

Further Discussion

On the Articles of Comrades Kettle and Cornforth

I SHOULD like to make certain comments on the articles by Arnold Kettle and Maurice Cornforth, in *Marxism Today* No. 1, which seem to me to raise vital problems.

My concern with Comrade Kettle's article is not so much with his evaluation of Blake as a great revolutionary poet of his own time, as with his use of Blake to reinforce certain contemporary attitudes and positions which I think have to be re-examined.

Blake, as I see it, was concerned to affirm a human wholeness against the corruption and evil of his day. He had to glorify Energy and the life of the body, and to denounce prudential and "conscientious" considerations, because the "Age of Reason" was in so many ways unreasonable and inhumane; and, like Rousseau (although with an "anti-sentimental" bias which marks him off from Rousseau) he was repelled by even the greatest "mechanical" thinkers of the Enlightenment, and could not see that their work was necessary if his own was ever to be brought to social fruition. Thus far I am with Kettle in appreciating the historical significance and value of Blake's position.

But Blake's "Energy" is an avowedly amoral god. It is true that Blake was appalled by the fate of exploited and ravished innocents (although it seems to me that there is overmuch dramatic relish and *generalised* feeling about a good deal of this) but he could also identify himself with the sort of scoundrel who seemed to him to embody Energy. His reaction against a prostituted Christianity brought him sometimes near to diabolism (a journey which the French "poètes maudits" were to complete). There is his famous judgment that Milton was "of the Devil's Party without knowing it"; and, more explicitly, there is this from his marginalia to Dante's *Inferno* (I am indebted to *The Times Literary Supplement*, November 1, 1957, for drawing my attention to this reference; the aphorism was first republished in the *T.L.S.* in May, 1957, and now appears in the new bicentenary edition of the *Nonesuch Blake*):

"The grandest Poetry is Immoral, the grandest

characters Wicked, very Satan-Capaneus, Othello a murderer, Prometheus, Jupiter, Jehovah, Jesus a wine-bibber. Cunning and Morality are not Poetry but Philosophy; the Poet is Independent and Wicked: the Philosopher is Dependent and Good."

If we look in the light of this at Blake's impatience with Pity and Mercy, we can see that it can lead all-too-easily to a position "beyond good and evil", such as was taken up by the "Independent and Wicked" poet-philosopher, Nietzsche. This kind of position is a constant temptation for revolutionary writers. Bertolt Brecht, I think, often succumbed to it, as in the *Threepenny Opera* (where, I agree with Herbert Lüthy, the satire on bourgeois society becomes an acceptance of the savagery of the underworld as a norm of human behaviour) and in a play about revolutionary ethics, *Die Massnahme* (which has not been shown in this country, so far as I know, but of which one or two very full accounts have appeared). Even such a great compassionate humanist as Maxim Gorky was clearly tempted by what may be termed "the cult of Energy" (his novel *Foma Gordeyev* seems to me to provide a good instance of this).

To suppose, however, that we can dispense with Pity and Mercy if only we know enough, see clearly enough and act with sufficient energy and determination is really "to throw out the baby with the bath-water". It is, I should say, an important psychological factor in the process whereby devoted Communists could be led to justify and even to participate in the police excesses that have disfigured the building of socialism in the U.S.S.R. and Eastern Europe. It could be termed a form of Utopianism.

Comrade Kettle invokes La Fayette and in our own day Koestler and Orwell as examples of intellectuals who are seduced by "humanitarianism" considerations into outright betrayal of necessary social revolution. He equates their attitude with Blake's image of "pitying the stormy roar". But if that "stormy roar" is a roar of intolerable human anguish—what then? Maxim Gorky and Romain Rolland were and remained revolutionary writers. But they pitied

and pleaded for prisoners of the revolution as well as of the counter-revolution.

To sum up: we must not use the "Poetry" of Blake to justify the "Cunning and Morality" of any "Philosophy", even of a philosophy which can be shown to be derived in part from Blakean insights.

This brings me to Maurice Cornforth's article on *Philosophy, Criticism and Progress*.

Here I find myself in sympathy with an important part of Comrade Cornforth's aim, which is to encourage a less dogmatic, a less "metaphysical" approach by Marxists to philosophical questions. Again, I am with him in thinking that philosophy can contribute to the solution of such urgent problems as "that both parties and states are means and not ends, what are the ends for which they are required, and how they can be made to serve these ends".

I do not see, however, that a philosophy which avoids measuring progress in terms of "happiness" or "well-being" because these states are considered to belong to the realm of "opinion or preference" rather than "ascertainable fact"—I do not see that such a philosophy can throw much fresh light on the nature of progress.

Marx's philosophic vision was of the universe, including Man and the mind of Man, as a complex of processes all governed by the laws of dialectical change. This vision has in turn fired the imagination of poets and men of science as well as class-conscious workers and left-wing politicians. Haldane wrote in his introduction to *The Dialectics of Nature* that much unnecessary puzzlement and frustration would have been spared the physicists in particular had they been acquainted with the materialist dialectic. (In the latest issue of *Marxism Today* Professor Bernal shows the influence of Marxist ideas on the study of the origins of life.) Among poets and scholars whose own outlook has been transformed by Marx's picture of harmony and unity in Man himself and in his society being capable of achievement only through the correct handling and resolution of conflict, we may instance Christopher Caudwell, Jack Lindsay and Professor George Thomson. Jack Lindsay, as is well known, has been influenced in particular by Marx's tragic view of Man's inevitable alienation from his own products and from his own human nature under the conditions of class society.

The point I want to make here is that all this is the kind of philosophic thinking which has close affinities with poetic thinking and with the most creative kind of scientific thinking. It is

generalised thinking on the basis of science and on the basis of all human experience, including aesthetic experience, *deeply felt* as well as worked over intellectually by the philosopher. It seems to me that without this spirit, which is a passionate *synthesising* spirit, philosophy conceived as "critical enquiry" can easily degenerate into logic-chopping.

There is at present a growing reaction, especially amongst young thinkers, against the cold, valueless universe of the logical analysts. This can take a potentially dangerous mystical form, as with Colin Wilson. But there is behind it a burning desire to restore the *whole man* to philosophy. Nobody has criticised logical positivism from a classical Marxist position more effectively than Comrade Cornforth himself. But another sort of criticism is also needed—the moral blasts of Miss Anscombe in the *Listener*, who refused to judge the A-bombing of Hiroshima only with reference to its hypothetical indirect consequences (in the supposed saving of Allied lives).

I believe that it is the felt need for a poetic, prophetic vision which leads Comrade Kettle to recommend Blake so enthusiastically to us. And I believe that Comrade Cornforth shares the deep distrust of old-fashioned rationalists and new-fashioned logical analysts for such a vision (this was shown in his treatment of Caudwell more clearly and fully than in the present article). My own view is that to take ready-made such a vision as Blake's, and try to fit it on to "Marxism" is no way to be either a poet or a philosopher. We must each have our *own* vision, worked out for and by ourselves. We must not be uncritical of it (here Cornforth's warnings are salutary) and we must not avoid or shout down the criticisms of others. But it is necessary for every man, to the best of his ability, to be his own poet and his own prophet. It was out of such a welter of passionate thought and feeling in the English Revolution that the great constructive, intellectual achievements of the later seventeenth and eighteenth centuries came forth. The other great pre-requisite was the growing realisation of the need for *tolerance*. Comrade Cornforth's recommendation of the give-and-take of controversy shows that he is alive to this side of our present-day needs. But there will be no fruitful clash of views, no sparks will be struck off, unless a good number of the controversialists are no longer (to use Bevan's provocative phrase) "dissicated calculating machines" but are thinking and speaking and writing from the depths of their being.

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