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Edited by D. W. Harding, F. R. Leavis, L. C. Knights and W.H. Mellers

Excerpt

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SCRUTINY

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Edited by

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LITERATURE AND SOCIETY¹

TWO or three years back, or at any time in the Marxising decade, having been invited to discourse on 'Literature and Society', I should have known what was expected of me—and what to expect. I should have been expected to discuss, or to give opportunities for discussing, the duty of the writer to identify himself with the working-class, the duty of the critic to evaluate works of literature in terms of the degree in which they seemed calculated to further (or otherwise) the proper and pre-destined outcome of the class-struggle, and the duty of the literary historian to explain literary history as the reflection of changing economic and material realities (the third adjective, 'social', which I almost added here would be otiose). I should have been braced for such challenges as the proposition that D. H. Lawrence, though he

'was unquestionably aware of and tried to describe the outside forces that were undermining the bourgeois society into which he made his way . . . saw those forces from a *bourgeois* viewpoint, as destroyers to be combated. Consequently he misrepresented reality'.²

What was wrong with his work was that he 'shared the life of a social class which has passed its prime'.

I assume that the expectation I should have had to address myself to in those not so very remote days isn't entertained at all generally on the present occasion, and I assume it gladly. But that does leave me with a large undirected formula on my hands: 'Literature and Society' might, in fact, seem to be daunting and embarrassing in the wealth of possibilities it covers. However, certain major interests of my own respond to it quite comfortably and I had no difficulty in concluding that I should be expected to do what, in accordance with those interests, it would suit me to do: that is, to try and define on what grounds and in what ways the study of literature—literature as it concerns me, who am avowedly in the first place a literary critic—should, I think, be seen as intimately relevant to what may be presumed to be the major interests of students at the London School of Economics.

For if the Marxist approach to literature seems to me unprofitable, that is not because I think of literature as a matter of isolated works of art, belonging to a realm of pure literary values (whatever *they* might be); works regarding the production of which it is enough to say that individuals of specific creative gifts were

¹This is the substance, reconstructed in a condensed form from the notes used on the occasion, of an address given to the Students' Union of the London School of Economics and Politics.

²*The Mind in Chains* (edited by C. Day Lewis, reviewed in *Scrutiny* for September, 1937).

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born and created them. No one interested in literature who began to read and think immediately after the last war—at a time, that is, co-incident with the early critical work of T. S. Eliot—can fail to have taken stock, for conscious rejection, of the Romantic critical tradition (if it can be called that): the set of ideas and attitudes about literary creation coming down through the nineteenth century. That tradition laid all the stress on inspiration and the individual genius. How do masterpieces arrive? Gifted individuals occur, inspiration sets in, creation results. Mr. Eliot, all of whose early prose may be said to have been directed against the Romantic tradition, which till then had not been effectively challenged, lays the stress on the other things (or some of them) besides individual talent and originative impulse from within that have to be taken account of when we try to understand any significant achievement in art. Of course, it was no discovery that there are these things to be taken account of: criticism and literary history had for generations dealt in influences, environments and the extra-literary conditions of literary production. But we are apt to be peculiarly under the influence of ideas and attitudes of which we are not fully conscious, they prevail until rejected, and the Romantic set—an atmosphere of the unformulated and vague—may be said to have prevailed until Mr. Eliot's criticism, co-operating with his poetry, made unconsciousness impossible and rejection inevitable.

Something like the idea of Tradition so incisively and provocatively formulated by him plays, I think, an essential part in the thinking of everyone to-day who is seriously interested in literature. If I say that idea represents a new emphasis on the social nature of artistic achievement, I ought to add at once that the word 'social' probably doesn't occur in the classical essay, *Tradition and the Individual Talent* (the word that takes Mr. Eliot's stress is 'impersonal'). The 'society' implied in this 'social'—and (which is, of course, my point) in the idea of Tradition—is not the Marxist concept; and the difference is what I have my eye on. But let me first remind you of the idea as Mr. Eliot formulates it. The individual writer is to be aware that his work is *of* the Literature to which it belongs and not merely added externally to it. A literature, that is, must be thought of as essentially something more than an accumulation of separate works: it has an organic form, or constitutes an organic order, in relation to which the individual writer has his significance and his being. 'Mind' is the analogy (if this is the right word) used:

'He must be aware that the mind of Europe—the mind of his own country—a mind which he learns in time to be much more important than his own private mind—is a mind which changes . . .'

and so on.

Something, I said, in the nature of this way of thinking seems to me inevitable for anyone who thinks about literature at all. The ways in which it is at odds with Marxist theories of culture are

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obvious. It stresses, not economic and material determinants, but intellectual and spiritual, so implying a different conception from the Marxist of the relation between the present of society and the past, and a different conception of society. It assumes that, enormously—no one will deny it—as material conditions count, there is a certain measure of spiritual autonomy in human affairs, and that human intelligence, choice and will do really and effectively operate, expressing an inherent human nature. There is a human nature—that is how, from the present point of view, we may take the stress as falling; a human nature an understanding of which is of primary importance to students of society and politics. And here is the first way that presents itself of indicating the kind of importance literature—the literary critic's literature—should be recognized to have for such students: the study of it is, or should be, an intimate study of the complexities, potentialities and essential conditions of human nature.

But that, by itself, is too large a proposition to take us anywhere. Let me, by way of moving towards more discussible particularity, make another obvious note on the difference between the Marxist kind of attitude toward literature and that represented by the idea of Tradition I've invoked. It's true that this latter stresses the social aspect of creative achievement as the Romantic attitude didn't; but it allows for the individual aspect more than the Marxist does. This is inevitably a crude way of putting it—as you'll see, that 'inevitably' is my point. But to postpone that for a moment: you can't be interested in literature and forget that the creative individual is indispensable. Without the individual talent there is no creation. While you are in intimate touch with literature no amount of dialectic, or of materialistic interpretation, will obscure for long the truth that human life lives only in individuals: I might have said, the truth that it is only in individuals that society lives.

The point I wanted to make is this: you can't contemplate the nature of literature without acquiring some inhibition in respect of that antithesis, 'the individual and society', and losing any innocent freedom you may have enjoyed in handling it; without, that is, acquiring some inhibiting apprehensions of the subtleties that lie behind the antithesis.

An illustration presents itself readily. I have spoken of the 'Romantic' attitude, and the phrase might be called misleading, since the actual poets of the Romantic period—Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Shelley, Keats—differ widely among themselves. No general description worth offering will cover them. Though as influences they merge later in a Romantic tradition, they themselves do not exemplify any common Romanticism. What they have in common is that they belong to the same age; and in belonging to the same age they have in common something negative: the absence of anything to replace the very positive tradition (literary, and more than literary—hence its strength) that had prevailed till towards the end of the eighteenth century. It is this tradition, the Augustan, that I want to consider briefly first.

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LITERATURE AND SOCIETY

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It originated in the great changes in civilization that make the second part of the seventeenth century look so unlike the first, and its early phase may be studied in the works of John Dryden. The conventions, standards and idiom of its confident maturity offer themselves for contemplation in *The Tatler* and *The Spectator*. The relevant point to be made about it for the present purpose is that it laid a heavy stress on the social. Its insistence that man is a social being was such as to mean in effect that all his activities, inner as well as outer, that literature took cognizance of were to belong to an overtly social context. Even the finest expressions of the spirit were to be in resonance with a code of Good Form—for with such a code the essential modes and idioms of Augustan culture were intimately associated. The characteristic movements and dictions of the eighteenth century, in verse as well as prose, convey a suggestion of social deportment and company manners.

An age in which such a tradition gets itself established is clearly an age in which the writer feels himself very much at one with society. And the Augustan hey-day, the Queen Anne period, was a period very confident of its flourishing cultural health. But we should expect such an insistence on the social to have in time a discouraging effect on the deeper sources of originality, the creative springs in the individually experiencing mind. We should expect to find evidence of this in the field of poetry, and we find it. This is no place to pretend to give a fair account of the Augustan decline, which was a complex affair: I'm merely stressing an aspect that is relevant to my present purpose. Where, then, a tradition like that I have adumbrated prevails there is bound before long to be a movement of protest in minds of the kind that ought to be creative. They will feel that conventional expression—that which, nevertheless, seems natural and inevitable to the age—imposes a conventional experience, and that this, suppressing, obtruding, muffling, and misrepresenting, is at odds with their own. There will be a malaise, a sense of blunted vitality, that would express itself to this effect if it were fully conscious. Full consciousness is genius, and manifests itself in technical achievement, the new use of words. In the seventeen-eighties it is William Blake.

Blake in his successful work says implicitly: 'It is I who see and feel. I see only what *I* see and feel only what *I* feel. My experience is mine, and in its specific quality lies its significance'. He may be said to have reversed for himself the shift of stress that occurred at the Restoration. But to such a reversal there is clearly a limit. Blake uses the English language, and not one of his own invention; and to say that he uses it is not to say that it is for him a mere instrument. His individuality has developed in terms of the language, with the ways of experiencing, as well as of handling experience, that it involves. The mind and sensibility that he has to express are *of* the language.

I may seem here to be handling a truism of the kind that there's no point in recalling. But I believe that the familiar truths that we contemplate when we contemplate the nature of language—

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in the way, that is, in which we have to when we take a critical interest in literature—have the familiarity of the familiar things that we tend to lose sight of when we begin to think. And what I have just been touching on is perhaps the most radical of the ways in which the literary critic's interest in literature leads to a new recognition of the essentially social nature of the individual—and (I may add) of the 'reality' he takes for granted.

In any case, I want to pass at once to an order of consideration that will probably seem to have more discussible bearings on the normal pre-occupations of the student of society. The measure of social collaboration and support represented by the English language didn't make Blake prosperously self-sufficient; he needed something more—something that he didn't get. This is apparent in a peculiar kind of difficulty that his work offers to the critic. I am thinking of the difficulty one so often has in deciding what kind of thing it is one has before one.

A petty sneaking knave I knew—
O! Mr. Cromek, how do ye do?

—that is clearly a private blow-off. *The Tyger* is clearly a poem (in spite of the abandoned job of the third stanza³). But again and again one comes on the thing that seems to be neither wholly private nor wholly a poem. It seems not to know what it is or where it belongs, and one suspects that Blake didn't know. What he did know—and know deep down in himself—was that he had no public: he very early gave up publishing in any serious sense. One obvious consequence, or aspect, of this knowledge is the carelessness that is so apparent in the later prophetic books. Blake had ceased to be capable of taking enough trouble. The uncertainty I have just referred to is a more radical and significant form of the same kind of disability. In the absence, we may put it, of adequate social collaboration (the sense, or confident prospect, of a responsive community of minds was the minimum he needed) his powers of attaining in achieved creation to that peculiar impersonal realm to which the work of art belongs and in which minds can meet—it is as little a world of purely private experience as it is the public world of the laboratory—failed to develop as, his native endowment being what it was, they ought to have done.⁴

The inevitable way in which serious literary interest develops towards the sociological is suggested well enough here. What better conditions, one asks, can one imagine for a Blake? Can one imagine him in a tradition that should have nurtured his genius rather than have been something it had to escape from, and in a society that should have provided him with the best conceivable public? But what is the best conceivable public? And so one is led on to inquire into the nature and conditions of cultural health and prosperity.

I will illustrate with a line of reflection that has occupied myself a good deal. Harking back from Blake one notes that the establishment of the Augustan tradition was associated with—in-deed, it involved—a separation, new and abrupt, between sophis-

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ticated culture and popular. Anticipating the problem of bringing home as convincingly and vividly as possible to (say) students of modern social and political questions what is meant by saying that there was, in the seventeenth century, a real culture of the people, one thinks first of Dryden's contemporary, Bunyan. If *The Pilgrim's Progress* is a humane masterpiece, that is in spite of the bigoted sectarian creed that Bunyan's allegory, in detail as in sum, directs itself to enforcing. In spite of his aim, a humane masterpiece resulted because he belonged to the civilization of his time, and that meant, for a small-town 'mechanick', participating in a rich traditional culture.

It is on the reader approaching as a literary critic that this truth compels itself (others seem to miss it).⁵ Take, for instance, this passage, which such a reader would fix on as representative of Bunyan's art:

Christian: Pray, who are your kindred there, if a man may be so bold?

By-ends: Almost the whole Town; and in particular, my Lord *Turn-about*, my Lord *Timeserver*, my Lord *Fair-speech*, (from whose ancestors that Town first took its name), also Mr. *Smoothman*, Mr. *Facing-both-ways*, Mr. *Anything*; and the Parson of our Parish, Mr. *Two-tongues*, was my Mother's own Brother by Father's side; and to tell you the truth, I am become a Gentleman of good Quality; yet my Great Grandfather was but a Waterman, looking one way and rowing another; and I got most of my estate by the same occupation.

Christian: Are you a married man?

³The second interrogative sentence of the stanza Blake made a number of attempts at completing before he threw up the job.

⁴The following, both in its curiously striking qualities—it clearly comes from a remarkable poet, and in what I take to be its lack of self-sufficiency as a poem, seems to me a representatively suggestive document of the case I have been trying to describe:

Truly, my Satan, thou art but a dunce,
And dost not know the garment from the man;
Every harlot was a virgin once,
Nor canst thou ever change Kate to Nan.

Tho' thou art worship'd by the names divine
Of Jesus and Jehovah, thou art still
The Son of Morn in weary night's decline,
The lost traveller's dream under the hill.

⁵See, e.g. two books reviewed in *Scrutiny* for March, 1938: *John Bunyan: Maker of Myths*, by Jack Lindsay, and *John Bunyan: Mechanick Preacher*, by William York Tindall.

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By-ends: Yes, and my Wife is a very virtuous woman, the Daughter of a virtuous woman; she was my Lady *Fain-ing's* daughter, therefore she came of a very honourable Family, and is arrived to such a pitch of breeding, that she knows how to carry it to all, even to Prince and Peasant. 'Tis true we somewhat differ in Religion from those of the stricter sort, yet but in two small points: First, we never strive against Wind and Tide: Secondly, we are always most zealous when Religion goes in his Silver Slippers; we love much to walk with him in the Street, if the Sun shines, and the People applaud him.

The critic notes that the names and racy turns of speech here are organically *of* the style; a style that clearly (and not the less so for there being literary associations) concentrates and intensifies the life of popular idiom. This life, running so richly into the placing nickname and the proverbial epitome, is unmistakably the expression of a vigorous humane culture. For what is involved is not merely an idiomatic raciness of speech, expressing a strong vitality, but a traditional art of social living, with its mature habits of judgment and valuation. We must beware of idealizing uncritically, but the fact is plain. There would have been no Bunyan (as there would before him have been no Shakespeare) if in his time, with all its disadvantages from a modern point-of-view, there had not been, living in the daily life of the people, a rich traditional culture—a culture that has disappeared so completely that modern revolutionaries, social reformers and Utopists do not commonly seem to have any notion of the kind of thing that has been lost.

This then is what the literary critic has to deduce from his reading. If he finds that others, interested primarily in social reform and social history, do not seem properly impressed by such evidence, he can, by way of bringing home to them in how full a sense there is, behind the literature, a social culture and an art of living, call attention to Cecil Sharp's introduction to *English Folk-Songs from the Southern Appalachians*. Hearing that the English folk-song still persisted in the remoter valleys of those mountains Sharp, during the last war, went over to investigate, and brought back a fabulous haul. More than that, he discovered that the tradition of song and dance (and a reminder is in place at this point of the singing and dancing with which the pilgrims punctuate their progress in the second part of Bunyan's Calvinistic allegory) had persisted so vigorously because the whole context to which folk-song and folk-dance belong was there too: he discovered, in fact, a civilization or 'way of life' (in our Democratic parlance) that was truly an art of social living.

The mountaineers were descended from settlers who had left this country in the eighteenth century.

'The region is from its inaccessibility a very secluded one . . . the inhabitants have for a hundred years or more been completely isolated and shut off from all traffic with the rest of the world.

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Their speech is English, not American, and, from the number of expressions they use that have long been obsolete elsewhere, and the old-fashioned way in which they pronounce many of their words, it is clear that they are talking the language of a past day. They are a leisurely, cheery people in their quiet way, in whom the social instinct is very highly developed . . . They know their Bible intimately and subscribe to an austere creed, charged with Calvinism and the unrelenting doctrines of determinism or fatalism . . . They have an easy unaffected bearing and the unselfconscious manners of the well-bred . . . A few of those we met were able to read and write, but the majority were illiterate. They are however good talkers, using an abundant vocabulary racily and often picturesquely'.

'That the illiterate may nevertheless reach a high level of culture will surprise only those who imagine that education and cultivation are convertible terms. The reason, I take it, why these mountain people, albeit unlettered, have acquired so many of the essentials of culture, is partly to be attributed to the large amount of leisure they enjoy, without which, of course, no cultural development is possible, but chiefly to the fact that they have one and all entered at birth into the full enjoyment of their racial inheritance. Their language, wisdom, manners, and the many graces of life that are theirs, are merely racial attributes which have been gradually acquired and accumulated in past centuries and handed down generation by generation, each generation adding its quota to what it received . . .'

' . . . Of the supreme value of an inherited tradition, even when unenforced by any formal school education, our mountain community in the Southern Highlands is an outstanding example'.

Correlation of Cecil Sharp's introduction⁶ with Bunyan should sufficiently confirm and enforce the significance attributed to Bunyan above. And Bunyan himself shows how the popular culture to which he bears witness could merge with literary culture at the level of great literature. The converse, regarding the advantages enjoyed by the literary writer, the 'intellectual', need not be stated: they are apparent in English literature from Shakespeare to Marvell. We see Marvell—it is, of course, for this reason I name him—as pre-eminently refined, European in sophistication, and intimately related to a tradition of courtly urbanity; but his refinement involves no insulation from the popular—the force of which judgment is brought out by contrast with Pope. In prose, compare Halifax with Dryden. Halifax (the Trimmer) is 'easy', 'natural' and urbane, a master of the spoken tone and movement; in short he is

⁶Since Sharp's volumes are not everywhere accessible it had better be noted here that the relevant parts of his introduction are extracted in an article in *Scrutiny* for September, 1935, entitled 'Lady Novelists and the Lower Orders'.

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unmistakably of the Restoration; but his raciness and idiomatic life relate him as unmistakably to Bunyan. I don't think I am being fanciful when I say that when Dryden gets lively, as in the preface to *All for Love*, he tends towards the Cockney; he assimilates, in fact, with L'Estrange. At least, his polite idiomatic ease is wholly of the coffee-house, that new organ of metropolitan culture the vibration of which seems essentially to exclude any intimate relations with Bunyan's world. The exclusive, or insulating, efficacy of the politeness of Augustan verse, even in Pope, whose greatness manifests itself in his power of transcending the Augustan, is at any rate obvious; and Pope's politeness belongs to the same world as the politeness of Addison's prose. Where, in short, Augustan convention and idiom, with their social suggestion, prevail, sophisticated culture cuts itself off from the traditional culture of the people.

The eighteenth century, significantly, had a habit of attempting the naïve, and, characteristically, evoked its touching simplicities of low life in modes that, Augustan tone and movement being inescapable, evoked at the same time the elegant and polite. It is one of the manifestations of Blake's genius that he, unique in this, can—the evidence is apparent here and there in *Poetical Sketches* (1783)—be genuinely, in verse that has nothing Augustan about it, of the people (popular London in his time was clearly still something of a 'folk'). The mention of this aspect of Blake serves to bring out by contrast the significance of Wordsworth's kind of interest in humble and rustic life. It is essentially—in so far as it is more than nominal—an interest in something felt as external to the world to which he himself belongs, and very remote from it: the reaction that Wordsworth represents against the Augustan century doesn't mean any movement towards re-establishing the old organic relations between literary culture and the sources of vitality in the general life. By Wordsworth's death, the Industrial Revolution had done its work, and the traditional culture of the people was no longer there, except vestigially.

No one, then, seriously interested in modern literature can feel that it represents a satisfactory cultural order. But if anyone should conclude that it ought therefore—the literature that the literary critic finds significant—to be contemned, and that a really significant contemporary literature would have the Marxising or Wellsian kind of relation to social, political and economic problems, he may be reminded that but for the persisting literary tradition, the history I have so inadequately sketched would have been lost, and our notions of what a popular culture might be, and what relations might exist between it and a 'highbrow' culture, would have been very different. And it needs stressing that where there isn't, in the literary critic's sense, a significant contemporary literature the literary tradition—the 'mind' (and mind includes memory)—is not fully live. To have a vital literary culture we must have a literature that is a going concern; and that will be what, under present conditions of civilization, it has to be. *Where* it is can be