

THE ILLUSION OF COGENCY

ILLUSION AND REALITY, by Christopher Caudwell (Macmillan, 18/-).

Illusion and Reality may fairly be said to belong to the class (several examples of which have been reviewed in these pages) of 'Marxist interpretation of literature.' It is no doubt a title which a strict Marxist would reject as a libel on his studies. Nevertheless this book and several others have been approved in Communist and near-Communist circles. At any rate a characteristic of these books is an assumption of the novelty of their approach. Armed with the Marxian phraseology and technique they assault the problem of the relation of literature to society, but however revolutionary their interpretation of society, there is a surprising staleness and tameness in their approach to literature. They are essentially amateur works and consequently the proportion of unrelated generalization is high. The dialectic invariably proves a procrustean bed for the literature under consideration. (Though a more complex image is needed to do justice to the variety of manipulations to which literature is subjected in the attempt to fit it into the correct categories). As a class these books have no intrinsic interest. Nor do they enrich the body of Marxist thought. But because they are on the whole favourably received by the public they provide the occasion for a critical examination. To employ an expression much favoured by their authors, they 'reflect' the increasing tendency to undervalue the function of literature in society, while illustrating increasingly fashionable attitudes in the reading public. In so far as they persuade people of the desirability of the Communist state, they do so under terms which jeopardize the future of civilization.

Yet the responsibility for the failure of these books cannot be laid upon the 'dialectic' itself. Whatever be the precise formulation one draws from the works of Marx, Engels and Lenin, it seems theoretically capable of all that it claims. Though perhaps it is just this theoretic perfection which paralyzes our authors. It is so easy to remain at the stage of the brilliant generalization, the all-comprehending possibility and to assert rather than to show that the work of relating has been done. For to attempt this

Herculean task would require abilities not normally found united in one man. Merely to correlate in a satisfactory manner the various specializations in one broad field of science seems impossible to-day. Yet the metaphysical sweep of the dialectic merely beats the air if it neglects the strict discipline of the sciences it attempts to embrace. It is through this neglect that the rigour of the dialectic comes to seem illusory. And as has been insisted often enough it is only through the strict practice of literary criticism that the data are available for those who would establish the relation of literature to society.

Illusion and Reality is tedious and unconvincing because it assumes as established all that we should like to see proved. The author boldly announces historical materialism to be the basis of his study. And it is true that we are treated throughout to statement and restatement of 'those hastily scribbled eleven *Theses on Feuerbach* that marked the beginning of a new era in human thought.' All other views of the subject-object relation are treated with contempt—a contempt that we are prevented from sharing until the Marxian conception is *shown* to be superior. It is true that this would require a purely philosophical treatise. The author nowhere refers to such a treatise nor does he himself supply the arguments which would render these theses acceptable. For one who finds them baffling their application (in words, at least) to art creates only mystification. The author's view of art disclosed in the preface remains as obscure as ever when the whole book has been read. 'It is an active view, implying an active living relation to art and not a cold contemplation of it, and implying therefore a view of art as active with an explosive, energetic content.' The author seems to be familiar with those early writings of Marx which are full of antitheses and generalizations. Indeed he himself at times writes like a translation of the early Marx and the book is full of quotations acknowledged and unacknowledged. But as they are used they have no more value than they had in their original contexts.

So much for the philosophical aspect of the book. It is equally unsatisfactory on the sociological side. The author, it is evident, has read diligently those anthropological books which form the general reading of our intelligentsia. He gleans here and there to support his generalizations. Where it is convenient Jung, for

example, or Ogden and Richards are adduced to *prove* something. But all those questions which sociologists are now debating and which when answered form the necessary preliminary to the use of the data collected by the various field workers are here ignored. The author proceeds as if sociology were a science which had already made the advances it will no doubt take at the very least half a century to make.

But setting aside this objection and proceeding as if the sociological positions were established, we are faced with another unsatisfactory feature. It is that the author asserts without demonstrating that poetry is 'simply a parallel in the sphere of ideology to what will take place in the sphere of material economy.' (Even this seems to distort the true Marxist view). The difficulties of such a view are simply not recognized by the author. He does not seem to have asked himself the questions raised, for instance, by L. C. Knights in *Shakespeare and Profit Inflation*s. Consequently he finds himself obliged to maintain impossibilities. The most striking of these is that the technical progress of nineteenth-century economic and productive relations is paralleled by an equivalent advance in poetic technique. 'At each stage the bourgeois contradiction by unfolding itself revolutionizes its own base and secures a fresh development of technical resources. Hence the movement from "art for art's sake" to *surréalisme* secures a development of the technique of poetry, of which in England Eliot is the best example . . . ' No one capable of literary criticism would dare assert that the period from Arnold to Eliot is one of steady technical progress and that Eliot develops what can be found in Tennyson. Or at any rate a most carefully documented survey would be necessary so to revolutionize current literary opinion.

Indeed wherever in *Illusion and Reality* the author abandons poetry in the abstract or in the tribal community and approaches individual poets, the illusory nature of the supposed demonstration of historical materialism in this sphere becomes unmistakably evident. At times the 'economic interpretation' seems actually to be substituted for literary criticism. For instance: 'Shakespeare could not have achieved the stature he did if he had not exposed, at the dawn of bourgeois development, the whole movement of the capitalist contradiction, from its tremendous achievement to its mean decline.' At other times the interpretation offered shows either

insensitiveness to poetry or an undue subordination of poetry to the exigencies of economic argument. Thus Pope is the perfect expression of the voice of manufacture ; Keats is an escapist ; poetry is not allowed to be pessimist until the nineteenth century: ' in Wordsworth the revolt takes the form of a return to the natural man, *just as it does in Shelley* ' (my italics).

But the most damaging and least excusable defect is the total unawareness of any other kind of breakdown than the economic. Thus for example, he is able to maintain that the development of modern industry has extended the development of individuality. He fails to realize that whether or not the terms ' bourgeois ' or ' proletarian ' have a precise meaning in economics, they must be given a different meaning when used to describe society in cultural terms. Thus he attempts to justify the word ' proletarian ' to describe the modern thriller, cheap film, jazz music, etc., by a tag from Marx (' it is at once an expression of real misery and a protest against that real misery.'). But it is surely evident that the enjoyment of this ' art ' is perhaps even more general among well-to-do people than among the very poor. Thanks to this blindness to some of the essential (for his thesis) considerations he is able both to find conditions in the U.S.S.R. already favourable to literature and to predict a glorious future for the poet in the coming Communist State.

It would be difficult to do justice to the unreadability of this book and to the irrelevance of most of the subject matter. The author, however, both in the conduct of his ' analysis ' and in his conclusion maintains: ' an analysis of the kind we have just completed, an economic and political analysis of the movement of society to-day, would be ordinarily regarded as foreign to a study of poetry. But no one who has patiently followed the argument thus far can fail to see its relevance to contemporary art, and the importance of understanding the revolutionary transformation of the basis of society which is everywhere affecting art and the artist.' But with all the patience that is needed to get through these 336 large and closely printed pages a more fitting description seems to be (*mutato nomine*) that which the author applies to those contemporary bourgeois artists who go so far as to join the Communist Party. ' His proletarian living bursts into his art in the form of crude and grotesque scraps of Marxist phraseology and

the mechanical application of the living proletarian theory.' (That this should be so is quite in keeping with the author's theories). For all the apparatus, including a bibliography of some four hundred entries drawn from the widest fields, for me at least, the book does not get anywhere. It would be perhaps facetious to murmur *Wahn, wahn, überall Wahn*. Yet this large volume might be reduced to pamphlet form without suffering in cogency, or even to the original *aperçus* of Marx from which it attempts to develop.

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THE END AND THE MEANS

ON THE POETRY OF POPE, by Geoffrey Tillotson (Oxford, 7/6).

Mr. Tillotson greatly admires Pope's poetry and he here attempts to supply a method of approach to it and a tentative appreciation of its value. He is painstaking and unpretentious but, in spite of himself, he comes to Pope with disabling preconceptions about the nature of 'Poetry' and his methods of analysis are too crude to permit of his rectifying the consequent misunderstandings. He realizes that Pope's claims to greatness rest on the *Dunciad* and the *Moral Essays* and *Epistles*, but he seems to me to admire them for the wrong, or for unimportant, reasons. His many penetrating comments are lost in the surrounding confusion.

As he says, 'the problem for the critic of Pope's poetry is that of relating the mechanics of the verse to its quality for the emotions.' Yet he can write of the *Dunciad*: 'And in this poem and the rest, there was the verse. Pope's verse is, of course, almost faultless.' These sentences indicate the fatally academic nature of his exegesis, which renders futile almost all of his sections on Design, Language, Versification, and the Stratification and Variety in Pope's poetry. He describes adequately the sureness of Pope's transitions from one idea to another in all his work, but when he writes,

'Book IV (of the *Dunciad*) may not be defensible as far as form goes. But its quality as satiric creation of human figures is so brilliant that cool-headed criticism looks pedantic . . .', it is exasperating that he does not add that form goes nowhere. He is most irritatingly perverse on the use of language. He discusses