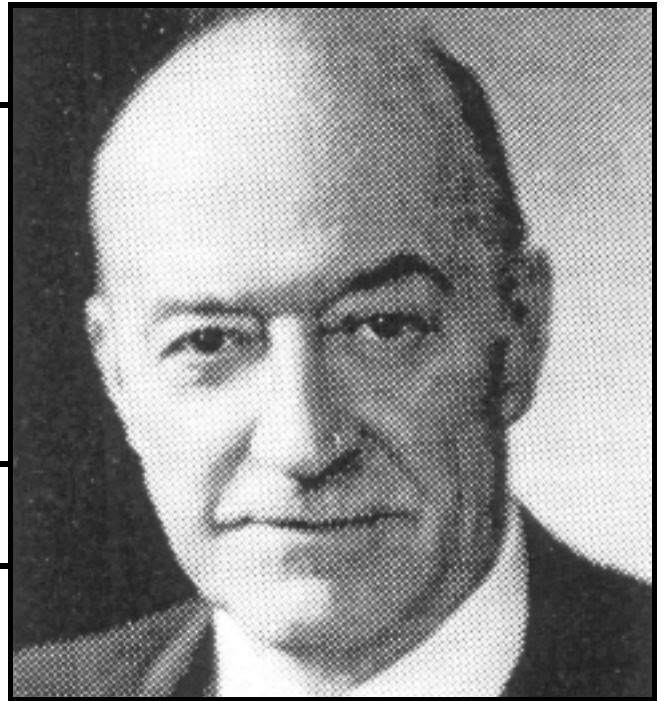


# LITERATURE AND THE CLASS WAR

**HENRY HAZLITT**



The astonishingly rapid spread, in the last two or three years, of the application of so-called social standards in literary criticism, and particularly of so-called Marxian standards, makes it desirable that these standards should be submitted to a critical examination. In undertaking such an examination one is confronted at the very beginning by a formidable difficulty. One feels that few of the writers whose theories are being examined will trouble to weigh on their merits any of the specific objections offered. For most of the nouveau-Marxists know all the answers in advance. They know that any critic who questions any item in the Marxian ideology is a “bourgeois” critic, and that his objections are “bourgeois” criticisms; and from that terrible and crushing adjective there is no appeal. For the bourgeois critic, if I understand the nouveau-Marxists rightly, has less free-will than a parrot. He is a mere phonograph, who can only repeat the phrases and opinions with which he has been stuffed from his reading of bourgeois literature and his contacts with bourgeois science and bourgeois art. All these make up bourgeois culture, which is a mere class culture, i.e., an elaborate and colossal system of apologetics;

worse, an instrument for class dominance and class oppression. The bourgeois critic, in brief, is a mere automaton, incapable of surmounting or of escaping from the bourgeois ideology in which he is imprisoned; and the poor fool’s delusion that he is capable of seeing any problem with relative objectivity and disinterestedness is simply more evidence that he cannot pierce beyond the walls of his ideological cell. (Of course it does seem possible for a few of the chosen, by an act of grace, to receive the revelation and jump suddenly into a complete acceptance of the Marxian ideology; otherwise it would be impossible to account for the bourgeois-Marxists themselves. But we may return to such miracles later.)

In such an atmosphere, I hope I may be forgiven if I begin with an *ad hominem* argument, for in such an atmosphere *ad hominem* arguments are the only kind likely to make any impression. Now the first article in the Marxian credo is that there is but one Karl Marx and that Lenin is his prophet. One would suppose, therefore, that the critics who call themselves Marxists would trouble to learn what their master and his greatest disciple thought on cultural questions. Did Marx himself reject the culture of his age on the ground that it was bourgeois culture? Did he flee from its contamination as from a plague? Did he repudiate it as mere apologetics? The evidence against such an assumption is overwhelming. Wilhelm Liebknecht, in his delightful biographical memoir, tells us that Marx read Goethe, Lessing, Shakespeare, Dante, and Cervantes “almost daily”, and that he was fond of reciting scenes from Shakespeare, and long passages from the *Divina Commedia* that he knew almost entirely by heart. Marx’s son-in-law, Paul Lafargue, in his personal recollections (which appear in *Karl Marx: Man, Thinker, and Revolutionist*, a symposium edited by D. Ryazanoff), confirms this and supplements it in more detail. Marx, he tells us,

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knew much of Heine and Goethe by heart, and would even quote these poets in conversation. He read a great deal of poetry, in most of the languages of Europe. Year after year he would read Aeschylus again in the original text, regarding this author and Shakespeare as the two greatest dramatic geniuses the world had ever known. For Shakespeare he had an unbounded admiration.

Sometimes he would lie down on the sofa and read a novel, and had often two or three novels going at the same time, reading them by turns. He had a preference for eighteenth-century novels, and was especially fond of Fielding's *Tom Jones*. Among modern novelists, his favorites were Paul de Kock, Charles Lever and the elder Dumas, and Sir Walter Scott, whose *Old Mortality* he considered a masterpiece.

He had a predilection for tales of adventure and humorous stories. The greatest masters of romance were for him Cervantes and Balzac. His admiration for Balzac was so profound that he had planned to write a critique of *La Comédie Humaine* as soon as he finished his economic studies.

Even more direct evidence of Marx's literary tastes is furnished by a "confession" which he signed at the insistence of two of his daughters. It was a game, popular in the early sixties, and still often revived, of answering a set of leading questions; and from what we know of Marx there can be no doubt that his answers, while in one or two instances playful, were fundamentally serious. Asked who his "favorite poet" was, he answered: "Shakespeare, Aeschylus, Goethe." He gave his favorite prose writer as Diderot, his favorite occupation as "book worming", and — what ought to interest those critics who seem to have decided that nothing outside of the class struggle is now worth discussing — he set down his favorite maxim as "*Nihil humanum a me alienum puto*" - "I regard nothing human as alien to me".

Lenin was as little disposed to reject bourgeois culture as Marx himself. In her biographical memoir, Lenin's widow, N. K. Krupskaya, tells us that "Vladimir Ilyich [Lenin] not only read, but many times reread, Turgenev, L. Tolstoy, Chernyshevsky's *What Is To Be Done?* and in general had a fine knowledge of, and admiration for, the classics." We learn also that at one time he was very much taken up with Latin and the Latin authors; that he eagerly scanned Goethe's *Faust* in German, Heine's poems, and Victor Hugo's poems; that he liked Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya*; and that he "placed the works of Pushkin, Lermontov, and Nekrasov by the side of his bed, along with Hegel". Madame Lenin tells an amusing story of his encounter with some young Communists. "Do you read Pushkin?" he asked them. "Oh, no, he was a bourgeois. Mayakovsky for us." Lenin smiled: "I like Pushkin

better." But he admired Mayakovsky, and even praised him once for some verses deriding Soviet bureaucracy.

If supplementary evidence is needed on this point, we have it in the list published by Joshua Kunitz in the *New Masses* of January, 1932, of the volumes which Lenin ordered for his library in 1919 — "a year", Mr. Kunitz reminds us, "of economic disorganization, political counter-revolution, and impending civil war". Among the poets whose collected works were ordered were Pushkin, Lermontov, Tuitshev and Fet, and among the prose writers Gogol, Dostoyevsky, Turgenyev, Tolstoy, Alsakov and Chekhov.

Even when we pass from this record of the personal tastes of Marx and Lenin to questions of theory, we find that the author of the doctrine of Economic Determinism was far from applying it with the crude, rigid and dogmatic directness of many of those who now profess to be his followers. Unfortunately, Marx's views on the relation of literature to class are less fully set forth than we should like, but in a paper published as an appendix to *The Critique of Political Economy* he makes this significant statement:

It is well known that certain periods of highest development of art stand in no direct connection with the general development of society, nor with the material basis and the skeleton structure of its organization. Witness the example of the Greeks as compared with the modern nations or even Shakespeare.

Here is a clear acknowledgement that a work of literature is not necessarily to be dismissed as inferior because it grows out of a society in which social injustice prevails, even if it is the product of an oppressing class or of a slave-holding class. To call a work of literature "bourgeois", in other words, would not have meant for Marx that it was necessarily not a great work. And as a corollary, to call a work of art "proletarian" would not have meant for him that it was necessarily admirable.

Now that Leon Trotsky is a political exile, his ideas on any subject are presumably not as widely popular among Communists, and certainly not among the party hacks, as they once were; but his remarkable volume *Literature and Revolution*, published in America in 1925, was written when he still held office, and seems to me at bottom a development of the attitude already implicit in Marx. Like Marx himself, Trotsky is not free from inconsistencies. Certainly he often mistakes political for aesthetic criticism. He has a curiously ambivalent attitude toward the "fellow-travellers", at times praising, at times deriding them, and at times engaging in an unattractive heresy hunt. He insists, especially in the early part of his volume, on the essential class character of art. Social land-slides, he says, reveal this as clearly as geological landslides reveal the deposits of earth layers. But he

has a genuine feeling for literature and brilliant analytical powers, and the common sense and courage to contradict the dogmas of the extremists in his own party. The italics in the following quotations are mine:

It is not true that we regard only that art as new and revolutionary which speaks of the worker, and it is nonsense to say that we demand that the poets should describe inevitably a factory chimney, or the uprising against capital! ... Personal lyrics of the very smallest scope have an absolute right to exist within the new art ...

It is very true that one cannot always go by the principles of Marxism in deciding whether to reject or to accept a work of art. A work of art should, in the first place, be judged by its own law, that is, by the law of art.

Every ruling class creates its own culture, and consequently its own art ... Bourgeois culture ... has existed five centuries, but it did not reach its greatest flowering until the nineteenth century, or, more correctly, the second half of it. History shows that the formation of a new culture which centers around a ruling class demands considerable time and reaches completion only at the period preceding the political decadence of that class ...

The period of social revolution, on a world scale, will last ... decades, but not centuries ... Can the proletariat in this time create a new culture? It is legitimate to doubt this, because the years of social revolution will be years of fierce class struggles in which destruction will occupy more room than new construction. At any rate, the energy of the proletariat itself will be spent mainly in conquering power ... The cultural reconstruction which will begin when the need of the iron clutch of a dictatorship unparalleled in history will have disappeared, will not have a class character. This seems to lead to the conclusion that *there is no proletarian culture and that there never will be any*, and in fact there is no reason to regret this. The proletarian acquires power for the purpose of doing away forever with class culture and to make way for human culture. We frequently seem to forget this.

The main task of the proletarian intelligensia in the immediate future is not the abstract formation of a new culture regardless of a basis for it, but definite culture-bearing, that is, a systematic, planful, and, of course, critical imparting to the backward masses of the essential elements of *the culture which already exists* ...

It would be monstrous to conclude ... that the technique of bourgeois art is not necessary to the workers ...

It is childish to think that bourgeois belles-lettres can make a breach in class solidarity. What the worker will take from Shakespeare, Goethe, Pushkin, or Dostoevsky, will be a more complex idea of human personality, of its passions and feelings, a deeper and profounder understanding of its psychic forces and of the role of the subconscious, ...

The proletariat also needs a continuity of creative tradition. At the present time the proletariat realizes this continuity not directly, but indirectly, through the creative bourgeois intelligensia ...

I apologize for these long quotations, but as I remarked at the beginning, the majority of our own so-called Marxists are so impervious to arguments from liberal and bourgeois sources that it is necessary to direct their attention at least to the tastes and opinions of the leaders they profess to follow. These leaders obviously, dispose of a good deal of the non-sense about "proletarian literature". Those who seek to dismiss practically all existing culture by the mere process of labeling it "bourgeois" are not necessarily Marxists. They are simply new barbarians, celebrants of crudity and ignorance.

There is in most of the new American "Marxist" critics a deplorable mental confusion, and this mental confusion, as I have hinted, is not necessarily connected with Marxism. Marx himself would probably be distressed by the manner in which they abuse Marxian terms. A proletarian, for example, in Marx's use of the term, is an exploited manual worker, a factory "hand", and he remains a proletarian regardless of his political or economic views. A Communist, on the other hand, is a person who, regardless of his economic position, holds a certain definite set of opinions. Most of the new "Marxian" critics use these terms interchangeably, as if they were synonymous, and as a result some very strange things happen. A Harvard graduate like Dos Passos, for example, is hailed as a great "proletarian" novelist. Still more abusive, in a double sense, is the use of "bourgeois" to mean either a person of a certain economic status or a non-Communist. Now it should not seem particularly disgraceful not to be sweated factory worker. In this simple, descriptive, and Marxian sense of the word, Marx himself was a bourgeois economist. (As Trotsky remarks in *Literature and Revolution*, "Marx and Engels came out of the ranks of the petty bourgeois democracy and, of course, were brought up on its culture and not on the culture of the proletariat.") If this economic-status meaning were adhered to, the adjective "bourgeois" would not seem particularly damning. But it is, as I have said, used also as an emotive word, a blackjack to describe non-Communists. Full advantage is taken of its historic, non-Marxian connotations - an uncultured shopkeeper, a provincial, a timidly conventional person, a non-Bohemian, a philistine.

This emotive use of words is bound to lead to mental confusion. It is impossible to make out, for example, exactly what the new Marxists mean by a “proletarian literature”. Most of them, most of the time, appear to mean a literature *about* proletarians. Some of them, some of the time, seem to mean a literature *by* proletarians. Some of them, part of the time, mean a *communist* or *revolutionary* literature; and a few of all three of these. This hardly seems to leave much room for most of what used to be called literature.

It may be well at this point to ask just how much a culture is invalidated or suspect because it is a “class” culture. We are led to suppose, under extreme interpretations of the doctrine of economic determinism, that those opinions are mere rationalizations of our class status. Let us admit the element of truth in this; let us admit that our economic status influences the opinions of each of us, in various unconscious and subtle — and sometimes not so subtle — ways. Is it impossible for the individual to surmount these limitations? Is it impossible for him, once he has recognized this prejudice, to guard against it as he guards against other prejudices? Is the limitation of class necessarily any more compelling than the limitation of country, of race, of age, of sex? Because Proust was a Frenchman, his writing is naturally colored by his French environment; it is different from what it would have been had he lived all his life in England. But does Proust’s Frenchness diminish, to any extent worth talking of, his value to American readers? Shakespeare, as a seventeenth-century writer, was naturally limited by the lack of knowledge and many of the prejudices of his age; his age colors his work. Does that mean that he is of little value to the twentieth-century reader? Because Dreiser is a man, does he lose his value for women readers? Does Willa Cather lose hers for men readers? The answers to these questions are so obvious that it seems almost childish to ask them. The great writer with great imaginative gifts may universalize himself. If not in a literal sense, then certainly in a functional sense, he can transcend the barriers of nationality, age, and sex. And certainly he can, in the same functional sense and to the same degree, transcend the barrier of class.

Indeed, the barrier of class is perhaps in some respects less difficult to surmount than the barriers of nationality, historic era, personal age, and sex. This is no place to examine the entire basis of communism, but it can be said that it is simply not true that the modern world, particularly the American world, consists of just two sharply defined classes. Our class boundaries are notoriously vague, loose, and shifting. No doubt the contrast between those at the top and those at the bottom is just as great as the Communists say it is, but the division into just two contrasted classes is a child of the Hegelian dialectic rather than of objective fact.\*

There is the further question, never satisfactorily dealt with and perhaps not even clearly recognized by most

Communist critics, of the distinction between genesis and value. Every opinion, stated or implied, has a right to be dealt with purely on its own merits, and must be so dealt with if there is to be any intellectual clarity. The truth or value of an idea or an attitude must ultimately be judged wholly apart from the prejudices, the interests, or the income of the man who expresses it.

All this is not to say that the question of class bias is not important in literature, science, or art. It is simply to subordinate it to its proper place. It is silly and practically meaningless, for example, to say that we have a bourgeois astronomy, a bourgeois physics, a bourgeois mathematics. Here the class bias enters to so infinitesimal an extent that it is not worth talking about. But the elements of class bias may be larger in biology - as, for example, in its answers to problems of environment and heredity. When we come to the social sciences, particularly economics, the elements of class bias may be very large. In the arts they will be present less directly: they will be smaller in poetry than in fiction, smaller in painting than in poetry, smaller in music than in painting. This distinction is clearly admitted by Trotsky. What must be decided in each case is the question of *degree* of class bias and the real relevance of it. It may be sometimes relevant for the critic to point out the class bias or the class sympathy in any writer and just how it affects his work. It may be sometimes even more relevant, for that matter, to point to his religious bias, his nationalistic bias, his sexual bias, or the influence upon him of the particular historic era in which he writes. There is no reason why any one of these should receive exclusive or constant emphasis. The greatest danger, in short, of so-called Marxian criticism in literature is that the critics who make a fetish or a cult of it will in time become infinitely boring. When we are told that Emerson was bourgeois, Poe bourgeois, Mark Twain bourgeois, Proust bourgeois, Thomas Mann bourgeois, we can only reply that this may all be very true, but that we knew it in advance and that it tells us nothing. It is like telling us that Rousseau was an eighteenth century writer, that Goethe was a German, and that atheists are not Catholics. What we are interested in is what distinguishes the great writer from other persons of his class, what gives him his individuality - in brief, what makes him still worth talking about at all.

\* Certainly that division would be completely arbitrary if made on the basis of income, for one may just as well divide the American population into seventy-four “income classes” - as the National Bureau of Economic Research actually has - as into two. Nor can the division be made purely on the basis of employer and employed. A bootblack with one assistant is an “employer”; a railroad president on salary an “employee”.