Towards a Marxist Aesthetic

ONE

When I joined Norman Lindsay as a disciple of his world-outlook (set out in his *Creative Effort*) in 1919-20, I brought in the concept of the Image. We made much use of the term, but I cannot recall any attempt to define it. The image seemed such an obvious element of art that we assumed an understanding of its nature in anyone responsive to the creative process. Now, seeking to explain the term, I feel that one may define it as the specific aesthetic quality which distinguishes a work of art from other forms of expression. For us it was the word become Flesh: the Idea in its distinctively sensuous manifestation. It could thus refer both to the work of art as a whole or to any of its parts. The unifying element was the image revealed in the work's totality; but each unit or facet of the work also had its aspect of sensuous immediacy, so that the totality was a cluster of images. Not, however, of images arithmetically added or strung together. Since the relationships were always dynamic and sensuous, one image merged into another while owning its distinctive moment, its contribution to the totality — to the deep central image which controlled the units and harmonized or contrasted them with one another, and gave them their place in the meaning and effect of the whole. The force bringing

about the interrelations within the unity was Rhythm.

In our system the creative image was seen as owning a unity superior to that of the organizations of nature, so that it provided the dynamic making possible for men all other constructions, social, economic, scientific, and so on. I was influenced by the Platonic concept of Forms, or *Eidê;* but there was an unrealized conflict in my ideas, which later became fruitful. Though I accepted Norman's view that the ultimate source of Form lay in the spirit-world — a position which fitted in with Platonic transcendence — I also thought of the image as itself embodying a formative principle which was that of all life.[1]

The image-unit, while often having a pictorial or plastic quality, was seen above all as dynamic and transformative. Two examples of favourite passages will show what I mean: "like bended moon that leans her lusty side" (Wyatt) and "Those milky paps that through the window-bars bore at men's eyes" (Shakespeare). In the first case, the two pictorial images (moon and naked girl) are fused to produce something new, in which both nature and mankind share; in the second case the idea of visual impact is given a great force by being interpreted in terms of drilling, of physical entry.

Though I have long since thrown out the transcendental aspects of *Creative Effort,* I feel that the concept of the Image arrived at in 1919, which was derived from my response to a large number of expressions (above all, Keats, Blake, Donne, Shakespeare, Beethoven, Theokritos and so on), had some genuine virtues and already raised the question of the relation of parts and whole in a work of art.[2]

TWO

In the years 1931-6 I went through the difficult experience of rejecting my previous ideas, while seeking to find what, if anything, had been valid in them, and how I was to bring the concept of formative process securely down to earth, with all

abstract or idealizing impositions removed. First, I used psychoanalysis to release myself from the fantasies born out of the unrealized elements in my relations to my parents. But this did not lead to some easy reconciliation with the outer world, with society; on the contrary it convinced me that the irrationalities I found in myself were at every point bound up with the hopeless irrationalities of the society in which I had grown up. And for some time this made me seek for ways of achieving a pure union with the life-flow, outside all the connections which seemed to lead at once into complicity with evil, with the tyrannical forces lurking under all the social masks.

In a desperate attempt to get back to origins, I turned to anthropology and felt that the pure life-flow found a true expression in the rituals organizing tribal systems. Here was the naked imagery of death and birth, with the ritual expressing the movement or passage between two levels of life. And here at last there was an undistorted relation of individual experience and social process, in a form which merged both in turn in natural process. At this stage, whether linked with birth and death themselves, with initiation and marriage, or with attempts to stimulate fertility (ever more life) in both group and nature, the death-birth ritual was the core of all expressions, drawing together music, song, story-telling, myth, pictorial art. It provided the ideas and terms for grasping and defining all forms of growth, change, development.

But even if all that were true, what use was the discovery to someone marooned on a desert island in the midst of an advanced class-society? Surely the original clues could not have been entirely lost. They must have survived in broken-up forms and modes of expression, even if confused and distorted. I set myself to study what happened in tribal societies as definite forms of private property, variation in status and power, and so on, appeared, especially after the advent of agriculture. The crucial question could not but be what happened with the Greeks; and it became clear that Greek drama preserved the

structure of the death-birth ritual, lifting it to a new level. In that drama we see the conflict of two deeply opposed forces, a disaster or death (sacrifice), an account of the disaster or death, a lament, a discovery (called by Aristotle the moment of recognition), and a theophany (rebirth or resurrection). The way this basic structure is developed in our surviving ancient tragedies has inevitable variations; for the drama between Aischylos and Euripides represents a matured artform which individual poets to some extent develp on their own. But the underlying link with initiation-experience is clear.

Here the relation of free artform and ritual structure is still close enough to be traceable; in later phases of European culture the link grows looser and more hidden, but the tradition carries on, at times with new infusions from folk-levels in which there is tribal detritus. In all expression that truly lays hold of the pattern of development, the essential elements of the old ritual structure are revived. For such expression re-creates the tensions of individual and group, of group and nature, and realizes afresh the successful passage through the crisis-moment of change.

This attempt of mine to get back to origins had Australian roots. As a child I had often looked through the books of Spencer and Gillen on the tribes of Central Australia, which my mother had (no doubt they had been Norman's). About the age of thirteen, at the time I first tackled Shakespeare, I tried to read them. In 1918-19 I entered the cultural anthropology of the Greeks through the work of Jane Harrison. I was now returning to those experiences. And I recognized also that the structure of the psychoanalytic process (as distinct from Freud's metaphysical interpretations or the failures of individual psychoanalysts to apply the method effectively) was closely related to that of the initiation experience: the union and conflict of the two persons (analyst and patient), the climax of the conflict in the self-identification of the latter with the former, then the dramatic recoil into the self with a recognition of

reality which brought out all the hidden factors and created the possibility of a new freedom. In this dialectical process one saw revealed the essential structure of all movements of self-knowledge which brought together outer and inner in a new unity.[3]

THREE

At this point two key-ideas emerged. The experience which unlocked the nature of the crisis-passage and provided the structure for all significant art presupposed a vital relation between the individual and the group. Not just any group, but the food-producing group in whom the fertility-rite was based. And the significant work of art fused the general pattern of death-birth with a specific crisis, which in turn involved both group and individual. To grasp the crisis-moment – life in its deepest pang and exaltation – meant to grasp the specific experience of an individual. If that was truly done, the wider change-ferment in the group, and all that was implied in the consequent changing relation to nature, would be equally implicated and defined.

I concentrated on the idea of the existential experience. Not as a sort of spontaneous absolute as with Proust (whom I had not yet read) or with Joyce and his epiphanies, but as the crisis-moment which, dialectically realized in its fullness, implicated everything else in the universe. Of course the writer could not follow out the infinite implications; but by the depth of his penetration into the moment he created an image which in its way reflected the totality. What Blake meant when he said that One thought filled Immensity. At every given moment the individual and his world were in a state of transition, making the passage between the death of the old and the birth of the new; and so, to define any moment as a whole was to penetrate into the structure of change in all moments. The moment which was defined was unique, never having happened before and never going to happen again, and yet it held the dialectical secret of

every other moment. Somehow the work of art expressed the purely transitory, the unique moment, and yet made this moment reflect the essential nature of all other moments.[4]

This thought still held unexplained elements; but I clung fast to it as seeming to define the lines along which one united, in a work of art, the pure flow of life, untampered with, and the historical situation. Only by discovering how this union could be brought about, it seemed to me, could one accept history, accept a role in the world. Unless one could take one's stand on this position, while clarifying it further, one had the choice only of totally rejecting art and society, or of fabricating some fantasy-solution such as I had done with Norman in 1919.

FOUR

To show how I moved on from this point, I must turn to the actual work-problems that came up as I tried to find a way of uniting the existential experience with an historical situation. Up to the time of the breakdown of what I may call the Norman-synthesis, I had looked upon myself primarily as a poet; the dynamic and transformative image had been seen as catching the immediate moment of experience in its living fullness. I had seen experience as always flowing in to the point of poetic activity where it was transformed into the image. Now, seeking a basis in history, in social existence, I had to turn the process inside-out. The problem presented itself to me as that of writing a novel set in the period of Catullus. I had translated his poems and explored them for all their meanings, which meant, first the comprehension of the poet's inner life, then the working-outwards to realize as thoroughly as possible the impacts upon him from people and from his society in general as it moved into the matured revolutionary crisis under Caesar. That is, I had sought to realize the period from a point of vision located in the centre of his poetic activity. Now I was seeking to understand the period in all its

aspects, as far as the available material went, and then to see how it all drove in on a specific individual, absorbed by him in terms of his character, transformed and realized in terms of his specific immediate experience.

That meant I had to take in as many of the objective facts of history as possible, yet keep on subduing them, transforming them, so that I saw how the external facts, given their final sense and meaning in terms of the passage-rite, became one with the existential moment of immediate experience. That moment thus appeared not just any moment of sensuous experience in a Roman context, but the moment of most complete *choice* which the situation afforded. This was the moment of tragic Recognition in which the human disaster was realized in its fullness, but as the crucial prelude to a deep stirring of rebirth.

The man was Catilina. How, in practise, was I to reveal him at his greatest existential intensity, in the moment of choice which was recognition of the total situation in which he found himself?

From one angle this meant the comprehension of the life of the period at as many levels as possible, all to which the available records gave clues. Catilina is a noble detaching himself from his class in an ever deepening opposition, so that his inner conflicts keep on evoking the essence of the cloven situation, of the forces and persons on either side of the dividing line that runs clean through his own being. We need then to grasp the political level, the legal level, the social level. The latter includes the form of the family, the status of women, the attitudes of men and women to one another, the attitudes of parents to children and of masters to slaves, and so on. We need to grasp the forms and ideas of religion, the particular kind of sensuousness revealed by the art and poetry, by the forms of entertainment and enjoyment, the level of productive activity and the implied relation to nature, and so on. To see the theme (the actual moment of choice embodied in Catilina) from all these different levels and perspectives; and yet to see it as a

unity, as concentrated in the choice of a specific individual.

The problem is then not to lump selected bits of all these levels together as background or as in-ground (in Catilina's consciousness); but to find how they work as the various parts of a living and changing whole. Every part is involved with all the others, but not in a mechanical system of interconnections; rather in a hierarchy of values determined by the central thing: the mind-body of Catilina moving to the moment of his final choice, of his most complete consciousness of himself and his world.

All the levels or perspectives are alive inside him, valued and reordered in terms of his specific individuality; but they also have their objective existence, involving in turn other persons, in whom the same elements beget a different unity – thus producing his allies and his enemies as well as the mass of people, caught up in everyday necessities, who see only a fragmentary snatch of what is happening, what is at stake. The world, the whole, is thus objective and made up of individuals existing in their own right; but it is realized in an increasing tension with the central moment, the specific moment of supreme choice which most powerfully illuminates its structure and nature. Everything changing, breaking up, coming together again, yet seen in a flash as a totality revealing the human essence.

FIVE

What then of this *human essence*? Does not the term hold something vague and mystical just at the point where we are trying to get rid of such elements? To purge it of such abstractions we must return to the problem of continuity in human expression amid all the variations and changes. In all great art of the past we feel simultaneously a quite different world and our own deepest experiences; we respond with a sense of both strangeness and familiarity. We need much historical inquiry

and conjecture before we can at all build up the actual situation of the paleolithic cave-artist at work; but by our response to the total image of the animal he created, we inhabit without an effort the here-and-now of his existential moment. For a lightning flash we are the painter, the man.

What provides the one clear element of continuity in human life is the active relation to nature, the concrete act of making or producing things by means of which man objectifies himself in an unknown and dangerous world, making that world part of himself. This transformative union with nature is not achieved by an abstract process of thought (though that may come into the picture); it is achieved by means of a vital tension and conflict, and the resolution of the conflict. A new harmony is established, a new tension, further resolutions. The objectifications include the tool, the word, the art-object, all systems of knowledge and work; they include the deepening consciousness of self and group which leads on to new organizational forms and systems of relationship. Whereas a plant or animal over long periods of evolutionary adaptation brings about a new organ or modifies an old one, man projects outside himself his extending adaptations in the tool, in the linking and directive word, and so on. And this is a process that slowly but steadily grows active at a quicker and a quicker pace, so that man adapts himself to his environment in ever wider and more varied systems. Here, in the power of objectification, lies the human essence.

The core of the objectifying process lies in the sphere of concrete work and production, where men most directly take nature into themselves and transform it. In the full working out, an infinitely complex set of interrelations is built up between the sphere of concrete work, and all the intellectual or artistic activities in which objectification is carried further, creating the vast field of potentiality in human existence, but the element of continuity here is in the last resort based in the productive sphere. Since in that sphere lies the source of all wealth, the key-conflict pervading any society must be between the

producers and those who exploit them. So in the productive sphere we find the human essence, the core of the process of objectification; the basis of continuity in human culture; and the source of conflicts that malform the human essence and limit or pervert human potentiality.

SIX

I arrived at these ideas in the years 1932-6. During that time I read many works of anthropology and biology, and went on researching into history, but read no philosophy. I had no idea that I was moving towards Marxism. Of Marx's works I had read only the *18th Brumaire* about 1928; I admired it as a shrewd and solid piece of historical analysis, but had no idea of the philosophical method behind it. Earlier I had read some Hegel and had gained a slight acquaintance with German Existentialism, but what was driving me on was the struggle to relate the immediacy of the poetic image to the movement and the complex interconnections of history. Not that I was trying to work these ideas out in extended and systematic analysis, though now and then I roughed out something of the general lines of my thought.

For instance in *The Literary Guide,* November 1934, I published a reply to Belloc's denigration of Darwin as purely mechanical. I insisted that any idea of God or of a "purpose-behind" makes everything mechanical, "and hope is driven back on paradox and continual self-contradiction, the glamour of which derives from the relieving light they shed on the tortured depths of the ambivalent unconscious." Behind such ideas was the old belief that we are "dead mechanisms galvanized into life only by the purpose-behind." In Darwin, "there is no purpose-behind; there is only action. The problem of will does not arise, since we are concerned with organic nature, not with fantasies of the divided self. Or we say that the totality of changes in an organism at any given moment is will and

purpose . . . a purpose which exists only as it comes into existence and which is never a purpose-behind except in so far as the changes it creates affect the future changes in the organism . . . We are given power over events in so far as we are aware . . . Awareness has to go much deeper than it has yet gone." (Thus I had formulated the idea that freedom is the knowledge of necessity without knowing of its Marxist enunciation.) We must see things *sub specie aeternitatis,* remembering that the phrase is Spinoza's and means "from the viewpoint of a total understanding of natural process." I was in fact stating what I had learned and developed from the *Origin of Species,* not Darwin's own position about natural process; I cite the argument to show how I was at the time seeking to grasp the moment in its living totality of cause and effect.

My ideas emerged out of practice and finally cohered during the efforts to write historical novels. But the practise involved all the while an effort to expand my theoretical grasp of the nature of history and of human experience, and was linked with a determination never to accept any system which did not help me to get at what I had called the pure life-flow. The struggle of thought and the moral resolve were at all points interconnected. The pure flow, which at first had meant the escape from all falsifying ideas and constricting pressures, had revealed itself in history and anthropology as the human essence cored in productive work and in the process of objectification. I had thus been able to move from notions of direct spontaneity, of freedom as the absence of constriction and lies, to those of the immediacy of experience linked always with the moving whole of which it was a part, and involving in varying degrees of fullness or correctness a theoretical consciousness of that whole. On this basis I felt that I could validly think of the human essence while realistically evaluating the forces that linked and distorted it at any particular phase, in any particular existence.

I may claim that I had now arrived at the generalizations set out above; but the interconnections of the ideas were not as

definite as appears when the points are neatly summarized. At last however in 1936, partly in response to the rise of fascism, of which, immersed in the ancient world, I had rather belatedly become aware, I got hold of some of the main works of Marx, Engels, Lenin, and read them. Almost at the first burst I felt that here were the final clues I was looking for: that is, the ideas which would fill in the gaps in my own system. The relationship of the productive sphere to history was clarified, and my existentialist dialectic fell properly into place in the fuller dialectic of development in all its aspects. Though it was to be some five or more years before I learned of Marx's 1844 manuscripts and began to study them, to make some use of their idiom, I had on my own reached their positions.

One crucial point that I had gained in 1936 from Marx was the concept of Conflict and Unity of Opposites, and with it the idea of the stable emergence of new qualities at the moment of the resolution of the conflict. This sort of understanding had been haunting me from 1932 on, partly through my efforts to revalue and reapply the thought of Plato and Blake, but it was only now that I stably grasped it as providing the central concept of the dialectics of development.

SEVEN

It will be clear that I hold Marx in the 1844 manuscripts to have passed definitely beyond the Hegelian level, even if a few unimportant shreds of vocabulary or formulation persisted from that level, in minor ways clouding or giving his terms a somewhat abstract or overgeneralized note. His concept of the human essence here has no longer the least mystical or abstract element, the least ingredient of Hegelian idealism. It defines the element which is to be found in humanity at all historical stages: an active relationship to nature, which is linked at all points with productive work and which issues in the theoretical consciousness of the stage that has been reached. Through the

social relationships it becomes historically conditioned, and those relations are dialectically linked with the degree to which nature is mastered and understood. The precise historical stage attained is thus defined by the forms and aims of work, the social relations, the theoretical consciousness, the whole relationship to nature (which embraces also science and art). These levels of development and social formation determine the forms and intensities of all the divisions, exploitations, alienations present in the society. Thus every stage of history reveals a society in which the characteristic human activities are being carried on and in which a system of alienation simultaneously operates.

In my anthropological studies I had realized that from the earliest tribal levels men were psychologically if not socially divided. That is, each man felt himself to have a dual existence: his actual everyday self and his otherself or external soul – this latter in various ways expressing both his social relations and his relations to nature, to the ancestors. The otherself, located in an object, e.g. the churinga, or later various talismanic or fetishistic objects, was held in a harmonious relation with the actual self at the stage of the Australian (palaeolithic) natives, but it always contained a potentially threatening and disintegrative aspect; if the individual was divorced from it, he was done for. Behind (and inside) the divided self lay the vast pressure of an unknown nature, which weighed heavily on the tribe and its members. While all went well, the harmonious relation of self and churinga, self and tribe, self and nature, self and the ancestors, was preserved in a cycle of rituals and rebirths. But with each phase of tribal break-up, the dangerous side asserted itself. The otherself asserted itself (a) in forms of private property, finally in money, in which security and salvation was felt to lie and (b) in forms of inner division which finally brought about the idea of separate body and soul. On the basis of the psychological and social divisions thus brought about there developed religion.

But religion cannot be reduced to these divisions. It also expressed the hope of their overcoming. This hope gathered round the rite of passage or initiation, whether that rite was of the individual or the collective. Indeed, even when a single person was involved, the rite, believed to carry him over a dangerous moment of transition or change and to reunite him with the group on a new level (or with a new group who held a fuller promise of salvation), had an essentially collective aspect. In religion then were gathered both the divisive forces at their highest level of intensity and the counter-hope of regaining unity.

The critique of religion, thus envisaged, seemed to me of primary importance if one was to understand the nature of history and of art-expressions. All art of significance looked to the passage-rite, the moment of deepgoing experience, change, conflict, transformation; and thus it also always in some way embodied the collective hope of a resolution of conflict rending society, however much its material was that of the existing society with all its divisive aspects.

While the spell of alienation held, with the division of self and otherself, class and class, religion showed its face of alienation, with minor consolations drawing their strength from the passage-rite. But at moments of sharp crisis or large-scale change, millenary movements have always been liable to come up, with a powerful liberation of the collective hope – though in a form which by its very nature made the resolution of the discord and division impossible. Socialism, by actualizing the collective hope, is the realization of the positive side of religion and the elimination of its reactionary side. Or rather that is what it should be. Which means that from the outset it should recognize the duality inside religion and do its utmost to clarify the inner conflict, not ignoring the complex reality of religious phenomena and speaking only of the false-consciousness of self and the world that is involved. There is a deep sense in which socialism-into-communism is the fulfillment of the

religious tradition as well as being the ending of the false-consciousness. Otherwise the cultural tradition is being castrated of one of its most important elements.

I am aware of the extreme complexity of the issues I have generalized about here. To deal with them adequately we need a thorough and many-sided analysis of the various stages of human development. And that would involve the creation of a new kind of anthropology, one which would move beyond both academic forms of classification and the empirical confusions that have resulted from fieldwork unable to evolve unifying insights. There is indeed yet one more aspect, which further complicates the problem and makes the working-out of an adequate system of analysis yet more difficult. Earlier I mentioned the power of objectification as an aspect of the human essence, something without which humanity could not have developed – an intellectual power closely linked with productive activity which lays hold of objects and transforms them. But the split in the self, born from fear of overwhelming nature, begets a series of false objectifications, which issue in time in the religious division of man into body and soul and which bring about a reifying tendency at the heart of man's objectifying powers. Thus life and death, the concrete and the abstract or metaphysical, wrestle at the heart of all human activities, human concepts. We are here up against one of the most destructive of the effects of alienation, which has hardly yet been grappled with except in very cursory and generalized terms. I would hold that post-Galilean science, with its mechanistic reduction of reality to quantities and to stable states (thus to forms of symmetry), its reduction of time to a coordinate no different in nature from space, is essentially malformed and blinkered– even if elements that it finds hard to control in terms of its preconceptions have come up in quantum theory and in the behaviour of particles. Here we see reification or false-objectification entangled at every point with the true comprehension of process, and preventing the breakthrough into a genuine

all-round science in which what was useful in the quantitative method would be kept, but without the disastrous limitations and the direction they give to thought and inquiry.

In this matter I see one of the main tasks that lie ahead for creative Marxism – if the dire consequences of a science based on blastpower and ballistics are to leave us with any future at all.[5]

EIGHT

Marx, after his early period, decided that the most valuable thing for him to do was to concentrate on political economy; and no doubt he was right to do so. But increasingly after 1917 we have been faced with the need to develop all the other aspects of dialectical materialism, since without such a development it is impossible to create the full theoretical consciousness needed by socialism in its actual struggle to root itself, to find the right forms of aetivity, to bring about a free dialectical comprehension of what its problems are and how they are to be resolved. The Althusserian viewpoint that the concept of the human essence in the manuscripts is a carry-over of Hegelian idealism I take to be a total denial of the creative aspect of Marxism, the reduction of Marxism to a bourgeois form of structuralism, the most deadly perversion of Marxism possible, the breeding-ground of all that is most sectarian, dogmatist, mechanist.

The concept of the dialectical unity of the life-process does not mean that all the various aspects of life, personal and social, moral and intellectual, artistic and scientific, are reduced to a single level, whether that of economics in an abstract form or that of praxis in general. Each aspect or mediation has its own validity and degree of autonomy, and contributes to the totality. But in turn that does not mean that the totality is merely a confused tangle of multiple forces or expressions. There is indeed a hierarchical system, since the human essence

resides in productive activity. (That idea is given a limiting and dessicating quality if one describes it as economic activity, which suggests the abstract aspects of labour and their social role; productive activity suggests rather all that is implied by work and its transformations.) Theory – that is, the total consciousness of their activities and their place in the world which men hold at any given stage – is inseparable from praxis, but it is not the same thing. The precise degree of truth in any dialectical formulation proceeds from the extent to which the formulation realizes the full part played by the relevant mediations in bringing about the total effect – and realizes the distinctive quality of that total effect, which results from the full interplay of the manifold mediations in bringing it about. But theory, whether dealing with some limited aspect of reality or seeking to sum up the total situation in which men find themselves, is always distinct from praxis, however it enters into it or emerges from it. A dialectical leap is involved in the change from praxis to theory or theory to praxis.

NINE

My approach via an existentialist dialectic had I think the value that it prevented me from falling at any time into an unduly sociological position in analysing an artwork. It enabled me to see that the aesthetic fact with its specific sensuous quality was always concerned with the individual in a situation that had to be realized as a unique here-and-now, though my search for the link with history, for the multiple mediations between the existential moment and the whole of which it was a part, saved me in turn from falling into subjective interpretations. From 1936 the need to relate the moment, the here-and-now, to its historical whole and the fundamental conflicts of that whole, became finally clear. The problem henceforth was to realize as fully and concretely as possible the many mediations at work between the part and the whole, the individual and the

central conflicts of his society.

The dialectical essence of any moment of development, at any level of life, remains the same, involving the unity of opposites and the emergence of a new qualitative form out of the resolution of the conflict. So, in essentials, the structure of experience remains the same at any period of history, in any kind of society, and is the structure we analysed in Greek drama and initiation-ritual. But we have only to think of, say, Homer and Dickens, Aischylos and Rabelais, Aristophanes and Tolstoy, Catullus and Blake, to see how infinitely varied the resulting art-work becomes when the concrete here-and-now and the enveloping series of mediations bring all sorts of new factors into play. The moment of Recognition exists in every significant artwork, but the particular way in which it operates can vary indefinitely. A formulation at which I arrived in the early 1940s was that the *form* of an artwork represents the *resolution of the deep conflict in the content.* Since the content, if it is truly a part of life, cannot but refract in some way or another the key-conflict of the period, it creates the problem for the artist of overcoming this conflict if he is not to be torn to pieces by it. The extent to which he truly grasps the conflict (in its refracted form) will in turn ensure the extent to which he effectively embodies a resolution of the problems set by his material. One does not mean that the resolution in any simple sense is a direct answer to the social or political problems of the world around him. One means that it will express the human clarification and resolution of the issues he has raised. These issues will not have been raised in abstract or generalized terms (political, social, economic, philosophic and so on); they may involve political and other problems, but the terms in which they are raised will be those of the specific event or character that lies at the heart of the aesthetic intuition. The idiom, imagery, symbolism, method, form of the resulting artwork will thus be determined by the artist's struggle to develop his intuition (born from a concrete situation with deep and perhaps hidden conflicts) as

fully, sensuously, and truly as possible. The tension set up between him and the idea (the image) will be one with the tension inside the idea, which he seeks to bring out into the open, to realize artistically. In terms then of the creative process we may claim that the form is achieved as the resolution of the inner conflict of the content. This way of putting the problem alone can enable us to solve the question of the relation of form and content. To say that in all true art form and content are one is not sufficient. That is merely to deal with the end-product. The unity of form and content is gained as the *result* of the struggle by the artist to realize and resolve the inner conflict in his material; for it is that conflict alone which ensures that his material is vitally a part of the life-process.

The moment of Recognition then, we may say, is the point in the work of art where the resolution reaches its final or strongest point. The consciousness of the life-process embodied in the work there reaches the height of its intensity. The moment may involve a direct judgment on life, on society and people, but it is not the direct judgment that matters. What embodies the recognition may be a single image or a long passage; but what appears at that point is the meaning of the work in its fullest human and aesthetic terms. An example may help to bring out what creates the moment. In the film with Olivier as Hamlet the character of Fortinbras was omitted; the result was to build up an effect of enclosed psychological drama. In the Russian film directed by Kozintsev, Fortinbras played a marked part, and at the end we saw the dead prince carried by his soldiers in a series of stark, moving, and dignified processional images, with the people finally looking on, silent and absorbed. In the English film the moment of recognition was dissipated and there was no meaning to the cry: "The world is out of joint! O cursed spite, that ever I was born to set it right." In the Russian version the moment was stressed. Not only is there a return to order after the destructive violences; but there is a sense of the consciousness generated by Hamlet's

struggle passing over into life. No simple solution is presented; the world is still torn with evils and oppressions and divisions; but we feel the true tragic exaltation. The victim has not been sacrificed in vain. His struggle has become part of life, modifying it and leading on to the next struggle to set the world aright.[6]

TEN

When I wrote *Rome for Sale,* I felt Catilina's death as tragic in the sense I have tried to indicate. His rebellion failed, but his death was from one angle the resolution of the conflicts which he had taken inside himself. And for this reason, his failure led on to the next movement of large-scale struggle, under Caesar. That movement too failed, yet its failure led on to many developments crucial for future development, including the birth of Christianity. Yet, in seeking to take an overall view of what happened, we cannot merely say that one thing leads on to another in a complicated forward movement; nor can we judge the events merely in terms of the subjective ideas and emotions of the actors. What we can and must make out is the human process at work; what I have called the human essence asserting itself in even the most difficult and oppressive circumstances. Freedom is *there,* in the specific moments making up the human process, not as some distant goal or as any overt political programme (however necessary such goals and programmes may be). Freedom is here-and-now or it is nowhere, never.

What differ are the relations, the historical phases in which the here-and-now occurs. The Novel as a particular artform developed out of a fusion of medieval romance (it is still *roman* in French), pastoral, and picaresque or lowlife satire. Thus it brings together the theme of the high quest (for some deep meaning in life), the criterion of a happy life on earth without money-values, and the realism which sees how at every point the

cash-nexus is distorting life. The way in which these elements have come together from the days of Rabelais, Cervantes, and Bunyan are endlessly varied; but in some degree or other they are all present in the great novel-tradition. They combine both in the general idea or image lying behind (and inside) a work, and in the particular form taken by the moment of recognition in it.

The form taken by the romance-theme, that of the quest for an ultimate meaning or purpose in life, assumed a new and vigorous life in the post-1870 period, as the inner conflict of bourgeois society deepened and revealed itself in the struggle for socialism. A quite new perspective appears in works like Zola's *Germinal,* Morris's *News from Nowhere,* Gorky's *Mother.* The prelude to this development is to be seen in the work of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky where the question of moral choice becomes central and hovers on the edge of fundamental social and political issues. Now the moment of recognition cannot but raise in some degree or another the conflicts of a society moving towards a momentous point of change. The consciousness of a vastly greater freedom, a more truly human way of life, appears in a situation where socialism has become practically possible and where a decisive blow can be struck at the sources of alienation.

This does not mean that henceforth all works become meaningless or reactionary unless they deal explicitly with the theme of socialism; but it does mean that the question of freedom and the human essence is lifted on to a new level, where the relationships surrounding these issues are decisively changed. Bourgeois culture proper, unable to face these questions but uneasily aware of their emergence, has developed the existentialist dialectic in its limited and subjective form, cut off as far as possible from history. The struggle in culture since 1900 has been between the two trends: that of the subjective and the objective dialectic. While the weakness of the former trends lay in a tendency to retreat more and more from the real conflicts

of the world, the weakness of the latter has been to see and treat those conflicts on too simply a sociological level – with people merely exemplifying the forces and trends at work. A fully satisfactory dialectic in the aesthetic sphere must embody the existential here-and-now, while rejecting the subjective interpretation and linking the here-and-now via the necessary mediations to the central conflict.

Only writers able to achieve in some degree the dialectical grasp which I have roughly outlined can validly claim the name of Socialist Realists. They alone can both grasp the fundamental pattern of conflict in our world and express the moment as the concrete realization of freedom. In a sense they are merely reviving the initiation-pattern of death-rebirth; but because of the enormous new potentialities for human advance before us, with the struggle for unity no longer fading into a pastoral or a millenary dream, the pattern gains a very much wider scope, a new quality of joy as well as a more complex understanding of what essentially goes to make a man. In the last resort this reachievement of great art involves a sense of solidarity with the socialist forces, though that sense does not imply an acceptance of anything and everything that comes up on the socialist side in the struggle. By its very nature the solidarity involves also a consistent critical approach to all the phenomena of our period, on either side of the fence; but its criticisms of any distortions or backslidings under socialism will be made, not from a backward-looking angle, but from the criterion of an enlarged and more finely balanced humanity emerging from the struggle for socialism itself.

We may say that in all culture after early tribal days there is a deep and ceaseless conflict between the alienated consciousness and the consciousness of alienation. The former expresses everything that submits to the divided situation and sees it as an eternal characteristic of human life; the latter expresses the forces that revolt against the division and all its malforming consequences, and that look one way or another to a higher

level of human unity. At every phase of culture there have been forms expressing the revolt in historically limited ways and others in which the indomitable hope for true unity asserts itself, sometimes in religion, sometimes in utopian forms such as the pastoral, the dream of a golden age. Now at last the two elements can fully combine, the realistic criticism and the utopian dream -- the former robbed of its limiting factors, the latter robbed of its fantasy-aspects. The dream always provided a sort of ultimate criterion by which the imperfections of the present could be judged; now it becomes an active factor in the expression at all moments and levels, bringing out the extent to which the present situation falls below the realization of its full potentiality.

ELEVEN

There then, briefly set out, are the lines on which it seems to me that a valid Marxist aesthetic can be developed. I have tied up the ideas with my struggle to achieve an understanding of the Novel while writing novels; for that was how it happened. And I feel that positions based on the unity of theory and practice should make more sense when the theory has in fact been hammered out of the practice, and vice versa. Looking at my *Short History of Culture* in the version published in 1929, I find an attempt to work out the recognition-theme: "My subject was the action and reciprocal reaction of the individual and the mass, one upon the other." And to those who said that such a treatment meant to lose the individual character, Zola retorted, 'How could I have achieved this if I had not had the individual?. . .'

"And now the final step was near. *Germinal* had been the bridge from Balzac on one side, and Tolstoy on the other, to the new world. The final step was taken by Maxim Gorky. Beginning as a depicter of the squalors of lowlife, the rebellion of the lost and the forgotten -- often with a buffoon-note -- he learned through participation in the class-struggle to find the

resolving artform. In *Mother* he showed what the agonies of search in Tolstoy and Dostoevsky really led to, what they really meant in terms of common life, what kind of sacrifice love could accept without recoiling into loss and ambiguity. The structure of Recognition came its full curve from Greek Tragedy to its goal."

I was oversimplifying the situation, unaware of the abundant ambiguities still present, or undervaluing them. But I feel that what I said was essentially true. It exprcsses the lines along which I had struggled with my work from 1933-4 when I wrote *Rome for Sale,* the lines along which I am still struggling.

TWELVE

Perhaps, to clarify what I have been trying to say, I may end by formulating concisely what seem to me new lines of thought in the development I have sketched:

The thesis that artistic form results from the resolution of the conflict inside the content;

The approach which seeks to grasp what is concrete in the existential aesthetic and may be used to give fullness to the dialectic of history;

The thesis that human division or alienation begins with the split between self and otherself in primitive psychology -- the otherself being historically objectified in a series of things that range from churinga to money;

The thesis that the false-objectification or reification brought about by alienation or the split-self has radically distorted post-Galilean science so that its final working-out can only result in ever great destructiveness;

The thesis that the deepest pattern of human experience is to be found in the rite of passage or initiation (linked as it is with certain deep bodily changes) and that this pattern has reasserted itself at all stages of culture;

The thesis that we see this pattern persisting in religion,

where, from the collective angle, it feeds deep hopes of a total reversal of things in which brotherhood will be regained;

The lines along which I arrived at the concept of the human essence: a concept which I believe to be central in all Marx's thinking, but which needs to be rediscovered with increasing fullness and depth.

It is of course for others to decide what elements of originality or of value lie in these lines of thought. I set them out here only that the reader may have as clearly as possible before him what are the main points raised. No doubt I should have set these out polemically from time to time more than I have done; but I have always been more interested in applying them and working them out concretely. In this way they pervade all my writings; but I should like to draw particular attention to the biographies in which I have tried to clarify just how the various mediations (family, education, impinging social forces) work in a man, what is the hierarchy of levels, and how the relative autonomy of certain spheres (art, philosophy and so on) asserts itself.

References:

1. Since writing the above, to test my memory, I have glanced through *Creative Effort* and cannot find there the term Image; Norman speaks only of Creative Form. There are two passing references to Plato, with no comment on his contribution; Norman knew him only as a name till I discussed him. The same applies to Freud, Einstein, etc.
2. My positions were set out most fully in *Dionysos: Nietzsche contra Nietzsche* and *William Blake: Creative Will and the Poetic Image* (1927), and the long essay in the first issue of the *London Aphrodite* (1928). *Dionysos* was largely written in Sydney, 1925. In the *London Aphrodite* essay there are signs of break from the Norman Lindsay bases.
3. In studying William Morris I have felt a deep kinship in realizing how much his socialist convictions were strengthened by finding that systems of tribal brotherhood had existed in the past. Such a discovery seemed to give a concrete basis to the dialectical spiral of history, to the belief that, after passing through the stages of class-divisions, it would bring back brotherhood in the stabler form of socialism. See my *William Morris* (1975).
4. An early influence now caught up at a new level was Bergson, especially

his *Time and Free Will* (read at Brisbane, 1918). Thinkers who had affected me about that time were Whitehead, Croce, Gentile, Coleridge, Hegel – this latter only imperfectly read, his dialectic not understood.
5. I have attempted to set out some of these problems in various books, of which the fullest is *Blastpower and Ballistics: Concepts of Force and Energy in Ancient Science* (1974), which involves a general critique of science.
6. Jan Kott in *The Eating of the Gods* (1974) shows a typical inability to grasp the significance of Fortinbras through limiting the problem of *Hamlet* to its psychological aspects. "The return to legality is without any motivation, deprived of even a semblance of necessity. It does not mean anything." That is to ignore the whole emotional impact, the role of spectator, who finds his objectification in Fortinbras. I may mention my point here was first made to me by Tristan Tzara in a discussion we had on the two *Hamlet* films.