

# Inside the Whale Again?

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*An introduction to the Documents on Commitment*

MR. ALLSOP has buried the "Angry Generation" with a book: *nil nisi bonum*. Now that "deaths and entrances" at the Long Bar, Royal Court, have ceded pride of place in the popular press to Jerry Lee Lewis's touring circus at the Palladium, and Mr. Hopkins has gone home to work on the Manifesto for his new political party, and Colin Wilson is in deep communion with the secular gods of Hampstead Heath—is there a breathing space for a reprise of what the "commitment" discussion is really about? For, make no mistake, it has touched a nerve, it has rattled certain skeletons, it has raised the hackles on certain necks. It has prompted a rash of re-appraisals. And when the Allsops and Walter Aliens of this world sight a moving target, you can be sure we're in for something more than a week-end shoot. (Cf.: Walter Allen, "All Out On Sunday: Commitment in the Thirties," *New Statesman*, June 14, 1958.)

One had better say quite bluntly that this is no mere romantic recreation of the past, not a looking backward in nostalgia. The question of the "neutrality" of literature and the "politics of culture" is not a form of political reversion. In spite of—because of?—John Osborne, we have tried to look back in order to take a proper perspective on the Thirties, because the problem of living and writing more fully now is related to the full, critical experience we have of the past. If Guernica is *the* painting, and Auden's *Spain* the poem, Orwell's *Homage To Catalonia* is *the* book—and there are no simple evocations or unfocused nostalgias there. We take the point of Orwell's essays, *Inside the Whale* and *Writers and Leviathan*, consciously called to mind here as a point of departure, even if we reject their final emphases. Those pieces are documents of our time. They stand between us and the International Brigade—de Gaulle notwithstanding. They were written as we turned into the first phase of the Cold War, and the shadow of the Zhdanov terror hangs heavily over them. Orwell's theme was "the position of the writer in an age of State control"—and we are not disposed to simplify *that* problem. He was right to remind us of the orthodoxies of Left, as well as Right, to question "the subjective yielding of the writer to the party machine," to draw sharp distinctions "between our political and literary loyalties." His comment that "by being Marxized literature has moved no nearer to the masses" offers us, not merely a critical insight into the past, but a viewpoint on the future.

The disrepute which has crept over the theories of "socialist realism" mark for us, not a possible beginning, but a positive end—a reduction of art to absurdity, bred by a dogmatic philistinism of the Left in its attitude towards culture. The sheer inhumanity of this ideology should be understood both in terms of the suffering it forced upon a community of writers, and of the literature it produced, which fails to offer a sustained or moving image of man or human relations. It was Engels, after all, who called Balzac's royalist novels "the triumph of realism"! Zhdanov should have looked at his texts.

But a rejection of this position cannot be turned against the Left in an attempt to blackmail us into the position that

literature and art stand neutral between all possible values. If we are critical of Auden's *Spain*, it is not because we feel that literature has nothing to do with politics, but in order to deepen our understanding of what that relationship actually is. There are surface commitments in that poem—"today the struggle," "today . . . the conscious acceptance of guilt in the necessary murder," "today the expending of powers on fiat ephemeral pamphlet and the boring meeting" which, as Orwell is at pains to point out, are too cheaply arrived at, too little felt. "The necessary murder" is too casually contemplated, if we are thinking of Barcelona: the "ephemeral pamphlets" and "boring meetings" rather too easily formulated, when we remember what they were *about*. However sternly Auden rejects the delights of "tomorrow"—and there is something disquieting about a future of "walks by the lake" and "weeks of perfect communion"—what *is* taken up "today" is done with a suspicious smartness, with a certain indecent haste. But when this has been said and grasped, we have some sense of the reach of Orwell's remark that a "Marxized literature"—for all its overt affirmations—"failed to move closer to the masses."

The view of literature and art which is being pleaded for is one which is alive, to these complexities of tone, attitude and intention, of implicit values as well as explicit. What concerns us is not that literature is related to life and society, but *how* life gets into literature, and what it does to our values and attitudes when it gets there. We are not concerned with politicized art: Jack London's *The Iron Heel*—for all its trumpettings about the class struggle—is not a working-class novel in the sense in which Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers* is. Lawrence is focusing and placing a genuine experience, the novel springs out of a genuine community of people and values, out of a concrete recreation of life. *The Iron Heel* marks the passion which London conceived for a political abstraction—the proletariat, and the gap between words and feeling leave room for a tough-minded sentimentality.

The difference is significant. *The Iron Heel* works on a level where attitudes, already formed and hardened into dogma, are manipulated by words. It reflects an ideology. *Sons and Lovers* moves us at a level where attitudes and values are *formed*, and the language is responsive to the pressure upon it of the very substance of human experience.

The values are achieved in the novel. They have been made in the lives of people he is writing about. They carry over into those novels whose settings are not explicitly "working class" as in his more mature work—say *Women In Love*—to provide a rigorous critique of bourgeois society.

This is not just a matter of the next committed poem or play—though it is that as well. For the poems and plays and films which get produced are shaped by our *expectations* of poetry and drama and cinema; and these expectations are more than formal or technical. They are a matter of social attitudes—of the kinds of "recognition," the kind of *relevance* we expect from art. These expectatons offer writer *and* reader a real tradition, a living tradition—of meaning and relevance. A tradition in *depth* rather than in time. It alters

our relationship to those objects of culture—a tradition in the sense of "the presence of the past as well as its pastness."

The tradition which lives on is a tradition of triviality and irrelevance—an "expectation" that art cannot enrich our lives, deepen our awareness, or alter our attitudes. This is the internal, implicit "censorship" which offers tasteful, abstract, "aesthetic" readings of, say, *War and Peace* or *Anna Karenina* or *King Lear*—pieces offered in the void of the social contexts from which they spring, the problems they focus.

Lawrence wrote "for life's sake." This is not a weak emotionalism. It restores literature to its proper function—serving life, serving our humanity, saving us from the abstractions which, in the name of humanity, can be exalted *over* man. It is this centre which we need now, to give our lives—and our culture—meaning.

"And finally, it seems to me that even art is utterly dependent on philosophy: or if you prefer it, on a meta-

physic. The metaphysical philosophy may not be anywhere very accurately stated and may be quite unconscious, in the artist, yet it is a metaphysic that governs men at the time, and is by all men more or less comprehended, and lived. Men live and see according to some gradually developing and gradually withering vision. This vision exists also as a dynamic idea or metaphysics—exists first as such. Then it is unfolded into life and art. Our vision, our belief, our metaphysic is wearing woefully thin, and the art is wearing absolutely threadbare. We have no future; neither for hopes nor our aims nor our art. It has all gone grey and opaque.

"We have got to rip the old veil of a vision across, and find what the heart really believes in, after all: and what the heart really wants, for the next future. And we have got to put it down in terms of belief and of knowledge. And then go forward again to the fulfilment in life and art."

D. H. Lawrence (*Fantasia of the Unconscious*).