

*Works by Georg Lukács published in English*

THE HISTORICAL NOVEL  
THE MEANING OF CONTEMPORARY REALISM  
ESSAYS ON THOMAS MANN  
GOETHE AND HIS AGE  
HISTORY AND CLASS-CONSCIOUSNESS

# WRITER AND CRITIC

*and other essays*

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## *Narrate or Describe?*

### A PRELIMINARY DISCUSSION OF NATURALISM AND FORMALISM

To be radical is to grasp things by the roots. The root of humanity, however, is man himself.

—*Marx.*

LET'S start *in medias res*! In two famous modern novels, Zola's *Nana* and Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, horse races are depicted. How do the two writers approach their task?

The description of the race is a brilliant example of Zola's virtuosity. Every possible detail at a race is described precisely, colourfully and with sensuous vitality. Zola provides a small monograph on the modern turf; every phase from the saddling of the horses to the finish is investigated meticulously. The Parisian public is depicted in all the brilliance of a Second-Empire fashion show. The manoeuvring behind the scenes, too, is presented in detail. The race ends in an upset, and Zola describes not only the surprise outcome but also the betting fraud responsible for it. However, for all its virtuosity the description is mere filler in the novel. The events are loosely related to the plot and could easily be eliminated; the sole connection arises from the fact that one of Nana's many fleeting lovers is ruined in the swindle.

Another link to the main plot is even more tenuous, hardly an integral element in the action of the novel at all—and is thus even more representative of Zola's creative method: the victorious horse is named Nana. Surprisingly, Zola actually underlines this tenuous chance association. The victory of the coquette's namesake is symbolic of her own triumph in Parisian high society and demi-monde.

In *Anna Karenina* the race represents the crisis in a great

drama. Vronsky's fall means an overturning in Anna's life. Just before the race she had realized that she was pregnant and, after painful hesitation, had informed Vronsky of her condition. Her shock at Vronsky's fall impels the decisive conversation with her husband. The relationships of the protagonists enter a new critical phase because of the race. The race is thus no mere tableau but rather a series of intensely dramatic scenes which provide a turning point in the plot.

The absolute divergence of intentions in the scenes in the two novels is further reflected in the creative approaches. In Zola the race is *described* from the standpoint of an observer; in Tolstoy it is *narrated* from the standpoint of a participant.

Vronsky's ride is thoroughly integrated into the total action of the novel. Indeed, Tolstoy emphasizes that it is no mere incidental episode but an event of essential significance in Vronsky's life. The ambitious officer has been frustrated in advancing his military career by a set of circumstances, not the least of which is his relationship with Anna. For him a victory in the race in the presence of the court and of the aristocracy offers one of the few remaining opportunities for furthering his career. All the preparations for the race and all the events of the race itself are therefore integral to an important action, and they are recounted in all their dramatic significance. Vronsky's fall is the culmination of a phase in his personal drama. With it Tolstoy breaks off the description of the race. The fact that Vronsky's rival subsequently overtook him can be noted in passing later.

But the analysis of the "epic concentration" in this scene is not yet exhausted by any means. Tolstoy is not describing a "thing", a horse-race. He is recounting the vicissitudes of human beings. That is why the action is narrated twice, in true epic fashion, and not simply picturesquely described. In the first account, in which Vronsky was the central figure as a participant in the race, the author had to relate with precision and sophistication everything of significance in the preparations and in the race itself. But in the second account Anna and Karenin are the protagonists. Displaying his consummate epic artistry, Tolstoy does not introduce this account

of the race immediately after the first. Instead he first recounts earlier events in Karenin's day and explores Karenin's attitude towards Anna. Thus he is able to present the race as the climax of the entire day. The race itself develops into an inner drama. Anna watches Vronsky alone, oblivious to all other events in the race and to the success and failure of all other participants. Karenin watches no one but Anna, following her reactions to what happens to Vronsky. This scene, almost devoid of dialogue, prepares for Anna's outburst on the way home, when she confesses her relations with Vronsky to Karenin.

Here the reader or writer educated in the "modern" school may protest: "Granted that these do represent two different fictional approaches, does not the very linking of the race with the destinies of the protagonists make the race itself a chance event, simply an opportunity for the dramatic catastrophe? And does not Zola's comprehensive, monographic, effective description provide an accurate picture of a social phenomenon?"

The key question is: what is meant by "chance" in fiction? Without chance all narration is dead and abstract. No writer can portray life if he eliminates the fortuitous. On the other hand, in his representation of life he must go beyond crass accident and elevate chance to the inevitable.

Is it thoroughness of description that renders something artistically "inevitable"? Or does inevitability arise out of the relationship of characters to objects and events, a dynamic interaction in which the characters act and suffer? Linking Vronsky's ambition to his participation in the race provides quite another mode of artistic necessity than that which is possible with Zola's exhaustive description. Objectively, attendance at or participation in a race is only an incident in life. Tolstoy integrated such an incident into a critical dramatic context as tightly as it was possible to do. The race is, on the one hand, merely an occasion for the explosion of a conflict, but, on the other hand, through its relationship to Vronsky's social ambitions—an important factor in the subsequent tragedy—it is far more than a mere incident.

There are examples in literature of more obvious contrasts

of the two approaches to inevitability and accident in the representation of fictional subject matter.

Compare the description of the theatre in the same Zola novel with that in Balzac's *Lost Illusions*. Superficially there is much similarity. The opening night, with which Zola's novel begins, decides Nana's career. The première in Balzac signifies a turning point in Lucien de Rubempré's life, his transition from unrecognized poet to successful but unscrupulous journalist.

In this chapter Zola, with characteristic and deliberate thoroughness, describes the theatre only from the point of view of the audience. Whatever happens in the auditorium, in the foyer or in the loges, as well as the appearance of the stage as seen from the hall, is described with impressive artistry. But Zola's obsession with monographic detail is not satisfied. He devotes another chapter to the description of the theatre as seen from the stage. With no less descriptive power he depicts the scene changes, the dressing-rooms, etc., both during the performance and the intermissions. And to complete this picture, he describes in yet a third chapter a rehearsal, again with equal conscientiousness and virtuosity.

This meticulous detail is lacking in Balzac. For him the theatre and the performance serve as the setting for an inner drama of his characters: Lucien's success, Coralie's theatrical career, the passionate love between Lucien and Coralie, Lucien's subsequent conflict with his former friends in the D'Arthèz circle and his current protector Lousteau, and the beginning of his campaign of revenge against Mme. de Bargeton, etc.

But what is represented in these battles and conflicts—all directly or indirectly related to the theatre? the state of the theatre under capitalism: the absolute dependence of the theatre upon capital and upon the press (itself dependent upon capital); the relationship of the theatre to literature and of journalism to literature; the capitalistic basis for the connection between the life of an actress and open and covert prostitution.

These social problems are posed by Zola, too. But they are simply described as social facts, as results, as *caput mortuum* ✓

Fact vs. event -  
↳ can we link the fact to families vs. narratives?

↳ is it an issue of scope?

of a social process. Zola's theatre director continually repeats: "Don't say theatre, say bordello." Balzac, however, depicts *how* the theatre *becomes* prostituted under capitalism. The drama of his protagonists is simultaneously the drama of the institution in which they work, of the things with which they live, of the setting in which they fight their battles, of the objects through which they express themselves and through which their interrelationships are determined.

This is admittedly an extreme case. The objective factors in a man's environment are not always and inevitably so intimately linked to his fate. They can provide instruments for his activity and for his career and even, as in Balzac, turning points in his fortunes. But they may also simply provide the setting for his activity and for his career.

Does the contrast in approach we have just noted arise where there is a simple literary representation of a setting?

In the introductory chapter to his novel *Old Mortality*, Walter Scott depicts a marksmanship contest during some national holiday in Scotland after the Restoration, organized as part of a campaign to revive feudal institutions, as a review of the military power of the Stuart supporters and as a provocation for unmasking disaffection. The parade takes place on the eve of the revolt of the oppressed Puritans. With extraordinary epic artistry Walter Scott assembles on the parade ground all the opposing elements about to explode in bloody conflict. In a series of grotesque scenes during the military review, he exposes the hopeless anachronism of the feudal institutions and the stubborn resistance of the population to their revival. In the subsequent contest he exposes the contradictions within each of the two hostile parties; only the moderates on both sides take part in the sport. In the inn we see the brutal outrages of the royal mercenaries and encounter Burley, later to become the leader of the Puritan uprising, in all his gloomy magnificence. In effect, in narrating the events of this military review and describing the entire setting, Walter Scott introduces the factions and protagonists of a great historical drama. In a single stroke he sets us in the midst of a decisive action.

The description of the agricultural fair and of the awarding

of prizes to the farmers in Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* is among the most celebrated achievements of description in modern realism. But Flaubert presents only a "setting". For him the fair is merely background for the decisive love scene between Rudolf and Emma Bovary. The setting is incidental, merely "setting". Flaubert underscores its incidental character; by interweaving and counterposing official speeches with fragments of love dialogue, he offers an ironic juxtaposition of the public and private banality of the petty bourgeoisie, accomplishing this parallel with consistency and artistry.

But there remains an unresolved contradiction: this incidental setting, this accidental occasion for a love scene, is simultaneously an important event in the world of the novel; the minute description of this setting is absolutely essential to Flaubert's purpose, that is, to the comprehensive exposition of the social milieu. The ironic juxtaposition does not exhaust the significance of the description. The "setting" has an independent existence as an element in the representation of the environment. The characters, however, are nothing but observers of this setting. To the reader they seem undifferentiated, additional elements of the environment Flaubert is describing. They become dabs of colour in a painting which rises above a lifeless level only insofar as it is elevated to an ironic symbol of philistinism. The painting assumes an importance which does not arise out of the subjective importance of the events, to which it is scarcely related, but from the artifice in the formal stylization.

Flaubert achieves his symbolic content through irony and consequently on a considerable level of artistry and to some extent with genuine artistic means. But when, as in the case of Zola, the symbol is supposed to embody social monumentality and is supposed to imbue episodes otherwise meaningless, with great social significance, true art is abandoned. The metaphor is over-inflated in the attempt to encompass reality. An arbitrary detail, a chance similarity, a fortuitous attitude, an accidental meeting—all are supposed to provide direct expression of important social relationships. There are innumerable possible examples in Zola's work, like the comparison of

Nana with the golden fleece, which is supposed to symbolize her disastrous effect on the Paris of before 1870. Zola himself confessed to such intentions, declaring: "In my work there is a hypertrophy of real detail. From the springboard of exact observation it leaps to the stars. With a single beat of the wings, the truth is exalted to the symbol."

In Scott, Balzac or Tolstoy we experience events which are inherently significant because of the direct involvement of the characters in the events and because of the general social significance emerging in the unfolding of the characters' lives. We are the audience to events in which the characters take active part. We ourselves experience these events.

In Flaubert and Zola the characters are merely spectators, more or less interested in the events. As a result, the events themselves become only a tableau for the reader, or, at best, a series of tableaux. We are merely observers.

## II

The opposition between experiencing and observing is not accidental. It arises out of divergent basic positions about life and about the major problems of society and not just out of divergent artistic methods of handling content or one specific aspect of content.

Only after making this assertion can we attempt a concrete investigation of our problem. As in other areas of life, in literature there are no "pure" phenomena. Engels once noted ironically that "pure" feudalism had existed only in the constitution of the ephemeral Kingdom of Jerusalem. Yet feudalism obviously was an historical reality and as such is a valid subject for scientific investigation. There are no writers who renounce description absolutely. Nor, on the other hand, can one claim that the outstanding representatives of realism after 1848, Flaubert and Zola, renounced narration absolutely.

What is important here are philosophies of composition, not any illusory "pure" phenomenon of narration or description.

What is important is knowing how and why description, originally one of the many modes of epic art (undoubtedly a

subordinate mode), became the principal mode. In this development the character and function of description underwent a fundamental transformation from what it had been in the epic.

In his critique of Stendhal's *Charterhouse of Parma*, Balzac had emphasized the importance of description as a mode of modern fiction. In the novel of the eighteenth century (Le Sage, Voltaire, etc.) there had scarcely been any description, or at most it had played a minimal, scarcely even a subordinate, role. Only with romanticism did the situation change. Balzac pointed out that the literary direction he followed, of which he considered Walter Scott the founder, assigned great importance to description.

But after emphasizing the contrast with the "aridity" of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and associating himself with the modern method, he adduced a whole series of stylistic criteria for defining the new literary direction. According to Balzac, description was only one stylistic mode among several. He particularly emphasized the new significance of the dramatic element in fiction.

The new style developed out of the need to adapt fiction to provide an adequate representation of new social phenomena. The relationship of the individual to his class had become more complicated than it had been in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Formerly a summary indication of the background, external appearance and personal habits of an individual (as in Le Sage) had sufficed for a clear and comprehensive social characterization. Individualization was accomplished almost exclusively through action, through the reactions of characters to events.

Balzac recognized that this method could no longer suffice. Rastignac is an adventurer of quite another sort to Gil Blas. The precise description of the filth, smells, meals and service in the Vauquier pension is essential to render Rastignac's particular kind of adventurism comprehensible and real. Similarly, Grandet's house and Gobseck's apartment must be described accurately and in precise detail in order to represent two contrasting usurers, differing as individuals and as social types.

But apart from the fact that the description of the environment is never "pure" description but is almost always transformed into action (as when old Grandet repairs his decayed staircase himself), description for Balzac provides nothing more than a base for the new, decisive element in the composition of the novel: the dramatic element. Balzac's extraordinarily multifaceted, complicated characterizations could not possibly emerge with such impressive dramatic effectiveness if the environmental conditions in their lives were not depicted in such breadth. In Flaubert and Zola description has an entirely different function.

Balzac, Stendhal, Dickens and Tolstoy depicts a bourgeois society consolidating itself after severe crises, the complicated laws of development operating in its formation, and the tortuous transitions from the old society in decay to the new society in birth. They themselves actively experienced the crises in this development, though in different ways. Goethe, Stendhal and Tolstoy took part in the wars which were the midwives of the revolutions; Balzac was a participant in and victim of the feverish speculations of emerging French capitalism; Goethe and Stendhal served as government officials; and Tolstoy, as landowner and as participant in various social organizations (the census and famine commissions, for example) directly experienced important events of the transitional upheaval.

In their public activity as well as in their private lives, they followed the tradition of the writers, artists and scientists of the Renaissance and of the Enlightenment, men who participated variously and actively in the great social struggles of their times, men whose writing was the fruit of such rich, diverse activity. They were not "specialists" in the sense of the capitalist division of labour.

With Flaubert and Zola it was otherwise. They started their creative work after the June uprising in a firmly established bourgeois society. They did not participate actively in the life of this society; indeed they refused to do so. In this refusal lay the tragedy of the important generation of artists of the transitional period. This renunciation of social activity was

above all a manifestation of their opposition, an expression of their hate, revulsion and contempt for the political and social order of their time. People who made peace with the order turned into soulless, lying apologists for capitalism. But Flaubert and Zola had too much integrity. For them the only solution to the tragic contradiction in their situation was to stand aloof as observers and critics of capitalist society. At the same time they became specialists in the craft of writing, writers in the sense of the capitalist division of labour. The book had become merchandise, the writer, a salesman of this merchandise—unless he had been born a coupon clipper. In Balzac we still see the gloomy magnificence of primary accumulation in the realm of culture. Goethe and Tolstoy can still exhibit the aristocratic disdain of those who do not live exclusively from writing. But Flaubert becomes a voluntary ascetic, and Zola is constrained by material pressures to be a writer in the sense of the capitalist division of labour.

New styles, new ways of representing reality, though always linked to old forms and styles, never arise from any immanent dialectic within artistic forms. Every new style is socially and historically determined and is the product of a social development. But to recognize the determining factors in the formation of artistic styles is not to assign equal artistic value or rank to these styles. Necessity can also be necessity for the artistically false, distorted and corrupt. The alternatives, experiencing and observing, correspond to what was socially determined for writers of two different periods of capitalism. Narration and description represent the principal modes of fiction appropriate to these periods.

To distinguish the two modes effectively, we can counterpose statements by Goethe and Zola regarding the relationship of observation to creation. "I have never," said Goethe, "contemplated nature with poetic purpose in mind. But my early landscape sketching and later investigations in natural science trained me to a constant, precise observation of nature. Little by little I became so well acquainted with nature in its smallest details that when I need something as a poet, I find it at hand and do not easily err against truth." Zola also expressed him-

self clearly about his method of approaching a subject: "A naturalistic novelist wants to write a novel about the world of the theatre. He starts out with this general idea *without possessing a single fact or character*. His first task will be to take notes on what he can learn about the world he wants to describe. He has known this actor, attended that performance. . . . Then he will speak with the people who are best informed about this material, he will collect opinions, anecdotes, character portraits. That is not all. He will then read documents. *Finally* he will visit the locale itself and spend *some days* in a theatre to become familiar with the minutest details; he will spend his evenings in the dressing room of an actress and will absorb the atmosphere as much as possible. And once this documentation is complete, the novel will write itself. The novelist must only arrange the facts logically. . . . *Interest is no longer concentrated on originality of plot; on the contrary, the more banal and general it is, the more typical it becomes.*" [Emphasis by G.L.]

These are two basically divergent styles. Two basically divergent approaches to reality.

### III

Understanding the social necessity that has produced a given style is something quite different from evaluating the aesthetic results of the style. In aesthetics the precept does not apply "tout comprendre, c'est tout pardonner". Only vulgar sociology, which views its sole task as the discovery of so-called "social equivalents" for individual writers or styles, believes that with the identification of social origin every question is answered and resolved. (How it seeks to accomplish this is not in our province here.) In practice this method means reducing all art history to the level of the decadent bourgeoisie: Homer or Shakespeare are just as much "products" as Joyce or Dos Passos; the task of literary investigation consists only in discovering the "social equivalent" for Homer or Joyce. Marx put the question quite differently. After analysing the social origins of the Homeric epics, he declared: "But the difficulty

is not in understanding that Greek art and epic are related to certain stages of social development. The difficulty is in understanding why they still provide us with artistic pleasure and still serve in certain measure as the norm and unattainable example."

Naturally Marx's observation applies equally in cases of negative aesthetic judgment. In neither case may aesthetic evaluation be mechanically separated from the question of historical origin. That the Homeric epics are true epics, while those of Camoens, Milton and Voltaire are not, is simultaneously a social, an historical *and* an aesthetic question. No "artistry" can exist independently of and in isolation from social, historical and subjective conditions which are unpropitious to a rich, comprehensive, many-sided and dynamic artistic reflection of objective reality. Social presuppositions and objective conditions adverse to artistic creation inevitably lead to a distortion in the fundamental forms of literary representation.

—This fact is relevant to the problem in question.

In this regard Flaubert's criticism of his novel *L'éducation sentimentale* is illuminating. He wrote: "It is too true, and aesthetically speaking, it lacks the falsity of perspective. Because it was so well contrived, the plan disappeared. Every work of art must have a point, a climax, must form a pyramid, or else light must fall on some point of the sphere. But in life nothing like this exists. However, art is not nature. Never mind, I believe no one yet has gone further in honesty."

Like all Flaubert's declarations, this confession shows his unsparing truthfulness. Flaubert characterizes the composition of his novel correctly. He is right, too, in emphasizing the artistic necessity of the climax. But is he also right in saying there is "too much truth" in his novel? Do "climaxes" exist in art alone? Of course not. Flaubert's frank confession is important not only as a personal criticism of his significant novel but even more as a disclosure of his basically erroneous conception of reality, of the objective existence of society, and of the relationship between nature and art. His belief that "climaxes" exist only in art and that they are therefore created

by artists at will is simply subjective prejudice. It is a prejudice arising from a superficial observation of the characteristics of bourgeois life and of the forms life takes in bourgeois society, an observation ignoring the motive forces of social development and their unremitting influence on even the superficial phenomena of life. In such an abstract view life appears as a constant, even-tenored stream or as a monotonous plain sprawling without contours. The monotony, admittedly, is interrupted at times by "sudden" catastrophes.

In reality, however—and naturally in capitalist reality as well—"sudden" catastrophes are actually long in preparation. They do not stand in exclusive contrast to an apparently peaceful flow but are the outcome of a complicated, uneven evolution. And this evolution shapes the supposedly unruffled surface of Flaubert's sphere. The artist must illuminate the important stages in this process. Flaubert is under a misconception in imagining that this process does not occur independently of him. The shaping of society conforms to laws of historical development and is determined by the action of social forces. In objective reality the false, subjective and abstract contrast between the "normal" and "abnormal" vanishes. Marx, for example, considered the economic crisis as the "most normal" characteristic of capitalist economy. "The autonomy assumed by interrelated and complementary factors," he wrote, "is violently destroyed. Hence the crisis reveals the unity of factors which had become independent of each other."

Reality is viewed quite differently by apologetic bourgeois science of the second half of the nineteenth century. A crisis appears as a "catastrophe" which "suddenly" interrupts the "normal" flow of the economy. By analogy, every revolution is considered catastrophic and abnormal.

Neither as individuals nor as writers were Flaubert and Zola defenders of capitalism, but they were children of their time and were profoundly influenced ideologically by the attitudes of their time—especially Zola, on whose works the shallow prejudices of bourgeois sociology had a decisive impact. That is why life for Zola develops almost without movement

or change so long as it is, in his conception, socially normal. According to him, men's actions are normal products of their social environment. There are, however, other diverse and heterogeneous forces at work, like heredity, which affect men's thinking and emotions with a fatalistic inevitability and provoke catastrophes interrupting the normal course of life. Thus the congenital drunkenness of Etienne Lantier in *Germinal* causes explosions and calamities with no organic connection to Etienne's character; nor does Zola seek any such connection. A similar case is provided in the calamity caused by Saccard's son in *Gold*. In each instance the normal, undifferentiated action of the environment is contrasted with the sudden, unrelated catastrophe caused by an hereditary factor.

Here obviously there is no precise and profound reflection of objective reality but a trivial distortion of its principles, a distortion resulting from the influence of apologetic prejudices on the ideology of the writers of this period. An accurate appreciation of the motive forces of the social process and a precise, impartial, profound and comprehensive reflection of their effects on life are always manifested in movement which exposes the organic unity of the normal and the exceptional.

This fact of the social process is also a fact of the life of the individual. Where and how is this truth revealed? It is clear not only in science and in politics founded on a scientific basis but also in man's everyday practical commonsense that truth is revealed only in practice, in deeds and actions. Men's words, subjective reactions and thoughts are shown to be true or false, genuine or deceptive, significant or fatuous, in practice—as they succeed or fail in deeds and action. Character, too, can be revealed concretely only through action. Who is brave? Who is good? Such questions can be answered solely in action.

And only in activity do men become interesting to each other; only in action have they significance for literature. The sole test for confirming character-traits (or exposing their absence) is action, deeds—practice. Primitive poetry—whether fairy tales, ballads or legends or the spontaneous anecdote which developed later—is always based on the primacy of action. This poetry has continued to have a profound meaning



because it depicts the success or failure of human purpose in the test of practice. It remains vital and interesting despite any fantastic, naïve and outlandish presupposition because it focuses on this eternal, fundamental truth. And the interest in individual deeds and actions which are arranged within an organic framework is due solely to the fact that in diverse and variegated adventures the same typical character trait is constantly maintained. With an Odysseus or a Gil Blas, there is the same poetic basis for the eternal freshness of the adventures. Of course, the decisive element is the man himself and the revelation of essential human traits. We are interested in how Odysseus or Gil Blas, Moll Flanders or Don Quixote react to the decisive events of their lives, how they stand up to danger, overcome obstacles, how the character traits which make them interesting and important to us unfold in action in ever-greater breadth and depth.

Without the revelation of important traits and without an interaction of the characters with world events, objects, the forces of nature and social institutions, even the most extraordinary adventures would be empty and meaningless. Yet one must not overlook the fact that even when not revealing significant and typical human qualities, all action still offers the abstract pattern, no matter how distorted and tenuous, for exploring human practice. That is why the schematic narration of adventures of shadowy characters rouses a certain passing interest (tales of knights in the past and detective novels today). The effectiveness of these romances testifies to one of the most profound and impelling attractions of literature: man's interest in the richness and colour, the constant change and variety of human experience. When the artistic literature of a period does not provide actions in which typical characters with a richly developed inner life are tested in practice, the public seeks abstract, schematic substitutes.

Such was the case with literature in the second half of the nineteenth century. Literature based on observation and description excludes this interaction to an ever-increasing extent. There has probably never been a time like the present when so much empty literature of pure adventure has

flourished alongside the official, serious literature. Nor can there be any illusion that this literature is read simply by the "uneducated" while the "élite" stick to the significant artistic literature. Rather the opposite is the case. Modern classics are read partly out of a sense of duty and partly out of an interest in the content—to the extent that they deal with the problems of the time even hesitantly and with distortion. For recreation and pleasure, however, the public turns to detective stories.

While working on *Madame Bovary*, Flaubert complained repeatedly that his novel failed to provide entertainment. We encounter similar complaints from many outstanding modern writers; they note that the great novels of the past combined the representation of significant human beings with entertainment and suspense, for which modern art has substituted monotony and tedium. This development is not entirely the result of the lack of talent, for there is a considerable number of uncommonly gifted writers today. Monotony and tedium result from the writers' creative approach and from their general philosophical views of the world.

Zola harshly condemned Stendhal's and Balzac's introduction of the exceptional into their works as "unnatural", complaining, for example, of the portrayal of love in *Scarlet and Black*: "Thus the truth we encounter every day is abandoned, and the psychologist Stendahl carries us into the realm of the extraordinary as much as the story-teller Alexandre Dumas. As far as exact truth is concerned, Julien provides me with as many surprises as d'Artagnan."

In his essay on the literary activity of the Goncourts, Paul Bourget formulates the new principle of composition very accurately: "Drama, as its etymology implies, is action, and action is never a good expression of manners. What characterizes a man is not what he does in a moment of acute and impassioned crisis but his daily habits, which do not mark a crisis but a state of being." In the light of this observation, Flaubert's criticism of his own technique of composition becomes comprehensible. Flaubert confused life with the everyday existence of the ordinary bourgeois. Naturally, such a pre-conception has social roots, but it does not thereby cease to be

a preconception, a subjective distortion which inhibits an adequate and comprehensive artistic reflection of reality. Flaubert struggled throughout his life to escape the vicious circle of socially determined preconceptions. Because he did not battle against the preconceptions themselves and even accepted them as incontestable objective facts, his battle was tragic and hopeless. He complained unceasingly and passionately of the boredom, pettiness and repugnance of the bourgeois subject-matter he was forced to depict. During his work on each bourgeois novel he swore never again to occupy himself with such filth. The only escape he could find was in a flight to the exotic. His preconceptions barred him from discovering the inner poetry of life. → i.e. *Salammbô*?

The inner poetry of life is the poetry of men in struggle, the poetry of the turbulent, active interaction of men. Without this inner poetry to intensify and maintain its vitality, no real epic is possible and no epic composition can be elaborated that will rouse and hold people's interest. Epic art—and, of course, the art of the novel—consists in discovering the significant and vital aspects of social practice. From epic poetry men expect a clearer, sharper mirror of themselves and of their social activity. The art of the epic poet consists in a proper distribution of emphasis and in a just accentuation of what is essential.

A work becomes impressive and universal according to how much it presents the essential element—man and his social practice—not as an artificial product of the artist's virtuosity but as something that emerges and grows naturally, as something not invented, but simply discovered.

Thus the German novelist and dramatist Otto Ludwig, whose own literary practice is very dubious indeed, arrived at a very correct insight from studying Walter Scott and Dickens. He declared: ". . . the characters seem the decisive elements, and the wheel of events serves only to impel the characters into a game in which they are naturally involved; hence they are not included to help turn the wheel. The fact is that the author makes interesting what requires interest and simply gives free play to that which is interesting in itself. . . . The characters are what is important. And actually an event, no

matter how amazing it may be, will in the long run not have as much effect on us as men who have won our affection through our association with them."

Description, as we have discussed it, becomes the dominant mode in composition in a period in which, for social reasons, the sense of what is primary in epic construction has been lost. Description is the writer's substitute for the epic significance that has been lost.

But in the genesis of new ideological forms, an interaction always takes place. The predominance of description is not only a result but also and simultaneously a cause, the cause of a further divorce of literature from epic significance. The domination of capitalist prose over the inner poetry of human experience, the continuous dehumanization of social life, the general debasement of humanity—all these are objective facts of the development of capitalism. The descriptive method is the inevitable product of this development. Once established this method is taken up by leading writers dedicated in their own way, and then it in turn affects the literary representation of reality. The poetic level of life decays—and literature intensifies the decay.

## IV

Narration establishes proportions, description merely levels.  
Goethe demands that epic poetry treat all events as past in contrast to the drama, which contemporizes all action. Thus Goethe perceptively defines the stylistic distinction between epic and drama. Drama in principle stands on a much higher level of abstraction than the epic. A drama is concentrated about a single conflict; whatever does not pertain directly or indirectly to the conflict must be excluded as a disturbing, superfluous element. The opulence of a dramatist like Shakespeare results from a varied and rich conception of the conflict itself. In the exclusion of all details not pertaining to the conflict, there is no fundamental difference between Shakespeare and the Greeks.

Goethe insisted that the action of the epic be set in the past

because he understood that only thus could there be an effective poetic selection of the essential elements within the varied richness of life and only thus could there be a representation of the essential elements that would promote the illusion of life in its full breadth. The criteria for determining whether a detail is pertinent, whether it is essential, must be more generous in the epic than in the drama and must encompass more complex and indirect relationships. Within this broader and fuller conception of the essential, however, selection is still as rigorous as for the drama. What does not pertain to the subject here too is ballast, no less an impediment than in the drama.

The involved complexity of patterns of life is clarified only at the conclusion. Only in activity are particular personal qualities in the totality of a character revealed as important and decisive. Only in practical activity, only in the complicated intercatenation of varied acts and passions is it possible to determine what objects, what institutions, etc., significantly influence men's lives and how and when this influence is effected. Only at the conclusion can these questions be resolved and reviewed. Life itself sorts out the essential elements in the subjective as well as in the objective world. The epic poet who narrates a single life or an assemblage of lives retrospectively makes the essential aspects selected by life clear and understandable. But the observer, necessarily a contemporary to what he observes, loses himself in a whirlwind of details of apparently equal significance, for life has not done its selecting through the test of practice. The use of the past tense in the epic is thus a basic technique prescribed by reality for achieving artistic order and organization.

Of course, the reader does not know the conclusion in advance. He possesses an abundance of details of which he cannot always and immediately determine the importance. Certain expectations are awakened which the later course of the narrative will confirm or refute. But the reader is involved in a rich web of variegated motivations; the author in his omniscience knows the special significance of each petty detail for the final solution and for the final revelation of character

since he introduces only details that contribute to his goals. The reader takes confidence from the author's omniscience and feels at home in the fictional world. If he cannot foretell the events, he feels confident about the direction which the events will take because of their inner logic and because of the inner necessity in the characters. Perhaps he does not know everything about the future progress of the action and the future evolution of the characters, but in general he knows more than the characters themselves.

Indeed, with the gradual exposition of their significance, the details are seen in a new light. When, for example, in his short story "After the Ball", Tolstoy describes with subtle touches the self-sacrifice of the father of the hero's fiancée for his daughter, the reader accepts the information without grasping its significance. Only after the account of the running of the gauntlet, where the same tender father acts as the brutal commander at an execution, is the suspense resolved. Tolstoy demonstrates his epic artistry in maintaining the unity within this suspense by avoiding depicting the old officer as a dehumanized "product" of czarism and by showing instead how the czarist régime transforms people decent and self-sacrificing in their private lives into passive and even eager instruments of its brutality. It is clear that all the nuances of the events at the ball could be revealed only in retrospect from the gauntlet scene. The "contemporary" observer, who could not view the ball from this perspective or retrospectively at all, would have had to see and describe other, insignificant and superficial details.

The necessary distance in narration, which permits the selection of the essential after the action, is not lost when true epic poets use the first-person point of view, where a character is himself the narrator, as in this Tolstoy short story. Even in a novel in diary form like Goethe's *Werther*, individual passages are set back in time, if only a short period of time, to provide the perspective necessary for the selection of details essential for revealing the effect of events and people upon Werther.

Only in this perspective can characters assume definite outline without at the same time losing their capacity to change. As a matter of fact, with this approach their transformation

can proceed as an enrichment, as a fulfilment of the outline with ever more intense vitality. Tension in the novel results from this evolution; it is a suspense regarding the success or failure of characters with whom we have become acquainted.

That is why in masterworks of epic art the conclusion can be anticipated from the very beginning. In the opening lines of the Homeric epics the content and conclusion are even summarized.

How then does suspense arise? Indubitably it does not arise out of an aesthetic interest in how the *poet* goes about arriving at his goal. It arises rather from the natural human curiosity regarding the capacities *Odysseus* will yet disclose and the obstacles he has still to overcome to achieve his goal. In the Tolstoy story we know from the outset that the love of the hero-narrator will not result in marriage. The suspense therefore is not in what will happen to his love but in how the hero developed his present maturity and sense of irony. The tension in genuine epic always develops out of concern for the destinies of the characters.

Description contemporizes everything. Narration recounts the past. One describes what one sees, and the spatial "present" confers a temporal "present" on men and objects. But it is an illusory present, not the present of immediate action of the drama. The best modern narrative has been able to infuse the dramatic element into the novel by transferring events into the past. But the contemporaneity of the observer making a description is the antithesis of the contemporaneity of the drama. Static situations are described, states or attitudes of mind of human beings or conditions of things—still lives.

Representation declines into genre, and the natural principle of epic selection is lost. One state of mind at any moment and of itself without relation to men's activity is as important or as irrelevant as another. And this equivalence is even more blatant when it comes to objects. In a narrative it is reasonable to mention only those aspects of a thing which are important to its function in a specific action. In and of itself everything has innumerable qualities. When a writer attempts as an observer and describer to achieve a comprehensive description, he must

either reject any principle of selection, undertake an inexhaustible labour of Sisyphus or simply emphasize the picturesque and superficial aspects best adapted to description.

In any case, the loss of the narrative interrelationship between objects and their function in concrete human experiences means a loss of artistic significance. Objects can then acquire significance only through direct association with some abstract concept which the author considers essential to his view of the world. But an object does not thereby achieve poetic significance; significance is assigned to it. The object is made a symbol. As this process demonstrates, the aesthetic approach of naturalism inevitably engenders formalist methods of fiction.

But the loss of inner significance and hence of any epic order and hierarchy among objects and events does not stop at mere levelling and transformation of an imitation of life into a still life. Bringing characters to life and representing objects on the basis of immediate, empirical observation is a process with its own logic and its own mode of accentuation. Something much worse than mere levelling results—a reversed order of significance, a consequence implicit in the descriptive method since both the important and the unimportant are described with equal attention. For many writers this process leads to genre description deprived of all human significance.

With devastating irony Friedrich Hebbel dissected a typical exponent of this genre-like description, Adalbert Stifter, who, thanks to Nietzsche, has been elevated to a classic of German reaction. Hebbel demonstrates how the pressing problems of mankind vanish in Stifter; all basic aspects of life are smothered under a blanket of delicately delineated minutiae. "Because moss shows up more impressively if the painter ignores the tree, and the tree stands out better if the forest disappears, there is a general cry of exultation, and artists whose powers scarcely suffice to render the pettiest aspects of nature and who instinctively do not attempt loftier tasks are exalted above others who do not depict the dance of the gnats because it is scarcely visible next to the dance of the planets. The 'peripheral' begins to bloom everywhere: the mud on

Napoleon's boot at the moment of the hero's abdication is as painstakingly portrayed as the spiritual conflict in his face. . . . In short, the comma puts on coat-tails and in its lofty complacency smiles haughtily at the sentence to which it owes its existence."

Hebbel astutely defines the other basic danger latent in description: the danger of details becoming important in themselves. With the loss of the art of narration, details cease to be transmitters of concrete aspects of the action and attain significance independent of the action and of the lives of the characters. Any artistic relationship to the composition as a whole is lost. The false contemporaneity in description brings a disintegration of the composition into disconnected and autonomous details. Nietzsche, observing with an acute eye symptoms of decadence in art and life, defined the stylistic impact of this process on the individual sentence. "The individual word," he declared, "becomes sovereign and leaps out of the sentence, the sentence bursts its bounds to obscure the sense of the page; the page acquires life at the expense of the whole—the whole is no longer a whole. But this is the picture of every decadent style . . . the vitality, vibrance and exuberance of life withdraws into the minute image; whatever is left over lacks life. . . . The whole is no longer alive; it is a synthetic, contrived artifact."

The autonomy of the details has varied effects, all deleterious, on the representation of men's lives. On the one hand, writers strive to describe details as completely, plasticly and picturesquely as possible; in this attempt they achieve an extraordinary artistic competence. But the description of things no longer has anything to do with the lives of characters. Not only are things described out of any context with the lives of the characters, attaining an independent significance that is not their due within the totality of the novel, but the very manner in which they are described sets them in an entirely different sphere from that in which the characters move. The more naturalistic writers become, the more they seek to portray only common characters of the everyday world and to provide them only with thoughts, emotions and speech of the everyday

world—the harsher the disharmony. The dialogue sinks into the arid, flat prose of everyday bourgeois life: the description declines into the strained artificiality of a synthetic art. The characters have no connection at all with the objects described.

But if the relationship is established on the basis of description, the situation becomes even worse. Then the author describes everything from the point of view of the psychology of his characters. Not only is a consequent representation of reality impossible in such an approach (except in an extremely subjective first-person novel), but, in addition, there is no possibility of artistic composition. The author's point of view jumps from here to there, and the novel reels from one perspective to another. The author loses the comprehensive vision and omniscience of the old epic narrators. He sinks consciously to the level of his characters and sometimes knows only as much about situations as they do. The false contemporaneity of description transforms the novel into a kaleidoscopic chaos.

Thus every epic relationship disappears in the descriptive style. Lifeless, fetishized objects are whisked about in an amorphous atmosphere. Epic relationships are not simply successive; and when in description individual pictures or sketches are arranged chronologically, epic relationship is not thereby established. In genuine narration an author can render a chronological series of events lifelike and meaningful only by utilizing approaches of considerable complexity. In narration the writer must move with the greatest deftness between past and present so that the reader may grasp the real causality of the epic events. And only the experience of this causality can communicate the sense of a real chronological, concrete, historical sequence, as in the double narration of the race in Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*. Similarly, with what art does Tolstoy in *Resurrection* expose bit by bit the background to the relationship between Nechlyudov and Maslova, introducing an additional detail whenever the illumination of a moment in the past is needed to advance the action another step!

Description debases characters to the level of inanimate objects; as a result a basic principle of epic composition is abandoned. The writer using the descriptive method starts out

with *things*. (We have seen how Zola conceives the writer's confrontation of a subject. The actual core of his novels is a complex of facts: money, the mine, etc.) The consequence of this approach is that the varied manifestations of a complex of objects determine the organization of the novel, as in *Nana*, where the theatre is described in one chapter from the viewpoint of the audience and in another from backstage. The characters' lives, the careers of the protagonists, merely constitute a loose thread for attaching and grouping a series of pictures of objects, pictures which are ends in themselves.

Matching this spurious objectivity is an equally spurious subjectivity. For from the standpoint of epic interrelationships not much is gained when a simple succession of events provides the motive principle of the composition or when a novel is based on the lyrical, self-orientated subjectivity of an isolated individual; a succession of subjective impressions no more suffices to establish an epic interrelationship than a succession of fetishized objects, even when these are inflated into symbols. From an artistic point of view, the individual pictures in both cases are as isolated and unrelated to each other as pictures in a museum.

Without the interaction of struggle among people, without testing in action, everything in composition becomes arbitrary and incidental. No psychology, no matter how refined, and no sociology, no matter how pseudo-scientific, can establish epic relationships within this chaos.

The levelling inherent in the descriptive method makes everything episodic. Many modern writers look contemptuously at the old-fashioned, complicated methods by which the old novelists set their plots into motion and elaborated an epic composition with all its involved interaction and conflict. Thus Sinclair Lewis contrasts Dickens' method of composition with Dos Passos' to the latter's advantage: "And the classical method—oh yes, was painstakingly spun out. Through an ill-fated coincidence Mr. Jones and Mr. Smith are sent out in the same coach so that something pathetic and entertaining may occur. In *Manhattan Transfer* people do not run into each other on the road but meet in the most natural fashion." "The

most natural fashion" implies that the characters either fall into no relationships at all or at best into transient and superficial relationships, that they appear suddenly and just as suddenly disappear, and that their personal lives—since we scarcely know them—do not interest us in the least, and that they take no active part in a plot but merely promenade with varying attitudes through the externalized objective world described in the novel. That is certainly "natural" enough. The question is: what is the result for the art of narration?

Dos Passos is no common talent and Sinclair Lewis is an outstanding writer. Thus what Sinclair Lewis says in the same essay about Dickens' and Dos Passos' characterization is significant: "Of course Dos Passos created no such enduring characters as Pickwick, Micawber, Oliver, Nancy, David and his aunt, Nicholas, Smike, and at least forty others, and he will never succeed in doing so." An invaluable admission and quite honest. But if Sinclair Lewis is right, and undoubtedly he is, what then is the artistic value of the "most natural fashion" of relating characters to the action?

## v

But what about the intensive existence of objects? The poetry of things? The poetic truth of description? These are the objections of the admirers of the naturalistic method.

In reply one must return to the basic principles of epic art. How are things rendered poetic in epic poetry? Is it true that a description accomplished with virtuosity and perfection of technical detail of a setting like a theatre, a market or a stock exchange will really transmit the poetry in the theatre or the stockmarket? It is certainly doubtful. Boxes and orchestra, stage and parterre, backstage and dressing-room are in themselves inanimate, absolutely unpoetic and void of interest. And they remain so even when thronged with characters in whose lives we have been involved. Only when a theatre or a stock exchange provide the arena for human ambitions, a stage or a battlefield for men's struggles with each other, do they become poetic. And only when they furnish the indispensable

vehicle for transmitting human relationships do they acquire poetic value or become poetic in themselves.

A "poetry of things" independent of people and of people's lives does not exist in literature. It is more than questionable whether totality of description, so highly praised, and accuracy of technical detail even result in an effective representation of the objects being described. Anything which plays a meaningful role in the activity of a man about whom we are concerned becomes poetically significant (given a certain literary competence) precisely because of its relationship to the character's activity. One has only to recall the profound poetic effect of the tools rescued from the shipwreck in *Robinson Crusoe*.

On the other hand, consider any description at all in Zola. Take, for example, backstage in *Nana*. "A painted curtain was lowered, the set for the third act: the grotto on Mt. Aetna. Stagehands planted poles in slots in the floor, others fetched the flats, pierced them and tied them with strong rope to the poles. In the background a lightman set a spot with flames behind red panes to simulate the blaze of Vulcan's forge. The entire stage was a mad rush, a hustle and bustle in which, however, the tiniest movement was purposeful and calculated. In the midst of this hurly-burly the prompter strolled with tiny steps, stretching his legs."

What purpose does such a description serve? Anyone ignorant of the theatre obtains no real insight; for the sophisticated such a description presents nothing new. Artistically it is superfluous. And this striving after maximum objective "accuracy" harbours a serious danger for the novel. One does not need to understand anything about horses to appreciate the drama in Vronsky's race. But the naturalists aspire to ever greater technical "precision" in terminology; in increasing measure they employ the jargon of the field with which they are dealing. Thus just as he speaks professionally of "flats", Zola would, whenever possible, describe a studio in the terms of the painter and a metal shop in the terms of the metal-worker. What results is a literature for specialists, for literateurs who have a connoisseur's appreciation of the painstaking assimilation of such technical knowledge and jargon. The Goncourts

expressed this tendency most clearly and paradoxically, writing: ". . . every artistic production comes to grief when only artists can appreciate its beauty. . . . This is one of the greatest stupidities ever expressed. It is d'Alembert's." To combat the profound truths of the Enlightenment, the fore-runners of naturalism embraced without reservation the theory of art for art's sake.

Objects come to life poetically only to the extent they are related to men's life, that is why the real epic poet does not describe objects but exposes their function in the mesh of human destinies, introducing things only as they play a part in the destinies, actions and passions of men. Lessing understood this principle of poetic composition. "I find that Homer depicts nothing but action," he wrote, "that he depicts all individual objects and people only through their participation in action". In the *Laocoon* Lessing provides an example of this observation so striking that it is worth quoting in entirety.

He is discussing the description of the two sceptres, Agamemnon's and Achilles': ". . . if, I say, we needed a more complete, a more precise image of this important sceptre, what would Homer do? Would he picture the wood and the carved head in addition to the gold nails? Yes, if the description were to serve later as an heraldic emblem<sup>1</sup> that someone might subsequently reproduce in every detail. And yet I am certain that many modern poets would give a description of such an heraldic emblem in the sincere conviction that they had achieved a true picture if a painter would be able to reproduce it. What does Homer care about how much he leaves for the painter to do? Instead of a detailed picture he gives us the history of the sceptre. First its carving by Vulcan, then how it shines in Jupiter's hands; now as a symbol of Mercury's dignity, then as the staff of command of the warlike Pelops, next as the shepherd's crook of the peaceful Atreus. . . . When Achilles swears by his sceptre to avenge himself for the contempt shown him by Agamemnon, Homer relates the history

<sup>1</sup> Here, in effect, Lessing is criticizing the "precision" of the Goncourts and of Zola.—G.L.

of this sceptre. We see it green on the hill, the axe sheers it from the branch, strips it of leaves and bark and shapes it to serve the people's judge as symbol of his divine office. . . . It did not seem important to Homer to represent two staffs of different materials and appearance in order to give a convincing picture of the varied powers of which these staffs had been the symbols. This one was a work of Vulcan. The other had been cut by an unknown hand in the mountains. The former was the ancient possession of a noble house; the latter was destined to fill the first and best fist that grasped it; the former's authority extended from the hand that wielded it over many islands and over all Argos; the latter was borne by a Greek king to whom had been entrusted, among other things, the guardianship of the laws. In them was embodied the disparity between Agamemnon and Achilles, a disparity which Achilles himself had to grant for all his blind rage."

Here we have a precise exposition of what really brings objects to life in epic poetry and makes them truly poetic. And when we think of the examples we have cited from Scott, Balzac and Tolstoy, we recognize that these writers also—*mutatis mutandis*—followed the principle Lessing discovered in Homer. We say *mutatis mutandis* having already noted that greater complexity in social relations necessitates the introduction of new methods.

It is quite otherwise when description is the dominant technique, and writers attempt a vain competition with the visual arts. When men are portrayed through the descriptive method, they become mere still lives. Only painting has the capacity for making a man's physical qualities the direct expression of his most profound character qualities. And it is no accident that at the time descriptive naturalism in literature was degrading human beings to components of still lives, painting was losing its capacity for intensified perceptual expression. Cézanne's portraits are mere still lives compared to Titian's or Rembrandt's with their sense of individual and spiritual totality; even as the characters of the Goncourts or of Zola are still lives compared to those of Balzac or Tolstoy.

A character's physical appearance possesses poetic vitality

only when a factor in his rapport with other men, only in its effect on other men. This fact, too, Lessing recognized and analysed in Homer's depiction of Helen's beauty. In dealing with this problem, the classics of realism again fulfilled the requirements of epic art. Tolstoy portrayed Anna Karenina's beauty exclusively as it influenced the action, through the tragedies it caused in the lives of other people and in her own life.

Description provides no true poetry of things but transforms people into conditions, into components of still lives. In description men's qualities exist side by side and are so represented; they do not interpenetrate or reciprocally effect each other so as to reveal the vital unity of personality within varied manifestations and amidst contradictory actions. Corresponding to the false breadth assigned the external world is a schematic narrowness in characterization. A character appears as a finished "product" perhaps composed of varied social and natural elements. The profound social truth emerging from the interaction of social factors with psychological and physiological qualities is lost. Taine and Zola admire the representation of sexual passion in Balzac's Hulot, but they see only a pathological diagnosis of "monomania". They do not appreciate at all the profound analysis of the connection between Hulot's particular kind of sexuality and his career as a Napoleonic general, a connection Balzac emphasizes through the contrast with Crevel, the typical representative of the July monarchy.

Description based on *ad hoc* observation must perforce be superficial. Among naturalist writers, Zola is certainly the one who worked most conscientiously and investigated his subject matter most thoroughly. Yet many of his characterizations are superficial and even faulty in essential respects. We need examine only one single example, one analysed by Lafargue. Zola diagnoses the alcoholism of the bricklayer Coupeau as the effect of his being unemployed, but Lafargue demonstrates that alcoholism is endemic to several categories of French workers, including construction workers, and shows that it is to be explained by the fact that they work only intermittently



and spend their free time in the taverns. Lafargue also shows how Zola in *Gold* explains the contrast between Gundermann and Saccard as the difference between a Jew and a Christian, whereas the conflict Zola is trying to represent is actually between old-style capitalism and the newer investment capitalism.

The descriptive method lacks humanity. Its transformation of men into still lives is only the artistic manifestation of its inhumanity. Its inhumanity is more decisively exposed in the ideological and aesthetic intentions of its principal exponents. In her biography of her father, Zola's daughter quotes his comments about his novel *Germinal*: "Zola accepts Lemaitre's description, 'a pessimistic epic of the animal in man,' on condition that one defines the term 'animal'; 'in your opinion the mind is what makes people what they are,' he wrote to the critic, 'I find that the other organs also play an important role'".

We know that Zola's emphasis on man's bestiality was in protest against the bestiality of capitalism, a bestiality which he did not understand. But his irrational protest became transformed into an obsession with the bestial, with the animal-like.

The method of observation and description developed as part of an attempt to make literature scientific, to transform it into an applied natural science, into sociology. But investigation of social phenomena through observation and their representation in description bring such paltry and schematic results that these modes of composition easily slip into their polar opposite—complete subjectivism. Such is the legacy the various naturalistic and formalist movements of the imperialist period inherited from the founder of naturalism.

## VI

Compositional principles of a poetic work are a manifestation of an author's view of life.

Let us take as simple an example as possible. In the centre of the action of most of his novels, like *Waverley* or *Old*

*Mortality*, Walter Scott places a character of moderate importance who has not taken a clear stand on the great political questions at issue. What does Scott achieve by this device? The indecisive hero stands between both camps—in *Waverley* between the Scots rebelling in favour of the Stuarts and the English government, in *Old Mortality* between the Puritan revolutionaries and the supporters of the Stuart restoration. Thus the hero can become involved alternately with the leaders of each of the opposing parties, and in this interaction these leaders can be portrayed not merely as social and historical forces but as men in human relationships. If Walter Scott had set one of these decisive personalities in the centre of his narrative, he would not have been able to bring him into adequate personal interaction with his opponents. The novel would have been a mere stage for a description of important historical events and not a moving human drama in which we get to know the typical agents of a great historical conflict as human beings.

In his method of composition Walter Scott exhibits his mastery of epic narration. This achievement is not, however, purely a matter of artistry. Walter Scott himself assumes a "centre" position on issues of English history. He is as much against radical Puritanism, especially its plebeian wing, as he is against the Catholic reaction of the Stuarts. The artistry in his composition is thus a reflection of his own political position, a formal expression of his own ideology. The hero's vacillation is not only an effective device within the general composition for a dynamic and personalized depiction of the two parties but also simultaneously an expression of Walter Scott's own ideology. Scott further demonstrates his artistry in convincingly portraying the energetic exponents of the political extremes as superior human beings despite his personal ideological preference for his own hero.

This example is effective because of its simplicity. In Scott there is always an uncomplicated and direct interrelationship between ideology and composition. In the other great realists this connection is generally more indirect and complicated. The intermediate position of the hero so suitable for the composi-

tion of a novel provides a formal and compositional principle which can take varied forms in literary practice. The "centre" figure need not represent an "average man" but is rather the product of a particular social and personal environment. The problem is to find a central figure in whose life all the important extremes in the world of the novel converge and around whom a complete world with all its vital contradictions can be organized. Rastignac is such a figure—a propertyless aristocrat who can mediate between the world of the Vauquier pension and the world of the aristocracy; another is Lucien de Rubempré, with his vacillation between the world of the aristocratic, opportunistic journalist and the world of serious art of the d'Arthez circle.

But the writer himself must possess a firmly established and vital ideology; he must see the world in its contradictory dynamics to be able to choose a hero in whose life the major opposing forces converge. The ideologies of the great writers are certainly various; the ways in which their ideologies are manifested in epic composition, still more various. The deeper, the more differentiated, and the more steeped in vital experience the ideology, the more variegated and multifaceted its compositional expression.

And without ideology there is no composition. Flaubert felt this truth acutely. He constantly quoted Buffon's profound and impelling statement: "To write well means to feel well, to think well and to express well." With Flaubert the process was reversed. He wrote to George Sand: "I try hard to think correctly in order to write correctly. But writing correctly is my goal, I do not conceal it." Flaubert never forged an ideology out of his life experiences to express in his work; he did struggle honourably and with artistic integrity for an ideology, understanding that without ideology there can be no great literature.

His inverted approach could lead to no result. With impressive sincerity Flaubert admitted his failure in the same letter to George Sand. "I lack a firm, comprehensive outlook on life. You are a thousand times right, but where does one find the way to change? I ask you. You will not illuminate my

ignorance with metaphysics, neither mine nor others. The words religion or Catholicism, on the one hand, and progress, fraternity and democracy, on the other, no longer meet the intellectual demands of the present. The new dogma of equality, which radicalism preaches, is refuted by physiology and history in practice. I see no possibility today either of finding a new principle or of respecting old principles. Thus I seek in vain for the ideal on which everything else depends."

Flaubert's confession is an uncommonly honest expression of the general ideological crisis of the bourgeois intelligentsia after 1848. Objectively, all his contemporaries experienced this very crisis. In Zola it expresses itself in agnostic positivism; he says that one can only recognize and describe the "how" of an event, not its "why". In the Goncourts the result is a spiritless, sceptical, superficial indifference to ideological questions. And this crisis intensified as time went on. Nor, as many writers pretend, did the transformation of agnosticism into mysticism during the imperialist period provide a solution to the ideological crisis; it just rendered it more acute.

A writer's ideology is merely a synthesis of the totality of his experience on a certain level of abstraction. The significance of ideology, as Flaubert recognized, is that it provides the possibility of viewing the contradictions of life in a fruitful, ordered context—the basis for feeling and thinking well and thus for writing well. When a writer is isolated from the vital struggles of life and from varied experiences generally, all ideological questions in his work become abstractions, no matter whether abstractions of pseudo-scientism, mysticism or of an indifference to vital issues; such abstraction results in the loss of the creative productiveness provided by questions of ideology in the earlier literature.

Without an ideology a writer can neither narrate nor construct a comprehensive, well-organized and multifaceted epic composition. Observation and description are mere substitutes for a conception of order in life.

How can epic compositions develop in the event of such a lack? And what kind of compositions would they be? Spurious

objectivism and subjectivism in modern writers lead to schematism and monotony in composition. In objectivism like Zola's, the unity of the objects chosen as the thematic material provides the principle of composition. The composition consists of the assemblage of all the important details as seen from various points of view. The result is a series of static pictures, of still lives connected only through the relations of objects arrayed one beside the other according to their own, inner logic, never following one from the other, certainly never one out of the other. The so-called action is only a thread on which the still lives are disposed in a superficial, ineffective fortuitous sequence of isolated, static pictures. The possibility of artistic variety in such a mode of composition is meagre. The writer must strive to counteract the intrinsic monotony through the novelty of the objects depicted and the originality of the description.

Nor is the capacity for variation enhanced in novels of pseudo-subjectivism. Here the pattern is derived from an immediate reflection of the basic experience of modern writers: disillusionment. They describe subjective aspirations psychologically, and in the description of different stages of life they depict the shattering of these hopes under the brutality of capitalist life. At least there is a temporal sequence in the theme. But it is always the self-same sequence, and the opposition between the individual and the objective world is so stark and crude that no dynamic interaction is possible. The most evolved subjectivism in the modern novel (Joyce and Dos Passos) actually transforms the entire inner life of characters into something static and reified. Paradoxically, extreme subjectivism approximates the inert reification of pseudo-objectivism.

Thus the descriptive method results in compositional monotony, while narration not only permits but even promotes infinite variety in composition.

"But was not this development inevitable? Indeed, it does destroy the older epic composition; indeed, the newer composition is not of equal artistic merit. Grant all this! Still, does not the new mode of composition provide an adequate picture

of fully developed capitalism? Yes, it is inhuman, it does transform men into appurtenances of things, static beings, components of a still life. But is that not what capitalism does to people?"

The rationale is provocative but none-the-less erroneous. In the first place, the proletariat also has an existence in bourgeois society. Marx emphasized the divergence in the reactions of the bourgeoisie and the proletariat to the inhumanity of capitalism. "The proprietary class and the class of the proletariat experience the same alienation. But the former class feels at ease and justified in this alienation, recognizing in it its source of power and the basis for a sham existence. Contrarily, the latter class feels destroyed in this alienation, recognizing in it its helplessness and the inhumanity of its existence." And Marx goes on to demonstrate the significance of the revolt of the proletariat against the inhumanity of this alienation.

When this revolt is represented in literature, the still lives of descriptive mannerism vanish, and the necessity for plot and narration arises of its own, as in such novels as Gorki's masterpiece *The Mother* and Martin Andersen Nexø's *Pelle the Conqueror*, novels which break with descriptive mannerism. (Naturally this new use of the narrative method is an outgrowth of the authors' commitment to the class struggle.)

But does the revolt described by Marx against the alienation in capitalism involve only the workers? Of course not. The repression of the workers under capitalism is carried on in struggles and inspires the most varied forms of rebellion. And after embittered struggles a not inconsiderable portion of the bourgeoisie becomes "educated" to the dehumanization of bourgeois society. Modern bourgeois literature bears witness against bourgeois society. Its predilection for certain themes—disappointment and disillusionment—is evidence of such rebellion. Every novel of disillusion is the history of the failure of such a rebellion. But such rebellions are conceived superficially and thus lack impact.

That capitalism is now perfected does not mean, of course, that everything henceforth is fixed and finished or that there is

no more struggle or development in the life of the individual. The "perfection" of the capitalist system merely means that it reproduces itself on ever higher levels of "perfected" inhumanity. But the system reproduces itself continuously, and this process is in reality a series of bitter and implacable struggles—a process evolving simultaneously in the life of the individual, who is transformed into a soulless appurtenance of the capitalist system though he had not come into the world "naturally" as such.

The decisive ideological weakness of the writers of the descriptive method is in their passive capitulation to these consequences, to these phenomena of fully-developed capitalism, and in their seeing the result but not the struggles of the opposing forces. And even when they apparently do describe a process—in the novel of disillusion—the final victory of capitalist inhumanity is always anticipated. In the course of the novel they do not recount how a stunted individual had been gradually adjusted to the capitalist order; instead they present a character who at the very outset reveals traits that should have emerged only as a result of the entire process. That is why the disillusionment developed in the course of the novel appears so feeble and purely subjective. We do not watch a man whom we have come to know and love being spiritually murdered by capitalism in the course of the novel, but follow a corpse in passage through still lives becoming increasingly aware of being dead. The writers' fatalism, their capitulation (even with gnashing teeth) before capitalist inhumanity, is responsible for the absence of development in these 'novels' of development."

Thus it is incorrect to claim that this method adequately mirrors capitalism in all its inhumanity. On the contrary! The writers dilute this inhumanity despite themselves. A dreary existence without a rich inner life, without the vitality of continuous development is far less revolting and shocking than the daily and hourly unremitting transformation of thousands of human beings with infinite capacities into "living corpses".

When one compares the novels of Maxim Gorki on the life

of the bourgeoisie with the works of modern realism, one sees the contrast. For all its close observation and description, modern realism has lost its capacity to depict the dynamics of life, and thus its representation of capitalist reality is inadequate, diluted and constrained. The degradation and crippling under capitalism is far more tragic, its bestiality viler, more ferocious and terrible than that pictured even in the best of these novels. It would be an impermissible simplification, of course, to affirm that all modern literature has capitulated without struggle to the fetishizing and dehumanizing of capitalism. We have already noted that French naturalism after 1848 represents a subjective protest against this process. Important exponents of later literary currents also attempt to protest. The most notable humanistic artists of the various formalist movements have sought to combat the emptiness of capitalistic life. The symbolism of the later Ibsen, for example, represents a revolt against the monotony of bourgeois existence. These revolts, however, are without artistic consequence when they do not probe the *root* of the emptiness of life under *capitalism*, when they do not afford direct experience with the struggles to restore meaning to life, and when they do not investigate and seek to depict artistically such struggles with ideological understanding.

Therein lies the literary and theoretical significance of the humanist revolt of the outstanding intellectuals of the capitalist world. Because of the extraordinary variety of the currents and personalities in this humanist revolt, not even a cursory analysis of this development can be attempted here. It is sufficient to note that the open humanist revolt of Romain Rolland is a serious effort at breaking through the limitations of the literary traditions of bourgeois literature since 1848. And the reinforcement of humanism through the victory of socialism in the Soviet Union and the definition of its goals and intensification of its struggle against fascist bestiality, the most ferocious form of capitalist inhumanity, have raised these efforts to a higher theoretical level. Theoretical essays of the last years like Ernst Bloch's offer the perspective of a basic critique of the art of the second half of the nineteenth century

and of the twentieth century. Of course this critical battle has not yet reached a decisive stage, it has not everywhere achieved clarity of principles, but the very existence of such a battle, of such a basic re-valuation of the decadence of the period, is a symptom of not inconsiderable significance.<sup>1</sup> 1936

<sup>1</sup>The final section of this essay, dealing primarily with problems of Soviet literature in the thirties, has been omitted.—*Trans.*

## *The Intellectual Physiognomy in Characterization*

Awake, men have a common world, but each sleeper  
reverts to his own private world.

—*Heraclitus.*

### I

THE continuing effectiveness of Plato's "Symposium" after more than two thousand years is hardly due to its intellectual content alone. The perennial vitality which distinguishes it from other dialogues in which Plato developed equally important aspects of his philosophic system, results from the dynamic characterization of a group of outstanding personalities—Socrates, Alcibiades, Aristophanes, and many others; the dialogue not merely transmits ideas but also brings characters to life.

What generates the vitality in these characters? Plato is a great artist. He can depict the appearance and environment of his characters with true Greek plasticity. But this artistry in depicting the outer man and his surroundings is matched in other Platonic dialogues which do not attain the same animation. And many of Plato's imitators have used this very dialogue as a model without attaining a modicum of its liveliness.

It seems to me that the source of the vitality of the characters in the "Symposium" is to be sought elsewhere. The realism with which the characters and environment are depicted is an indispensable but not decisive factor. What is decisive is that Plato reveals the thinking processes of his characters and develops their varied intellectual positions regarding the same problem—the nature of love—as the vital factor in their characters and as the most distinctive manifestation of their