Preface

Literature has plenty to say, and much of it is radical and much of it is true. The twentieth century was probably the first age to doubt that at all widely – a melancholy distinction – and my object here is to find a way back to a sense of the unity of knowledge and the objectivity of judgement: to recover a radical purpose for literature.

It was a mistake made by professionals, like conjurers who make things vanish. Odd that critics, of all people, should choose to give knowledge up. But suddenly, a generation and more ago, knowledge-denial became the rage in schools of literature, and it was more fashionable to look knowing than to know. As a state of mind it sounds desperate, rather like someone sawing off the branch he was sitting on, and you are bound to wonder what made so many people desperate at the same time. It is a question to ponder.

The likeliest answer is the failure of utopia, and there are precedents. In 1850 Alfred Sudre added a preface to the fourth edition of his *L'Histoire du Communisme*, which had appeared a year before. A radical lawyer in Paris, he had just written the first history of socialism in any language, and the book had won a valuable prize from the French Academy and sold well, demonstrating on ample evidence that socialism favoured the rich and the privileged. Then the monarchy fell and events took control, with confusion on the left. 'The ground,' Sudre wrote in his new preface,

> is scattered with the ruins of systems envisaged by our modern reformers – ruins created by the very chorus-leaders of utopia themselves.

The sudden overthrow of Louis Philippe had led to a brief Second Republic (1848-52) plagued by disorder, and in 1851 Napoleon's nephew seized power and assumed in 1852 the title of the Emperor Napoleon III. Radicals could not unite, fear had made for reaction, ancient forms and traditional values; order duly triumphed.

The pattern was broadly repeated in the twentieth century. Lenin led to Stalin, Stalin to Hitler, and the intellectual left of the 1930s led to the New Left of the 1960s, which applauded conformist dictators like Mao Tse Tung and even Hitler himself. Then came the New Right of the 1980s. Far from proving radical, socialism threw the brakes on history, as Sudre had predicted, and revived antique and discarded traditions. That, after all, was what Marx had demanded in 1848 in *The Communist Manifesto*, a highly conservative work which advocated family values and protested against the radicalism of the new factory system. In December 1976 Saul Bellow invoked the forgotten socialist tradition of genocide, which was unique, citing an *Encounter* article of mine called 'Race and the Socialists' and quoting Ulrike Meinhof's applause for Auschwitz on behalf of the Red Army Fraction four years earlier. Suddenly there were no more Good Guys and Bad Guys in politics; Hitler too was a child of Marxism. 'There is no simple choice,' Bellow told his audience in Stockholm, accepting his Nobel prize for literature, 'between the children of light and the children of darkness.' The origin of critical scepticism, once again, was confusion on the left. Mankind is fundamentally conservative, and when change threatens to shift alarmingly into free fall it seeks to correct it through revolution. The twentieth century tried more than one such revolution – they included fascism and communism – and when in their turn they failed the survivors despaired of knowledge itself.

It was a moment widely felt to be dangerous, and nobody can expect to be loved for posing radical questions or answering them. For half a century I have been asking why anybody ever expected socialism to favour the poor, and it is a question still unanswered. Bertrand Russell used to say that many people would sooner die than think, 'and what is more they do.' No wonder if early convictions are eagerly misrepresented or willingly left unvisited, and it can be an heroic enterprise to take back the past or to wonder, as Germans wondered in 1945, how it ever happened at all.

But then research itself is dangerous. Pliny the Elder was perhaps the first researcher on record to die of curiosity, mounting too far up Vesuvius when it erupted violently in A.D.79. The modern equivalents are usually less lethal than that, but there is still a lot to be afraid of in literature. The past is a dangerous place, and known to be. I do not accept that critical theorists in our time have denied knowledge because, having earnestly sought to find the theoretical foundations of critical

judgement, they regretfully failed to find them. That is to overrate their good intentions. They sought foundations because they knew there were none to be found, and critical scepticism became a convenient way of burying evidence and saving face. By now, however, no one is interested, the audience has gone home, and the case for studying literature needs to begin again. It cannot begin too soon.

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