

Talk by WSWS Arts Editor David Walsh

# The political and theoretical sources of *The Sky Between the Leaves*

David Walsh  
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WSWS arts editor David Walsh gave a talk in Detroit recently to SEP members and supporters to mark the publication of *The Sky Between the Leaves*. This is the first part of two.

Our movement, the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), is alone in treating art from the point of view of the cultural and political development of the working class—because we are the only movement that concerns itself with the general problem of the workers taking power, much less makes preparations with that end in mind.

There is no question but that a new, angry, radicalized mass movement is going to emerge in response to the ongoing global war against workers' conditions and their very lives.

On a daily basis, injury is added to insult is added to injury. The announcement of the evaluation by Christie's auction house of the artwork at the Detroit Institute of Arts—a step toward privatization or selling off the art—is a clear signal by the financial elite to the population: we will grab everything, in spite of your opposition and hostility. It is a provocation of the social counter-revolution, in line with the budget talks, Obama's health care "reform," the cuts in food stamps, the ending of unemployment benefits for 1.3 million people. It is worthy of the French aristocracy prior to May 1789.

In that regard, writing of the year 1785 in *A Tale of Two Cities*, Charles Dickens noted, "In both countries [France and England] it was clearer than crystal to the lords of the State preserves of loaves and fishes that things in general were settled for ever." In other words, all hell was about to break loose! That is our situation.

It is our conception that cultural development is critical to resolving the crisis of working class leadership. The approach of social explosions raises before the revolutionary movement in a new and palpable, more pressing and direct manner the problem of working class consciousness. What will be the direction of the coming social upheavals? We know there will be the inevitable confusion, but how can we impart to this movement a politically advanced, socialist character? What political, intellectual and cultural food supply does this emerging movement need?

The approach of social revolution poses as a sharp, objectively driven question the need to broaden the thinking and activity of the working class and of our own movement, as the conscious element within the class. As the introduction to *The Sky Between the Leaves* argues, the general social-cultural awakening that needs to take place doesn't occur independently of the revolutionary party. Our work on the WSWS and in publishing this book and others is motivated by that understanding.

It is a fight in part against narrowness, pragmatism, callousness, crudity, backwardness, against the "quick fix," especially in America, which of course never fixes anything. It is a struggle for more universal thinking, for considerations of problems and conditions in their entirety and their

development, for an understanding of all sorts of human personalities and psychologies and complex situations.

"Socialism is not a bread and butter problem, but a cultural movement, a great and proud world-ideology," wrote Rosa Luxemburg in a letter to Franz Mehring on his 70th birthday in 1916.

The Russian revolutionary movement was saturated with a feeling for literature and culture generally. The following is a passage from Aleksandr Voronsky's autobiographical work, *Waters of Life and Death* (1936), a marvelous book even in its abridged, English translation. Voronsky had been sent into exile for three years following his second arrest, in the years of reaction following the 1905 revolution in Russia. One of Voronsky's fellow exiles addresses him here. One doesn't have to agree with the sentiments, the man at the moment is quite frustrated and angry, but the reference to literature is significant:

"Who told you that a man must be consistent? Only fools, pedants and philistines are that! Now, you like the classics; are they consistent, tell me? Pushkin, Gogol, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, what a range—what a diversity of feeling! What contradictions and contrasts! You can only raise your hands to heaven! Take away their inconsistencies and what will remain of their genius? Nothing! I will whisper in your ear: I am trying to achieve consistency, but I like the confusion of feelings and thoughts. I like Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, and Gogol for the very lack of clarity in their aims, for their sincere intellectual doubts, for their very complexity."

As I say, the generation that led the October Revolution, including Voronsky, was schooled in Marxism and the classics of world and Russian literature. Plekhanov played an indispensable role in that schooling, and remains indispensable in our education.

I would like to explain a few things about the new book, about its roots in our movement, and some related questions, including the attitude of pseudo-leftism to cultural problems. I don't propose to go over the contents of the reviews and comments. Comrades can determine for themselves what they think of those, although I would be happy to answer any questions about them.

It should be clear to all of us, I think, that the split in 1985-86 with the opportunists in the British Workers Revolutionary Party (WRP) leadership, one of the most significant and best documented in the history of the Marxist movement, provided the intellectual basis and political impetus for our recent work on artistic problems. The taking of power by the Trotskyists in the International Committee of the Fourth International meant the re-emergence and resurgence of classical Marxism after a decades-long struggle.

Under conditions of the break-up of the bureaucratic stranglehold over the working class, which had lasted many years, of which the conflict in the ICFI was both a foreshadowing and a critical element, the full depth and breadth of Trotsky's analysis and the views of all the great Marxists

could once again hold sway over, inspire and enlighten the movement. As “How the Workers Revolutionary Party Betrayed Trotskyism” (1986) concludes:

“The great liberating ideas of Leon Trotsky are once again firmly entrenched within the International Committee of the Fourth International.”

This was a pledge to the working class—and a warning to its enemies—that the party has carried through on, and intends to carry through on to the end.

Pabloite notions (referring to the opportunist movement led by the late Ernest Mandel, Alain Krivine and others) about substitutes for the international working class as the revolutionary force in society, and all the other false paths (“student power,” the “Red University,” guerrillaism, Castroism, Maoism, etc.) that had dominated the left in previous decades, were decisively repudiated in the split of 1985-86. The scientific basis of the Marxist perspective was restored and developed. Inevitably, therefore, great emphasis was once more placed on the level of consciousness in the working class and the fight to elevate that consciousness, a fight that had been neglected or repudiated by the WRP in its period of degeneration.

The question of art and culture, and their role in broadening and educating the population, inevitably enters into any such effort. After all, if—like the Pabloites and the WRP leadership—your political perspective is to place pressure on various bureaucracies, if you are oriented toward the union officials and the Stalinists and the bourgeois nationalists, your attitude toward the problems of culture will be entirely different—if you bother about them at all!

The evolution of the Socialist Labour League-WRP’s relationship with the artists (like the Redgraves, Ken Loach and so on), from a principled to an opportunist one, is instructive in this regard, but that is a separate discussion. I think the recent commemorations of Dave Hyland, who was won on a principled political-cultural basis to the Trotskyist movement in the early 1970s, are highly relevant in this regard.

Important discussions on perspectives took place in the International Committee in 1987 and 1988, resulting in the statement, “The World Capitalist Crisis and the Tasks of the Fourth International,” published in August 1988. The statement advanced a perspective on the phenomenon of globalization in particular and outlined the objective basis for a new upsurge of the international working class.

That document, in a critical passage, also emphasized the struggle for principled socialist politics against the opportunists who “deny the necessity of any open struggle for socialist consciousness in the working class. It is not necessary, they say, to patiently nourish the workers’ movement with the rich fruit of Marxist culture. Rather, it is enough to dish out a few simple demands which will supposedly entice the masses and lead them to socialist revolution without even being conscious of their ultimate destination.”

This notion of nourishing the working class movement with the “fruit” of socialist culture—in other words, the party’s role in the political and cultural education of the working class, became and remained a central theme in the discussions in our international party at the time. In fact, the subject came up again and again, in different forms.

For example, these are some of the comments (numerous others could be cited) made by David North, then National Secretary of the Workers League, predecessor of the Socialist Equality Party in the US, in internal party discussions in early 1989:

“Comrades will often say that we’re building a revolutionary party ... what is this revolutionary party? ... We are fighting to build an international party of the international proletariat. That isn’t done with a few clever slogans. An enormous theoretical foundation must be built for such a movement to emerge, like the scaffolding of a skyscraper. A great deal of preparatory work must be done. ... The party must create the theoretical nourishment that will sustain and be worthy of a mass

movement.” (February 12, 1989)

“The development of the mass movement should not be conceived of as ‘spontaneous.’ Within the spontaneous movement, there exists a conscious element. The level of the spontaneous movement reflects the influence of the Marxists within it. The *Bulletin* [the Workers League publication at the time] must be a real force for the education of the working class. Comrades must take great pride in the development of the press. We must produce a paper worthy of the coming movement. It must be a paper which broadens workers’ outlook. Understanding important issues in history and culture will increase workers’ critical faculties in approaching struggles in the labor movement. We must [also] have good coverage of science and technology.” (February 19, 1989)

“There is an important development taking place. We want to broaden this paper [i.e., the *Bulletin* ] and really make it an instrument for the political and cultural education of the working class. Workers derive from this paper a great amount of knowledge. ... We will have to find a culture editor who can prepare serious material for the paper.” (February 26, 1989) “What is it that separates us from everybody else in the final analysis? We oppose the bureaucracy. We fight for revolutionary consciousness in the working class. We fight ... for the political and cultural development of the working class.” (March 19, 1989)

The insistence on the rich, broad basis necessary for the emergence of a genuine revolutionary movement was terribly important for the development of the party at that time. It was an antidote to the thin intellectual broth the WRP had doled out in its last years, in the pages of its *News Line* and elsewhere. This emphasis was both a breath of fresh air and a return to the conceptions of Trotsky and that generation of Russian and European revolutionaries.

The collapse of the Stalinist regimes in Eastern Europe and the USSR in 1989-91 marked a turning point in the history of the international workers’ movement, and world culture, and the ICFI made the most searching analysis of the events.

At a plenum in March 1992, the ICFI analyzed the developments thoroughly, and drew far-reaching conclusions about the situation the party and the working class faced. We have cited this passage before from David North’s report, but it bears repeating:

“The intensification of the class struggle provides the general foundation of the revolutionary movement. But it does not by itself directly and automatically create the political, intellectual and, one might add, cultural environment that its development requires, and which prepares the historic setting for a truly revolutionary situation. Only when we grasp this distinction between the general objective basis of the revolutionary movement and the complex political, social and cultural process through which it becomes a dominant historical force is it possible to understand the significance of our historical struggle against Stalinism and to see the tasks that are posed to us today.” (12th Plenum of the ICFI, March 1992)

This understanding, in a sense, almost inevitably led to the renewed concentration on artistic and cultural problems, along with many other areas of work. There is no understanding what we have done, or why we have done it, in the past two decades without taking this analysis into account. It became possible on this basis to grasp the *crisis in art* in its relation to the *crisis of perspective and leadership in the working class*.

None of the current “left” intellectuals, who expound endlessly, pretentiously and often incomprehensibly, about problems of politics and culture offer the slightest genuine insight into the experiences and lessons of the class struggle in the 20th century, or the concrete role played by various parties (Stalinist, social democratic, centrist), movements and leaderships. Or, in many cases, to be less charitable, these intellectual figures deliberately and self-servingly *avoid examining* those decisive experiences. In this fashion, the oh-so “independent” and “deconstructive” and “critical” academic often *covers up*, or even

sanitizes, the criminal-destructive activity of Stalinism, Maoism, reformism, anarchism and the other anti-Marxist tendencies in betraying revolutionary opportunities and helping preserve the oppression of the working class.

Our theory of art, with all its distinctive features, is part of our general theory of social development and history. We subscribe to the historical materialist conception, according to which, as Plekhanov explained it, human beings “do not make several distinct histories ... but only one history, the history of their own social relations.”

So our perspective on contemporary cultural conditions takes as its starting-point our analysis of the great social experiences that have given the present era its specific character and that must find “multiform reflection in the minds of men” (Plekhanov), including in contradictory form in artistic production.

Returning to the 1991-92 period, the introduction to *The Sky Between the Leaves* explains that the Fourth International had foreseen that Stalinism, if not overthrown, would destroy the USSR, and now, our movement argued, the working class had suffered a major defeat. On what basis would a new revolutionary movement emerge? The fundamental objective contradictions of the capitalist system had not been resolved ...

“But what of the *subjective* prerequisites for socialist revolution? Through what process would the objective impulses for the overthrow of capitalism find subjective expression in the consciousness of the working class?”

The introduction continues to discuss that March 1992 ICFI Plenum just referred to and its conclusions:

“The October Revolution was the outcome of a massive growth in the political consciousness of the international working class in the decades that followed the publication of the *Communist Manifesto* in 1848 and, especially, in the aftermath of the suppression of the Paris Commune in May 1871. ...

“The growth of socialist consciousness was not only the product of the struggle for specific economic and political demands. The development of art and culture—through the work of writers, painters, musicians (often, but not always, partial to socialism) and the Marxist critics who appraised their efforts—played an immense role in shaping and broadening the outlook of the working class, of sharpening its awareness of the injustices of capitalism, strengthening and refining the workers’ outrage and willingness to sacrifice and making more ardent their belief and confidence in the possibility of realizing socialism and building a society based on genuine social equality and solidarity.

“Socialism required a cultural awakening among a significant section of the working class, for such an awakening is essential to the development of a conscious revolutionary critical attitude toward capitalist society. This awakening, however, did not occur independently of the efforts of the revolutionary party. Rather, it is the party—the most conscious section of the working class—that leads the fight for this development.”

These conceptions have animated our work over the past twenty years, and they find expression, I hope, in *The Sky Between the Leaves*. They also find expression in our ongoing defense of the Detroit Institute of Arts. It is no accident that the question of public access to artistic masterpieces has emerged as a political issue. The struggle over the DIA concentrates at a high level the conflict between the financial aristocracy and the working class, which is very sensitive to the effort to steal the artwork.

Workers have demonstrated that they care more about the art, even if they are uneducated aesthetically, than the powers that be or the upper middle class—or the pseudo-left for that matter, who have nothing to say about the issue; who agree with the union officials and the Democrats; who calculate, in fact, that they too might benefit, directly or indirectly, from the sale of the artwork.

We see an important correlation between artwork that illuminates reality and the growth of popular awareness and sensitivity. People are altered, in

a profound manner, by art. The altering is a complex process, and it may not be immediate or direct, but it takes place just the same. In the final analysis, of course, the ability of art to influence and affect human beings, i.e., the depth and weight of a given artistic trend, is “determined by its importance for the class, or stratum, whose tastes it expresses, and by the social role played by that class or stratum” (Plekhanov). But we do not take a fatalistic or passive view toward this question. We fight implacably for a cultural change, for an improvement in artistic life.

The attack on Marxism has been unrelenting in recent decades, and it coincides, not accidentally, with the attack on the real, on life, as the basis of art.

“The effort to set art free from life ... devitalizes and kills art. The very need of such an operation is an unmistakable symptom of intellectual decline.” (Leon Trotsky, *Literature and Revolution*, 1924)

This has not been an operation mounted by a few aesthetes, advocates of art for art’s sake, or the relative handful of Russian Formalists, to whom Trotsky’s comments were addressed in the early 1920s. No, in recent decades virtually the entire academic and “left” cultural world has come to agree that art has little or nothing to do with life and reality. It is an extraordinary, unprecedented development.

On the part of the bourgeoisie, the hostility to artwork that demystifies reality, that cuts through the official version and lays bare what life is really like, is not something mysterious.

“A declining capitalism ... fears superstitiously every new word, for it is no longer a matter of corrections and reforms for capitalism but of life and death.” (Trotsky, “Art and Politics in Our Epoch,” 1938)

The determined attack by considerable sections of the so-called intelligentsia on the uncovering of life as it is, even on the artistic possibility of such an undertaking, expresses, above all, their rapprochement with the ruling elite, the decline in their opposition to capitalism. Since the demise of the Soviet Union and Stalinism in power, on which many left intellectuals relied, the convergence of the “left” intelligentsia and capitalism has picked up steam, it has become a full-scale and shameful capitulation. The devastated condition in which the masses live is not an issue that intrigues most of the “left” artists and intellectuals, who have gone off into self-centered, lifestyle politics. They lack, in many cases, any critical attitude toward the social order. The very concept of the politically engaged and committed artist has come under ferocious attack.

Even the makers of relatively timid socially critical films at present have to swear in public a dozen times that it was not their intention ... that the farthest thing from their minds was to make a socially conscious or socially realistic work ... that no one should be confused on that score, etc., etc. It’s rather unseemly.

Of course, the inner life of the anxiety-ridden middle class professional is an endless source of artistic interest. Social reality has vanished from much of the art world, but libidinal and psycho-sexual reality—or pseudo-reality, in fact--and the irrational are doing very well. We know all sorts of things about the inner thoughts and feelings of the upper middle class philistine (or at least how he or she *would like* those thoughts and feelings to be perceived), and his or her self-pity, self-inflated despair, even out of control behavior. There is no shortage of that. It is not very edifying.

The concerted struggle to divorce art from the problem of the socially real, from the problems of society has been going on for decades. This is not the occasion to go into that in detail, but the discouragement and pessimism of the Frankfurt School intellectuals in the 1940s and beyond marks an important milestone.

“The rejection of progress and the repudiation of the working class as the central revolutionary force in modern capitalist society became in the decades that followed the essential principle and theme of petty-bourgeois left politics. We find them developed and repeated in the writings of [Herbert] Marcuse, [Raya] Dunayevskaya and countless contemporary

anarchist, post-anarchist, post-structuralist tendencies.” (“Report to the Second National Congress of the Socialist Equality Party,” David North, July 2012)

The process has accelerated in recent decades. This is a comment on postmodernism by two postmodernist authors:

“Disappointment and skepticism led the postmodern thinkers of the past several decades to reject the possibility of reflecting reality in one’s thinking and one’s art.” According to such thinkers, “one’s optic or analytic frame never mirrors reality exactly as it is that it is always selective and unavoidably mediated by one’s pre-given assumptions, theories, values, and interests. The notion of perspective also implies that no one optic can ever fully illuminate the richness and complexity of any single phenomenon, let alone the infinite connections and aspects of all social reality. Thus, as [Friedrich] Nietzsche, [Max] Weber, and others have argued, all knowledge of reality stems from a particular point of view, all ‘facts’ are constituted interpretations, and all perspectives are finite and incomplete.” ( *Postmodern Theory*, Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, 1991)

No one, of course, would seriously suggest that thinking, or art, reflects reality “exactly as it is.” As Aleksandr Voronsky noted, “The object is never equal to the subject.” But, the question is, as that same critic asked, do our subjective sensations have *any* objective significance? Can thinking and art reflect reality with *relative, qualitatively decisive* truthfulness?

As opposed to the modern ultra-relativists and subjectivists, we answer yes to these questions and pose this to the artists as a challenge: Your task is not to produce photographs, exact copies, but to produce ‘pictures of life,’ based on your understanding and your powers of imagination, that convey important truths, truths that enlighten and stimulate and provoke. Is that possible? Yes, *the entire history of art affirms that possibility*. Human beings have been shaped and educated and civilized in part because of works of art for several thousand years. Marxism, as Lenin suggested, sets itself on that entire history.

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To illustrate the attack on the real as the basis for art I would like to take an example, the 19th century novel and specifically the work of Charles Dickens, the author of many remarkable novels between 1836 and 1870. I would like to demonstrate how Marxists and others in an earlier period regarded his artistic work in contrast to how contemporary “left” theory, or significant sections of it, views it.

2012 was the bicentennial of Dickens’s birth. He was a tremendously popular novelist at the height of his fame. And he remains one, deservedly so. According to researchers, his *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859) has sold more than 200 million copies, making it the best-selling novel of all time, in any genre.

Dickens was an immensely honest, searching and scathing critic of many aspects of society, as well as an endlessly lively, amusing chronicler of life itself, in all its dimensions. Dickens introduced a new, plebeian element—modern street life, popular city life—to the novel, and literature was never the same.

His enormous contribution to culture was appreciated by the most perceptive minds of his time. The most perceptive mind of that epoch belonged to Karl Marx, who in 1854, in the *New York Tribune*, included Charles Dickens, along with William Makepeace Thackeray, Charlotte Brontë and Elizabeth Gaskell, in that “splendid brotherhood of fiction-writers in England, whose graphic and eloquent pages have issued to the world more political and social truths than have been uttered by all the professional politicians, publicists and moralists put together.” (“The English Middle Class,” 1854)

The great Russian literary and social critic, V.G. Belinsky (1811-1848),

a socialist and opponent of tsarism, one of the predecessors of Plekhanov, Lenin and Trotsky, wrote along similar lines, in 1847:

“We can point to the novels of Dickens which are so deeply permeated with the sincere sympathies of our time but which nevertheless represent excellent works of art.”

Belinsky used Dickens’ work as an example of the objectivity of artistic truth. Plekhanov and Voronsky derived a great deal from this conception, as we do.

“It is said that Dickens’ novels were responsible for improving the educational system in England where everything was based on merciless floggings and the barbarous mistreatment of children. What is wrong, we ask, if Dickens in this case acted as a poet? Are his novels any the worse aesthetically? This is an obvious misunderstanding: people see that art and science are not one and the same thing, but they do not see that the difference between them is not at all subject matter, but merely the way in which that matter is treated. The philosopher speaks in syllogisms, the poet in images and pictures, but both say the same thing. ... One *proves* and the other *shows*, but they both convince, the one by logic, the other by pictures.” (“A View of Russian Literature in 1847”)

The *Northern Star*, the newspaper of the Chartist movement, the revolutionary movement of British workers at the time, hailed Dickens as “the champion of the oppressed.” Edwin Pugh, in *Charles Dickens, Apostle of the People* (1908), claimed Dickens for the working class as an “unconscious socialist.”

There is no need to make such claims, which are exaggerations, but it merely goes to prove how socialists and progressive-minded people of that age thought of Dickens, an enemy of oppression, the abuse of children, the debtors’ prisons, the workhouse, the legal system, hypocritical, self-satisfied and cruel bureaucrats and officials, and an ally of the young, the poor, the suffering.

The great Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy, who admired Dickens greatly, said of him: “He loves the weak and poor and always despises the rich.” (Dickens remained a favorite writer in the Soviet Union after the Russian Revolution.)

In 1912, to mark 100 years since Dickens’ birth, the German Marxist Franz Mehring, after whom we named the publishing company that has put out *The Sky Between the Leaves*, wrote a perceptive essay in honor of the English novelist, which includes this comment:

“The nerve-shattering life of the city was the real spirit of his [Dickens’] artistic creation. He knew that life in its heights and depths; with wonderful penetration he grasped its social types and embodied them in living figures, many of which are still popular in England and beyond England as well. Mr. Pickwick and Sam Weller [in *The Pickwick Papers*, 1836] compare in fame with Don Quixote and Sancho Panza. His heart, even when he was a celebrated dinner guest of Ministers of State and a close friend to all the famous names of England, was with the poor and unfortunate from whose midst he had, by his huge strength of spirit and life, raised himself to brilliant fame. No one could feel more deeply for Nature’s stepchildren, the blind, the dumb, and the deaf, nor more deeply—and this says even more—for the stepchildren of society. Even bourgeois aesthetes said of Dickens, partly in accusation, partly in wonder, that he never confused in his sympathy for the working classes crudity, criminality, immorality, or filth.”

The influential American critic Edmund Wilson, during the years, in the late 1930s, when he was most influenced by Marxism, and Trotsky in particular, commented:

“It is difficult for British pundits to see in him the great artist and social critic that he was. ... [Dickens] was nevertheless the greatest dramatic writer that the English had had since Shakespeare, and he created the largest and most varied world. ...

“Dickens is almost invariably against institutions: in spite of his allegiance to Church and State, in spite of the lip-service he occasionally

pays them, whenever he comes to deal with Parliament and its laws, the courts and the public officials, the creeds of Protestant dissenters and of Church of England alike, he makes them either ridiculous or cruel, or both at the same time.” (“Dickens: The Two Scrooges,” 1941)

How does modern “left” criticism, on the other hand, treat Dickens and the 19th century novel generally? To a large extent, with incomprehension and ill-concealed hostility. Dickens, for example, is not someone who can be enlisted in the service of sexual and gender politics, into “post-colonial studies” and so on—so he is automatically suspect. His popularity with masses of readers, English-speaking and otherwise, including the less educated, “the great unwashed,” also makes him a dubious character. And the realist novel and literature as a whole are widely treated in “left” academic circles as means of manipulation and accommodating the population to bourgeois domination.

Two examples from two prominent figures:

“Literature is a vital instrument for the insertion of individuals into the perceptual and symbolic forms of the dominant ideological formation, able to accomplish this function with a ‘naturalness’, spontaneity and experiential immediacy possible to no other ideological practice.” (*Criticism and Ideology*, Terry Eagleton, 1976)

“The novel plays a significant role in what can be called a properly bourgeois cultural revolution—that immense process of transformation whereby populations whose life habits were formed by other, now archaic, modes of production are effectively reprogrammed for life and work in the new world of market capitalism.” (*The Political Unconscious*, Fredric Jameson, 1981)

Inspired by the postmodernist Michel Foucault in particular, D.A. Miller, an American academic, in *The Novel and the Police* (1988), sets about countering the argument that the realist novel represented anything subversive or inherently emancipatory. Instead, such novels, according to Miller, work primarily as a technology of discipline, to create an internal policeman.

Miller writes, “Few of course would dispute [!] that, with Dickens, the English novel for the first time features a massive thematization of social discipline ...” (If no one disputes this in Miller’s circles, and that may well be true, it speaks to their intellectually dwarfish character.)

“This book [Miller’s book] attempts to redress the ‘positive’ achievement of nineteenth-century fiction ...”

“It could be argued that, despite or by means of its superficially hostile attitude toward bureaucracy, a novel like [Dickens’] *Bleak House* is profoundly concerned to train us ... in the sensibility for inhabiting the new bureaucratic, administrative structures.”

And this, along the same lines, from Edward Said, the late Palestinian critic, an intelligent man, but influenced by the same wrongheaded conceptions.

“Some of the most exciting recent criticism ... shows the novel generally, and narrative in particular, to have a sort of regulatory social presence in Western European societies. ...

“In the main, though, the nineteenth-century European novel is a cultural form consolidating but also refining and articulating the authority of the status quo. However much Dickens, for example, stirs up his readers against the legal system, provincial schools, or bureaucracy, his novels finally enact what one critic has called a ‘fiction of resolution.’” (*Culture and Imperialism*, 1993)

Audrey Jaffe in *Vanishing Points: Dickens, Narrative, and the Subject of Omniscience* (1991), applies the theories of various postmodern figures (Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan and Foucault) to argue that the “omniscient narration” in Dickens “belongs to a series of cultural phenomena through which the gaze—and, more generally, knowledge itself—is coded as white, male, and middle class.”

One commentator (Laurence W. Mazzeno, in *The Dickens Industry: Critical Perspectives 1836-2005*, 2008) notes that most modern female

critics “have not been positive about Dickens’s treatment of women,” and later remarks that “By the late 1980s it became customary for feminists to expose Dickens’s essentially patriarchal and demeaning view of women.”

One could go on ... and on. In any case, it would be no trouble to come up with a thousand similar, equally sterile examples.

These so-called “left” positions are profoundly false and reactionary. One could point to all sorts of failings in Dickens, which have a largely historical and almost unavoidable character, but to suggest, as Miller and company do, that the dominant effect of his work is to accommodate the reader to the status quo is reactionary idiocy and anyone who reads the novels in an objective manner, and not like a petty bourgeois professor attempting to show off, would recognize that. Fortunately, the average reader over the years has had more in his or her head than the professors.

It is truly absurd. “Dickensian England” and “Dickensian London” have entered the English language as phrases identified with official hypocrisy and cruelty, and the wretchedness of the slums and the conditions of the masses. These “left” intellectuals are a million miles from the population, past and present.

I think the following passage from *Nicholas Nickleby*, published in 1839, in which Dickens describes his central character’s reaction to an especially degrading and demeaning situation he finds himself in, as an assistant at a dreadful school where boys are beaten and starved, is valuable as a summary of the writer’s own attitude toward British social reality in general and his place *and responsibility* within it. It should be the attitude of the serious artist or intellectual in general toward the existing social order that attempts to make use of him or her.

“The cruelty of which he [Nicholas] had been an unwilling witness, ... the filthy place, the sights and sounds about him, all contributed to this state of feeling; but when he recollected that, being there as an assistant, he actually seemed—no matter what unhappy train of circumstances had brought him to that pass—to be the aider and abettor of a system which filled him with honest disgust and indignation, he loathed himself, and felt, for the moment, as though the mere consciousness of his present situation must, through all time to come, prevent his raising his head again.” (*Nicholas Nickleby*, 1839)

In fact, Dickens held a far healthier, more radical attitude toward society than our contemporary “left” professors, who long ago gave up, if they ever had such a perspective, on the possibility of changing or even seriously protesting against contemporary injustice.

Since we are currently engaged in a campaign in defense of the Detroit Institute of Arts, I can’t resist citing the comment of William Valentiner (1880-1958), longtime director of the DIA, in regard to the American painters James McNeill Whistler and Winslow Homer. He contrasts the latter favorably with the former, because Homer’s “art arises from greater depths, embodies the broad masses of the people.” No major public figure in the arts in America or Europe speaks like this any more.

The “left theory” industry at present is a large publishing-academic-media machine, which transfers, on a global scale, many, many millions of dollars from universities, foundations, think tanks, research institutes, unions, billionaire philanthropists and so on to professors, editors, journalists, consultants and the like. Many prestigious careers and comfortable incomes are made from “cultural theory.” We are deeply hostile to this industry.

The specific conception that art and literature are merely, or primarily, congealed ideology has thoroughly dominated literature and art departments and academic journals for decades. And continues to do so. The inimitable Jameson, for example, asserts in his new book, *The Antinomies of Realism* (2013), “If it is social truth or knowledge we want from realism, we will soon find that what we get is ideology.”

While Bruno Bosteels, one of the rising stars of the anti-Marxist left, in *Some Highly Speculative Remarks on Art and Ideology* (2012), refers to the “minimal gap that separates art from ideology” and asks, “Could not

artistic freedom ... serve as the quintessential model for the ideological inscription of individuals into the existing social structures, rather than as their much-flaunted political subversion?"

These views, which pass for and are falsely identified with "Marxism" in the minds of many, go essentially unchallenged and unquestioned, except by us. Trotsky responded 90 years ago to this sort of subjectivist reduction of art to ideology—admittedly enunciated by healthier elements—in his famous speech on "Class and Art" (1924), a reduction that he said only made "one spread one's hands in helplessness."

Trotsky pointed out in that discussion that we will continue to "recommend [the poet Alexander] Pushkin to the worker" because "the expression that Pushkin gave his feelings is so saturated with the artistic, and generally with the psychological, experience of centuries, is so crystallized, that it has lasted down to our times." The great artist's efforts have an *objectively truthful, enduring* quality that goes beyond his or her class, historical prejudices. The complacent "left" philistine of our day, for whom the "broad masses of the people" and their problems count for nothing, is entirely closed off from this understanding. "In works of art," he or she, in Trotsky's phrase, "ignores that which makes them works of art."

Voronsky elaborated magnificently the attitude of the Marxists toward the honest artist and his or her inevitable limitations:

"There can be no doubt that subjectively each genuine artist tries to depict the reality of life. He experiences the greatest happiness if he is certain that he has succeeded in doing so. It is also true that there are critics, and they have by no means become extinct in our times, who naively assume that the artist is engaged only in advancing his own ideas and is not worried about the reality of life. But there is no less doubt that, in depicting the reality of life, the artist sees this reality through the prism of the thoughts and feelings of his class. Objectively he introduces the ideas of his class, and nearly always does so unconsciously.

"Under the influence of these thoughts and feelings he reproduces the reality of life only to the degree that these thoughts and feelings allow him to. There are instances when the reality of life is rendered very one-sidedly, there are times when it is completely distorted, and there are times when this reality emerges sharply and clearly. The last instance usually happens if the artist reflects the thoughts and feelings of a class which is flourishing, or of a class which is on the rise, in short, of a class which at a given historical moment most clearly expresses the general interests of society as a whole, the interests of a movement forward. ...

"The critic ... must always explain: to what degree reality is objectively and precisely reproduced in the given work; whether artistic discoveries have been made in the work, and which ones; how one can explain the correctness or incorrectness of what the artist has done in depicting the 'reality of life'; what falsehoods he has introduced due to his class subjectivism, or, on the contrary, to what degree class feelings and thoughts have helped the artist find 'reality'; what is the relative social weight of these feelings and thoughts; how are they transmitted in the work of art, and so forth." (Voronsky, "On Art," 1925)

This is the general conception that guides our work on critical efforts.

The views of Eagleton, Jameson, the various feminist critics and company on art are so impoverished and impoverishing. Art becomes, in their treatment, this mere secretion of ideology, which hides far, far more than it reveals of the world. It is an attitude that suggests fear of and hostility toward art. One really wants to ask, after reading their views, why would any thinking person, any worker who doesn't have a lot of time to spare, waste his or her time on Shakespeare, Tolstoy, George Eliot or anyone else? At best, he or she might come to understand the ideology of a particular social layer at a particular time and place, but nothing new or eye-opening about life. It's a horrible and debilitating approach.

This is not our view. We see art as something based in life, replenished by life, oriented toward life, that also encourages and propels people, that

outrages and astonishes them, that inspires and moves them, and teaches enormously important, indispensable things about the world.

I would like to conclude with this wonderful quote from Trotsky. The enlightening and socially destabilizing role of art is understood *best* by the great Marxists:

"It is well that there is art in the world as well as politics. It is well that the potentialities of art are as inexhaustible as life itself. In a certain sense art is richer than life, for it can both overstate and understate, lay on the bright colors thickly or resort to the opposite extreme and content itself with the gray crayon, can present the same object in all its varied facets and shed a variety of light upon it. There was only one Napoleon—his reproductions in art are legion." ("A Masterly First Novel: Jean Malaquais's *Les Javanais*," 1939)

I hope you find the book interesting.



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