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Marxism and Christopher Caudwell : A Disputed Relationship

FIFTY YEARS HAVE PASSED since the death of Christopher Caudwell in the Spanish civil war* and yet the debate about his adherence to the Marxist position has not conclusively ended. His explicit Marxist proclamations on art and life have not convinced some of his critics who continue to opine that his position on art contains some non-Marxist elements. At the same time, he is being vehemently defended as a genuine Marxist critic by some of his defending critics. The phenomenon called 'Caudwell—Criticism' has thus emerged from such an extreme assessment of his relationship to marxism.

Though a large part of Caudwell—criticism remains confined to the problem of his adherence to Marxism, it has raised some fundamental issues about art-criticism in general, and Marxist literary criticism in particular. Our attention is thus focused on the possibility and desirability of including important insights from apparently opposing theoretical perspectives in one's view of art and life. The problem of supplementing one's perspective by using insights from an-

other valuational framework has also been thrown open for discussion by issues raised in the Caudwell—controversy. The history of Caudwell-criticism is thus impregnated with some important methodological and ideological issues.

One can begin the discussion of these issues by clarifying one important point: even those who severely criticised Caudwell for his deviation from Marxism in his theory of art and poetry do not challenge his Marxist intentions and his belief in the Marxist view of life. They mainly criticised his use of some non-Marxist concepts and insights, which he has derived from disciplines such as genetics, anthropology and psychology. They argue that the concepts derived from these disciplines do not conform to Marxism and Marxist literary criticism. Caudwell is thus challenged for his use of non-Marxist concepts and disciplines.

It was Maurice Cornforth who initiated the famous 'Caudwell Controversy' in *Modern Quarterly* in the winter issue of 1950. Cornforth dubs Caudwell's critical writing as 'obscure' and 'confused' and censures him for adhering to bourgeois thought, bourgeois anthropology and instinct psychology.

He distinguishes Caudwell's 'difficult' and 'obscure' style from the difficult style of Marx and argues, "Caudwell is difficult for another reason: because his thought is nebulous, shifting, eclectic and inconsistent, be-

* Caudwell's premature and tragic death occurred on 12th February 1937 in the Spanish civil war. As a member of the International Brigade he was covering the retreat of his unit when he was fired upon from all sides. 1987 is the year of his 50th death anniversary.

cause he clothes simple things in a veil of obscure phrases, and drags with him the confusions of bourgeois ideology".¹

Another English critic, J. D. Bernal, attacks Caudwell for lacking the historical sense and for unintentionally admitting bourgeois thought in his writing.² In recent times, Terry Eagleton has offered sharp comments on Caudwell saying, "His work bears all the scars of that self-contradictory enterprise: speculative and erratic, studded with random insights, punctuated by hectic forays into and out of alien territories and strewn with hair-raising theoretical vulgarities."³ A famous Marxist critic, Raymond Williams, accepts that Caudwell is the best-known English Marxist critic and then reproves him in these words: "His theories and outlines have been widely learned, although in fact he has little to say of actual literature that is even interesting". Williams further adds. "——— for the most part his discussion is not even specific enough to be wrong."⁴

Caudwell's sympathetic critics are not far behind in defending him as a true Marxist critic. George Thomson refutes almost all arguments of Cornforth against Caudwell and asserts that Caudwell did not fail to vic-

tim to bourgeois ideology and bourgeois thought of his day. He further argues that Caudwell is the first English critic to attempt a full-scale Marxist critique of bourgeois thought and bourgeois literature. Thomson also refutes Cornforth's allegation that Caudwell used difficult and obscure style.⁵ Besides *Modern Quarterly* of 1950-1951, Caudwell's contribution to criticism is reviewed by many other critics. To cite two examples from recent Caudwell-criticism: Samuel Hynes praises him as 'a gifted synthesizer'⁶ and David Craig describes him as 'one of the profoundest English Marxist critics'.⁷

Investigating Caudwell's use of Marxist and non-Marxist notions may help us understand why his contribution to criticism has been assessed so variously. In the absence of any systematic exposition of Marxism or of Marxist concepts from Caudwell, we will turn to his explanations of some Marxist notions.

Marx's notion of dialectics (Marx had mainly used it to indicate the interaction between man and nature observed in man's history) is used in an extensive manner by Caudwell when he considers art as a reflection of that dialectics. Art, in Caudwell's view, performs the task of adapting the genotypical or instinctive man to social reality. The dialectical relationship between genotypical and social reality is thus reflected in art. He views art as an integral part of life and observes the presence of a dialectical relationship in art also. This could be seen as an extension of the Marxist notion of dialectics to the field of art.

The Marxist notion of division of labour helps us understand the relations of production or the class-structure of a given period of time. It gives us a valuable insight in man's history. Caudwell wanted to apply the notion of division of labour to art, but he could not derive much help from the

contemporary Marxist criticism in this direction. He therefore seems to have turned to Jung for help. Like Marx, Jung also has expressed dissatisfaction about the class-based differentiations in bourgeois society and has suggested that a free, complete and individuated man (one whose innate faculties are freely and fully grown) as an ideal in place of the differentiated man in bourgeois society. Art is given by Jung an important role of adapting the instinctive or genotypical man to social reality. Jung's functionalist view of art, it seems, has made an impact on Caudwell and he is led to use Jung's formulation in his explanation of the nature and function of art.

While doing it, he is well aware of a need to voice his Marxist convictions. He says, "——— This also explains why it is correct to have a materialist approach to art, to look in the art work of any age for a reflection of the social relations of that age."⁸ Caudwell's use of an important insight of Jung about art thus does not affect his belief in Marx's total perception of life. Reiterating his belief in the Marxist view of life he adds, "Thought is ultimately inseparable from concrete living, from practice."⁹

Caudwell's severe critics missed the significance of his assertions about Marxism and they also ignored the fact that he has made a copious use of Marxist concepts such as socialist revolution, freedom, determinism, historicism, base-super-structure relationship. He has viewed the world as a material unity, a self-determined whole, a becoming established by the unity of thought and practice. One cannot thus pass by the fact that he is a thorough-going Marxist. His use of some alleged non-Marxist concepts could also be seen as his attempt to

extend the Marxist perspectives to aesthetic and cultural aspects of life. A close look at Caudwell's use of the 'non-Marxist' concepts of individuation, genotype and illusion makes one realize that these concepts contain a strong Marxist slant in Caudwell's writing. He thus views individuation not only in the Jungian way, but also in a Marxist way. Caudwell sees individuation as one of the final goals of socialist revolution. He argues that in the present class-torn bourgeois societies, the innate capacities of an individual are stifled and he is not allowed to grow as a full individual. In the classless society of the future, an unlimited scope for the development of an individual's innate capacities would be offered which, in its turn, would also enrich the entire society. It may be recalled that Marx too has envisaged such a situation in his early works, i.e. *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*. Caudwell's use of the concept of individuation is not incongruent with Marxism.

Caudwell used another allegedly non-Marxist notion, the genetic-anthropological notion of genotype. In his description of genotype, Caudwell writes that the genotype is "the instinctive man as he is born, who if 'left to himself might grow up into something like a dumb brute.'¹⁰ He attributes the affective, irrational part of man's personality to genotype (the instinctive, animal self of man) and maintains that art and poetry help adapt the genotypical, affective, instinctive, irrational self of man to social reality.

Critics like Maurice Cornforth do not, however, consider that Caudwell's emphasis on the notion of adapting the genotype to social reality is adequate enough to make it congruent with Marxism. Cornforth refers to the non-Marxist sources of genotype and argues that it is an alien, reactionary and non-Marxist concept. In defence of

¹ Maurice Cornforth, 'Caudwell and Marxism'; *Modern Quarterly*, Vol. 6, No. 1 winter 1950-51, pp. 17-18.

² J. D. Bernal, 'Caudwell Discussion'; *Modern Quarterly*, Vol. 6, No. 4, summer 1951, p. 350.

³ Terry Eagleton *Criticism and Ideology* (London: Verso edition, 1978), p. 21.

⁴ Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society* (Penguin, 1966), p. 268.

⁵ George Thomson, 'In defence of poetry'; *Modern Quarterly*, Vol. 6, No. 2, spring 1951, pp. 107-134.

⁶ Samuel Hynes, Introduction to *Romance and Realism* (New Jersey: Princeton Uni. Press, 1970), p. 23.

⁷ David Craig, *The Real Foundations: Literature and Social Change* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1973), p. 248.

⁸ Caudwell, *Illusion and Reality* (New Delhi: People's Publishing House, 1966), p. 212.

⁹ *Illusion and Reality*, p. 149.

¹⁰ *Illusion and Reality*, p. 138.

Caudwell, it could be strongly maintained that Caudwell has used the notion of genotype to explain the perennial human problem of adapting the biological, genetic, in-born psychological self or psyche of man to social reality. His solution of the problem is that the historically evolved socio-cultural forms like art and poetry help adapt the 'genotype' to social reality. His critics will be justified in criticising Caudwell's notion of adapting the genotype to social reality as an incomplete and inadequate solution of that problem, but they will not be right in saying that Caudwell's attempt to use the notion of genotype in his theory of art is an unMarxist exercise. All societies of the past, present and future—which also includes the classless socialist society of the future—have to face the problem of adapting the 'genotype' to social reality and none of these societies can wish away the problem. The term 'genotype' may not be acceptable to many critics of Caudwell, but the concepts and ideas suggested by this term have to be considered by all societies.

Further, it should not be difficult for Caudwell's critics to accept the fact that the genetic factors in the constitution of a given human psyche are more or less constant, whereas the changes in the social environment are perceptibly rapid. When a more recent critic like Francis Mulhern criticises Caudwell for "injecting a fundamental timelessness into the core of history" by using the notion of genotype, one fails to understand the significance of such a criticism. Caudwell is very clear about his notion of genotype. He does not expect any dramatic change in the genetic personality of man even in the classless society of the future. He therefore wants art and poetry to func-

¹¹ Francis Mulhern, 'The Marxist Aesthetics of Christopher Caudwell', *New Left Review*, May/June 1974, p. 54.

¹² *Illusion and Reality*, p. 157.

tion as efficient means of adapting the genotype to social reality. Caudwell's critics can raise a point that Caudwell expects too many things from art and poetry, but they will not be right in accusing him of using a non-Marxist concept.

The concept of illusion is the third important concept to be criticised by his severe critics as a non-Marxist and affectivist concept. His defending critics, however, point out that Caudwell does not use the notion of illusion in one sense only. They find out three different uses of the term 'illusion' in Caudwell's writing—(1) The bourgeois illusion about social reality, (2) The element of illusion in the primitive man's mythical perception of reality, (3) The phantasy element or illusion in art. Caudwell's notion of illusion thus consists of the Freudian, Marxian, Aristotelian and anthropological perceptions on art and life. We find Caudwell using the Freudian view that art is a phantasy, a day-dream, an illusion, when he characterizes the world of art as a mock world. He follows Aristotle when he refers to the mimetic element in art as 'the essence and puzzle and method of literary art'.¹² He echoes I. A. Richards' distinction between art and science in separating the affective domain of art from the cognitive domain of science. His use of the anthropological perspective is clearly reflected in his argument that the illusion in art transmits the primitive man's mythical perception of art and reality to the modern man. The Marxist argument that the bourgeois perception of reality is illusory in nature has been expressed by Caudwell at many places in his books.

The notion of illusion in Caudwell thus does not refer to one specific meaning. The meaning of this concept rests upon the context in which it is used. Yet it can be asserted that the Marxist meaning of the concept is the most dominant one. Caudwell

has unequivocally stated that poetry wishes to symbolize the social ego and is compelled to make some statement about reality. Though he maintains that the world of art has an affective side, he also adds that the affective character of art serves the purpose of adapting the instinctive life of man to the given social reality and the (imaginary) social ego. The affective aspect of art is thus meant to serve the social purpose. Such a clear statement about the social objectives of art does not leave any doubt in one's mind that Caudwell wanted to use the notion of illusion for his Marxist purposes. He was trying to assimilate the historically evolved meanings and usages of the concept of illusion in art in his inclusive view of art if he had clarified these different meanings of the term 'illusion' and had shown the linkages between them, his critics would not have accused him of using non-Marxist concepts in his Marxist view of life and art.

This discussion of Caudwell's use of 'non-Marxist' concepts—we discussed only three such concepts and indicated that Caudwell used a few other concepts this way—directs our attention to the fact that Caudwell made a rather 'uninhibited' use of 'non-Marxist' perceptions in his view of art. This phenomenon has been assessed variously by his critics. Critics like Sol Yurick have discovered that Caudwell was a Marxist-Stalinist and his books show 'a Stalinist crudity'. At the other extreme, we have Montague Slater to claim that Caudwell's theory of literature in *Illusion and Reality* leads us away from socialist realism.¹³ The entire Caudwell criticism is filled with such divergent opinions of his critics. The truth about his achievement as a Marxist critic must therefore lie midway between the polar assessments of his critical performance.

¹³ 'Caudwell Discussion', *Modern Quarterly*, Vol. 6, No. 3, summer 1951, pp. 262-265.

¹⁴ *Illusion and Reality*, Introduction, p. XIV.

A fair assessment of Caudwell's performance as a Marxist critic has to begin with a consideration that he was a product of the characteristic ethos of the thirties. He has to be seen as a sensitive young man of the thirties in England responding to the post-war phenomenon of recession, unemployment, helplessness and disintegration. Like many other young men of his times, he too attributes most of the contemporary social evils to the bourgeois structure of society available during those post-war years. Marxism, to him, is a redeemer of the contemporary European man. In Marxism, he does not only see the possibility of a philosophical-political solution, but the emergence of a *Weltanschauung* to integrate and satisfy his emotional, scientific and artistic needs.

Moreover, he belongs to the open, independent, liberal British tradition that was interested in assimilating divergent views. His assimilating tendencies make him recommend the use of sound sociology for art-critics as it would 'enable the art-critic to employ criteria drawn from other fields of learning without falling into eclecticism or confusing art with psychology or politics'.¹⁴

Caudwell's critical works contain the following five Marxist principles which shaped his personality as a critic:

- (1) The Marxist deterministic view—i.e. Being determines consciousness—is totally acceptable to Caudwell and he holds that art-activity is determined by the economic conditions of a given society.
- (2) He accepts the historical perspective of Marx that man's development in history is dialectical in nature and the establishment of a classless society in future will synthesize the two major achievements

- of man's past social formations i.e. equality and prosperity for all.
- (3) As a Marxist, he views the dichotomy between theory and practice, art and science, thought and action as only temporary dichotomies and expresses a hope that the revolutionary action of proletariat class—i.e. praxis—will dissolve these dichotomies. He quotes Marx's eleventh thesis on Feuerbach: "philosophers have only interpreted the world, the point, however, is to change it."
 - (4) He strongly repudiates the Rousseauesque bourgeois notion of freedom that freedom is the absence of social restraints, and upholds Engel's view that freedom is the recognition of necessity.
 - (5) He expresses his faith in Marx's notion of complete or total man by elucidating his view that individuation or the fullest possible growth of man's innate capacities is the final

¹⁵ David Margolies, *The Function of Literature: A study of Christopher Caudwell's Aesthetics* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1969), p. 23.

¹⁶ George Thomson, 'In Defense of Poetry', *Modern Quarterly*, Vol. 6, No. 2, spring 1951, p. 133.

goal of any social structure including the future socialistic structure of society.

Caudwell's critics have succeeded in raising a controversy about his use of some 'non-Marxist' concepts, but there will be hardly any dispute about his Marxist beliefs and his faith in Marxism. Critics like David Margolies were convinced about Caudwell's unshaken faith in Marxism. Margolies offers the following observation on Caudwell's Marxism: Caudwell used Marxism as "a habit of thought, not a system of ideas to be applied to experience with finicking circumspection".¹⁵ George Thomson encapsulated Caudwell's view or 'message' about art and society in these words: "Bourgeois art is an image of the reality of bourgeois society refracted through the 'false consciousness' of the class that has produced it. The proletariat, on the other hand, as the class which abolishes classes creates the conditions for the abolition of class ideology. The conditions in which shedding its class illusions society stands as a united whole face to face with reality."¹⁶

Caudwell's use of 'non-Marxist' concepts does not, on a careful appraisal, amount to abandoning Marxism. On the contrary, one can view it as his effort to integrate and synthesize different insights into a cohesive view of the world.