

LITERATURE AND COMMUNISM

By R. W. POSTGATE

PERHAPS our main task at the present—the revolution not being “on” just at the moment—is an internal affair. It is to make ourselves good Communists. No one can deny that the British movement is not entirely satisfactory—not in lack of enthusiasm or hard work, but because it feels itself in some ways inadequate to its own task. What we are feeling the lack of is mainly Communist self-education. For this reason it may not be unsuitable to dwell for a moment on what is, frankly, a by-path of Communist education. Most of us are under a general impression that we must have a knowledge of Marx’s economics—a bit of industrial history—something about the *gens* and primitive promiscuity maybe too—and if we have heard a lecture on Dietzgen as well, we are fully armed with all the knowledge useful for the class struggle.

That, if true for any, was never true for all. There are some who will always need more than that—speakers who need to train themselves to speak, and writers who must learn to write—agitators of all kinds who want to learn to cultivate their powers of perception and apprehension generally, without knowing too well how it is to be done. It is for this reason, I suppose, apart from its attractiveness as a mere relaxation, that classes all over the country are taking up the study of literature on the lines mentioned, for example, in the *Plebs*.

* * *

Generally, of course, one is only too glad of this. But the method of approach that is the commonest is only too likely to intensify the Marxist’s pet vice—the dividing up of everything into rigid compartments. The student is far too commonly told merely “Literature is to be studied as a branch of the Materialist Conception of History. Let us proceed to examples. Shakespeare and Scott are feudal. Sterne is early capitalist. Browning is late industrial capitalist. Kipling imperialist. All these people have schools, which also reflect the political and economic characteristics of the epoch.” We are left to understand that all fits in—all Browning’s contemporaries being notably industrial capitalist; all Kipling’s imperialist, and so on.

[How do they fit in Oscar Wilde, by the by, and what stage of economic development does he represent?]

Not only is this not true, but it gives an entirely false impression of the subject matter. For example—Keats’ Ode to a Nightingale:—

“Thou wast not born for death, immortal bird,

No hungry generations tread thee down,
The voice I hear this passing night was heard,

In ancient days by Emperor and clown.

Someone recently, I think in the *Plebs*, pointed out acutely that the second line was an evidence of the effect of machinery on the workers. Maybe—it is, anyway, a very interesting theory. But what a lesson to teach the student! That he should go away with the idea that all there was to the Ode was a veiled reference to Arkwright’s spinning jenny. If that was all, why choose this Ode? The works of inferior writers are much easier to fit into your machine-made boxes and Charles Garvice is a better illustration than Joseph Conrad.

Or, again. Take the earnest student who is set down before Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*. You will remember that the beginning deals with a certain affair of a clock—so business-like was Mr. Shandy that “my poor mother could never hear the said clock wound up,—but the thoughts of some other things unavoidably popped into her head—and vice versa:” . . . for it appears that Mr. Shandy wound up this clock regularly on certain days and had “brought some other little family concerns to the same period.”

Now imagine it. The earnest student enters in his notebook: “Early Capitalism, meticulousness of rising bourgeoisie in this period:—see Clock.” Also “Large Families, Need of in early stages of Capitalism—see Clock.” Like Mrs. Shandy, he “Knows no more than his backside what Mr. Shandy meant.”

More than that, let us turn to our own period. Kipling, teacher says, is imperialist. Take up the White Man’s Burden. But, of course, *broad-mindedly* imperialist. “You’re a better man than I am, Gunga Din.” All very well, but if this theory is correct, it applies to all other writers of that date. Kipling is an obvious—too obvious—illustration. Thomas Hardy and Conrad must be fitted in. It is true that there is some tedious writing by Conrad about the claims of Poland, that seem to fit nicely into the capitalist politics of to-day. But it is precisely this sort of unexpected, disappointing inferior matter, by which one does not judge Conrad. Conrad’s virtue lies in such stories as *The End of the Tether*—the story of Captain Whalley, the sea-captain who went on with his duty until the final catastrophe—going blind all the time. There is nothing in the whole story of Captain Whalley—not a word—that is specifically capitalist-imperialist. Change a few casual references to material circumstances—steamers and Dutch officials—and alter the names of rigging and Captain Whalley might have commanded a brigantine. Or a trireme, for that matter. There is nothing temporary or passing in Captain Whalley, the whole story deals with personal emotions that have not changed or have hardly changed, through the ages.

Nor is there much more truth in the more intelligent application of the theory. Jackson argues that it is true to say that Keats, Byron and the rest of them represent a revolt against the old aristocratic school of Pope and Dryden, corresponding to the fall of the aristocracy in the economic sphere. The aristocratic character of the former is shown by the former school’s formal and pedantic verse—imitated from the ruling French aristocratic school of the day. The revolt against this “dead poetry” written in frozen heroic verse, represents a revolt of the bourgeoisie . . . and so on. But just read these lines before you fly away on that tack:—

“White lilies in full canisters they bring,
With all the glories of the purple spring.
The daughters of the flood have
searched the mead,
For violets pale, and cropped the
poppy’s head,
The short narcissus and fair daffodil,
Pansies to please the sight and cassia
sweet to smell;
And set soft hyacinths with iron-blue,
To shade marsh marigolds of shining
hue;
Some bound in order, others loosely
strewed,
To dress thy bower and trim thy new
abode.”

But for the last line, that should, by all the rules have been written by Keats, but it happens to be pure Dryden.

* * *

The plain fact of it is that the “ideology” of an epoch only roughly and in the most general way correspond to the economic conditions, and very frequently mental survivals persist long after the conditions to which they correspond. They may be utterly in conflict with them. No more than this is true: that the literary life of an age is ultimately dependent upon the social life. But that does not mean anything more than that it is easier to understand a writer when you know something of his time. Economic progress is the main current of the river: literature the eddies and swirls of a backwater, from which it may be impossible to discover the direction of the main current.

Therefore, we cannot study literature wholly, or even mainly, as an example of the materialist conception of history. We can read it only (if we want an end beyond the mere reading of it) as an expression of the fundamental characters of man and nature, on which any capitalist or socialist system is a mere superstructure.