U.S. Social Novel Under Fire

By JIM MILLS

“The aim of the American Social Novelist is not to reflect life, but to make his audience see society as he wishes them to see it.” With this premise proposed, Michael Millgate of the University of Leeds, England, delivered one Englishman’s view of the American Social Novel, February 5 in an “added attraction lecture” of the current English Department Semicentennial series.

DR. MILLGATE is a Lecturer in English and American Literature at the University of Leeds and is considered an authority on William Faulkner.

“The American Social Novel too often takes the form of a moral fable,” Millgate said. “Where the English regard the Social Novel as a guide to political movements, the Americans are ready to adapt this form of novel as a political instrument.”

BRITISH AND American novelists have one common element: Both approach society with their minds already made up. The difficulty in writing in this manner lies in the temptation to mold material to fit the theory, Millgate finds the Americans much more susceptible to this temptation than the British who take their society more for granted than Americans.

One the other hand, Millgate attacked Theodore Dreiser for allowing his material to shape his novels. He stated that this “lack of control” seriously affects the value of Dreiser’s works as artistic expressions.

IN CONSIDERING business as a social force, Millgate said the American Novelists fail to realize the advantage of exploring the effect on people by possession of wealth over considering the morality of money-getting. This moralizing attempt on the part of the American Novelist results in a paradox, Millgate said, wherein business is a source of social decay on one hand and the backbone of society on the other. John Dos Passos, he said, allows social criticism to be blunted by underlying convictions toward Jeffersonian capitalism.

“The use of realistic technique often attempts in American Novels to disguise a lack of real knowledge about the society by pure shock value.” Millgate ascribes this lack of knowledge to the ambition of American novelists who wish to deal with the whole scope of society and not confine themselves to areas with which they are most acquainted.

MILLGATE FINDS two Americans, F. Scott Fitzgerald and Edith Wharton, as heroes of the Social Novel. He cited Fitzgerald’s “Great Gatsby” and Wharton’s “Gilded Age” as examples of what the American Social Novel should be. Fitzgerald was acclaimed for his ability to hold his material in “clear, historical perspective,” and for treating the business acumen in Gatsby as only one of the factors of a whole character. Wharton was lauded for her treatment of a society with which she was acquainted.