

# BOOK REVIEWS

TOWARDS A MARXIST PHILOSOPHY OF ART.

*Crisis and Criticism.* By Alick West. (Lawrence and Wishart.) 6s. net.

**C**RISIS and Criticism is the first serious attempt by an English writer to approach a Marxist theory of art-criticism. It is a work only too likely to be passed over in silence; Marxists in general will not realise that it has an interest, and a profound one, for them, while the experts in criticism whom it confounds will keep silent because it leaves them with so little to say.

For whom is *Crisis and Criticism* important? In the first place for Marxists, since it is at any rate a beginning in the work of filling a gap, and a serious one, in their armoury. Hitherto we in Britain have limited ourselves, in the main, to attempts to demonstrate the connection between the art of various historic epochs and the economic foundations of those epochs. Thus it is easy to see that at a certain stage in the history of Europe painters and sculptors must paint and execute their sculptures either for the Church or for one of the few princes who have an appetite for such works. From this as a starting point it is easy to show that the shift in the kind of paintings produced, as by the early Italian schools to those produced by the later Flemish and Dutch school, rested upon a change in the economic and social source of the demand—upon the rise of a comfortable bourgeois class with a taste for ornamented domestic interiors. So, more widely, we may trace the succession in the development of the specific Arts (as “Arts”)—Architecture, Sculpture, Painting, Music, Poetry and Fine Literature—to a progressive development in the history of human society.

But when this has been done, the problem still remains of *why* men saw a value in these things, not only in the first place, but all the time. A partial explanation of the historical progression in forms of Art only throws into relief the problem as to what exactly constitutes the nature of that which *abides* through all these changes of form, and abides in such a way as to establish an inter-connection and development distinct from and even opposed to the disconnection between the *forms* themselves and the particular development of each form separately.

As Marx says in another connection :—

It is, in reality, much easier to discover by analysis the earthly core of the misty creations of religion, than conversely, it is to develop from the actual relations of life the corresponding ecclesiastical forms of those relations. The latter method is the only nationalistic and therefore the only scientific one.—*Capital*, Vol. I., footnote p. 367 (Moore-Aveling ed.)

Whether Alick West has succeeded or not, it is his merit—and a very great one—that he has seen exactly what is the problem to be solved.

But what, it may be asked, shall we as Marxists gain, even if the problem be solved? The answer raises the second aspect of this book's importance. Criticism must be something more than an expression of personal likes and dislikes. That a man dislikes cats tells us something about the man, but little or nothing about the cats. That all men feel it necessary to eat, and that they, generally, enjoy their food, tells us that food is necessary and that it can become enjoyable, but one must know what constitutes “food” itself, in relation to man, before we can understand fully its necessity and enjoyability.

So with Art-works in general, and more particularly the specific Art-work—poetry and creative literature—to which Alick West restricts his attention. It is not enough for Marxists to suppose that these things will continue to “happen”

in the future, as they have in the past. Many things (such as infant mortality) that our ancestors accepted as things that just happened, we no longer accept fatalistically, and if, as we see from the U.S.S.R., it is possible not merely to revolutionise men's whole conception of what is preventable in disease, but to contemplate a radical transformation of the relative significance of climate for man and his food production—then surely we have no excuse for treating the production of Art, and of art creators, as our ancestors treated measles and the cholera, namely, as things that just happen and have to be made the best of when they arrive.

"Nothing human is alien from me," Marx quoted as his favourite motto. Throughout the ages art has embodied the highest forms of human expression and enjoyment; a critical theory of art must serve as a guide to higher practice and to a higher range of enjoyment.

Alick West tackles the problem in its most immediate form—the state of criticism as it emerges to-day from the most skilled practitioners in the camp of the bourgeoisie. He first shows in a succession of closely packed chapters that in Criticism, as in its world-outlook generally, the bourgeois order stands self-revealed as incapable of further progress—bankrupt and destitute alike of faith, hope, and charity. This is proved by a close and careful analysis of the representative work of the foremost British bourgeois theoreticians—especially that of T. S. Eliot and of I. A. Richards. That a simple negation of bourgeois standards leaves us in no better case is shown by a consideration of the Surrealists represented by Herbert Read. West finds a positive starting point in the striking fact—which workers in other fields have also demonstrated—of the close parallel between the crisis in criticism to-day and that at the close of the Napoleonic wars and the culmination of the industrial revolution. The parallel can be carried much further, but West rightly refrains from pursuing it; criticism is his subject and he keeps to it.

At its outset the intensifying individualism of the industrial age found expression in the work of the Romantic School—operating within the limits of a contradiction which Romanticism alone was unable to resolve. On the one side the Romantic revolt against conventionalised Classicism was a revolt against a set of artificial barriers which constrained men's sympathies and admiration within arbitrary limits and so excluded from artistic consideration the major part of the human race and most of the everyday concerns of mankind. In so far as they affirmed the right to find the raw material for art-creation in

The common wants and common cares,  
That sow the human heart with tares,

the Romantics fought to overthrow a barrier between the artist and community with his fellow-men.

But, on the other hand, in so far as the Romantics felt themselves to be exploring and adventuring into an emotional world till then uncharted and unknown, they found themselves continually stressing the uniqueness of the artistic experience and the essential *loneliness* of the art-creator. From the works of the romantic school one might gather two sharply contrasted and even opposed anthologies, one containing all those passages in which from Burns onward through Blake, Coleridge and Wordsworth to the disintegration of the school in Browning, Tennyson and Swinburne (to say nothing of its vulgarisation in Kipling), the Romantics have affirmed the kinship of art-emotion with the everyday life of plain men and women engaged upon plain everyday work, and the other—all those passages from the same authors showing the various

methods by which they sought escape, and with varying degrees of acrimony affirmed their sense of loneliness, of isolation, and of misanthropic aversion for that Calibantic monstrosity, mankind in its mob-aggregations.

If now, we examine the works of the newest school in creative literature and its theoretical appraisal we find this same contradiction operating, but with a reverse significance. The misanthropy of the Romantics was only skin-deep. It was in fact only a variety of growing pains—an expression of exasperation at the slowness with which the old conventional habits and valuations yielded before their more fundamental humanitarian onslaught. But with the newer school it is the humanitarianism which is the surface show, or transient mood. That which is fundamental to them is a growing fear of the destructive and creative dynamic of mankind and a concomitant craving for a new absolutism in Art and Philosophy—a neo-Platonism—by means of which they can reinforce their deeply-felt insufficiency against the impending horror which threatens to engulf their order.

West shows that whereas Shelley, Keats, Coleridge and Wordsworth (to name no others) affirmed the right of the artist to possess and to assert his own personal feelings about everything in the cosmos—claiming that only in so far as the artist was *himself*, was he a true artist and a true means of liberating the constrained personalities in his fellow men—to-day the whole trend of art-work is the flight from personality, which finds theoretical expression in the claim that an artist must lose all sense of personality by deliberately merging himself into something “super-real.”

This is to be sharply distinguished from the Marxist view that the individuality of an individual is only an expression, or aspect, of his inescapable social relations. On a Marxist view, for instance, the misanthropy of the Romantics was, like their self-questionings and self-tormentings, an expression of the contradictions and antagonisms then ripening in bourgeois society. It was an artistic criticism, though a one-sided one, of the bourgeois social order. In a communist social order the relations between the individual and society will cease to be contradictory and antagonistic. Hence in such an order the consciousness of dependance upon society will carry with it no sort of sense of the need to be either a “boss” or a “misfit.”

In the light of Marxism the self-deception of the Moderns can be explained and rightly valued. That the romantic school heralded and facilitated a revolutionary advance for mankind in general is not more true than that it also heralded a devastating intensification of slavery for mankind in particular. Bourgeois production achieved an enormous enhancement of the national productive forces of human society, and of mankind's collective power over the force of Nature, but did so only by ways which enslaved an increasing majority of mankind, and enslaved the bourgeoisie itself to its own process of production. In winning the power to dictate to Nature mankind seemed to have created a still more monstrous enslavement for itself.

But whereas the misanthropy of the Romantics disguised their fundamentally revolutionary humanitarianism, with the Moderns it is their abandonment of individualism and egoism which is the superficial disguise. Fundamentally they are for the most part at war with those “humanities” which can only be won to-day through the world process of proletarian revolution. Their pleas for an abandonment of the limitations of personality reveal themselves as modes of surrender to theocratic dogmatism or crude Fascist leader-worship.

West's main theme is that a valid scientific criticism can only be developed through Marxism. In the second part of his work he seeks to show this in detail. Seldom has a work been written in which more thought has been packed into closer compass. The range of Alick West's reading is remarkable and the ground covered so bristles with points of complex and rarefied interest that even a summary is not possible. His merit is not that he has written the last word possible on the subject, but that, for Britain, he has written the *first* word. It is not a perfect book. I am not at all sure that I agree with everything in it. And my doubts on this head arise from what, to me is Alick West's chief fault—his tendency to suppose that his reader has read as widely as he has himself and has reflected for as long upon the problems of criticism. Some of his passages are (unless the fault is in my obtuseness) positively cryptic from over-compression.

I find West at his best in those parts of his work—(they form the bulk of the book)—in which he deals with particular writers and specific works. The third part in which he demonstrates his meaning by a critical examination of James Joyce's *Ulysses* and Harold Heslop's *Gate of a Strange Field*, is a joy and a delight from beginning to end—save only that, for me, he is too sparing in his condemnation of the shoddy element in Heslop's work. That the best part of Heslop's work is an attempt to show old man Zola how much better a *real* miner could describe a flood-disaster underground than *Germinal* does, seems to me impudence and also bad art. All the best in Heslop's work is, really, Zola. The rest is either irrelevant or no improvement. West does not even comment upon this derivative aspect of Heslop's work. The detailed analysis of *Ulysses*, on the other hand, is simply masterly.

Alick West has broken open for us a territory which has yet to be conquered and assimilated in detail, but every Marxist owes him a debt of gratitude and will gain much from a careful study of his book.

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