THE FALLING TOWER

EDWARD UPWARD

VIRGINIA Woolf sees the younger writers of the 1925–39 period as 'dwellers in two worlds, one dying, the other struggling to be born.' She accuses them of confusion and compromise. There is truth in her accusation, but the most significant thing about it is the angle from which it is made. She sees these writers from the standpoint of the dying world, a standpoint which gives her a distorted view of them. Their merits—not least of which were their hostility to the dying world and their sympathy for the world struggling to be born—appear to her as faults, and one of their faults—their tendency to analyse themselves 'with help from Dr. Freud'—appears to her as their only merit.

She states that their writings are filled with bitterness against bourgeois society, and she points to this as a fault. Why is it a fault? Perhaps because she considers that bourgeois society deserves a more lenient treatment. But this is not the reason she gives. She criticises these writers for what she assumes to be their private motives rather than for writing untruths about the bourgeoisie. She suggests that their bitterness is due to a sense of guilt: they are aware that their middle-class position in society offers them 'a very fine view and some sort of security,' and at the same time they feel that it is 'wrong' for them to enjoy privileges which 'other people pay for'; but they wish to cling to their privileges, and they therefore write violently against other bourgeois persons, such as retired admirals and armament manufacturers, in order to distract attention from their own wrongdoing. If she is right about their motives these writers were indeed very stupid people. But in fact few of them were so shortsighted as to imagine that the view from their 'leaning tower'—a view that showed surroundings of poverty, unemployment and approaching world war—was a very fine one, and few were so insensitive as to

believe that their position on the leaning tower—'falling tower' would have been a better description—was anything but insecure. However, let the biographer and the psychologist regard their motives as of primary importance. In their private lives they may or may not have been futile, objectionable persons: the literary critic will be more interested in establishing the truthfulness or untruthfulness of what they wrote.

If bourgeois society is in reality admirable or at least harmless then the attitude of these writers towards it is a fault—a fault serious enough to outweigh and to vitiate any merits they may have had. No writer, however skilful, can be a good writer if the picture of life he presents is basically untrue. But bourgeois society is neither admirable nor harmless. Its two world wars within twenty-five years and its world economic slump of 1929–33 cannot be regarded as irrelevant trifles. Bourgeois society has passed its prime, is reactionary and destructive and has little to offer to the vast majority of human beings except suffering and death. This is a fact, not a political theory. The writers whom Virginia Woolf attacks, were, in a greater or less degree, aware of this fact, and they ought to be praised rather than condemned for attempting to write about it. They are better writers than they would have been if they had evaded it or denied it. (Virginia Woolf will no doubt disagree. One passage in her paper seems to imply that the best modern writers are those who have remained immune to the 'influence' of the major social realities of our time. Which writers she means is not quite clear.)

Some critics may argue that bitterness, no matter what its object, is in itself an emotion which makes good writing impossible. There is a hint in Virginia Woolf's paper that she holds this view. Yet the Inferno of Dante and the tragedies of Shakespeare are certainly not free from bitterness and discord. The great imaginative works of the past in which these qualities have played an unimportant part—for example, Don Quixote and The Canterbury Tales—have been few. To criticise the younger writers of the 1925–39 period on the ground that their work is

filled with bitterness and discord is as absurd as to criticise them for writing poems which cannot easily be 'listened' to 'when we are alone' (she might as well condemn all poetic drama from Aeschylus onwards) or to criticise them because 'they must teach, they must preach' (the Hebrew prophets, Dante, Milton, even Wordsworth might be regarded as offenders in this respect; possibly she does so regard them).

There is room in imaginative literature both for bitterness and for good-humour, for vehement 'preaching' and for tranquil contemplation, for discord and for harmony. Only the parochially-minded critic who cannot see beyond the literary fashions of his own time will rule out any one of these qualities as absolutely impermissible. A writer's emotional attitude cannot, any more than his style, be criticised in isolation from the material with which he deals. And to demand that a modern writer should not deal directly or indirectly with bourgeois society would be tantamount to demanding that he should not live in bourgeois society.

The fact that a writer bitterly attacks present-day society is not enough to prevent him from creating 'great' literature. Whereas a writer who praises present-day society is more than likely to be a very bad writer. If the 'thirties had produced a great poet or a great novelist he would almost certainly have been one whose writing showed strong hostility towards the old world and passionate sympathy for the world struggling to be born. Yet it is doubtful whether any of the 'leaning tower' writers, in spite of their hostility towards the old and their sympathy for the new, can be called 'great.' There is some truth in Virginia Woolf's accusation that they were half-hearted and that their work was filled with confusion and compromise. They attacked bourgeois society but they tended to direct their attacks mainly against its more trivial evils and against its minor representatives. They sympathised with the struggle to create a socialist society but they had their misgivings about this struggle. At times they seemed afraid to hate and afraid to love. Their experience of

bourgeois hate and of bourgeois love made them distrustful also of socialist hate and love. Consequently very few 'heroes' or 'villains' of any stature appear in their writings. Auden holds up for our disapproval Miss Gee, the repressed church-worker who dies of cancer of the breast. A socialist writer would have preferred to attack a more important person, an archbishop for example or an imperialist politician, and would have viewed him less inhumanely even if with far stronger disapproval—since in the last analysis the socialist blames not individuals but the conditions which have made them what they are. A socialist writer would be likely to choose as his 'hero' a character of historic proportions, but the writers of the 'thirties tended to choose as their heroes either very ordinary people or else frustrated intellectuals or even criminals. They could not really admire their heroes. And in their search for someone or something to admire they fell into philosophical abstractions and psychological obscurities. Their writings sometimes show a lack of common human feeling and of the fundamental simplicity that never was paucity. This is a fault which is not to be found in the great imaginative writers of the past.

The writers of the 'thirties rejected the bourgeois outlook on life. Why were they unable wholeheartedly to adopt the socialist outlook? Virginia Woolf explains that unless they were prepared to cease writing altogether they could not afford to throw away their bourgeois education and their inherited money. But there was no need for them to 'throw away' either their education or their money or to go and earn their living 'in a mine or a factory.' Such behaviour might accord with bourgeois conceptions of saintliness, but from a socialist point of view saints are useless people. One does not cease to be a member of bourgeois society by becoming a worker in a bourgeois-owned factory. What they could and should have done was to use their education (or at least those parts of it which had any value) and their money (if they had any) to help the struggle for a socialist society. Marx and Lenin did not throw away their bourgeois education, nor did

Engels throw away his bourgeois money. On the contrary they made proper use—the only proper use—of these advantages. This is not to suggest that the writers of the 'thirties ought to have abandoned imaginative for political writing. One does not help socialism by refusing to make use of one's best talents. A first-rate imaginative writer who views the world from a socialist standpoint can be of very great help to the struggle for socialism—as Gorki showed in Russia. (Moreover he is likely to produce better literature than a writer of equal ability who believes that writing is more important than life and that it ought not to 'help' or be subordinated to anything in life). The difficulties which hindered the writers of the 'thirties from adopting a completely socialist outlook were not insurmountable. It is true that in order to write like socialists they would have had to be socialists and to work with other socialists, but this does not mean that they would have had to spend all their time in committee meetings or in door-to-door canvassing or in composing propaganda leaflets. They could have taken part in ordinary political work and they could have written poems and novels as well. Their inherited money gave them—or those of them who possessed inherited money—the time and the freedom both for political work and for imaginative writing. But socialist activity, even in the 'thirties and even for those socialists who did not fight in Spain, was neither easy nor comfortable. The younger writers who did become active undoubtedly found that they had less energy to spare for imaginative writing. Others who had been at one period strongly attracted to socialism were deterred from activity by this example. And their hesitation was increased by the fact that their economic position enabled them, temporarily at least, to devote most of their energy to writing. Their tower had not yet fallen; and there was just a possibility, they may have felt, that it would not fall for some time.

But the time is very near now when the tower of middle-class leisure and of middle-class freedom will fall to the ground and will be smashed for ever. The alternative before writers will

no longer be between bourgeois comfort and socialist hardship. Whether they become socialists or not they will have to live hard lives. Some of them will find the conditions too difficult and will give up writing altogether. Others will persist. And those who become active socialists and who persist in writing may be able to produce far better work than before. Many of the 'leaning tower' writers have already, in the 'twenties and the 'thirties, produced good work. There is much in the poetry of Auden and of Spender which is fit to stand beside the great poetry of the past. The 'leaning tower' writers are abler and more serious than most of their detractors. No better work than theirs appeared in England in the 'thirties. They may produce their best work in the 'forties.