



A Critical Analysis of Marxism and Literature by Edmund Wilson

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Abstract

Wilson's "Marxism and Literature" published in 1938, is his study of the origins of socialism. It celebrates Marxism's ability to throw a great deal of light on the origins and social significance of works of art, but attacks the belief then advocated by that good literature can be made from ideological formulas. This article aims at how his essay "Marxism and Literature" attempts at an evaluation of the impact of Marxism on art and literature and literary criticism.

Introduction

Edmund Wilson was born in New Jersey in 1895 and he attended Princeton University. He began a lifelong career as an editor (for *Vanity Fair* and *The New Republic*), book reviewer (for *The New Yorker* and *The New York Review of Books*), novelist, poet, playwright, and independent scholar. Wilson died in 1972. The "foremost American literary journalist of the twentieth century," Wilson's "Marxism and Literature" published in 1938, is his study of the origins of socialism. It celebrates Marxism's ability to throw a great deal of light on the origins and social significance of works of art, but attacks the belief then advocated by that good literature can be made from ideological formulas.

His illuminating critical essay "Marxism and Literature", is an attempt at an evaluation of the impact of Marxism on art and literature and literary criticism. In a systematic survey with extensive illustrations, he proves that art and literature cannot be weapons for social, economic and political propaganda. It encompasses the role of literature in Marxian system and various thoughts of different Marxist philosophers and thinkers.

According to Wilson, Marx and his follower Engels were theorists of Marxist thought. They believed that the development of human society was directly dependent on economic structure of the time and place. This structure resulted in the development of superstructure or higher activities like politics, literature religion and art..it might have been possible that art and society mutually influenced each other. But Marx and Engels never believed that art and literature were conditioned and determined by social and economic aspects alone. The validity of art is never to be judged from merely socio-economic standards. They responded to art purely on its artistic merits.

Marx and Engels believed in Renaissance perspective of complete man, a man with many sides. They were against specialization. But Lenin was a Marxist, who believed in specialization. He called himself a fighter and organizer-a specialized man. He loved music and still thought that music made him soft. He loved to read

Tolstoy and Gorky and wanted them to be different writers. He believed that art should be specialised as a weapon for social change. This was dichotomy and contradiction in Lenin.

The carry over value of literature became a matter of concern for later Marxists. The literature created during the old bourgeoisie society and its validity in proletarian set up was a major problem for Trotsky. Marx accepted Shakespeare and Aeschylus and presumed them beyond the scale of Marxism. For Trotsky there was no such literature. The question was, would there be a new proletarian literature with new style, new language and new form. He asserted that the terms proletarian literature and proletarian culture were very dangerous. They attempt to compress the culture of future into the narrow limits of the present. This proletarian culture must grow out of the already existing socialist bourgeoisie culture. Trotsky maintained that communism had no artistic culture, it had only a political culture. Hence, a work of art should be accepted or rejected by its own laws and not by the principles of Marxism.

Artistic and literary freedom ended with Stalin. He reduced literature to a state of manipulating the people. Art and Literature degenerated into mere journalism or instruments of state policy and weapons of communist propaganda. Later Marxists lacked appreciation of art and literature from aesthetic perspective. For them, literature is good if it is ideologically sound. Marx and Engels, Lenin and Trotsky demonstrated the inescapability of the importance of economic systems in the creation of art and literature. But they were also capable of pure aesthetic appreciation. The later Marxists in their excess of ideological zeal had done a great disservice to the cause of literature. Ironically, those who have no literary competence started laying down the rules by which art is to be judged.

A work of art is not simple social vision. A great writer works by implication and a great work of art is not produced to order. A subtle distinction between good literature and journalism must be drawn. This is where the later Marxists critics failed. Long range literature of all



times and short range literatures are to be judged differently. Certain periods in human history have been very congenial for creation of great works of art, as they are peacetime activities. The sustaining force of great literature must be realized. Thus Edmund Wilson with critical analyses studies the various stages of communist perspective of literature and literary criticism.

References

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