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LITERATURE AND THE CRISIS

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Literature and the Crisis

Introduced and edited by Henry Hardy

Some time in early 1935, in response to encouragement, the twenty-five year old Isaiah Berlin offered the editor of the *London Mercury*, R. A. Scott-James, an article – one of the very few pieces he ever wrote on his own initiative. Scott-James had problems with it, as he explained in a letter dated 8 March 1935:

My dear Berlin,

I am enclosing your own article¹ because I hope you will be willing to make certain changes in it. I am rather in a difficulty about it from several points of view. Firstly, its theme is much closer to that presented by Michael Roberts last January² than I expected. Secondly, is it judicious so completely to brush aside everything written by anyone over 26? Or, on the other hand, really to suggest that the Bloomsbury school was ever of such very great importance? Again, and perhaps more important still, is it not damaging to Spender, Auden and Day Lewis to put them up (when they are just unfolding their wings on a first trial flight), as if they could already really be accepted as the divinely ordained spokesmen of the present and the future. I fear this will do them a harm which you do not intend, and expose them to undeserved ridicule. Also, I doubt whether *The Mercury* ought to quote from 'New Verse', a journal which is so prone to publish the worst examples of good poets' work. Can you not modify these points, to avoid the appearance of extravagant zeal? I think certain skilful changes might put it right. What you say about Blok is admirable. Do forgive me for making these objections and adding to your trouble about this article, but for your own sake, as well as mine, I feel I ought to put these points.

With best wishes [...]

This reminds me of a much longer letter Berlin received a quarter of a century later from the editor of the *Journal of the History of Ideas*, effectively rejecting his article 'Joseph de Maistre and the Origins of Fascism', which had to wait another thirty years to see print in *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*. In both cases hindsight seems to favour the author over the critic. Berlin later annotated the letter from Scott-James with the remark: 'I withdrew the article which remained unpublished; & probably destroyed it.' That was the way he used to react to negative criticism. He

¹ They were probably corresponding at the same time about another matter, perhaps one of the reviews Berlin published in the journal.

² Michael Roberts, 'Poetry and Propaganda', *London Mercury* 31 (November 1934 to April 1935) no. 183 (January 1935), 230–6.

was only too ready to believe his work inadequate, and in response to comments that cut as deep as this, he would put the piece aside rather than try to meet the points. He did reply to the letter, but Scott-James seems to have been unmoved. At all events, the piece was not published, then or later. I have not found a typescript among his papers, and it may be that, if one existed, it was indeed destroyed, though this would be rather uncharacteristic of Berlin. (However that may be, he certainly did not forget the piece, and from time to time referred to this obviously wounding episode, until the end of his life.) But various manuscript drafts do survive, and I have used the only complete one as the basis for the following text, which was published as 'A Sense of Impending Doom' in *The Times Literary Supplement*, 27 July 2001, 11–12.

[11] Everyone seems to be agreed that English imaginative literature is at present passing through a period of transition. This in itself is a trivial truth: it is obvious that any activity which is not approaching petrification is permanently in transition in the sense of passing from one state to another. When the path which it pursues is unbroken and its direction reasonably clear, we can, if we have any sense of our intellectual surroundings, predict its course without falling into serious error: the literary historian examines it as it proceeds by hardly perceptible stages from one settled attitude to another, at times disappearing below the surface, generally moving in broad daylight, always, however, in a continuous and traceable manner. When this is the case, he is faced with no serious problems; if he is accurate and moderately sympathetic he is all that he need be. But this is not always so: the process of change is sometimes troubled and spasmodic, the prevailing mood is uncertain, everything is dominated by a widespread feeling of insecurity and alarm, which occasionally, as at present, finds violent expression under the stress of an acute sense of social guilt. When this is the case, exceptional insight and flexibility of mind are required to understand it and describe it. I am not competent to do this: I only wish to draw attention to certain aspects of this phenomenon which may be omitted from any future history of our times.

No one can read the work of a poet or novelist typical of this generation without seeing how conscious these writers are of the public world in which they live, how anxious they are to connect their private or purely artistic problems with the social and political situation, the conception of which shapes their work more,

perhaps, than the reality. This fact alone, if nothing else, would serve to distinguish them sharply from their immediate predecessors, notably from the writers loosely covered by the labels of Bloomsbury and the *Criterion*, who together formed a period more interesting, fuller of critical and creative power, than any for half a century. This period is now seen to be almost, if not quite, over. Mrs Woolf or Mr Eliot may yet produce a work of genius, but nothing which they can do can appreciably alter or increase the influence which they already exercise; in relation to the new age which they themselves helped to create they are historical figures, remote enough to be seen without distortion; their magnitude can be as adequately grasped by us today as that of Henry James or D. H. Lawrence. But what concerns us now is not the past, but the present, our own restless environment, of which it is truer to say than of most periods that it lacks its own positive character, being intelligible only as a point at which two worlds meet, *chargé du passé et gros de l'avenir*.

We have already remarked that a growing sense of insecurity, and in particular of uneasiness about social and political phenomena and their relations with art, distinguishes it from the more personal and introspective past. When the history of this age comes to be written and the development of Europe is surveyed as a whole, the troubled period in England will be seen in the light of parallel stages in the evolution of other nations. The patient historian, after considering more familiar countries, will sooner or later come to examine the course of events in Russia: here he will, possibly to his own surprise, be richly rewarded, for reasons which I shall attempt to show.

Analogies with the Russian situation are, in the case of modern literature, nearly always profitable, since everything in its history is so much more dramatic and exaggerated than anything anywhere else, is invariably such an extreme instance of its kind, that it can be made to act as a standard of comparison by which to order its analogues. Moreover Russian writers, being, as a rule, highly introspective, articulate and prolific, have left a complete record of their desires and feelings at various periods; particularly of the state of mind of that very definite body, the intelligentsia (a class which does not exist in England, its place being filled by isolated groups which appear sporadically and live intensively but not for long), in

its last and most tragic phase during the years of war and revolution.

A very remarkable, sometimes uncannily prophetic, analysis of its condition is contained in a series of essays, extending over fifteen years, written by Alexander Blok, a poet of great genius who, as poets often are, was also an acute and sensitive critic more profoundly aware of the unique character of his time than any of his contemporaries, not excluding Gorky. In his youth he wrote exquisitely lovely and moving lyrical poems full of personal, sometimes highly exotic, symbolism; he was at that time greatly influenced by Pushkin, Nietzsche and the French Symbolist poets and was absorbed almost entirely in artistic and personal problems.

The Russian revolution of 1905 changed the course of his life. He became acutely uneasy about what seemed to him the enormous gulf between the intellectual and the masses; he was too clever and too honest to suppose that it could be bridged by some heroic act of conversion or renunciation on the part of the intellectual – a change of mind, or even a change of heart, which would transform his nature but preserve him from destruction. His poetry, but even more his prose, became obsessed with the persistent question of how artists could continue to live and work in the artificial and isolated condition into which they were being driven faster and faster by the menaces and gathering forces of revolution. He is perpetually divided between terror of the new, barbarian invasion, much vaster and wilder than the last, which is about to overwhelm the Western world, and passionate hope that it will sweep away every trace of the old, corrupt, unhappy order, will free humanity and emancipate the individual artist, who is slowly being suffocated in his contracting universe, a private world originally built in self-defence which is steadily growing narrower and darker. He is quite certain (nine years before the event) that a débâcle of enormous dimensions is imminent, and notes the helpless and divided attitude of the stricken intelligentsia:

I think that no one in the last generation succeeded in freeing himself from a sense of impending catastrophe. This is due to the enormous accumulation of real facts, some of which are in the past while others may occur at any moment. It is only too natural that people try every device they can think of in order to drown this feeling, they want to smother their memories, not to think certain thoughts, they want to

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believe that events are taking their normal course, to ignore the real facts, which contrive somehow or other to remind them relentlessly of what has happened already and of what has yet to occur.

And there are others who have given up, who no longer cope:

In everything they do they are obsessed by the feeling that there is a something looming somewhere behind them, which alone can resolve the doubts and suffering; without this release, this final solution, nothing is worth doing at all, [12] everything becomes pointless.

It is as though our generation found itself near a bomb. Everyone will, of course, behave according to his character and temper: some approach gingerly and try to take the thing to pieces, to make it harmless. Some, their eyes starting with terror, torture themselves with the question: 'Will it burst or not? Will it go off or won't it?' Others pretend that nothing at all unusual has occurred, that the curious round object lying on the table is not a bomb at all, but merely a large orange; it is all part of an enormous joke, of an innocuous and, indeed, rather enjoyable piece of fooling. Finally there are those who are in the act of running away as fast as their feet can carry them, but trying at the same time to leave all doors open, to come to some satisfactory arrangement by which their faces will be saved, the proprieties preserved, and no mention of cowardice be made by anyone.³

This was written in 1908, and was a most accurate diagnosis of the situation, which lasted for another decade. My point is that, whether by accident or by the operation of an obscure law of historical parallelism, it is relevant to the contemporary situation in England, at any rate so far as literature is concerned, or at least so far as those writers are concerned who are in the main tradition of this literature, who are its future; these are always easily distinguishable from the isolated individual artists or artistic groups who pursue independent aims, whether they be men of genius like Donne or Hopkins, or men of original talent like Landor or Wyndham Lewis, or purely decorative figures, ingenious virtuosi, like the Sitwells. The only figures of size who are moving in any common and definite direction are those of Auden, Spender and Day Lewis. They must by now be tired and resentful of the fact

³ From 'Stikhiya i kul'tura' ('The Element and Culture'), a talk given on 30 December 1908. This passage may be found in Alexander Blok, *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 5 (Moscow/ Leningrad, 1962), pp. 350–1.

that they are invariably discussed together and judged collectively: but it is nevertheless true that in such matters public opinion makes few mistakes; nor is this one, for they form a genuine movement.

The analysis made by the Russian poet touches them closely: for the intolerable tension, the scattered, fitful, occasionally melodramatic character of their latest work, comes from the social conditions under which they write. Their sense of approaching disaster is as vivid as that of the Russian: they are as conscious as he that in the sultry period which immediately precedes a revolution it is impossible to go on working in a private world, shutting out all intimations of the storm, in order, as it would be said, to preserve their integrity, their personal attitude; in order to deal with purely artistic problems. The necessity which exists for the artist in ordinary times to build walls within which he can preserve his own scale of values (whether derived from some established tradition or not) – this, which is the prerequisite of normal creative work, is now literally out of the question. Those who have failed to see this, like Mr Eliot, who will not stir beyond his threshold, beyond the closed doors and windows of his painfully constructed universe, only succeed in saving their doctrine at the expense of their art and the sense of reality with which it is bound up. This rigorism has a heroic quality, but it has become fanatical and is hostile now to the very essence of creative art, which, save in the case of the solitary figures already mentioned, cannot afford to reject the external world which is its material and its end; where its course is catastrophic, the poet must say so:

Machines created by clergymen and boys
 Lured them like magnets from marl and clay
 Into towns on the coal measures, crowded and dark
 Where the careful with the careless drove a bitter bargain,
 But saved in the act the seeds of a hatred
 Which, germinating in tenement and gas-lit cellar
 While she who was not amused was our sun,
 Is now bursting the floors of beautiful mansions
 Where their sons sit certain of their safety still,
 And will shake the world in a war to which

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The last was only a little manoeuvre.⁴

This is the authentic note, as heard in Russia in 1909 or thereabout; even more so is this:

The timely warnings of the tender to the tough
Grow more insistent; pierce them we must
Or in a scandalous explosion of the stolid perish.⁵

The poet is obliged to speak the truth which he alone may see clearly for

He greets the
Historians of the future, the allies of no city,
O man and woman minute beneath their larger day;
Those burrowing beneath frontier, shot as spies because
Sensitive to new contours; those building insect cells
Beneath the monstrous shell of ruins; altering
The conformation of masses, that at last conjoin
Accomplished in justice to reject a husk.⁶

These poets write always with one eye on the bomb, waiting for it to burst: until this happens they will have no peace, everything they write will have it, or the fear of it, or the expectation of it, as its central point of reference, the factor by which their behaviour is determined. Will it go off or won't it? Will there or will there not be a social revolution? Somehow we must come to terms with the masses, must identify ourselves with their demands and sufferings and ultimate destiny, which daily grows bigger in the world in which artists live and work.

This is not the doctrine of Lucretius or of Beethoven (not to speak of Tolstoy), who held that art was an instrument with which to rescue humanity from suffering and delusion. Nor is it the Communist (and, so far as it has one, Fascist) view that art cannot be justified save as a social weapon. They believe, or act as if they believe, that the artist's function is to evince his personal experience in the medium best fitted to convey it, precisely and

⁴ W. H. Auden, 'Speech from a Play', *New Verse* No 13 (February 1935), p. 11.

⁵ *ibid.*

⁶ Stephen Spender, *Vienna* (London, 1934), pp. 42–3.

directly, in a detached manner, the artist being altogether kept out of his work; to evince is to show forth, to exhibit the analysis, not to teach, or state, or describe, which the psychologist, the secretary and the historian do better.

When one's experience takes place in a society in which social and political issues are so crucial that they colour everything, the artist of integrity who has no axe to grind, either political or anti-political, will, in his work, reflect the degree to which politics permeate the experience which is his material. In the present case the mood seems one of pressing haste: there is no time, the bomb may burst at any moment, or at least looks as if it may. The artist lacks that ample sense of leisure, assurance of being able to move unimpeded and build a careful and spacious framework for his thoughts, to conceive his poem or his picture slowly, secure in the knowledge that his landmarks and familiar world will not be dynamited overnight, leaving him isolated among its ruins, with all his activity robbed of relevance and meaning, his values part of a defunct order suddenly made to look silly and anachronistic. Yet it is only where this stability obtains that works can, as in the Renaissance, not only be in fact, but be conceived as, for all time.

I do not say that it is impossible for a great masterpiece to be composed by anyone now, or even by anyone who, like these poets, thinks that he lives on the edge of a volcano; but only that anyone who, like them, is a human being no less than an artist, living in a society and conscious of its condition – or rather, if being an artist is not a separable attribute, but the way one is made as a human being, any artist who truly believes that the bomb is not an orange or a toy or an illusion but is ticking away steadily and will presently alter our fate – has two ways in which he can act and two only.

Either one can, like a man condemned to death who commits suicide to avoid the agony of suspense, act as though all was already over, as though the revolution had occurred, and turn one's art into a party weapon, that is, deny the possibility of continuing in one's profession, and turn one's skill to some useful end in a world in which art – disinterested creation – is no longer possible. This is a form of social re-insurance which promises safety in either case. It is the step taken by those Communist poets who explain that poetry is, and always has been, a Party weapon, who attempt to forget their past, hoping that this new faith will

still their fears and give them peace. To exchange one life as a poet for another is tantamount to artistic suicide: this may be a metaphor, but from it it is only a step to literal suicide, as may be seen from the well-known fact that the communist poets Esenin and Mayakovsky both took it; and this cannot be explained away by saying that after all they were both Russians and therefore probably mad in any case.

A crisis may arise in which censorship is morally justifiable, but to be in the least degree effective it must remain negative: it may be just to tell writers what not to write, or not to write at all; and it may be granted that the society in which this may occur is not necessarily Mr Auden's

unprogressive blind society
Knowing no argument but the absolute veto.⁷

Such a measure may be tragic, but it is not fatal, it does not kill. But to tell writers what they must say and how, if they find nothing in their own experience which forces them to say it in any case, is to order them to contradict their nature. If their art is genuine at all they cannot do this for long, however anxious they may be to obey; the swift decline of Russian films is an example of the law that, whereas a work of art may be one-third tendentious and still be beautiful, it cannot be nine-tenths propaganda and remain a work of art of any kind. This is valid psychologically as well as morally.

There is only one other possibility: to do what Auden, Spender and Day Lewis do; what was in fact done by Blok himself. They tell the truth about their experience of the present, just as it comes, and about their insight into the immediate future, which poets, being more sensitive to change, seem to discern so much more accurately than specialists absorbed each in his subject; tell this truth immediately, before it cools, before the scene changes completely or the world has tumbled about their ears, and therefore in great haste and incompletely. Often this is bound to cause their work to be part poetry and part material for poetry. Indeed this is what occurs again and again in Stephen Spender's poem *Vienna*, remarkable if only because it marks the end of a long

⁷ loc cit. (p. 7).

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period of introspection: its great defect is precisely this inability always to assimilate the raw stuff of experience into a unified artistic whole; lines of pure poetry are succeeded by unworked patches of what is almost prose. But the unfinished, half-formed character of the writing of these poets is a defect of their virtue: their very experience is unfinished because the time itself is in a sense unfinished, or so at least it looks to them. They know that they could go on trading on their past experience and turn out satisfying poems in the old technique. They choose to deal with the world in which they actually live. The bomb may not go off, or even be a curious mass illusion. If so, so much the worse for their political sagacity. This cannot diminish the value of what they write: they, far more than anyone, make the sensitive individual of our generation conscious of his and their attitude to the time in which we live, of the uniqueness of the novel human relations of which it is made, of their present and their future. This, to return to our beginning, is the sense in which their poetry is poetry of transition; to see this is to understand the character of their work, the reason for it, and its value.

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