings. But what makes them truly moving, meaningful, and timely is the story Robbins tells through them about the "adventurous and incomplete" cross-class project that is the welfare state (242) — here "very loosely" understood to "includ[e] all the state's caring and rescue functions" (7). How is it,

the book asks, that this project, and “Modern social democracy” more generally, “could ... have come into existence, even to the limited extent that it has” over the past two centuries (xiv)? Robbins’ surprising yet compelling argument is that the answer lies in the upward mobility story itself. For far from “peddling ... the shopworn ideology of individual self-reliance” fundamental to contemporary *anti*-statism, that story in fact “teach[es] us” how “to think about” and to desire “the common good” (2), effectively doing the affective and conceptual spadework — or “cultural-political labor” — needed to make and sustain modern social democracy as “the personally wished-for project of a multitude of protocitizens” (xiv).

<4> In Robbins’ persuasive reading, first set out in an introductory chapter on Thomas Harris’ *The Silence of the Lambs* (1988), this is the case largely because “the emotional center of an upward mobility story lies not in its protagonist but in the protagonist’s relation with a patron, mentor, or benefactor” (xv) — in formalist terms, a “donor” (41) — “who stands between two worlds” and “can both help and obstruct the passage between them” (xv). The unlikely “fairy godmother” in Harris’ novel, for example, is Hannibal Lecter, the strangely “charming” serial killer who “bestows on the virtuous but disadvantaged” F.B.I. agent Clarice Starling “the magical help that makes possible her advancement” (1). By itself, the very centrality of such a patron — and such “magical help” — to both the mobility narrative and the social “passage” it chronicles puts paid to the idea that this narrative celebrates “heroic self-reliance” (xv). But so, too, does the fact that the patron’s interest in the protagonist tends to be generated precisely by the latter’s disinterestedness and generosity toward others. And if the criminal taint of patrons from Hannibal Lecter (back) to Dickens’ Magwitch is only one of several ways these texts register the guilt and ambivalence attaching to individual advancement, these narratives address and assuage those emotions and link advancement with the common good in yet another way by rendering “the role of benefactor ... an endpoint of upward mobility as well as its proximate cause” (42). Whether acting as agents of the welfare state (in twentieth-century narratives like *Silence of the Lambs*) or as private “benefactors without any money” performing precisely the sorts of care-taking functions that the state will ultimately take over (as in nineteenth-century narratives like *Great Expectations*), protagonists ultimately move upward and legitimate that move only by enacting their ongoing loyalty to those they left behind, even as their rise alone provides those left behind with the help they need. The complex emotional charge of these patron-client relationships, moreover, suggests the ways in which these stories record and enable “a re-channeling of risky and ethically unpredictable desires, erotic and otherwise” — away from heterosexual bonding and the family toward the looser, non-procreative, if “still compromised[ly] ... hierarch[ical]” bonds characteristic of both a modern citizenry and the professions and institutions that serve it (242).

<5> Robbins’ choice of paradigmatic texts, his attention to autobiography, and the argument he makes through them will be somewhat less surprising, if also all the more compelling, to readers familiar with his *Secular Vocations: Intellectuals, Professionalism, Culture* (1993), which takes the 1966 western *The Professionals* as its core text; “reads” the careers of Raymond Williams and Edward Said; and, through them, explores the reconciliation of individual and communal good in the “secular vocations” of professionals in general and professional intellectuals in particular.<sup>(1)</sup> Though much more literary than *Secular Vocations*, *Upward Mobility* is, like its predecessor, an astute intervention into its particular historical moment — specifically, in this case, the active “dismantling and defunding” of the welfare state begun in earnest under Reagan

and Thatcher (9), the escalation of “populist antifeminism, antiprofessionalism, and antistatism” (7), and the “persistence” or even dominance within academe of a Foucauldian approach that tacitly aligns itself with these developments insofar as it envisions the state only “as an apparatus of domination” (9). (Robbins is, however, careful to point out the differences between Foucault and his later, especially U.S., interpreters [91-2].) While remaining fully alive to the problems endemic to the welfare state and the way it serves, as well as interferes with, capitalism, *Upward Mobility and the Common Good* is a timely and much-needed defense of what Robbins rightly describes as “the closest thing we have had to ... a defensible common program in which the glaringly different interests of the poor and needy, on the one hand, and elite experts, on the other, can even appear to be resolved” (10). As both products and servants of that project, those of us who profess literature or anything else have an obvious stake in such developments.

<6> Inspired, too, by the “incipient attempts to extend social citizenship on an international scale” (9), Robbins also pays heed to the geo-political coordinates and limits — as well as gender dynamics — of upward mobility, the welfare state, the stories we tell about both, and the story he tells about them. Noting how a text such as *Silence of the Lambs* represents the Third World as the place where “the contradictions of the welfare state can be exported” (9), for example, Robbins also devotes his conclusion to what can only problematically be called postcolonial upward mobility narratives (Robbins himself wisely never resorts to this label): Caryl Phillips’ *A Distant Shore* (2003); Lorraine Adams’ *Harbor* (2004); Jamaica Kincaid’s *Lucy* (1990); the memoir of Gulf War veteran Debra Dickerson, *An American Story* (2000); and Gayatri Spivak’s *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (1999). Through them, Robbins acknowledges the dependence of both (Western or “First World”) upward mobility and the welfare state on the exploitative violence of empire and teases out the ways that globality productively troubles notions of class (ways Spivak herself both does and does not confront). Yet he also considers how the logic of upward mobility at least in some ways transcends and troubles the logic and limits of the nation-state.

<7> Like the stories and the state it examines, *Upward Mobility and the Common Good* inevitably has its own problems and limitations, as other reviewers have noted. Robbins does not attend to the ways in which the welfare state and notions of the common good have historically been constructed through a “common enemy.”<sup>(2)</sup> He acknowledges, yet does not always thoroughly explore, the “gendered determinants and effects” of the welfare state; he largely ignores that state’s tendency to “reinforce, rather than undermine, compulsory heterosexuality” in the way he so persuasively demonstrates that the upward-mobility narrative itself does.<sup>(3)</sup> Such criticisms are apt and could be extended. Being myself somewhat less sanguine than Robbins about the recent “rediscovery of class” within and without academe, for example, I would like to see him more fully flesh out the implications of his study for our understanding of class and its “historical inability to structure from within the daily experience of the people to whom it is supposed to apply most urgently” (17) — an inability demonstrated yet again in the very attempts to invoke the concept in the recent U.S. presidential campaign. As previous reviewers agree, however, such criticisms seem picayune in the face of all that *Upward Mobility and the Common Good* achieves. They also risk underestimating not only the book, but also the exigencies of the present moment to which it is so thoughtful and thought-provoking a response.

## Endnotes

(1) Bruce Robbins, *Secular Vocations: Intellectuals, Professionalism, Culture* (London: Verso, 1993).<sup>(^)</sup>

(2) Daniel Bivona, Review of *Upward Mobility and the Common Good* by Bruce Robbins, *RaVON: Romanticism and Victorianism on the Net* 49 (Feb. 2008) <<http://id.erudit.org/iderudit/017870ar>>.<sup>(^)</sup>

(3) Lori Merish, "Feeling National, Feeling Global: Class, Sentiment, and American Literary History," *American Literary History* 20 (2008): 598.<sup>(^)</sup>