

## NEW-OLD CRITICS

THE PROBLEMS of the dissenting critic are today more complicated than in earlier generations because so many who have followed this direction during the past few years have also been academic teachers of literature, institutional prisoners who have abandoned the independence which earlier writers at least imagined they possessed. This was demonstrated to me with particular emphasis when I read *The Politics of Literature*<sup>1</sup>, a symposium by a group of rebel scholars from American and Canadian universities. It is sub-titled "Dissenting Essays on the Teaching of English", but this is misleading, since most of the essays are concerned less with what goes on in the smell of classroom chalk than with the contemporary situation of the academic critic, for none of the contributors — to judge from their lists of works and projects — has any intent of perishing for lack of publication.

A man of the Thirties, I could not help hearing some familiar echoes as I read through these essays. Expressed in tones of political naiveté which one would never encounter in a similar European collection, the viewpoints of the writers extend over a radical spectrum that includes on the left the near-anarchism of Ellen Cantarow, who admires the Wobblies and wept when she read of the CNT communes in Spain, and on the right the antique Russo-Marxism of Bruce Franklin, a latter-day Leninoid whose critical judgment is so ludicrously warped by his politics that he can describe Melville as a "consciously proletarian writer" and write of "reactionary tracts . . . like *Animal Farm* . . . which come right out and say in terms that everyone can understand: Man is a pig." But Franklin talks with an exceptional proselyte's rage, which is perhaps understandable in view of the fact that he was converted in middle age from equally rabid New

Criticism. For the most part the attitudes represented in *The Politics of Literature* reflect a kind of non-partisan and non-passionate radical populism with strains of Marcuse and early Marx.

Most of the writers indeed describe themselves as Marxist critics, but no essay actually makes a direct attempt to apply Marxian concepts to the study of literature. There are only four quotations from Marx and Engels in the whole volume, and the only one of these that refers to criticism actually dismisses it as unimportant, when Marx asserts, in *The German Ideology*, that “not criticism but revolution is the driving force of history, also of religion, of philosophy and all other types of theory.” There is only one reference to Georg Lukacs, without whose presence in the shadows one would have thought no volume of modern Marxist criticism complete, and then he appears merely to make a very banal statement, “everything is politics”, while the considerable body of important neo-Marxist criticism that has appeared in France during the past decade goes entirely unmentioned. The Marxist critic most often mentioned is Christopher Caudwell, and that I find very significant.

Caudwell, who was revived by Marxist scholars during the 1950s only to be dismissed as superficial and romantic, is now experiencing a Third Coming in left-wing literary circles, and seems to be gaining an acceptance that was denied to him two decades ago. No doubt in a way his return is part of the cyclic cultural pattern by which, having re-enacted Twenties movements like Dada, fashion has moved on a decade, and young intellectuals are vicariously reliving the thrills of the Thirties in the same way as late-night television is reviving the films of the same era. For nostalgia is an important and debilitating element in Leftism as it has developed in the early Seventies, and one cannot accept contemporary campus enthusiasms in the same way as one had to accept the passions of the Thirties which Caudwell validated by a grave beside the Ebro and Orwell with wounds in the cause of socialism and freedom that hastened his death. The aura of the hero and martyr hangs over Caudwell, and, however much one might disagree with his critical viewpoint, there is no doubt of his dedication to what he saw as the revolutionary cause. Undoubtedly some of the essayists in this volume, after their forays with deans and governors, after making in their own minds a Madrid out of Columbia, see themselves as heirs of the Thirties, but history does not repeat itself, and the stances of that decade can no longer convincingly be taken. Thus one has the impression, reading through these campus essays in rebellion, that their authors are really actors, re-enacting with spirit in a kind of living theatre the roles of past revolutionaries — sham Caudwells and

Luxembourgs longing vainly for martyrdom. They are not entirely to blame, for society has learnt to encourage revolutionary role-playing as a safeguard against revolution.

But Caudwell is significant in this context not merely as a Marxist hero towards whom the attitude of official communists has always been somewhat ambiguous. He also represented the more simplistic type of Marxist criticism (which is largely why the British academic Marxists of the 1950s rejected him), and the fact that the writers of *The Politics of Literature* should embrace him so warmly cannot be divorced from the excessive simplism of their own attitudes towards literature as well as politics. "High" literature as it has existed up to the present is seen consistently as a product of "ruling class" culture (and this in spite of the crucial part played by the Russian novelists of the nineteenth century in preparing the intellectual ground for the Russian revolution); "class" in fact becomes a naively convenient explanation for all the anomalies of society and the crises of culture. And, with the exception of the libertarian socialist Ellen Cantarow, none of the writers seems even aware that there are other traditions of dissent, other criticisms of the existing order, which are more deeply impregnated with the freedom they all claim to seek than Marx, that honestly outspoken authoritarian, ever was. Proudhon, Kropotkin, Gandhi, even Paul Goodman, one is surprised to observe, are never mentioned.

Yet *The Politics of Literature* cannot entirely be dismissed as politically naive and critically superficial. Most of the eleven writers are capable of sharp critical judgments in their own fields of study. Lillian S. Robinson, for example, includes in "Who's Afraid of a Room of One's Own?" a penetrating analysis of Virginia Woolf's feminist writings, and Richard Ohmann presents a clear and not unsympathetic survey of New Criticism as a social-literary phenomenon. Others write well on the limitations of modern English Departments as settings for acquiring a vital understanding of literature, and on specific social issues of which they have direct personal experience, like the position of women in academic life.

There is also a group of interesting and less directly polemical essays on experiments in education and study outside the recognized academic channels. I was fascinated by Florence Howe's "Why Teach Poetry?", an account of an experiment which she and some women undergraduates carried out in arousing the appreciation of poetry among high school students on vocational tracks, so successfully that potential motor mechanics revealed shrewd critical insights into the works of poets like Karl Shapiro. Other useful essays stress the need for academic definitions of literature to be expanded "so as to include local works, popular

culture, songs, hymns and oral story-telling", as well as labour songs and such documents as the autobiography of Big Bill Haywood. However, I find it curious that to these academics of the Seventies this should seem a new departure; critics outside the academies were working on such material in the Thirties, when Orwell prepared his splendid essays on popular culture, and in the Forties when A. L. Lloyd was working on English folk songs and the present writer on popular hymns. Perhaps the difference between then and now is that none of us in the past over-estimated the material we studied or tried to suggest that it was in some mysterious way as good as contemporary works of high literature; any such suggestion we would have felt unfair to popular works whose virtue lay in their appropriateness to particular and often very limited social conditions. But perhaps we had an advantage in that we did not have to inflate the importance of our fields of studies to meet the demands of thesis-oriented research programmes.

The failure to recognize the extent of past non-academic work on popular culture is an example of the atmosphere of academic parochialism that impregnates *The Politics of Literature*. The towers from which these essays were written may now be of plastic rather than ivory, their ivy leaves may have been metamorphosed into the foliage of Indian hemp, but the writers remain imprisoned within the university ambience to such an extent that they still regard it — like their despised predecessors of the 1950s — as the centre of literary culture and the source of all significant criticism, from which the revolution in literature must have its beginnings. Not only are all the contributors past or present university teachers, but most of them have found the zenith of their political activities in the conclaves of the Modern Languages Association, doubtless in accordance with the old Marxist illusion that by seizing the institutions of power and prestige the rebel can transform them, whereas in fact it is the rebel who is transformed, like a figure in a fairy tale, when he enters such enchanted portals.

Literary developments in recent years are seen by the essayists of *Politics in Literature* almost wholly in the context of what has happened on the campuses, so that in their lengthy introductory essay Louis Kampf and Paul Lauter claim that "academic repression" "has helped to limit the re-establishment of a left-wing literary culture" in recent years, a statement which one cannot imagine any critic or even any academic scholar making before the Fifties when the universities began to draw writers in large numbers into their employ and a powerful campus movement of literary exegesis, the New Critics, came near to dominating critical thought in the United States.

The shadow of the New Critics hangs heavily over *Politics in Literature*, which in one sense is a manifesto of liberation from New Critical domination of English Departments in North America. The editors contrast the methods of close textual analysis which that school favoured to what they call "traditional criticism" which "tried to relate the experience of literature more intimately to the rest of the readers' lives"; the attitude of their contributors varies from the hysterical denunciations of the former believer, Bruce Franklin, who describes New Criticism as "a conscious counter-attack on rising proletarian culture" (he never tells us where that elusive proletarian culture was in fact to be found rising), to the saner comments of Richard Ohmann, who defends the New Critics from the charge of reactionary tendencies, grants that they represent a genuine offshoot of liberal thought, but contends that their rejection of politics cannot be sustained in the world as it is.

It is evident that, in assuming the roles which the New Critics rejected, the authors of *The Politics of Liberation* are linked with these predecessors in a line of rebellious filiation; for their view is as limited to the academic horizon as that of any New Critic, which distinguishes them from some of the academic rebels of the late Sixties. "In 1971," says Ellen Cantarow, "it is clear that dropping out is not a viable alternative, but that what is needed is the creation of an intelligentsia a large part of which engages in active political work"; the editors "propose that teachers of literature . . . should conceive as central to their *work* entering actively into political struggle." In other words, so far as critics are concerned the political struggle must emanate from the classroom and be expressed in the teaching and analysis of literature, though the editors also grant that there are "no simple, direct, one-to-one relationships between literature and action." If this means that in the last resort these campus radicals are not prepared actually to subordinate their literary sensibilities to their political aims, all to the good, but a reading of their essays does not convince me that this is the case. Most of them, despite occasional weak denials that they are advocating socialist realism, in fact present a rather sentimental recreation of the view taken by Stalinists and Maoists alike that literature is significant only as an instrument of the power struggle.

One cannot deny that there may be uses for a book of this kind. It is good, for instance, that critical moulds which have grown rigid should be broken, and it is also good that university teachers should at last come to recognize what *their* critics have long been saying, that "specialization breeds privilege, privilege generates more specialization, both isolate teachers from the concern of students

and, often, of the society generally." Yet it is not always easy to square such a desire for the doors and windows to be thrown open on to the world with the *actual* ignorance which all these writers display of the living tradition of criticism that has flourished outside the universities, largely unaffected by the great rift which the New Critics created between the Thirties and the Fifties.

For even in our age what the editors call "traditional criticism" has continued, relating literature to life, and the study of literature has by no means been monopolized by university teachers. One has only to think of Orwell, of Edmund Wilson, V. S. Pritchett, Dwight Macdonald, Herbert Read, to realize that a strong current of what Northrop Frye has called "practical criticism" still continued, carrying on the traditions of Hazlitt and Ruskin, of Arnold and James, and developing a synthetic approach that gave due value to every aspect of a work of literature. That line of criticism has never lost sight of the social context from which literature emerges, it has never denied that writing has political resonances, but it has regarded works of any art not only as the instruments for changing men's minds and consequently society, but also as the flowerings of the human will that transcend while they illuminate our present condition. Critics must be politically conscious, but they must also realize that to read a poem as a political manifesto is to destroy it as a poem. Literature is not included in, but includes politics.

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NOTE

- <sup>1</sup> *The Politics of Literature: Dissenting Essays on the Teaching of English*, edited by Louis Kampf and Paul Lauter. Random House of Canada. \$11.95.