

SKETCH FOR A MARXIST INTERPRETATION OF LITERATURE

EDWARD UPWARD

Marxist literary critics are sometimes accused of basing their approach to literature on one or both of the following assumptions: first, that all books written by non-Marxists are 'bad' books; second, that literary 'values' are a *bourgeois* myth, and that books should be classed not as 'good' or 'bad' but as belonging to and reflecting the social and economic conditions of this or that period in history. The first assumption would rule out from among the 'good' writers all who wrote before and the majority who have written since the middle of the nineteenth century—including Shakespeare, and Marx who admired Shakespeare. The second assumption would be rejected at once by any practising writer who took his work seriously, who wanted to write 'better' books in the future than he had written in the past; it would be rejected also by any Marxist who approached literature from genuine interest and not from a mere sense of political duty. Neither assumption can be reconciled with Marxism. Yet literary criticism which aims at being Marxist must begin by recognising that literature does reflect social and economic conditions, and must proclaim that no book written *at the present time* can be 'good' unless it is written from a Marxist or near-Marxist viewpoint.

A literary critic, whatever his political or philosophical opinions, cannot avoid passing judgments, implicit or explicit, on the books he reviews. Even the barest descriptive summary of the contents of a novel is inevitably an assessment of its literary value. A Marxist critic knows that he cannot and does not try to avoid passing judgments; nor does he base his assessments of value on the principle that a book must be Marxist in order to be 'good'. But if a non-Marxist book can, by Marxist standards, be 'good', then what precisely are those standards?

To answer this question we must first examine the basic assumption of Marxist literary criticism—that literature reflects and is itself a product of the changing material world of nature and of human society. A poet's images or a novelist's characters are not created out of pure mind-stuff, but are suggested to him by the world in which he lives. The very words he writes correspond to words that are spoken and written in that world. Even the wildest fantasy is a picture, however much distorted, of material reality. The *Arabian Nights* give a fuller account of the real Baghdad at the height of its culture than ever Sir Richard Burton or Doughty or Colonel Lawrence, writing centuries later, could have given. To suppose that literature reflects nothing at all, or that, as Jung supposes, it reflects archetypal images which exist quite independently of the material world, is to suppose that a writer can think without using his material brain—or that the material brain itself is nothing more than an intellectual fiction. Marxists believe that the material world is real and that it exists independently of men's thinking; they believe also, unlike the eighteenth-century materialists and the twentieth-century behaviourists, that men's thinking is a real activity and that it differs entirely from—though it arises out of—the activity of the material brain. Before men or their thinking existed the changing material world existed. Before there was life of any kind, animal or vegetable, there was matter in movement. Life was not created in heaven, nor has it always existed: it arose from matter in movement, from the conflict of matter with matter, and having arisen it was something new, something entirely different from other forms of matter in movement. The movement of lifeless matter gave birth to the movement of living matter, which in turn gave birth to the action of living men. In the beginning was the Deed, not the Word. Human language was not created in heaven, nor has it always existed: it was created by living men in the course of their practical struggle with nature, their primitive hunting and fishing; it was something entirely new, and it helped them to make their struggle more successful. Before men could

tell even the simplest stories they had to learn to speak. Before they could produce written literature of any kind they had to learn handwriting, had to invent an alphabet or an ideography. Until men had reached a certain stage of social development and of mastery over nature they could not write books. It is an historical fact that literature is produced only after human society has become divided into classes. Books therefore reflect the material world of class-society and of man-modified nature, and reflect that world as it is encountered by writers who are living members of one or other of the social classes.

Imaginative writing, no less than scientific theory or any other form of intellectual activity, reflects the material world—but reflects it in a special way. Literature, like science, generalises about the world, but its generalisations are more emotional and less intellectual than those of science. Whereas science translates material reality into terms of thought, literature translates it into terms of feeling. Literature, however, can never be entirely unintellectual—any more than science can be entirely unemotional. Even the stupidest writer must *think* as he writes, and even the most austere scientist must *feel* some interest in his scientific work. To suppose that a poet's images, because they are emotional, correspond to nothing at all in the material world would be to suppose that emotions can exist independently even of the nervous system—or that the nervous system itself is nothing more than an emotion.

There have been able literary critics in the past who have worked on the assumption that literature reflects, not the changing material world, but eternal spiritual truths; and some of the ablest critics of to-day assume that literature reflects nothing at all. The weakness of the first assumption becomes apparent as soon as the critic attempts to define particular spiritual truths. Beauty, Love, Sorrow, Joy—such so-called eternal realities can be, as Mr. I. A. Richards has admirably demonstrated, defined in almost as many different ways as there are different literary critics; and there is no standard by which one definition can be

shown to be more correct than another. Critical theory, if it is to be a guide not merely to intuitive appreciation but to intellectual understanding of literature, must be based upon something less arbitrary than eternal spiritual truths. The second assumption—that literature reflects nothing at all—affords an even less satisfactory basis for critical theory than the first. Mr. I. A. Richards, in his revolt against metaphysical criticism, arrives at the conclusion that poetic images do not necessarily correspond to any kind of reality. He describes the language of poetry as ‘emotive’, and claims that emotions, in contrast to thoughts, cannot be ‘of’ anything in the objective world. “It is true we can speak of a ‘feeling of pity’ or ‘of anger’, but this is clearly a different use of the word ‘of’.” His argument fails even as a verbal trick, since we can speak, for instance, of ‘fear of a mad dog’ or ‘love of books’, or, if we substitute the word ‘about’ for the word ‘of’, we can speak of a ‘feeling about a child’ or ‘about a bombing aeroplane’. The theory that emotions are in no way connected with reality and that thoughts, in contrast to emotions, are always ‘of’ real things, must lead us to the conclusion that intellectual criticism ‘of’ emotive literature is an impossibility, and that the would-be critic cannot logically write ‘about’ imaginative books at all. Since, however, a critic who holds this theory is unlikely to be logical, he will write about imaginative books, and he will describe them not as ‘beautiful’ or ‘joyful’ or ‘sad’, but even more vaguely as ‘complex’ or ‘skilfully integrated’ or ‘loosely organised’. Metaphysical criticism, though it assumed the existence of eternal spiritual truths, did at least suppose that these truths expressed themselves in terms of the material world, and did therefore attempt to study the material content of literature. The attempt could not be scientific, but it led to a fuller and more rational critical theory than modern psychological criticism, with its denial of the material content of literature, can hope to arrive at. The more nearly a critic succeeds in ignoring the objective world, the more limited and irrational will his practical criticism be. The more closely he approaches to the Marxist practice of

explaining spiritual realities (i.e., thoughts and feelings) in terms of material realities (i.e., nature and human society) the fuller and more scientific will his criticism be.

Imaginative literature is an emotional reflection of life; but since life is not static no finished work of literature can reflect life with absolute truthfulness. Movement is the only absolute fact in the material world, and therefore every finished product of the human mind—whether literary or scientific—must sooner or later fail to give a true picture of material reality. Literature, no less than scientific theory, can only be approximately true to reality. However, it is possible for one work of literature to give a truer picture of life than another. It is possible for one novel or poem to give a falser picture than another. Absolute falsehood—complete detachment from reality—is as impossible in literature as absolute truth, but relatively one book may be false and another true.

We can now attempt to answer the question—What is the standard of value on which the Marxist critic bases his judgments of literature? For the Marxist a good book is one that is true to life. This does not mean that he prefers a photographic naturalism to all other styles of writing: on the contrary, he recognises that only in exceptional historical circumstances can naturalistic writing give a true picture of life—since only in exceptional circumstances, in revolutions and in major wars, do fundamental realities come to the surface of life. If a novel were to be written describing with complete faithfulness the surface of life in England to-day—the slums, the luxury, the power of the capitalist minority, the political ignorance of the exploited majority—such a novel would be untrue to life. It would show one side of the picture only, and not the most important side; it would be pessimistic, would represent militant socialism as a comparatively insignificant movement having not more than a few thousand adherents; it would distort the future and misinterpret the past; it would tell us almost nothing about the real forces at work beneath the surface of life. For the Marxist critic, therefore, a

good book is one that is true not merely to a temporarily existing situation but also to the future conditions which are developing within that situation. The greatest books are those which, sensing the forces of the future beneath the surface of the past or present reality, remain true to reality for the longest period of time.

What, for the Marxist, is the test of truth? He does not, as anti-Marxists sometimes assert, claim that no idea can be true unless it is to be found in the works of Marx and Engels or in the decisions of the Communist International. He does not appeal to 'Holy Writ' in order to prove the truth or falsehood of a given thought or feeling. For the Marxist the final authority is not the Word but the Deed. An idea, a theory about the world, is true in so far as it works in practice. A work of literature is true in so far as the thoughts and feelings it evokes can survive the test of practical experience in the material world. A novel which suggests that every mill-girl can marry a millionaire is false not merely because it disagrees with the Marxist analysis of society, but because it fails to correspond with the facts of experience.

A work of literature, past or present, is good in so far as it is true to the fundamental realities of to-day. Books written in the past which were true to the surface of life in the past, and which in the present tell us nothing about life as we experience it, may have value as historical documents, but as literature they are dead. However, a book which in the past has reflected the forces at work below the surface of life is likely to have something of value to tell us about the fundamental realities of to-day. Movement is quicker on the surface than below it, and the more deeply a writer's vision penetrates below the surface, the longer will his work remain true to the changing real world. Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* no longer appeals to us as forcefully as it appealed to the men engaged in the religious struggles of the seventeenth century, but because it was based on vital contemporary realities it is still to some extent true of the modern political struggles which have developed out of those earlier religious struggles. There is

much in Shakespeare—his verbal humour, for instance—which no longer has a vital meaning in the modern world, and one can conceive of a time when Macbeth's ambition and Othello's jealousy will seem merely barbarous, but Shakespeare had so deep an understanding of the life of his own time that his work is still largely true for us to-day in a world of class-struggle and crime and war. Even myths and 'fairy' stories, which were primitive man's attempt to tell the truth about the world he lived in, may still have some real significance—though it will be very slight—in the conditions of to-day. Literary allegories and fantasies, sophisticated fables in which, to quote La Fontaine, "*le récit est menteur et le sens est véritable*,"—the story is a lie and the meaning is true—have survived the test of practical experience in former centuries when a more realistic view of the world could only have led to despair or to futile rebellion; and because their meaning was true in the past they may still have some value for us in the present. But a modern fantasy cannot tell the truth, cannot give a picture of life which will survive the test of experience; since fantasy implies in practice a retreat from the real world into the world of imagination, and though such a retreat may have been practicable and desirable in a more leisured and less profoundly disturbed age than our own it is becoming increasingly impracticable to-day. The fact that non-realistic literature written in the past may still have some value in the present does not mean that modern non-realistic writing may have value: a modern fantasy might be a more or less truthful imitation of past fantasies, but it could not be as true to the life of our own time as the work of earlier fantasy-writers was to the life of their times. In former ages the majority of men, though they had no hope of bettering their material conditions, were not so harassed by life that passive contemplation was impracticable for them, whereas to-day not only does the possibility exist of radically changing material conditions, but men cannot much longer console themselves with fantasies about a world which is daily drifting towards a war of unprecedented destructiveness. For the majority of men to-day

no practical living can be successful unless it is based on a realistic view of their material situation. Modern literature, if it is to be true to life and if its emotional generalisations about life are to help us to live rather than to beguile us or dope us, must view the world realistically. And it must view not merely the surface of life, not isolated aspects of life, but the fundamental forces at work beneath the surface.

For the Marxist the fundamental forces of to-day are those which are working to destroy capitalism and to establish socialism. Consequently he considers that no modern book can be true to life unless it recognises, more or less clearly, both the decadence of present-day society and the inevitability of revolution. We might proceed to inquire how far some of the best-known modern imaginative books correspond to reality as the Marxist views it; but as the non-Marxist questions the reality of the future revolution we shall perhaps do better to inquire how far such books correspond to those aspects of present-day life which both the Marxist and the non-Marxist regard as real. Economic crisis, unemployment, the growth of fascism and the approach of a new world war—these facts are regarded by almost everyone as real and important, and they are beginning to be reflected in the work of the majority of serious writers to-day, even though the positive side of the world situation—Soviet Russia and the advance of the international working-class movement—is often ignored and fundamental reality is consequently distorted; but were these facts even dimly foreshadowed in the work of serious writers twenty years ago? Did D. H. Lawrence, Joyce, Proust, provide us with emotional generalisations about life which will survive the test of practice in the world of to-day? There can be no question that these writers tried to tell the truth about life. Proust explicitly stated that he had set out to discover the fundamental laws—*les grandes lois*—of society. Possibly he meant only Society with a capital S: if so we should not be altogether justified in complaining that his picture of the world neither is nor was true to the world outside Society. But we should be

justified in pointing out that his picture is not true even to the world which it purported to represent. He gives us an immense wealth of truthful detail, but he misleads us by suggesting that Society is the only part of the social world that matters. He gives no indication that Society is influenced by outside forces, is changed by these forces, and, therefore, though he can tell us accurately what it was like at a given period, he cannot reveal for us the fundamental laws of its development, cannot tell us what it is like now or what it will be like in the future. Ignoring the struggle between capitalism and socialism, he offers no hint of the effects this struggle will have on the world he describes. He does not understand the dynamics of Society. Therefore, in spite of his psychological insight and his skill in presenting minor truths—a skill so considerable that if it had been coupled with a wider understanding it would have made him one of the greatest writers of all time—his work is unlikely to have a high value as literature in the society of the future. For similar reasons Joyce's *Ulysses*, in spite of its mastery of language and the brilliant faithfulness of its observation, is unlikely as a whole to have a vital interest for the future. The *petit bourgeois* Dublin society that Joyce pictured was, like Proust's aristocracy, decadent, a dying society destined to be supplanted by something younger and more vigorous, by a new society as yet in embryo and quite invisible to Joyce. And because this embryo was invisible to Joyce he could not tell the whole truth even about the *petit bourgeoisie*, could not see them in their true perspective, could only accept the immediate fact of their decay and attempt to give it a universal importance which in reality it had not got. D. H. Lawrence, unlike Proust and Joyce, was unquestionably aware of and tried to describe the outside forces that were undermining the *bourgeois* society into which he had made his way; but he saw these forces mainly from a *bourgeois* view-point, as destroyers to be combated; consequently he too misrepresented reality, and though he could give a wider picture of the world than Proust or Joyce, he was unable to give as clearly detailed a

picture as they did.

How did it happen that these three writers, all of whom had potentialities which might have placed them among the greatest writers of the world, failed to tell the truth? It did not happen because they wanted to avoid telling the truth. If they had wanted to do this they would have written thrillers or amusing fantasies. They tried to give a picture of fundamental reality, and they failed because in their everyday lives they set themselves in opposition to that reality. They shared the life of a social class which has passed its prime, is decaying and, no matter how violently it may struggle, is doomed to ultimate extinction. A writer, if he wishes at all to tell the truth, must write about the world as he has already experienced it in the course of his practical living. And if he shares the life of a class which cannot solve the problems that confront it, which cannot cope with reality, then no matter how honest or talented he may be, his writing will not correspond to reality, his emotional generalisations about life will not survive the test of practice. He must change his practical life, must go over to the progressive side of the conflict, to the side whose practice is destined to be successful; not until he has done this will it be possible for his writing to give a true picture of the world. The only alternative for him is, as the reactionary class to which he clings plunges ever deeper into failure, to write books which increasingly distort reality and which, translated back into practice, lead to even greater failure. Failing to tell the truth about the major realities, he will try to tell the truth about dreams or words or the past, but he will not succeed even in this. Distortion will appear also in the more limited field of vision. He will at best write something in the style of the later work of Lawrence or Joyce, the style of *The Man Who Died* or *Haveth Childers Everywhere*. He will at worst write something so obscure or far-fetched that it will have no value at all as literature in the future.

A writer to-day who wishes to produce the best work that he is capable of producing, must first of all become a socialist

in his practical life, must go over to the progressive side of the class conflict. Having become a socialist, however, he will not necessarily become a good writer. The quality of his writing will depend upon his individual talent, his ability to observe the complex detail of the real world. But unless he has in his everyday life taken the side of the workers, he cannot, no matter how talented he may be, write a good book, cannot tell the truth about reality.

Going over to practical socialism is not so easy for a writer as some Marxist literary critics think it ought to be. He is aware that it will involve him in extra work other than imaginative writing, and that this work will come upon him at a time when, having abandoned his former style of writing, he most needs to give all his energy to creating a new style. He is aware also that this work may in certain circumstances stop him writing altogether, that he may be required to sacrifice life itself in the cause of the workers. It is not much use telling him that, unless he becomes an active socialist, the world situation—the growth of fascism and the approach of war—will sooner or later prevent him from devoting himself to writing: he might retort that, though the world situation may sooner or later hinder and perhaps stop him from getting on with his job as a writer, becoming an active socialist will certainly hinder and perhaps stop him *now*. He must be told frankly that joining the workers' movement does mean giving less time to imaginative writing, but that unless he joins it his writing will become increasingly false, worthless as literature. Going over to socialism may prevent him, but failing to go over *must* prevent him from writing a good book.

In the classless society of the future the writer will no longer be faced with the necessity of going over to a new way of life: he will be born into a new way of life. Nor will he be compelled to give the best of his time and energy to the political struggle, since that struggle will have died away. He will be able to devote himself to his job, to writing and to improving his writing, without fear that by so doing he will cut himself off from the fundamental forces of his day. In his social life, from

which political struggle will have been eliminated, he will have become a part of those victorious forces. Such a happy situation for the writer has not yet arrived, though in Russia it is on the way, and in Russia already writers are better off than anywhere else in the world.

In the classless future writers will have leisure to evolve new literary forms appropriate to the reality of their day. What these forms will be we can at present only guess. It is probable that they will be fundamentally different from those of the last two thousand years. If we accept Sir James Frazer's view that there have been three main and successive phases in the thought of man—the phases of magic, religion and science—and that science, unlike religion, agrees with magic in proclaiming man's power over nature, we may suppose that future writers will no longer regard Tragedy—the contemplation of the defeat of man—as the most effective and most serious literary form. It is possible that the 'fairy' story—celebrating the triumph of man over dangers and difficulties—will reappear on a higher, a scientific level. But speculation about future literary forms is idle unless it is accompanied by the realisation that already now the old forms can no longer adequately reflect the fundamental forces of the modern world. The writer's job is to create new forms now, to arrive by hard work at the emotional truth about present-day reality.

He cannot begin to do this until he has in his everyday life allied himself with the forces of the future, until he has gone over to the socialist movement. Becoming an active socialist will involve him in work other than imaginative writing, but he must not, therefore, neglect writing or think that questions of literary style are unimportant. Good writing—like good housing and good wages—is something worth fighting for. The world oppressed by capitalism needs it, and the socialist movement needs it. Decaying capitalism is the enemy of all culture, of all good-living, and if we are to do our best in the fight against capitalism and for the establishment of a new world order, we

need to understand and to feel the grandeur of our task. This understanding and this feeling the imaginative writer can give us.