

# Book Supplement

## Revolution and the Novel

### I. *The Past and Future as Themes*

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OF ALL literary types the novel is the hardest to define; any rigid definition excludes a certain number of books that by common consent are known as novels. This situation has driven Mr. E. M. Forster to define a novel as any largely fictitious narrative too long to be called a short story. The flexibility of the novel helps to explain its vogue: it lends itself to many purposes and to all points of view. The most recent of literary forms—an infant when compared with the epic, the lyric, the ballad, the drama—the novel has dominated the literature of the western world for more than a century and a half. Its rise has closely corresponded to the rise of the bourgeoisie, and in the course of its history the mind of the bourgeoisie has been fully expressed, but it cannot be limited to any one class. Not only has the novel been adopted by all the various groups within the bourgeoisie; it has been taken over by proletarian authors, and it is in the novel that the greater and better part of proletarian writing has been done.

Forster's definition explains why the novel can be so naturally and effectively adopted by proletarian writers. Certain traditions have grown up around the drama, traditions with which the proletarian dramatist has to break. Each of the various types of lyric has a history that weighs more or less heavily upon the proletarian poet. But the only tradition of the novel is the tradition of flexibility, of almost complete freedom. The only reason for warning proletarian writers against bourgeois literary forms is that certain of those forms cannot be transferred without a transference of the intellectual and emotional conditions that created them. But the novel is not a form at all in that sense; the term is merely a convenient way of describing a great variety of literary forms that have in common only the two qualities Forster notes.

We do not know what kind of literature a classless society will bring forth, but apparently the novel is to have a prominent part in the literature of the transition period. It is therefore important for proletarian writers and readers, and for Marxist critics, to understand the novel's potentialities. Our youth-

ful proletarian fiction has thus far exhibited a striking lack of variety, which possibly indicates a lack of resourcefulness. Not only have important themes been neglected; the best methods have not always been found for the themes that have been used. In these articles I shall try to point out the manifold possibilities of the novel by commenting concretely on both methods and themes. I shall draw as far as seems advisable on the past history of the novel, but I shall treat the past only in so far as it illuminates the opportunities of contemporary proletarian authors.

An obvious, but none the less useful, classification of novels is based upon time. A novel may be located in the past, in the present, or in the future. (By the present I mean, roughly, the lifetime of the particular author.) Most authors have written of the present—of their particular present, that is—and I shall devote myself chiefly to the possibilities of dealing with the present. But we should not forget that the novelist has both the past and the future to write about if he chooses.

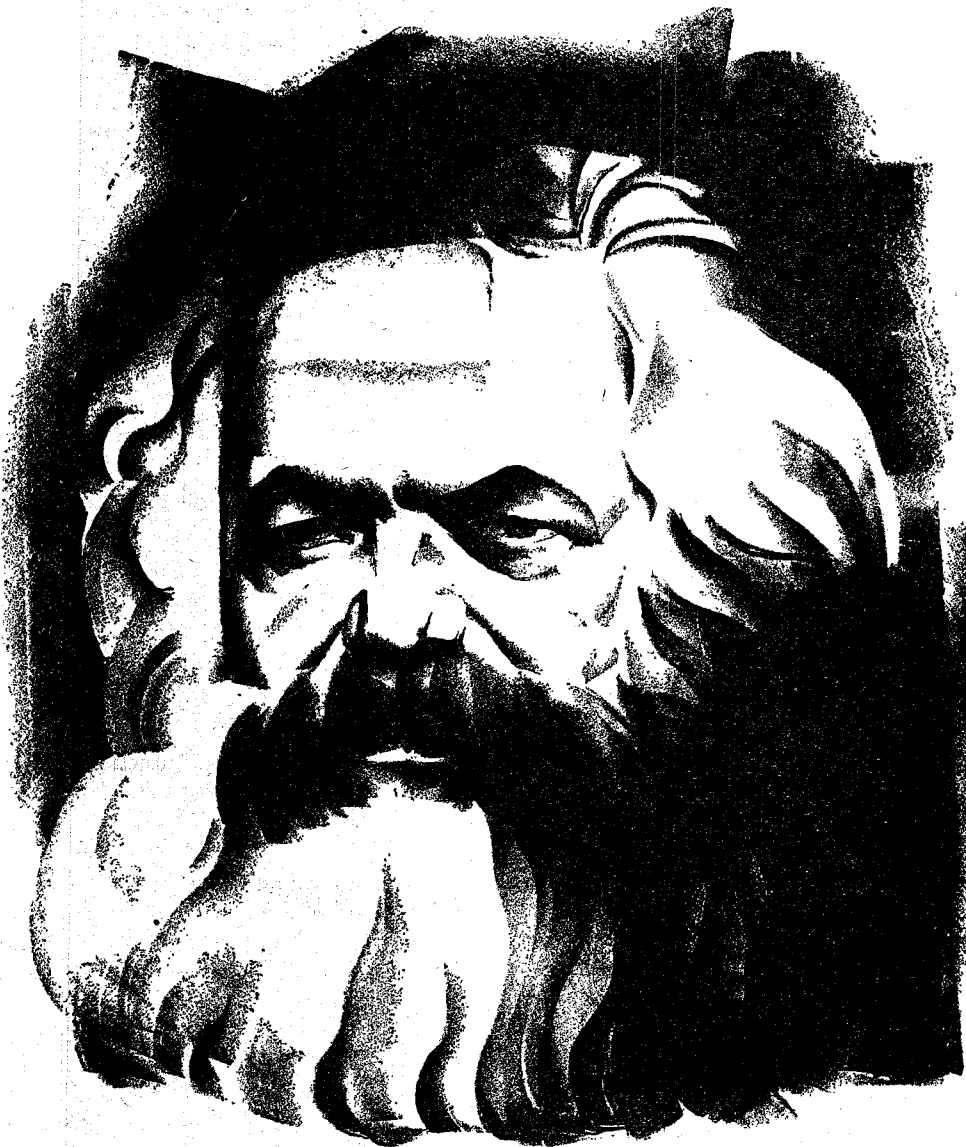
The two essential qualities in a novel of the past are authenticity and relevance. Authenticity we may define for the moment as correspondence to both the known facts about the period in question and the best possible interpretation of those facts. Relevance is relevance to the fundamental interests of the author and his readers.

Novels of the past are most commonly what we call historical romances, and the name indicates that authenticity is not the principal aim of their authors. The greater number of writers who have located their novels in the past have done so because they were thus freed from certain of the responsibilities of dealing with the present. Even the least critical reader, the one who is most eager to yield to illusions, cannot prevent himself from making some sort of comparison between a novel of the present and the reality he knows. Of course he goes through the same sort of process with an historical novel, but so much cannot be compared that he finds it relatively easy to forego criticism even when there is a legitimate place for comparison. The author is thereby privileged to create characters and

events in accordance with his own desires or his conception of his readers' desires, and the only checks upon his performance are his readers' knowledge, usually meager, of history and their sense, often not very sharp, of what constitutes consistency and plausibility in human conduct. The author's deviation from authenticity may be the result of ignorance or it may be conscious. It permits both the romanticism of Dumas and Stevenson, a romanticism of adventure and action, and the sentimental, nostalgic romanticism of Willa Cather's *Shadows on the Rock* and Wilder's *The Woman of Andros*.

The absence of authenticity would be enough to condemn historical romances, but in many of them we note the absence of relevance as well. In a sense any book that is read must have some reason for its appeal, but this need not be relevance to the fundamental interests of the reader. The typical historical romance appeals to the reader's desire to escape from the world in which he lives and to experience vicariously a more ideal life, a life unhampered by the restraining conditions of that world. To provide such an opportunity for escape is, according to Stevenson, the primary purpose of fiction, and he, as well as countless others, put his theory in practice. One does not need to engage in any profound psychological demonstration of the harmfulness of such literature; the infantile character of the satisfactions it offers is apparent; indeed, Stevenson frankly said that the function of literature was the function of day-dreams.

But historical romances may have relevance even when they lack authenticity, and, as a matter of fact, the leading historical romancers have sacrificed authenticity for the sake of relevance. Even when the author is permitting his readers to escape from the confines of contemporary reality, he may be seeking as well to impress upon them his own conception of that reality. So Sir Walter Scott, in his novels of the Middle Ages, gave his readers plenty of adventure, but took care at the same time to communicate to them the world-view of a Tory. Willa Cather, in *Death Comes for the Archbishop* and *Shadows on the Rock*, has a message for the modern



From Karl Marx' "Capital" in Lithographs, by Hugo Gellert

world. Hervey Allen has admitted that he chose the period he did for *Anthony Adverse* because he saw in it a parallel to his own age. Miss Cather, Mr. Allen, Mr. Wilder, and a good many others have written of the past precisely because the lower level of authenticity—the result of the impossibility of the reader's making a direct comparison with reality—has permitted them to give to their conceptions of life an apparent relevance that they really do not have. They believe, for example, that religious faith is necessary in the modern world, but they find it easier to demonstrate that necessity in terms of the past.

It is also possible for an historical novel to have a high degree of authenticity with a low degree of relevance. Perhaps complete authenticity would necessarily involve relevance, but in practice, as Leonard Ehrlich's *God's Angry Man* shows, a novelist with wide knowledge of and considerable insight into a period may nevertheless fail to bring out its relevance for our times. Somewhat the same criticism may, at this point, be leveled against Josephine Herbst's *Pity Is Not Enough*, though perhaps subsequent volumes in the series will indicate that this flaw results from some defect in the author's treatment rather than from a fundamental weakness in her

conception of the past. In general, authenticity without relevance is the mark of a serious novelist who has not quite found himself.

Enough has been said to indicate the importance of both authenticity and relevance. Authenticity, for the proletarian novelist, means correspondence to the best documentary evidence about the period in question as interpreted according to the Marxian theory of history. Relevance is relevance to the contemporary situation, interests, and demands of the working class. The historical novel further requires, of course, various qualities that are also demanded by the novel of the present, in connection with which I shall discuss them. But, these qualities being present, authenticity and relevance must be added to them.

There is obviously no reason why the proletarian author should not, on these terms, attempt the historical novel. Theoretically the entire past is open to him; there is no period of the past that is not, if one sees deeply enough, relevant to the present interests of the working class. In practice, however, the proletarian author will probably select some event the relevance of which is fairly clear: the French Revolution, Shay's Rebellion, the

Paris Commune, the Chartist revolt, for example. Such events offer a magnificent opportunity for increasing the understanding of the present by increasing the understanding of the past. It is true that the proletarian author will probably find it easier to deal with the present, and will be far more interested in the present, but the past is open to him, and, as proletarian literature becomes richer and more diverse, it is safe to predict that the past will not be neglected.

The problem of documenting the historical novel differs little from the problem, which I shall discuss later, of documenting the novel of the present. Authenticity is not secured by the introduction of masses of material gleaned from the history books, nor does it depend on the inclusion of real persons and events. Every character and every incident in a book might be fictitious, and yet the book could have absolute authenticity. Authenticity depends, obviously, on knowledge and understanding, and, if these are great enough, the essential character of the period can be re-created wholly in the realm of fiction. On the other hand, the introduction of historical figures is always permissible and usually advisable.

One reason for urging proletarian novelists to attempt the historical novel is the great advantage they have over their bourgeois contemporaries. It seems almost impossible for the representative middle-class novelist to write about the past without romanticizing it; his vague discontent with the present and his lack of hope for the future almost force him to assume an elegiac tone, even when he is making the greatest effort to be honest. A proletarian author, however, expresses his dissatisfaction with the past in constructive labors for the future, and he would therefore feel little temptation to become nostalgic. The achievement of relevance could scarcely be a serious problem for him, since he would be fully aware of the significant tendencies of his own day. Moreover, the clarifying force of Marxian analysis would lay a firm foundation for the understanding of the past. This is not to say that the writing of a sound and valuable historical novel is easy, even for a proletarian novelist with all his advantages. These advantages entail high standards, and the proletarian writer would be intensely conscious of shortcomings. The difficulties are real, but the opportunities are not to be overlooked. The construction of an artificial parallelism, such as one finds in Upton Sinclair's *Roman Holiday*, is not worth the efforts of a serious writer; such work is as misleading as propaganda as it is defective as literature. But the actual and authentic recreation of some past period—particularly a period in which the class struggle is sharp and its implications for the proletariat significant—offers opportunities for the artist that will compensate for the difficulties it involves.

If novels of the past have much to offer, novels of the future are less promising. We find a few novels located in the future, just as we find many novels located in the past,

merely for the convenience of the author. We also find a few novels that are concerned with the future merely for the fun of prediction. These usually make some pretence to scientific authority, and they combine romantic entertainment with more or less serious efforts at instruction. The romances of Jules Verne and some of the earlier novels of H. G. Wells are the best examples of the type. Ordinarily, however, any novel that seeks seriously to predict the future does so in order to influence the present. Thus we come to the largest and most important group of novels of the future, the Utopian novels. We may legitimately consider all Utopian novels as novels of the future, even though some of them are located in some imaginary land in the present.

From the earliest times Utopian novels have been written because their authors thought to popularize their views by sugar-coating the bitter pill of exposition. The Utopian novel is always more or less expository, and has to be. Therefore it cannot be judged by the criteria we would apply to other types of fiction. The fundamental criteria must be sociological; it is the soundness of the author's views that counts. On the other hand, we may recognize the presence of literary values, though they are of secondary importance. The Utopian novelist does not merely expound his conception of the future; he tries to show the future itself in human terms. Morris does not content himself with saying that the men of the future will be happy and free and artistic; he tries to show their happiness and free-

dom and their pursuit of beauty. Huxley does more than condemn the dangers of a mechanized, standardized society; he exhibits the minds and hearts of the people of which such a society is composed. The more fully an author can reveal the human inhabitants of his Utopia, the more convincing he will be. And yet his work must ultimately be judged by the views on which it rests. At best all his art can do is to permit him to apply his knowledge of what human beings are like under the existing conditions to his conception of what future conditions will be, and if he misunderstands the tendencies in the present that are shaping the future, his work fails at both points.

The Utopian novel has been used for a multitude of purposes. Occasionally the author paints the kind of future he hopes will be avoided, as Huxley did in *Brave New World*. Jack London, in *The Iron Heel*, though assuming that the revolutionary movement would eventually succeed, portrayed an initial defeat and its consequences. More commonly the author permits his own interests and desires to shape his conception of the world of the future. After the appearance and success of Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward*, several score of American writers embodied in narratives of the future their conceptions of the kind of world they desired and the ways in which such a world could be achieved. Some authors are principally concerned with ends, as both Bellamy and Morris were, in their different ways, in *Looking Backward*

and *News from Nowhere*, and describe briefly or not at all the steps by which the better society is to be obtained. Others seek, as Wells has done in his *Shape of Coming Things* to describe the whole process of transformation.

It would appear that the Communist author would be in a position to write with particular effectiveness of the future, and this is probably true. The question, however, is whether it is worth doing. The general conception of the future he would express would be, of course, the property of all Communists, and his work could not have the "originality" of the famous Utopian novelists. So far as the structure of the future society is concerned, the pioneering work has been done, and all the writer could do would be to embody the conceptions of Marx and his followers in as richly human terms as possible. This might have value, in so far as it could bring home the desirability of the classless society and the necessity of the proletarian dictatorship as a means to that end. But there would always be the danger of fanciful and unscientific Utopianism, of the sort that Marxism has always condemned. Communism is rightly opposed to the kind of speculation that interferes with the realistic perception of objective facts, and it may be that a Communist Utopia is a contradiction in terms. Some Communist writer may some day prove me wrong, but I believe, especially when I think of all the other opportunities there are, that the novel of the future is not worth the efforts of a proletarian author.

# Joyce and Irish Literature

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JAMES JOYCE and Marcel Proust are the leading representatives of the literature of the decadent bourgeois culture of the West. But of Proust, the Parisian, the portrayer of the upper layers of this society, one might say if he did not exist the Marxian critic would have to invent him. Joyce is not so pure an example of this type. He has, in addition, certain special characteristics, due to the fact that he was born in a colonial country. If a writer is to be classified by his characters, their locale, their period, then we should have to say that Joyce is the literary representative of the Irish petty bourgeoisie as opposed to that middle bourgeoisie which come into power in the new-born "Irish Free State," after the partial success of the Irish revolution—through betrayal of this revolution and compromise with British Imperialism. But an artist is not classified merely by the material he uses. No less important is his attitude towards his material and the way he uses it. In his relation to his material Joyce is an apostate-emigrant. He has run away from the reality which produced his material.

In his creative method he is connected with both the ultra-psychologists, Henry James and Marcel Proust, and the modernist painters from Cézanne to Picasso.

Joyce was born in Ireland in 1882, in an educated petty bourgeois family. His youth falls in the late 80's and early 1900's—when the Irish revolutionary movement was declining and Irish literature in English was flourishing.

Irish literature in Irish died with the destruction of Irish feudal-tribal society, when the upper class of Ireland began to unite with English colonizers. During the first half of the 19th century the mass of the Irish people began to speak English instead of Irish, due especially to the influence of the Irish Catholic Church, which wanted to use Ireland as a base for the conversion of England to Catholicism. Only in the extreme west of Ireland was there preserved an island of the Irish language.

In the beginning of the Eighteenth century Ireland had produced a number of outstanding writers using the English language. But

these writers reflected the landlord class and the old privileged bourgeoisie of the cities, classes English by origin or completely Anglicized. During the whole nineteenth century there was arising in Ireland a new Irish bourgeoisie, plebian-peasant in origin. But up to the 1870's this growth was forcibly checked by the domination of England. All the best powers of the rising Irish intelligentsia in these years went into the national revolutionary movement; and not only into the Irish movement—Ireland gave England two important Chartist leaders, O'Connor and O'Brien, and one of the most important pre-scientific socialists, William Thompson. Irish literature of these years was either of the landlord class (and consequently not Irish but English) or revolutionary. But Irish revolutionary poetry was only an intermittent accompaniment of the revolutionary movement and did not result in the creation of a national literature as a true expression of Irish culture.

In the 1880's the situation changed. Under the pressure of the revolutionary movement of the Irish peasants, English liberal capital-