

The Manifesto and the Fifth Column

MICHAEL GREEN

The Secret Agent

Control of the passes was, he saw, the key
To this new district, but who would get it?
He, the trained spy, had walked into the trap
For a bogus guide, seduced by old tricks.

At Greenhearth was a fine site for a dam
And easy power, had they pushed the rail
Some stations nearer. They ignored his wires:
The bridges were unbuilt and trouble coming.

The street music seemed gracious now to one
For weeks up in the desert. Woken by water
Running away in the dark, he often had
Reproached the night for a companion
Dreamed of already. They would shoot, of course,
Parting easily two that were never joined.

WH Auden

I

Vladimir Mayakovsky, in his quasi-allegorical stage representation of the Russian revolution, *Mystery-Bouffe*, includes a character called Menshevik, who spends most of his time trying to effect a compromise between the Tzarists and the Bolsheviks. In his rather slap-stick attempts to show the two sides what they have in common, and falling hilariously afoul of their obvious differences, Menshevik is thoroughly trounced by both.

In a critical climate characterised by division, many a well-intentioned critic may be forgiven for advocating a critical pluralism in which all theories may happily co-exist and work together. In doing so, however, he is bound to discover that the reason for the state of division is that, by their very definition, certain theoretical positions are mutually exclusive, and often aggressively so. At which point Mayakovsky's Menshevik may come to mind again quite forcefully.

Currently there is a modified brand of pluralism that is popular, as may be seen, for example, in *A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature* by Guerin, Labor, Morgan, and Willingham. The motto here is that "not all works lend themselves equally well to a given approach. Consequently ... [there] ... should be ... the recognition of the need to select the most suitable approach for a given literary work"¹. With scant regard for the theoretical bases of the approaches concerned, the authors exploit the fact that certain methodologies have had more success with certain literary forms than others. This blithe academic relativism, while it may serve as a means of introducing undergraduates to a range of critical approaches, is of necessity superficial, skirting as it does both the implicit and the explicit ideological perspectives that circumscribe and are central to each approach.

II

The contention of this paper is that no critical approach is innocent of wider ideological implications. 'Ideological' is used here in a qualified Althusserian sense, that is, the "representation of the imaginary relations of individuals to their real conditions of existence"². It is in no way meant in a reductionist, reflectionist, or simply deterministic sense. It is used to signify the way in which literary criticism, in a similar way to literature itself, is of necessity related to the hegemonic process that informs experience as "a whole body of expectations ... our shaping perceptions of ourselves and our world ... a lived system of meanings and values ... [which] constitutes a sense of reality for most people in society"³.

The development of literary criticism is making it increasingly difficult to ignore ideology. As a result, the theoretical dimension of criticism is becoming increasingly important, for it is at this level that the concealed ideological underpinnings of any given critical approach must be made manifest in order to understand both the approach and its subject better. The importance of critical theory (the analysis of analysis, a self-reflective process), becomes obvious once the significance of no critical approach's being innocent is seen. In ideological terms there is no such thing as 'pure' critical practice. The language and methods used, the choice of subject matter, the nature of conclusions drawn, all rest upon specific ideological determinates (bearing in mind the complex ways in which these determinates are mediated) and to the extent that these may limit the critic, they must be understood and challenged. The claim of 'pure' practice rests upon a belief in the natural or *a priori* nature of the principles from which it works. It is the task of ideological criticism to reveal that these principles are in fact a manifesto, an implicit declaration of a particular social and historical orientation.

A distinction, then, of the type made by Allan Rodway in his contribution on 'criticism' in Fowler's *A Dictionary of Modern Critical Terms* between 'metacriticism' (theory, scholarship, history) and 'intrinsic criticism' (practice) is, in ideological terms, false. "Critical theory", he writes, "should be distinguished from criticism, since it concerns itself with the analysis and judgement of concepts rather than works. It is a philosophical activity which

should underlie criticism but, again, should not be regarded as part of it". Given that the distinction between theory and practice may be taken as being a merely technical one, of the nature of a form/content distinction, for example, this statement may be allowed to stand (although "should not be regarded as part of it" would still seem to be rather extreme), but Rodway goes on: "in fact (*intrinsic*) criticism must precede metacriticism, as no literary work can constitute valid evidence in any more general field until its own nature has been roughly assessed"⁵. While this statement may seem perfectly reasonable at one level, when coupled with the previous one, it shows that his theory/practice distinction is not merely technical, an aid to analysis. At a deeper level, Rodway is stating that the basic practice of criticism precedes any theoretical concepts about itself, is free, in fact, of that which gives rise to itself. He is setting up a concept of pure critical practice not dependent upon anything but the object of its study, which is presumed to be the only dictator of the manner in which it should be studied. Such a view conceals the fact that practice works from an implicit manifesto, rests upon a framework of assumptions drawn from a far wider area than its subject, and contains highly significant elements of the total ideological structure from which it arises. Ideological criticism must reveal this and show practice to be directly dependent upon a theoretical (in the widest sense) base. It must reveal practice to be, in fact, praxis, theory in practice.

It is not surprising then, that such a form of criticism is characterised by an overt foregrounding of its own theoretical base. A constant turning of its essential principles upon itself is one of the more complex but most rewarding aspects that marks ideological criticism. In passing, and by way of brief example, it should be noted that the very term 'ideological criticism' as used in this paper is admittedly in many respects unsatisfactory; it is used, however, in order to focus upon a particular facet of a much broader argument. A better illustration is Terry Eagleton's overview of the development of Marxist criticism in *Marxism And Literary Criticism*, in which the principles of historical materialism are applied within his account of the growth of historical materialist criticism in such a way as to demonstrate the Marxist point that no critical practice is 'pure', that is, free from its ideological context.

III

'Pure' practice is not meant to denote a critical approach devoid of social awareness. It is unlikely that any approach has truly attempted to confine itself to a study of words upon a page in the infamous 'vacuum' so often attributed to the practitioners of 'practical criticism'. The originator of the term 'practical criticism' had so strong a belief in the potential effect of literature on society that he predicted literature's replacing religion in a scientific age (an age he presumed imminent, if not already born, at the time he was writing). For those familiar with the work of I.A. Richards, it will be clear that he did not mean this in a mystical sense, for Richards, who may be said to have 'invented' modern criticism, did do largely by introducing scientific method into the study of literature; the keyword, let us remember, in his first four books, is

'demystify'. He did not see literature as a vessel for moral value either; in *Principles of Literary Criticism*, which forms the scientific basis for the exercise of practical criticism, he insists that value is not inherent in the literary work, but in its effect upon the reader. He demonstrates this by means of a rather primitive psychological model (this was in 1924, after all), but this is not as important as the other crucial step involved, which is the debunking of the 'phantom aesthetic state'. A literary experience is for Richards of the same qualitative order as all our experiences.

Practical Criticism is essentially a method put forward in order to try and ensure as accurate as possible a reading of a text so that the positive effects of literature may work more clearly upon the reader. Richards does stop short of fully 'demystifying' criticism, for evaluation, which he sees as central to the critical endeavour and the social utility of literature, is finally attributed to a 'truly mysterious ... "leaning of the will"' that is only partially accounted for in his psychological model. However, although many of the most avid appropriators of Richard's methodology tend to employ only its obviously functional aspects while ignoring the implications of the theoretical thrust behind it, thus dismissing some of his most valuable contributions, Richards remains firmly in a critical tradition that emphasizes the value of literature for society.

That other chief villain, or (depending on one's critical allegiances) hero, of 'new' or 'practical' criticism, FR Leavis, may be equally easily defended from the charge of 'separating literature from life'; a gleeful defender of the Leavisite faith has simply to point to a statement of the following nature:

to insist that literary criticism is, or should be, a specific discipline of intelligence is not to suggest that a serious interest in literature can confine itself to the kind of intensive local analysis associated with 'practical criticism' - to the scrutiny of the 'words on the page' in their minute relations, their effects of imagery, and so on: a real literary interest is an interest in man, society and civilization, and its boundaries cannot be drawn; the adjective is not a circumscribing one⁸.

Although an equally gleeful member of the sociological set may just as simply point to a statement of this kind:

The business of the literary critic as such is with literary criticism. It is pleasant to hope that, when he writes or talks about political or 'social' matters, insight and understanding acquired in literary studies will be engaged ... But his special responsibility as critic ... is to serve the function of criticism to the best of his powers ... If he tells himself (and others) that [criticism] matters 'because a skilled reader of literature will tend, by the nature of his skill, to understand and appreciate contemporary social processes better than his neighbours', he misrepresents it and promotes confusion and bad performance ... What it should be possible to say of the 'skilled reader of literature' is that he 'will tend' ... to understand

and appreciate contemporary literature better than his neighbours'⁹,

the apparent contradiction is overruled (albeit not fully dealt with) by the manifest concern for the state of contemporary society that infuses nearly all of Leavis's work.

The 'vacuum' attack, then, is essentially meaningless (it is, after all, a metaphorical expression of the case, but the metaphor hardly holds in itself and it certainly cannot bear extending), yet it is still often to be heard bandied about in the seemingly endless stalemate that characterises the divisions in the present critical climate.

The crux of these divisions is not that one or another critical approach is guilty of 'abstracting the study of literature from life'. The real problem is of almost the opposite nature. The very term 'critical approach' suggests a distance between reader and text, a gap that must be closed in order to explain¹⁰ the text more fully. Far from attempting to separate 'literature' from life, the endeavour of all critical enterprise is to cover the 'distance' between them that seems to be admitted in the very word 'approach'. Given that this is the case, then the essential point of contention between varying critical approaches lies in the conception of the nature of the distance to be covered and, depending on this, the method of 'crossing'.

IV

Perhaps a reflection on a formula basic to at least one mainstream of science fiction will help us here. Our hero, be it in *Nineteen Eighty Four*, *Player Piano*, or a myriad other works of this genre, is threatened by a futuristic environment. The nature of the threat offered by this usually technologically utopian (in an extremely utilitarian sense) environment is that it no longer recognizes essential human values. These values are presented as fundamental if human existence is to remain worthwhile and our hero reaches his stature in his defiance of their erosion. Even if he is defeated, he affirms their eternal necessity, for the quality of existence that remains after his demise, the reader is left in no doubt, is fundamentally depleted. This standard device depends upon an important presupposition. Central to it is a belief in a static concept of what is valuable in human nature. For all science fiction's structural dependence on the invention of futuristic states and modes of life, the moral of much 'serious' science fiction depends upon a timeless and universal concept of what makes life worth living.

Even a cursory glance at these 'timeless' and 'universal' human values will reveal them to be, however, largely representative of the period which saw the chief period of production of the type of science fiction that follows the formula sketched above. Roughly speaking, it is a mid-twentieth century Western liberal humanism (characterised by individualism, democracy, free enterprise, etc) that our hero cannot live without. In so far as the futuristic environment which denies these values is depicted as 'inhuman' and 'unnatural', the values are reinforced as fundamental, essential, and natural to human existence.

The choice of science fiction as an illustration may be casual, but it is not random. The interesting feature of the formula presented above is that, for all its apparent imaginative (or perhaps Coleridge's 'fancy' is more applicable here) interest in the possible developments of society, it presents a fundamentally static picture of 'man'. The moral is generated by and depends upon an unchanging concept of the 'good' in human nature within a concept of society as evolving and developing. This illustrates the core of the dissention between ideological or historical materialist criticism and the 'liberal tradition'. The ideological critic would say that, if, in one's conception of 'man' in history, history is treated in much the same way as the science fiction writer treats the future, that is, as inessential to the basic definition of 'man', the nature of the problem of the 'distance' between the reader and the text is distorted, and consequently, so is the method of 'crossing' it. The critic of the 'liberal tradition', even when placing a text historically, relegates history to a secondary position in which, although it may be interesting or present certain technical problems that have to be overcome (archaic language, for example, or obscure references), it is not of primary importance, for the real concern of the critic is with the essentially unchanging nature of 'man'. This basically moral interest is generated by and depends upon a concept of 'man' that is atemporal and universal, and which can be trusted to reveal itself throughout history. Moreover, it is assumed to be empirically available to the critic, who needs only a technical knowledge of the devices employed to transmit it to be able to grasp it in an otherwise unmediated fashion. (In much the same way, the work itself is assumed to have an unmediated access to the essential and unchanging moral truths of history -- to a greater or lesser degree, of course, but this is the scale upon which it is valued).

One of the most significant points that may be noted about such a critical approach is the extent to which it 'conceals' the specific historical factors both in itself and its subject that ideological criticism makes its work to uncover. 'Pure' critical practice claims to limit itself to the essentially literary; ideological criticism works within the practice of literary criticism to betray the very concept of 'the literary'. It is a fifth column within the realm of literature, exposing the ideological implications of the 'purest' concepts within that realm, destroying the false independence they have been given from the movement and moment of historic flux. To the extent that ideology serves to legitimize the contradictions inherent in a particular historical moment, literature and the reading of literature (that is, the partial particular reproduction of a text within a given period) partake of the concealment, for they are, in themselves, ideological. In the interests of a fuller understanding of literature and the study of literature, ideological criticism works towards revealing their ideological nature and the ways in which they participate in ideology. Both the historical subject and the historical reconstruction of that subject (its only form of existence) must be made to reveal their manifestoes.

VI

The abstract nature of this paper will demand, in the minds of many a practical critic, some conclusions of a more concrete nature.

Fortunately it is possible today to point towards a growing chorus of voices raised in the call for the study of English literature in South Africa to recognize its particular environment both in the choice of material to be studied and in the critical methods it employs in those studies. Yet a paper such as Keyan Tomaselli's "The Semiotics of Alternative Theatre in South Africa" (which goes a long way towards suggesting solutions for the problems it poses) is a chilling reminder of how little we have yet succeeded in adapting ('transforming' is perhaps a better word) our critical practice to the environment in which we operate. Tomaselli starkly demonstrates the extent to which our present practice is largely helpless before a medium that is in no way text-dependent, that "does not reproduce (albeit critically) the dominant social relations of society"¹¹ and that, even more disturbingly for the traditional critic, evaporates before all the conventional methods usually employed in pinning a text down for analysis. He writes:

To try to resurrect [such worker theatre] under alien circumstances will ultimately destroy their purpose and force this theatre into the very world of theatrical convention and commodity exchange it is trying to overcome. Under these conditions, what started out as theatre, becomes a play, a text and is consequently sucked into bourgeois interpretations where biographical and psychological influences predominate in subsequent enactments. With this transformation the role of the intellectual, as Gramsci would describe him, is equally vitiated as this capitalist intellectual is unable to understand the ideological significance of form or substance¹².

The drastic shortcomings in our critical practice are, as Tomaselli suggests, largely due to the particular ideological limits imposed on our conception of the critic and his subject. The fact that much South African writing appropriates more 'conventional' forms does not substantially alter the situation, for this very 'conventionality' is a problematic area in itself, often proving highly deceptive in our situation and illustrating the fundamental nature of the present clash in critical manifestoes.

VII

In the 1981 AUETSA Conference, Prof CO Gardner delivered a paper¹³ that showed an admirable desire to take into account some recent theoretical endeavours. It is an honest and searching paper, one that demonstrates a real desire to confront the problems involved, and it is consistent with the scrupulous seriousness that Prof Gardner applies to his work and its relationship to the problems of this country. Its very virtues, however, make it a tempting illustration for this paper.

While maintaining his basic adherence to the 'liberal tradition', Prof Gardner states that his intention is to make use of the "interesting and valuable tendency" evinced by (he admits the vagueness of the term) "contextual approaches" in so far as they "supplement and modify" the liberal tradition and do not attempt to "supplant" it. It may be valuable at this point to raise the proposition that, given the mutually exclusive nature of many theoretical approaches¹, a dialectical model of interaction and development will serve us usefully. Perhaps for many, the most irritating feature of theoretical debate is the 'no-man-cometh-to-the-Father-except-by-me' attitude of the protagonists. If we may subsume this into the dialectical model, in which we have progress by opposition, with each new synthesis becoming a thesis awaiting its antithesis (not in a linear fashion, but rather as a multidirectional set), we do have some grounds for an overview of the situation that allows for substantial 'supplanting' and a far more radical transforming of manifestoes than 'supplementing' and 'modifying' suggest -- a radicalism that many admit the need for. Gardner's paper, in spite of, or perhaps because of, its stated methodological aim, serves to illustrate the fact that the 'contextual' approach (whether its specific emphasis is structuralist, post-structuralist, Marxist, concerned with reader-response, or simply sociological) cannot be, at least not in all of the above listed permutations, simply subsumed into the 'liberal tradition'.

The five poems from *Staffrider* are read with an awareness of and sympathy for their political content and this is the extent to which they are 'contextualized'; that is, they are read as expressions of social grievances arising from a particular political situation. Gardner's concern, however, is with the extent to which our political sympathies may blind us to the literary effectiveness of the poems. His critical approach then, is to acknowledge the political content while also distancing himself from it in order to more effectively evaluate the literary merit of the expression. This 'distancing' is achieved by an application of the strictest possible literary standards and the very strictness of these standards is reinforced by a refusal to allow any hint of 'patronization' to creep into the discussion. (An interesting comment in itself on one prevalent view of the contributions to *Staffrider*). The results of this rigorous evaluation range from "a successful little poem, I think" ('Banned', Mandi Williams) to, "only moderately successful" ('Rage', Mandla Ndizi) and "impressive, though not flawless" ('Time to Come Home', Dikobi Martins), culminating, at least for the purposes of this paper, in, "it commits every literary error: it is guilty of bathos, false metre, improprieties of every kind. And yet it touches one not only with ordinary human sympathy but with an odd sense that, in an admittedly unsatisfactory way, an actual literary exploration is involved" ('Pressed', James Twala).

"An actual *literary* exploration ..." (my emphasis). The concept of the 'literary' that is the standard of evaluation throughout Gardner's paper is not defined; indeed, in terms of the 'liberal tradition' it need not be, for a familiarity with the criteria involved is assumed. What is more, the works under discussion invite the test of these criteria, for, formally, they are recognizable attempts at a conventional form associated with them. In terms of the 'liberal tradition', then, Gardner is on firm

ground, and to the extent that this is the stated base of his approach, it is perhaps unfair to take the issue any further. Yet Gardner also states that he is "employing a contextual approach" in his paper, and while it is clear that he means this only in a limited sense, it is the concern of this article to show that the limits imposed upon 'contextual' approaches that are subsumed into the 'liberal tradition' rob them of their radical implications, and in doing so, of many of the really new contributions they have to offer. 'Structuralist, post-structuralist, Marxist, concerned with reader-response, ... simply sociological', all these approaches start by challenging the very nature of the criteria that are brought to bear upon the text; as such they subvert from the most basic level upwards, from theory to practice, the fundamental tenets of categories such as the 'literary' as they are used by the 'liberal tradition'. 'Contextualizing the text' without taking this into account results in evaluating literature in society without challenging traditional concepts of evaluation, literature, or society -- and it is a fundamental aspect of the 'contextual' approaches listed in Gardner's paper that they insist on putting forward, while challenging traditional ideas of evaluation, new concepts of the context as well as of the text.

Each of the 'contextual' approaches will, of course, do this in its own way, although Marxist criticism, while maintaining that "the ultimately determining element in history is the production and reproduction of real life"¹⁵ (the forces and relations of production), is showing itself increasingly capable of admitting areas of complexity which must be accounted for with the help of disciplines previously conceived of as being outside its parameters. Debbie Posel has noted, for example, the semiotic Marxist work of Coward and Ellis, which sees itself as extending Althusser's situating of ideology ("it is the way in which the individual actively lives his or her role within the social totality: it therefore participates in the construction of that individual so that he or she can act"¹⁶ into an examination of "the actual processes whereby this constitution of the subject occurs"¹⁷, by embracing "a semiological analysis of the construction of subjectivity in and through language"¹⁸. Posel points too, to the work of Fredric Jameson, which should go a long way towards challenging those who still conceive of Marxist literary theory in terms of rigid and prescriptive concepts of 'social realism'. Jameson's claim that

dialectical criticism is at the other extreme from all single-shot or universal aesthetic theories which seek the same structure in all works of art and prescribe for them a single type of interpretive technique or a single mode of explanation¹⁹

places the real value of ideological criticism on its ability to flexibly adapt itself to the text in hand without collapsing into a naïve critical relativism.

The fundamental Marxist critical principles still apply in each of the above cases, however, as do the fundamental principles of each of the other 'contextual' approaches in their various permutations, and it is the essential areas of conflict between the various approaches with which this paper is concerned. This may be illustrated by looking at one particular area of critical

practice and two opposing approaches.

VIII

The five poems discussed by Gardner are, as has been stated above, 'conventional' in form. In so far as they may be seen to aspire towards the great short lyrics of the established Anglo-American tradition, it is assumed by the 'liberal tradition' that they can be clearly evaluated in terms of that tradition. Taken at face value, this is a reasonable assumption and it provides a standard by which the 'liberal tradition' can evaluate additions to its tradition. Yet a 'contextualization' of the text in Marxist or ideological terms would require, apart from a redefinition of the nature of form in general terms, a specific consideration of the many and complex mediating factors that exist between the short lyric form as represented by each of these five poems and the 'tradition' after which they are assumed to be modelled. A few of the factors that come immediately to mind include the education of the writers in a system geared towards protecting its own supremacy, the second language situation of the writers (including their ambiguous relationship with the language in which they write), and the mode of publication (in this case the 'magazine' format of *Staffrider*, which lends itself best to the short lyric and short story forms). Eagleton gives a far more comprehensive idea of what is involved in a Marxist analysis of form in his suggestion that

form ... is always a complex unity of at least three elements: it is partly shaped by a 'relatively autonomous' literary history of forms; it crystallizes out of certain dominant ideological structures ...; and ... it embodies a specific set of relations between author and audience. It is the dialectical unity between these elements that Marxist criticism is concerned to analyse. In selecting a form, then, the writer finds his choice already ideologically circumscribed. He may combine and transmute forms available to him from a literary tradition, but these forms themselves, as well as his permutation of them, are ideologically significant. The languages and devices a writer finds to hand are already saturated with certain ideological modes of perception, certain codified ways of interpreting reality ...²⁰

It is obvious that such an account of what is involved in the analysis of form cannot be seen as a modification of or supplement to the 'liberal tradition'. The terms of analysis involved express essentially conflicting manifestoes and the concept of practice involved in these manifestoes is of a qualitatively different nature, in which the categories, structure, and substance of the two critical exercises are radically opposed. It is the contention of this paper that it is necessary for the nature of these oppositions, which includes the manifestoes underlying them, to be constantly revealed and acknowledged for progress by opposition to take place.

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4. Fowler, R. (ed.) 1973: *A Dictionary of Modern Critical Terms*. Routledge and Kegan Paul, London and Boston, p. 42
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KUNAPIPI

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