

A note on my dialectic

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About the age of 14-15 (as I have told in *Life Rarely Tells* [1958]) I began to be interested in poetry and in Greek mythology. Keats, in his poems and letters, affected me strongly with the idea of Beauty as a form of Truth, Truth as a form of Beauty. That is, the idea that the formative forces at work in human beings sought to bring about new balances or structures which had found in Beauty their highest point of integration, and that Truth was not a mere correctness of factual statement but the moment of grasping how those forces thus worked. I would not then have phrased my intuitive responses in those terms, but it was along such lines of thinking that I was moved to a passionate conviction of the dynamic and creative nature of Keatsian Truth-Beauty. I was seeking to grasp the nature of development and was reacting against mechanistic interpretations of life. There were idealistic elements in my formulations, but I was also rejecting idealism and saw in the term God only an evasion of the issues. I felt in poetry and art a force that broke through accepted levels or structures of thought, and that held the vital clue to new and more integrated forms of life. Keats said that, in listening to an unseen singer with a lovely voice, one imagined the beautiful face. 'That face you will see.' Thus from the outset I felt in poetry the clue to the forward-movement of life, the forces that would somehow beget new qualitative levels, forms, modes of spirit and body (matter), new unities. From Shelley I gained a feeling of elemental energies ceaselessly reasserting themselves in nature and in humanity, akin at all levels, though the levels were not identical.

How the links between artform and life operated I had no idea, beyond a desperate feeling that I must give a total obedience to what I

felt the creative element in poetry and art, which was somehow connected with the impulse to find unions outside oneself, especially in love, in sexual experiences. Somehow the criterion of Truth-Beauty distinguished what was valuable in the releases of that impulse, in the union it brought about. There was a growing feeling that society as I knew it was organised on lines hostile to the release of the creative impulse, though how or why I had little idea. For a while I had something of a personal cult of St Francis of Assisi, which omitted the religious terms and was concerned only with the rejection of everything that did not simply and directly help towards love, union, the acceptance of the sanctity of all living.

By the age of 17-18 I had come on Plato and Blake, each of whom from different angles strengthened the convictions started off by Keats. Plato gave me the idea of a triadic movement of thought on to new levels, new centres of knowledge and self-expression. The reactionary forces in society held back this movement, but again I had little idea of how and why. The doctrine of supernal Forms that ultimately determined the breakthrough on to new levels of comprehension, I neither rejected nor accepted in any definite way. I saw such Forms rather in a Keatsian sense as the directive core in the moment of creative achievement, without asking how they got there. (I struggled to grasp the dialectics of Herakleitos, which I found stimulating and baffling.)

From Blake I gained clearly the concept of contraries or opposites continually merging to bring about new unities, the forward movement of life, and I saw in his Prophetic Books the dramatisation of the struggle. Here I felt was the working-out of the Keatsian system, a poetic definition which brought powerfully out into the open the entangled and submerged tumult of my deepest emotions and aspirations. (For the next 60 or so years I was indeed to return every now and then to Blake to test out what I had learned and to reformulate the ideas which I felt seething in his work.)

By the age of 19, making use of the library at the Queensland University, I had read and pondered Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* and several works by Bergson, Croce, Gentile, Alexander, as well as parts of Hegel and Goethe. My concept of dialectics was enlarged, even if there was much in the work of these thinkers that confused or eluded me. (I was studying also the poetry of Donne and the so-called Metaphysical Poets.) I was strongly affected by Bergson's *Time and Free Will*; and henceforth the question of Time haunted me: Time as the repetitive and mechanistic system of the clock, which I recognised as lying at the heart of all the science with which I was acquainted — though I kept on trying to understand Einstein in the hope that he

had broken through the systems based on abstract Time; and Time as the concrete moment of experience, which involved the dialectical leap into new unities, new qualities, new vital relationships.

One way or another this problem of Time has remained with me: abstract and concrete time. Here I felt lay the core of the struggle between life and death, between a forward movement on to new levels and a ceaseless inhibitory repetition of unchanging systems. I was unaware at the time how Bergson had affected so many writers, from Proust to Joyce; in any event my response had an element which I think was not present in the others. The concrete moment was for me creative in the Keatsian sense, revolutionary in the Blakean sense.

I had also read Freud, interpreting his terms and symbols rather in terms of a Blakean universe. The struggle, as I saw it, was to transform the unconscious, the whole mass of sensuous and emotional reactions heaped up from the moment of birth, into the creative image of art, which put order into the inner universe of conflicting urges, and gave life a valid meaning and direction, even though the next moment the achieved structure and balances were threatened and had to be realised afresh on a new level, in a new situation. Those who failed to resolve the conflict were torn by divided impulses or stupefied into an inert acceptance of the existing world with all its unbalances, injustices, falsifications.

My ideas were given a yet further field in which to operate when I read Jane Harrison's *Ancient Art and Ritual*, then her *Themis* and *Prolegomena*. Greek mythology, in which I had been so interested from the angle of its poetic presentations, its symbolic redefinitions, came fully alive, linked with the rituals through which the peoples of tribal societies in various stages of development had striven to understand and control their lives, in both the individual and the social aspects. Here was expressed their dynamic relation to nature as well as the living structure of the group's experience, the transformative unions and conflicts. The concept of art and its functions was richly extended. Above all I was affected by Gilbert Murray's excursus on Tragedy in *Themis*, in which the basis of Greek drama in initiation ritual and its structure, its imagery of death and rebirth (the passage of one level of life or experience to another), was brought out. The dialectic of change and development was given a crucially important new field, which was seen to have deeply affected the interpretations of both history and individual growth. I returned to the books of Spencer and Gillen on Australian aborigines which my mother had and on which I had browsed in early years.

Now in 1919-20 came the reunion with my father, Norman. I became the disciple of the positions he had set out in *Creative Effort*.

This meant for a decade the sharp limitation of the ideas I had been struggling to grasp and develop. Those ideas were cut down to a Blakean scheme of Los the artist, aided by his emanation Enitharmon (with whom he came also in conflict), as the sole constructive force in a universe falling into darkness, contracting to dead mechanisms, to the limit of opacity, Satan. Los by his imagery, his rhythmic formations, resisted the fall and set into action the contrary movement of integration and joyous self-realisation. With these positions there came an end to the efforts I had been making to relate art positively to social process. The mass of mankind were seen as inert, unresponsive to dynamic Form, and therefore always liable to surrender to the evil pressures of disintegration and repression, with money and things as their sole aim, their spiritual reflection.

The one important new element was the thought of Nietzsche. Here the Hegelian dialectic was narrowed down to an existentialist ethic of the Free Spirit (whom we identified with the Artist) opposed to the servile masses. Nietzsche thus strongly reinforced the very worst aspects of the N.L. aesthetic, its elitist and racist components. But there were elements which I could validly link with elements of my previous thinking: the concept of the Beyond-Man. The *Übermensch* was the moment, the leap into an intensified freedom, human fullness, significant activity; he represented the dialectical movement beyond a given state or level, which was necessary if that state or level was not to stagnate and degenerate. (To see him as a Superman was to vulgarise the concept hopelessly, though he did also represent an ideal of transformative living.) Life was seen as a ceaseless struggle to transcend the limitations of the existing stage of things with a fuller and more unified consciousness, which at once pervaded all spheres of life and action.

Man is a rope stretched between beast and *Übermensch*, a rope over an abyss. Perilous is the crossing, perilous the way, perilous the backward look, perilous all trembling and halting by the way. Man is great in that he is a bridge and not a goal: man can be loved in that he is a transition and a perishing . . . I love them which greatly scorn because they also greatly adore; they are arrows of longing for the further shore.

The concept of the *Übermensch* thus merged with that of concrete Time which I had built up out of Bergson. Life was seen as forever breaking through any formulation that could be made of it. Every image, definition, expression, however powerful and effective in its resolution of the opposites or contradictions with which it grappled, could never encompass perfectly the situation it tackled. Life in its endless potentialities, conflicts, harmonies, burst through every

definition or organisation made out of it. The very success of any such definition or organisation deepened the emerging problems, the contradictory complexities of the issues to be grasped and expressed, so that it started off the whole struggle on a new and more demanding level. (I opened my *Dionysus* (1928) with the aphorism that it was the function of thought, not to solve the riddle of the universe, but to create it.)

The years 1921-25 saw the first working-out of this phase, with the periodical *Vision*. Then came the movement to London through the Fanfrolico Press. Though I held generally to the N.L. positions till 1930-31, new stresses and strains kept appearing as I sought to grapple with the modernist world and its expressions more directly and fully. I set out my own version of the N.L. universe in *Dionysus* and *William Blake* (1927), while in the essays written for *The London Aphrodite* the attempt to deal with contemporary culture showed the first stages of a movement to a new synthesis.

During these years I sought to write poems which defined a moment of pure sensuous enjoyment, and verse-plays which used a fusion of Elizabethan, romantic (Keats to Beddoes), and contemporary idioms and rhythms to express, first the liberated image, then the inner conflicts of love that broke down the aspirations of a life lived-out in pure sensuous enjoyment. (Also in *Marino Faliero* (1927) I tried to deal with the revolutionary political impulse which I had now put behind me, using the N.L. line of Justice as a social concept impossible of actualisation on earth.) In my poem on Beethoven's C sharp minor quartette I attempted a lyrically philosophic statement of our beliefs. I had moved to the position that the only kind of imagery capable of grappling with the modern situation was that which moved beyond the romantic synthesis to that of symbolism. I called this style the Colour Image and saw Wagner as the supreme creator of such imagery in terms of both lyrical immediacy and dramatic conflict.

The writers who from my later teens had most strongly affected me as having most deeply and comprehensively defined the structure of experience in its full social context were Scott, Balzac, Dostoevsky, with Shakespeare in verse — though I also read and reread with much sympathy many other Elizabethans, Marlowe, Webster, Chapman, Jonson, Donne.

Finally the unresolved conflicts came to a head in 1930-31, as told in *Fanfrolico and After* (1962), to bring about a total revolt from the N.L. positions. For some years of extreme poverty I struggled to rebuild a world view on the ruins: not in an abstract philosophic way, but as an integral part of the effort to find a basis in work. A basis that

would enable me to carry on living and at the same time continue to express the Keatsian concept of Truth-Beauty in terms of the experiences of the previous twenty years. At all costs I had to find a new system or structure, aesthetic, moral, philosophic, for my writing, which would pass all the tests I had developed. One which carried on what I still felt as valid in my previous stages but got rid of the confusions and falsities, the limitations, that had led to the crisis of 1930-31.

I turned to prose, to the novel, feeling that there was the best medium through which to build up the more objective world view for which I was struggling. I wrote a novel with a contemporary theme, *Flat Dwellers*, in which the main character was a young girl who after various sexual experiences decides, though she has had a child, to reject all half-measures and rely on herself alone. And a fantasy about an Earth of Satyrs and Centaurs, which is destroyed through war and an explosion brought about by mad scientists. (It thus prophesied the way in which the science of our divided world was moving towards nuclear fission.) The few publishers I approached were not interested. Then I at last came through by turning to the historical novel and starting a trilogy set in the period of the Caesarian revolution.

I can best explain how I arrived at the new basis by turning to the poems of Catullus, which I had translated with a long exegesis for the Fanfrolico Press. I had seen in him the existential individual vividly depicted in his poetry. Now I sought to grasp and unfold the world implicated there, the social totality refracted in the individual experience. To reverse the process that had created the poems, to expand them back into the society that had made Catullus possible, with his intense reaction to immediate events. I saw the individual caught up in a complex pattern of social, economic, political mediations. (I did not yet use the term of Lukács, but it best explains what I was working to.) The mediations somehow came together in a dynamic moving unity. The pattern was refracted variously in the individuals making up the society, so that some dominant aspects of the totality were vitally at work in each one, but never with exactly the same mixture in any two persons — though there was an ultimate connection in the dynamic whole. Never in quite the same way even in the same person at different moments, though there was an ultimate unity of the self. At moments the compacting or unifying element predominated, at other moments the contradictory or unbalancing elements asserted themselves and there was profound and lasting conflict, which carried on till a new balance emerged.

I was still vague or confused as to the key-forces creating balance or unbalance (in individual or society), but I struggled to grasp the way

in which they concretely operated at the given moment of history: that of the Caesarian revolution. I began with Catilina and his revolt, analysing and interlinking all the ancient or modern accounts I could get; and tried, by going as deep as I could into the human situation, to disentangle the main historical patterns, social and political. I then went on to the crisis after the murder of Caesar; and after that to the conflict between Augustus and Antony, the battle of Actium, when a new balance was at last achieved.

I cannot here go further into my work as a novelist, which continued for more than thirty years. Already in 1937, in *End of Cornwall*, I tried to extend the method to the contemporary scene, though it was not till the postwar series, *The British Way*, that I fully grappled with that scene. From the outset I may claim that my method was simultaneously existential and historical, seeking to see the individual in all the immediacies of his reaction to the moment, while setting that moment in a definite historical situation — so that in the last resort the personal situation was dialectically linked with the social or historical. Two more writers who affected me in the 1930s must be mentioned, Proust and Tolstoy. Proust strengthened the sense of the existentialist moment, though he abstracted that moment from the structures of development; Tolstoy helped me to strengthen in every way the positions at which I had arrived, making me realise ever more acutely the problem of the living relationship of the individual and the moving whole. Near the end of the 30s I read Lukács on Scott, and felt that his analysis clarified further what I was seeking to do.

While at work on my Roman trilogy, I rented by chance a cottage in which the previous tenant had left a large collection of anthropological works. I was thus able to read the theorists and synthesisers, Morgan, Frazer, Cook, Rendel Harris, Hartland, Crawley (*The Mystic Rose*) and many others as well as Malinowsky and various field-workers in Africa and Polynesia. I also studied afresh ancient religion and the origins and developments of Christianity. Such studies in time led to the two versions of the *Short History of Culture* (1939, 1962) as well as books like *The Clashing Rocks* (1965) and *Helen of Troy* (1974). But they also permeated my whole approach to the questions of culture, my sense of history and of the relations of the individual and the social whole.

By 1935 I realised, as I turned more and more to look at the actual political scene in Europe, that it was time I read Marx. I started on *Capital* and other writings of his, as well on works by Lenin. At once I felt that here was the clue to bringing together my ideas in something like a fully coherent whole. I may claim that I had worked out in my



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own way both a dialectical method and a theory of historical materialism, but I had not produced a stable structure. I read Marx with a sense of immense illumination, and felt that at last my converging systems of thought had found the full basis of dialectical interrelationship which I had been seeking. Then the Spanish Civil War broke out and I felt myself drawn passionately into the political struggle, with the idea of human unity given flesh and blood. I now took as my theme in historical novels the moments of decisive change and great popular forward-movement in England.

In many ways the most important element for me in Marx's thinking was his concept of alienation and commodity-fetishism. This enabled me, I felt, to make secure sense of the work I had been doing in anthropology and to realise the continuity between the first forms of spiritual-social division among human beings from the days when the separation out from nature was reflected in ideas of the churinga, soul-object or external soul, and related rituals. There seemed to me a clear chain of spiritual and social states of being that led from the churinga through a vast number of forms of the soul-object into money and into religion proper, with its division of body and soul. Marx showed how the final stage of this development came with the bourgeois reduction of people to things. (His careful use of the term *fetichism*, it seemed to me, proved that he would have welcomed the full anthropological analysis, not yet possible in his day, of the way in which inner and outer division, dialectically linked, had led finally to bourgeois commodity-production. The free human being was not only one who had been liberated from all forms of exploitation; he was also one liberated from commodity-production. I have however found all Marxists, orthodox or not, to be hostile to such an approach. I once sent a considered essay on the subject to *New Left Review*, and had it returned without comment within a few days.)

I attempted to apply my concept of dialectics in a large and diverse number of fields, which I cannot analyse here. But I wish to make the point that 'application' was never a matter of using a rigidly given set of ideas and forcing the material into their pattern. The concept must spring from the inner life and movement of the material, and only then be generalised. (For this reason the structural system evolving was never stressed, and so did not seem to exist to readers who could only recognise it if it were abstracted and set over against the material.) From the start I felt that the extension of dialectics into new fields was also a clarification and development of the methods used. If what one found was merely a system already formulated in abstract terms, then there was something wrong with the exploration and with the terms. I was helped in this position by the one element in Nietz-

sche which I felt to be valid and which remained with me (as discussed above), and by my study of Giordano Bruno, his struggle to transform philosophy and to grasp reality as a single dynamic process in which form and matter are inseparably united and in which opposites are dialectically fused. 'It is profound magic to know how to draw out the contrary after having found the point of union.' The devoted life of Bruno stirred me deeply. I wrote a novel on him, *Adam of a New World* (1936), and later translated his *Cause, Principle, and Unity* (1962), with critical apparatus.

I thus came early (1944) into conflict with the orthodox defenders of Marxism in a thesis in which I set out the idea of culture (art, poetry, science and so on) as a form of production without which there could be no human existence, no movement forward. Culture was thus dialectically linked with economic activity, but not in any mechanistic way derived from it. My ideas were totally rejected. I was further attacked as wholly on the wrong track when I published *Marxism and Contemporary Science* (1949). One of my points was that conflict or contradiction could only be dialectically grasped as occurring inside a unity; and I went on to analyse the positions in various scientific fields to bring out what elements there were dialectically based or capable of dialectical development. I had been much affected by meeting L. L. Whyte and discussing these problems with him. He set out the ideas soon after published in *The Unitary Principle in Physics and Biology*. His analyses were much concerned with the part played by symmetry and asymmetry in the structure and development of matter. Starting with Curie's aphorism that the asymmetry created the phenomenon, he went on to show subtly how development occurred through the reassertion of symmetry in an asymmetrical situation. I felt strongly that such ideas enabled one to produce a fully critical focus on post-Galilean science with its basis in stable states, in symmetry. With Einstein, Planck, nuclear or particle physics, the possibility, the necessity, of a new science, dialectically based, was present. Nuclear fission, I came to realise, was the final disastrous working-out of bourgeois science with its mechanistic basis. These positions underlay my books on ancient science, coming to a head with *Blastpower and Ballistics* (1974).

Only in Poland was there any serious evaluation of my book, in a long critical but sympathetic essay.

While continuing to attempt to 'apply' my Marxism in novels, poetry, historical or anthropological works, in biographies of writers or artists, and so on, I did my best to recast my direct formulations more effectively. In the 1960s I wrote two works on Alienation, Bureaucracy in Socialism, and allied topics, but could not get them

published. Finally I put my ideas together in a book, *The Crisis in Marxism* (1981), that attempted to analyse the main expressions of Marxist thought after 1917 — in Stalin, Lukács, Bloch, the Frankfurt School,* Althusser, Della Volpe, Colletti — and to present my version of an open Marxism, diametrically opposed to all closed systems: to the dogma of 'the complete, harmonious, consistent system of all the views and teachings of Marx' (Lenin), and to the various confused or one sided attempts to break through the dogmatic positions. In such a version the contradiction between a dialectical system expounding human history and a mechanistic system ruling in science is at last broken down. That at least is how I see it.

Despite all the changes, the many confusions as well as steady efforts to integrate afresh my ideas in order to tackle ever larger issues, I feel a deep and living continuity between my positions as set out in 1981 and those with which I was struggling over sixty years ago in my responses to Keats, Plato, Blake.

* In Adorno the element in Nietzsche, which I have praised as a defence against dogmatism, is carried to its extreme. The result is a demoralising parody in which nothing whatever can be said of life which is not at once falsified. But to reach this position it was necessary also for Adorno, like the others of his School, to consider the working-class hopelessly integrated into capitalism, so that no class or alliance could ever break through the impasse of alienation and resolve the bourgeois contradictions.