



## LITERATURE VERSUS OPINION

*Address at the Award of the Avery Hopwood Prizes, May 31, 1935*

BY HENRY HAZLITT

THE will of the late Avery Hopwood expressed the desire that the literary prizes for which he so generously provided should be especially used to encourage "the new, the unusual, and the radical." It is interesting to recall that the will was made in 1922. It was about that time that those whom we now think of as the older generation in American literature, symbolized by such figures as Theodore Dreiser and H. L. Mencken, emerged into real prominence. Just before that period the waters of literary discussion had been relatively stagnant. Mencken and his disciples, deserting the genteel tradition, began calling their opponents harsh and extraordinary names, and the attention of youth was arrested. A fight is always exciting: moreover, if literature was something worth fighting over, it might be worth looking into.

That particular battle has not continued, but a series of battles have followed each other with only the briefest intermission. Meanwhile the issues have altered and even the sides have changed, so that many of those who were previously on the left now somehow find themselves on the right. The battle lines, moreover, have become so widely extended that it is no longer clearly possible to tell the literary front from the political front. Whatever one may say of the present era, it is not stagnant. One result, at least, is that "the new, the unusual, and the radical" are today much more certain of a hearing than they were thirteen years ago. But another result, less happy, is that the growing bitterness of the battle, and the extent and depth of the issues involved, have placed the most serious obstacles in the way

of a sober objective evaluation of the current literary product, whether new, unusual, radical, or otherwise.

The tone of political discussion in the last few years has been increasingly acrimonious. It is not merely that arguments have been growing more passionate and less reasonable; the extremists on both sides have been losing faith in the efficacy of reason itself. One should not attempt to persuade one's opponent; one should suppress or imprison or execute him. This is the philosophy of the rulers of Germany and of Russia; it is shared only to a lesser degree by other rulers who have not yet consolidated their power, and it has influenced the tone of political discussion even in the great democracies. It has spread to the field of letters, and it emerges there as the theory that no such thing as an objective judgment of literary work is possible: there are only proletarian, bourgeois, or Fascist judgments; and writers are praised or denounced in accordance with their political or economic sympathies and doctrines.

Now I cannot believe that this attitude is either a salutary or a lasting one. It is, of course, the most natural thing in the world to praise those who are on our side of any question and to denounce those who are against us. Some of the so-called Marxist critics have built up elaborate rationalizations of the process. But the critic of literature who yields to this temptation, whatever good he thinks he may thereby be doing for his particular "cause," betrays his function as a literary critic.

The great critics of the past have always recognized this fact, and have been great

critics partly through that very recognition. One of the most interesting examples is William Hazlitt. Now few writers have ever had more violent and uncompromising political opinions than he had. He was an ardent and tireless defender of the French Revolution; the uncompromising vehemence of his Jacobinism, indeed, led him into constant quarrels with most of his friends. But these differences of opinion, or even violent personal antagonisms, seldom perverted his literary judgments. No better illustration of his sanity and insight in this respect appears than in his numerous discussions of Edmund Burke. Here was a writer who had thrown the whole weight of his eloquence and passion against that French Revolution which to Hazlitt was one of the great historic landmarks in the eternal struggle for human liberty. Yet Hazlitt almost never wrote of Burke except in terms of the most ungrudging praise. In an essay devoted to him in 1807, Hazlitt tells us that Burke "enriched every subject to which he applied himself"; that "he was the most eloquent man of his time, and his wisdom was greater than his eloquence." "It has always been with me," he added, "a test of the sense and candor of any one belonging to the opposite party, whether he allowed Burke to be a great man." Hazlitt apparently had never met more than one or two political opponents who would make this concession; and he set their reluctance down either to the fact that party feelings ran too high to admit of any real candor, or to "an essential vulgarity in their habits of thinking."

Hazlitt's praise seems to have been misunderstood. In a later printing of his "Character of Mr. Burke" he inserted the following explanatory footnote: "This character was written in a fit of extravagant candor, at a time when I thought I could do justice, or more than justice, to an enemy, without betraying a cause." But the truth was that Hazlitt was always subject to such "fits of extravagant candor," and seldom had fits of any other kind. In his essay "On Reading Old Books," he tells us that when he first

encountered Burke's writings he exclaimed to himself: "This is true eloquence: this is a man pouring out his mind on paper." "The most perfect prose style, the most powerful, the most dazzling, the most daring . . . was Burke's." It was "forked and playful as the lightning, crested like the serpent." And here Hazlitt wrote the sentences that may serve as a sort of text for the present lecture:

I did not care for his doctrines. I was then, and am still, proof against their contagion; but I admired the author, and was considered as not a very staunch partisan of the opposite side, though I thought myself that an abstract proposition was one thing — a masterly transition, a brilliant metaphor, another. I conceived too that he might be wrong in his main argument, and yet deliver fifty truths in arriving at a false conclusion.

Let us look at some of the implications of this attitude, and see to what extent we can apply them to the literary controversies of our own day. One of the favorite slogans of the Marxist critics is that "art is a weapon." We need not ask, at the moment, in what sense or to what extent this is true. But I should like to point out that even if art *is* a weapon, and even if we grant also that we must all line up on one of two sides in wielding it, it is still possible for us to judge it objectively. Machine guns are certainly weapons, and we should prefer to have them all on our side, but a sensible man's preferences have nothing to do with his realistic observation. Allied military commentators during the World War were able to say quite objectively whether the Germans had better or worse rifles, artillery, airplanes, or gases, than they had, or whether they made more or less effective use of them. An objectivity that is possible in a war of bullets ought surely to be possible in a war of pamphlets. A Communist critic ought to be able to discuss the ability of a bourgeois or a Fascist writer with the same cool detachment with which the high command in a war must estimate the ability of the opposing leadership. Wars are not won by dismissing all the enemy's generals as scoundrels and fools.

Here, then, is one form of critical objectivity of which even the most embittered class-conscious critics should recognize the need. We must correctly estimate the skill and ability of our opponents. This correct estimate is one of the primary functions of literary criticism. The important question for such criticism is not which side a writer is on, but how able he is in the service of that side. For estimating him it is not the bald conclusion at which he arrives that counts, but the mental process by which he arrives at it. It is not what he nakedly contends; it is the persuasiveness with which he states it. There are dull minds on both sides of every great controversy — minds that deal only in stereotypes and clichés, minds that can only repeat, parrot-like, the phrases the leaders have coined. But there are also brilliant minds on both sides of every great controversy; it is these that develop the new arguments and put them forward with the greatest force. The cardinal business of literary criticism in such a situation is not to declare that side A is right and side B wrong; it is to distinguish, on whichever side, the brilliant and original writers from the empty ones.

In brief, it is the paradoxical function of the literary critic, *as* critic, to detach himself as completely as possible from the actual merits of the controversies of his own time. In appraising the comparative qualities of individual writers, he must judge not the controversies but the controversialists. He will sometimes be obliged to say, at least to himself: "What A writes is perfectly sound, and I agree with it passionately; but I am obliged to add that it will be completely forgotten ten years from now." At other times he will have to say: "This man B is utterly wrong; his perversity sometimes infuriates me; but, damn it all, there is some quality in what he says that leads me to fear that a century from now it will still be quoted." Few people could be more thoroughly wrong-headed, according to most of our current standards, than Dr. Johnson, but his aphorisms live because they have this quality. As for the philosopher, there is al-

most as much disagreement today as in his own lifetime whether Berkeley, or Kant, or Hegel was right or wrong. It is not being right or wrong that counts: it is having an interesting and original and powerful mind.

But this brings us to a further question. There is a certain ambiguity about the phrase "being right." For there are several kinds of truth, and the truth of literature is not necessarily the truth of science. We recognize this as soon as we come to deal, in fiction, with the differences between realism and romanticism, naturalism and fantasy. "Gulliver's Travels" is a true book; but it is not true that there are midgets of six inches, or giants seventy feet high, or nations of horses. The truth of "Alice in Wonderland" is not the truth of Main Street. The truth of poetry is not the truth of prose. Departures from fact, even when not purposely made for a certain effect, must be judged by different standards, depending on where they occur. The recognition of this principle is as old as Aristotle. When an error has been made in poetry, he remarks, it is important to ask whether it is a matter directly or only accidentally connected with the poetic art. For example, he tells us, it is a lesser error in an artist not to know that the hind has no horns, than to produce an unrecognizable picture of one. To speak of stout Cortez and all his men, silent, upon a peak in Darien, may be bad history but excellent poetry.

What all this comes down to is that we cannot apply ordinary fact-standards or opinion-standards in any crude or direct way to the judgment of literature. We have first of all to recognize that the elements of literature are so various and complex, as Lytton Strachey once reminded us, that no writer can be damned on a mere enumeration of faults, because he may always possess merits which make up for everything. If this is true, as I believe it is, then it is surely still more absurd either to dismiss a writer, or to regard him as important, merely because he holds or rejects some specific doctrine.

I am afraid that most Marxist critics

would disagree with this. They might say that this would doubtless be so if the doctrine were one of secondary importance, but that the question of the class struggle happens to be paramount and central. A writer must align himself either with the proletariat or with the bourgeoisie, either with the forces of light, or with the forces of darkness. In the first case, the effect of his work will be beneficent; in the second it must be pernicious. They might go even further, and hold that the abler a bourgeois or capitalistic writer is, the more harmful the effect of his writing will be.

Now when we examine this reasoning it begins to strike us as strangely familiar. The class struggle is not the first so-called paramount or central question to divide mankind. Historically there has always been some issue that partisans have declared to be the central one, and historically it is always a different issue. For centuries writers have been damned for not holding the correct religious or theological beliefs, or for not belonging to the right political party, or for not having the correct attitude toward sex. In the Victorian period, and during the nineteen twenties, we were accustomed to having novels judged by so-called moral standards, which usually referred to sexual morality. The Victorians condemned their predecessors, from Rabelais and Boccaccio to Wycherly and Congreve, for their indecency, and disapproved of the Voltaires and Swifts for their cynicism. Our critics of the twenties dismissed the Victorians for their prudery and puritanism, and derided them also because they were sentimental, and not, as they should have been, cynical. Our new Communist critics now dismiss contemporary writers who have only a "sterile cynicism" in place of a fighting faith.

There are two ways of dealing with Marxist criticism. One may begin by questioning its premises. Is it true that there is an inevitable class struggle? Is it true that social and economic classes divide themselves basically into just two? Is it true that this social cleavage is more important than

any other? Even before we begin any close scrutiny of the matter we are entitled, certainly, to our suspicions. For it would be astonishing if the objective facts were to fit in so neatly with the requirements of drama. Immemorially playwrights have recognized that audiences want to see a clash of just two great contending forces. If the contending forces are three, four, five, or twenty, the audience is distracted and confused. Its attention is scattered, its sympathies dispersed. To economize attention and sympathy, it is necessary that there be essentially just two contending forces, and that the audience should wish to see one triumphant and the other crushed. The theory of the class struggle conforms providentially to this law of the theater. It is obliging enough to conform also to the requirements of Hegelian logic. This second conformity is perhaps not so surprising, because the Hegelian logic, by which Marx was so deeply influenced, was itself unconsciously created by Hegel to accord with the rules of dramatic appeal. Marx acquired from him the habit of looking in the actual world for the embodiment of logical categories, with sharp boundaries, clearly opposed to each other.

So we have presented to us in the Marxist drama a world consisting essentially of just two classes engaged in a death struggle: on the one side the capitalists and their hirelings; on the other the on-marching proletariat. When we look at the world, however, unencumbered by this rigid theory, we see that the borderline between economic classes, particularly in America, is vague and shifting. We see that the president of a great steel corporation, working on salary and holding little or no stock in his company, is technically an employee, while the owner of a fruit stand with one assistant is technically a capitalist and an employer. More importantly, we know that, for all the appalling contrasts in wealth and income at the two extremes, income classes in the United States shade gradually into each other. The National Bureau of Economic Research, a statistical organization of the

highest standing, for example, recently divided the country, not into two, but into seventy-four separate "income classes."

Space will hardly permit an extensive examination of the postulates of Communism, and fortunately such an examination is not necessary. Let us for the moment, instead, accept some of the premises of Marxist literary criticism. Let us accept the premises that there are essentially just two economic classes, that the division between them is real and sharp, and that membership in one of these classes affects our whole point of view. Even if we cannot believe that our opinions are mere rationalizations of our class status, let us grant at least the large element of truth in the contention that our class status influences the opinions of nearly all of us in various unconscious and subtle ways — and sometimes even in pretty obvious ways.

The question we must then ask ourselves is this: Is it impossible for the exceptional writer to surmount these limitations? Is it impossible for him, once he has been brought to recognize this bias, to guard against it as he tries to guard against other forms of bias? For the limitations and biases that may affect the human mind are almost innumerable. There is the limitation imposed by a man's language and nationality. What can Thomas Mann and Spengler, and Proust and Gide, and Pareto and Knut Hamsun, and Dostoievsky and Tolstoy, have to say that could interest Americans with their so different experience? Yet somehow they seem to have a great deal to say to us. There are Americans who feel that they get more of value from some of these foreigners than from any of their own writers. Anatole France once regretted that we could not, like Tiresias, be men and remember having been women, that we are shut up in our personality as in a perpetual prison. But his own works, and the works of hundreds of other writers in all ages, of Shakespeare, of Flaubert, of Hardy, of Dreiser, prove otherwise. The great male writer, by the power

of his imagination, can portray the soul of a woman more fully and truthfully, even in the opinion of women, than the overwhelming majority of women writers can. And the great woman novelist can tell us more of what goes on in the mind of a man than most men can.

To take but one more example, there is the limitation imposed upon a writer by the historic era in which he lives. If any limitation seems absolutely insuperable, this one does. How can Karl Marx, who died fifty years ago, who knew nothing of the immense social, political, scientific and technological changes that have taken place in the half century since then, how can Marx possibly have anything to tell us that is still of value? How can Shakespeare and Montaigne, in their graves three centuries and more, possibly have written words that we can still cherish for their wisdom or beauty, that may even come to us with a shock of delight? What could be more absurd than to suppose that Aristotle and Plato and Homer, who knew nothing at all of the knowledge and experience that a hundred generations of mankind have garnered in the years since they passed on, what could be more absurd than to suppose that any of them could have written works that can still give us intense pleasure, or a sense of encountering flashes of penetrating wisdom for the first time? Yet this miracle is achieved.

In brief, the great writer, with supreme imaginative gifts, can universalize himself. He can vault over the apparently insuperable barriers of race, sex, and time. And yet there is a new school of critics who tell us, in effect, that he cannot vault over the barrier of his class. This contention is an astonishing one. For while no writer can, in any literal or physical sense, change his race, his sex, or his historic era, the one thing he can and frequently does change is precisely his economic status. He can have the experience of being poor, as well as of being "comfortably off," not merely in imagination, but in actuality. Economic class boundaries are so uncertain, indeed, that even Marxists have

difficulty in deciding upon which side of "the coming struggle for power" certain great groups will be aligned, or which "ideology" controls them.

We are obliged to conclude, then, that it is surely no more difficult for the great writer, in a functional sense, to transcend the barriers of class than to transcend those of nationality, sex, and time. And we are also entitled to conclude that the great upper or middle-class writers of the past, or even of the present, have as much to say to the intelligent proletarian as they have to the intelligent bourgeois. We may acknowledge that class bias sometimes enters into what these writers have written. Where it does, it is the duty of the critic to point to the extent and nature of the bias. The positive contribution of the literary Marxists is that they have sharpened our eyes in this respect. But it is not the duty of the critic to declare *a priori* that this class bias necessarily affects and invalidates everything that a middle class writer has written; or to point to this bias to the exclusion of all others; or to make it the central theme of all his criticism. Such criticism merely rests on the ancient fallacy of the *argumentum ad hominem*—of trying to discredit an argument or an attitude (and thus to seem to prove the opposite) by abusing the one who advances the argument or who holds the attitude. Such criticism, moreover, must miss all the infinitely rich and subtle values that literature has to offer. It must end by being dreadfully monotonous and tiresome.

Now I must confess that some of the views I have been discussing up to now are extreme. They are by no means held by all critics who call themselves Marxist. For the more intelligent Marxists have been uneasily aware of the narrow and absurd judgments into which this type of reasoning must lead them. So they have sought to rescue themselves from their dilemma by making a distinction. They have, in fact, sawn literature itself into two sharply contrasted aspects as they have sawn society into two

sharply contrasted classes. This might almost be called the official cleavage. The resolution on literature, for example, adopted by the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1924, begins by declaring that "such a thing as neutral art in a class society does not and cannot exist." It then divides literary works, however, into their "social-political contents" on the one hand, and their "form and style" on the other. On all questions of "content," it holds, the Party must take a firm and positive stand; but on questions of "form and style" it may permit considerable freedom. A similar division is made by a number of American Marxist writers when they distinguish between the "social significance" or the "ideas" of a literary work, and its "craftsmanship." Something of the same sort seems also to be in the mind of the English Marxist, Mr. John Strachey, in his somewhat confused volume called "Literature and Dialectical Materialism." After praising Mr. Granville Hicks, for example, as "the foremost Marxist literary critic of America," he adds that Mr. Hicks "hardly seems to pay enough attention to the merits of writers as writers."

This whole attempt to split literature into its "ideas" or "social significance" on the one hand, and its "form and style" or "craftsmanship" on the other, seems to me mistaken. Literature will simply not submit to such a violent bifurcation. "Style" and "form" are not separate qualities that can be thrown over "content" like a raincoat: they are determined by content. A work of literature is an organic whole. It is true that, for convenience of discussion, either "craftsmanship" or "social significance" can be discussed as if it existed in isolation—provided the critic always remembers that it does nothing of the kind. What is even more important for us to keep in mind, in relation to the present point, is that after we have discussed the "social-political contents" of a literary work on the one hand, and its "craftsmanship" on the other, we may still have left out what is chiefly important about

the work — unless, of course, we happen to have stretched one or the other of these two terms far beyond its legitimate meaning.

Let us see what would happen if we applied these standards, for example, to Hamlet. I am afraid that on the question of social-political content a Marxist critic would give that play a very low rating. For in the usual sense of the phrase, it seems simply to have no social-political content. It aims at no reform; it does not imply the need of any change in social-political institutions. It takes for granted the institution of monarchy, and the class relationships and moral code of Shakespeare's time.

Ah, says the sophisticated Marxist critic, but the value of Hamlet lies in its "craftsmanship," in its "style and form." Now, certainly, part of its value does reside in these qualities. To take but one example, in the way in which he leads us up to the scene in which Hamlet first sees his father's ghost, Shakespeare reveals a masterly technical adroitness. But if the reputation of "Hamlet" rested wholly on its "craftsmanship," as that word is ordinarily used, it would not be higher than that of hundreds of other plays. For it is full of what today would be thought of as technical crudities. It is a sprawling drama of five acts and twenty scenes, overloaded with improbable accidents and coincidences. Any second-rater today could probably do a neater job of mere carpentry.

In what, then, does the greatness of "Hamlet" consist? We might, if we wished, here begin to introduce further criteria. We might speak of "character delineation," which is not "social-political content" and which is surely something broader than mere "form and style." We might talk of the magnificent poetic imagery, which may mean "style," but which implies a good deal more than that. We might talk of the truth or wisdom of the ideas in the famous soliloquy, or in the advice of Polonius. But whatever our detailed analysis, we should be obliged to say, finally, that what made "Hamlet" great was the whole range and

texture and quality of its creator's mind.

This is what counts, in the end, in literature — the quality and nobility of the author's mind — and not either mere technical excellence, or the author's social and political sympathies. If we were to judge authors by our agreement or disagreement with their leading doctrines, a very strange sort of criticism would result. But in recognizing this, as the more intelligent Marxist critics do as well as the rest of us, it is unnecessary to fall back upon so narrow a standard as "craftsmanship." We can, instead, recognize more completely than before the wisdom of William Hazlitt's criticism of Burke. "Burke must be allowed to have wanted judgment," he wrote, "by all those who think that he was wrong in his conclusion. . . . But if in arriving at one error he discovered a hundred truths, I should consider myself a hundred times more indebted to him than if, stumbling on what I consider as the right side of the question, he had committed a hundred absurdities in striving to establish his point."

So far we have been discussing the duty of the critic in the present situation. What shall we say of the duty of the creative writer? Supposing his sympathies to be radical, shall he devote himself to writing propagandistic novels, propagandistic plays, propagandistic poetry? Shall he plunge into the center of the fight, or shall he stand "above the battle"?

These questions are by no means easy to answer. There is, to begin with, the difficulty of determining exactly what "propaganda" is. There is a sense in which all art is propagandistic because it reflects and propagates some vision of the world. Propaganda, it has been argued, does not need to be conscious; it may express itself through the unconscious acceptance of existing values and institutions that have been taken for granted. And it is on this basis that Marxists hold that all "bourgeois art" is propaganda for capitalism.

Now while there is perhaps an element

of truth in this contention, it seems to me that it does make a difference whether propaganda is conscious or unconscious. To say this, however, does not solve the problem, for it is sometimes difficult to say to what extent propaganda is conscious. Perhaps we can get at the question best by looking first at propaganda in the strict sense, then at the examples of literature which are difficult to classify in this respect, and finally at literature which can be called propagandistic only by the greatest possible extension of the term.

Strictly propagandistic art may be provisionally defined as art which is not regarded by its creator as a sufficient end in itself, but merely as a means of achieving some further end which its creator considers more important. It aims usually at some specific social or political reform: the abolition of capital punishment or of vivisection, a revision of the divorce laws or of sexual mores, the need for revolutionary action. Thus "Uncle Tom's Cabin" is clearly a propagandistic novel, as are most of the novels of Upton Sinclair and the later plays of Elmer Rice.

But now we begin to move into more doubtful territory. As the implied reform becomes broader and vaguer, as the implication itself becomes less definite, the propagandistic nature of a work of literary art becomes more doubtful. The mere fact of whether the work under consideration is good or bad does not always help us in deciding upon its propagandistic nature. Horatio Alger's novels seem propagandistic enough, for they very clearly imply the importance for material success of the virtues of ambition, pluck, hard work, and thrift. But there is a question even here. Alger was certainly not, in the ordinary sense, *advocating* material success; it was a value that he took for granted and assumed that his readers took for granted. Further, the question may be raised whether he was deliberately advocating these means toward material success, or was again merely utilizing the values he assumed his readers already to

believe in, in order to secure the undivided sympathy for his heroes and the undivided hatred for his villains deemed essential to create interest and suspense.

Most of the plays of Shaw are propagandistic, as are many of the dramas of Ibsen: "Pillars of Society," "A Doll's House," "An Enemy of the People," "The Wild Duck," all imply a definite social philosophy, and the need of some sort of social renovation. But clearly we have begun here to move toward works that it is getting to be more difficult to classify. This doubtful field is a very broad one. It includes many of the novels of Dickens, which helped in the movement toward prison reform and the alteration of the debtor laws; it includes Hugo's "Les Miserables," which affected the French attitude toward criminals. And almost too propagandistic to be doubtful are the novels and plays of Dumas fils, which inculcate such morals as the duty of a seducer to marry the woman he has seduced, or the right of a husband to take the law into his own hands and kill the wife who has been unfaithful and worthless. The propaganda in a novel need not necessarily take the form of solemn advocacy of a given attitude: it may consist merely in derision of its opposite. Thus Voltaire's "Candide" is a clear piece of propaganda against the philosophy of optimism.

We come at length to those works of literature which are as free from propaganda as it is possible to imagine. They include some of the greatest works in the language and some of the worst. It would be a rash critic indeed who would venture to say that there is much propaganda in the poetry of Keats, or who could find much more than a shade of it in the plays of Shakespeare. Shakespeare, it is true, sometimes reveals a social attitude; he had, for example, a hardly disguised contempt for the mob. But for the most part his work merely reflects an acceptance of, or an indifference to, the dominant social values and institutions of his time; he portrays no interest in changing them. The average detective story of

our own day is just as non-propagandistic.

What conclusions can we draw from this casual survey? We are entitled to conclude, I think, that no clear-cut division can be made between propagandistic and non-propagandistic work. But this absence of a clear boundary line does not mean that the distinction is unimportant. On the spectrum it is impossible to tell at precisely what point blue becomes green or green becomes yellow; but this does not mean that there is no difference between blue and yellow. And it is pointless in view of this survey to continue to argue that *all* literary work is basically propagandistic, whether definitely or vaguely, consciously or unconsciously, aggressively or passively, because even if we were to grant this it would still be necessary, for purposes of intelligible discussion, to distinguish between definitely, consciously, and aggressively propagandistic work and vaguely, passively, and unconsciously propagandistic work. It saves time to call the first propagandistic and the second non-propagandistic.

Making this distinction, then, what can we say about the duty of the writer? Shall he write propaganda or unflinchingly eschew it? I think we are obliged to say, after our perfunctory glance over the field, that it is folly to lay down any general rule. We can merely point to some of the possibilities and dangers of the alternative courses. The dangers of writing propaganda are almost too numerous to mention. At its lowest level the propagandistic novel or play is too unreal and mechanical to be convincing or even interesting: the sheep are all on one side and the goats on the other: the characters are either white or black. Close to this is the danger of falling into a shopworn formula: there is a picture of the oppression of the working class in the first two acts, for example, with a triumphant revolution or strike or a sudden outburst of proletarian consciousness in the third act. Even the best writer runs the danger of subordinating his characters to his thesis: instead of being interesting for their own sakes, instead of im-

pressing you as living, breathing people that act on their own account, they then become obvious marionettes built to fit the plot and to prove the equation; and one is always conscious of the author pulling the strings. For all his cleverness, most of Bernard Shaw's plays suffer from this defect.

"I hate poetry," said Keats, "that has a palpable design upon me." That line points to the central difficulty of propaganda in all art. It has a design upon you, and the task of the writer is to prevent it from becoming a palpable one. It requires the highest skill to succeed in that task. It would be unfair to condemn all propagandistic work merely by pointing to the innumerable examples of bad propagandistic works, but they must forever stand as awful warnings to the new aspirant. He must never forget that he always has the direct pamphlet in which to agitate specific reforms, and that it is possible to keep them out of his art.

There are, on the other hand, especially in an eruptive period, like the present, also dangers in avoiding propaganda. The artist has every right, if he wishes, to ignore the social and political upheavals of his time, and if he is a great artist, he may increase his chances for immortality by doing so. "The world," as Joseph Wood Krutch has eloquently reminded us, "has always been unjust as well as uncertain. . . . It is too bad that men had to be hungry and women had to be dying at the very moment when Newton was inventing the method of fluxions or Gibbon was composing the history of the downfall of Rome. It is too bad that these things had to be done then; but it was far better that they should have been done then than that they should never have been done at all."

There is only one rule: the writer should write about what most interests him, and in the way that he prefers to do it. Good literature is any literature that intensely interests his fellow man; and that is likely to mean, whatever most intensely interests the writer himself. A more narrowly propagandistic literature may interest more men now and

fewer men later. A literature with broader aims, without conscious propaganda, on some theme that has little to do with economics or politics, may be neglected today but widely read by the next generation. But

what in any case will finally save a work of literature, and make it worth reading, is not the specific doctrines held by its author, but the whole quality and texture of the thought and imagination that go into it.