

LITERATURE
AND THE IMAGE OF MAN
Sociological Studies of the European
Drama and Novel, 1600-1900

By Leo Lowenthal

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Preface

The theme of this book is the changing image of man in relation to society as revealed in some of the great literature of the Western world from the end of the sixteenth century to the beginning of the twentieth. Its method is frankly unorthodox. As a social scientist I am here dealing with materials traditionally allocated to the humanities; and I have employed techniques of analysis other than those commonly expected in the social sciences. Against the risk of attack from both scholarly camps, I can only hope to contribute to some rapprochement between them.

My interest in such an investigation dates from my joining the Institute of Social Research at the University of Frankfurt in 1926, and since then it has been stimulated greatly by my close association with Max Horkheimer, director of the Institute, and Theodore W. Adorno. I have also profited from many lively discussions with students in my courses in the sociology of literature at Columbia University during the last two decades and at the University of California since 1955.

The book was written in 1955 and 1956 while I was a Fellow of the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford, California. No atmosphere could have been more conducive to my task than that of the Center. Under its generous policy, judiciously administered by the Director, Ralph W. Tyler, I enjoyed a unique opportunity to submit my research to the constructive criticism of scholars working in the same, or related, or even seemingly unrelated fields. I am particularly indebted, among the many Fellows who assisted me in this undertaking, to the historian Merle Curti, the sociologist Seymour M. Lipset, the psychologist Daniel Miller, and the novelist and critic Wallace Stegner.

PREFACE

In addition, the manuscript was read by a number of other friends and colleagues, and I wish to express gratitude to Siegfried Kracauer, Daniel K. Lowenthal, Hereward T. Price, Philip Rieff, David Riesman, Gertrude Jaeger Selznick, Philip Selznick, and Allan Temko. I owe special thanks to my wife, Marjorie Fiske Lowenthal, whose patience was surpassed only by the substance of her advice.

For editorial assistance I am grateful to Bennett Berger, Miriam Gallaher, Lester Hawkins, and Edgar Rosenberg. Maria Paasche's secretarial competence and perseverance were outstanding.

Wherever possible, inexpensive and readily available editions in English have been quoted in this study. Learned references have been kept to a minimum since this book is intended as much for the general reader as for the scholar.

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Introduction: SOCIAL MEANINGS IN LITERATURE

Creative literature conveys many levels of meaning, some intended by the author, some quite unintentional. An artist sets out to invent a plot, to describe action, to depict the interrelationships of characters, to emphasize certain values; wittingly or unwittingly, he stamps his work with uniqueness through an imaginative selection of problems and personages. By this very process of selection—an aspect of creativity that is most relevant to the theme of this book—he presents an explicit or implicit picture of man's orientation to his society: privileges and responsibilities of classes; conceptions of work, love, and friendship, of religion, nature, and art. Through an analysis of the works included in this volume, an image may be formed of man's changing relation to himself, to his family, and to his social and natural environment, from the beginning of the seventeenth to the threshold of the twentieth century.

The writer indeed develops believable characters and places them in situations involving interaction with others and with the society in which they live. He must present what he considers to be the essentials of the individual largely through the behavior of particular characters as they face concrete situations. Of course, the historian does not neglect such considerations. But he often depersonalizes the reaction of the individual to other individuals and to society in order to reveal the broader political, economic, and social forces at work. At the other extreme, memoirs, autobiographies, diaries, and letters might be offered as sources of data at least as personal and specific as the contents of imaginative literature. In such personal documents, however, rationalization and, particularly, self-justification often blur or distort the image of social reality. It is the

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artist who portrays what is more real than reality itself.

One of the concerns which the creative writer shares with the theoretician is to describe and name new experience. The artist's desire to re-create the unique and the important often leads him to explore hitherto nameless anxieties and hopes. He is neither an articulate recording machine nor an inarticulate mystic but a specialized thinker, and it is often only after his creative tasks have been performed that society recognizes its predicaments. The specific treatment which a creative writer gives to nature or to love, to gestures and moods, to gregariousness or solitude, is a primary source for a study of the penetration of the most intimate spheres of personal life by social forces. It is the task of the sociologist of literature to relate the experience of the writer's imaginary characters and situations to the historical climate from which they derive. He has to transform the private equation of themes and stylistic means into social equations.

Certainly, other sources describe the occupations and preoccupations of the bourgeois at the time of Molière; but only Molière reveals what it was like to live this experience. Similarly Goethe depicts the social and occupational problems which faced the sensitive bureaucrat or white-collar worker of his time. But the writer not only reports how the individual reacts to the pressures of society; he also offers a picture of changing views about the comparative importance of psychic and social forces. Corneille, the spokesman for the French absolute monarchy, viewed man as naturally incapable of imposing order on himself and his affairs without the guidance of a powerful state authority. Ibsen, on the other hand, living in the heyday of a competitive society, portrays individuals who are highly competitive in all their affairs, both public and private, and who ascribe their conduct to their innate natures. In fact, most generalized concepts about human nature found in literature prove on close inspection to be related to social and political change.

In the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, the values of the national state and the monarchy were almost

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universally accepted by authors who saw in them not only a cure for the evils of the remnants of feudalism, but also a delimiting framework for the boundless aspirations characteristic of the time. It was only later that republican ideals appeared in literature, and later still that the elaborate social critique of an Ibsen could make its debut.

Authors may look forward or backward to a different age, but they tend to do so within the confines of an existing or foreseeable reality. Because the writer is not so much concerned with objects, events, or institutions as with attitudes and feelings which his characters have about them, any social or political "bias" he may have is far from the severe handicap that it would appear to be at first sight. Man is born, strives, loves, suffers, and dies in any society, but it is the portrayal of *how* he reacts to these common human experiences that matters, since they almost invariably have a social nexus. Precisely because great literature presents the whole man in depth, the artist tends to justify or defy society rather than to be its passive chronicler.

All literary materials, including those hitherto considered beyond the province of the sociologist, therefore assume social meanings. The idea of "nature," for example, at different moments of history has had these very different connotations: the non-human world to which one goes for relaxation from the human scene; a Utopia which idealizes an extra-historical space as opposed to society in corruption; the sanctuary for those in flight from a frustrating situation. Sometimes the style of the artist provides significant clues, as when Ibsen's people use almost identical terms to describe competition between husband and wife and competition in the professional world. Or again it may be the emotions which assume social relevance. Thus, for example, Cervantes displays a number of sentiments and actions denoting extreme personal insecurity, ranging from worry about professional status to moral and philosophic doubts. Such fears in turn can be related, more or less directly, to the unprecedented social mobility which followed the disintegration of the feudal world, and they indicate how profoundly the individual was affected by this dramatic change.

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The literature of any period gives its audience meaningful portraits of human types. The Spaniards to whom Cervantes spoke, the Englishmen who saw Shakespeare's plays, and the French audiences of Corneille, Racine, and Molière had no difficulty in identifying their *dramatis personae* or in recognizing their nuances. Because of this representational quality, all literature, whether first or second rate, can be subjected to social analysis. But the works of a Cervantes or Ibsen present problems quite different from those of the hack.

The writer achieves greatness because of the depth of his insight into the human condition. The fact that literary genius is rare and its audience small, presents in itself a sociological problem, but this in no way detracts from the writer's role as interpreter. More important is the question of his relation to various population groups, as a participant or observer. For if a group has no opportunity to express its own emotional or intellectual experiences, and is isolated from the literate sector of society, it may lie beyond the artist's range of observation. To the Greek tragedian, for example, the feelings and thoughts of slaves were of little significance. The contemporary American writer, on the other hand, has almost unlimited access to behavior on all social levels, from the industrial tycoon to the migrant farm laborer. The problem here is simply to be as clear as possible about the scope of the author's view. For most of the periods studied, members of the lower classes of the European population rarely appear as fully drawn characters in works of literature. There are exceptions; Cervantes and Shakespeare both went to considerable pains to create individuals from the lower classes, and Cervantes surely had unusual opportunities to observe them closely. But the bulk of the fictional characters considered here are from the middle and higher levels of society.

This analysis of three centuries of European literature begins with the breakdown of feudalism and the rise of absolutist governments, then turns to the growth and con-

solidation of the middle classes, and ends with the fore-shadowings of modern totalitarian orders. As social history, it suggests an arc, curving upward in the first tentative gropings toward modern individualism, rising to a plateau of confidence in the individual, and finally declining at the point where the individual feels threatened by technological and social forces. Each end of the trajectory marks a period of stress.

The breakdown of the feudal order forced man to fall back upon himself; he had to learn how to cope with countless problems and decisions that were once taken care of by worldly and spiritual hierarchies. But together with the anxieties generated by this new autonomy he sensed a great promise, for in the period of the formation of the national state and the development of a mercantile economy his own future seemed to have infinite possibilities. At the end of the curve, in our own century, he begins to feel threatened by the encroachment of powerful social forces emanating not only from his own corner of the earth but from every part of a contracting world.

This curve, as illustrated in the works studied here, also describes the context of the individual's growing awareness of his own history and of the social conditioning of his roles. In Shakespeare's day, men tended to be aware of society mainly through face-to-face encounters with others; human bonds, whether of pity or sympathy, were felt to be freely assumed. From the time of Corneille onward, however, the individual learned to see himself as irrevocably involved in a social order, whether he subjected himself to it or revolted against it in the name of a different order. After Molière, social awareness increased to the point where the problem of adaptation to organized society became a central theme of literature; Goethe and Ibsen were both concerned with the price this adaptation exacted from the individual, and at times each writer went to great pains to reveal the social determinants of private problems. Ibsen's works explicitly portray persons as they experience the all-pervasive force of their society.

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For the beginning of the period, Lope de Vega, Cervantes, and Calderon represent Spain; Shakespeare, England; and Corneille, Racine, and Molière, France. Strict chronological sequence has been sacrificed for the sake of preserving national groupings. The Spanish writers are dealt with first, since Spain remained closest to feudalism and did not succeed in developing a viable national state or a successful capitalist economy.

The effect on Spain of its conquests in the New World was dramatic; and the three writers considered display three different ways of facing the social changes brought about by this development. Calderon accepted the *status quo* with a kind of fatalism, while Lope de Vega adopted a more dynamic social orientation in glorifying the benefits of an absolute monarchy; Cervantes rejected it.

The Spain of Cervantes' novels is a highly mobile and competitive society. Man has become the measure of a world which is losing its theological determinants; he can now judge what he sees in strictly human rather than theological terms. He rejects much of his society, particularly those deformations of character that are the result of competition and insecurity, but he does so in the name of a man-made ideal. Despite the obvious fact that Don Quixote is presented as a feudal knight, the ideals and observations of Cervantes are too modern, too secular, and too close to the Renaissance concept of the individual for us to call him a sentimentalist. Unlike Cervantes, Lope de Vega is very much the successful and active man of his times, and very much at home in his world. He is intoxicated, in a sense, by the splendor of Spanish power at its peak. But by the middle of the seventeenth century only the deluded could maintain a glorious image of the declining empire: Calderon no less than Lope endorses monarchism; his allegiance, however, is colored by nostalgia for medieval values, caused perhaps by his awareness of diminishing Spanish strength.

Shakespeare in *The Tempest* presents a paradigm of the condition of man at the beginning of the modern era. Shake-

sppeare's age was still characterized by the spirit of an adventurous, mercantile economy which preceded the consolidation of the middle class. He provides the most complete picture of the Renaissance individual who interprets the world almost exclusively in the light of his own needs and to whom outward events appear as tests of an inward adequacy and dynamism. While Shakespeare advocated the importance of competent rulers, he simultaneously perceived their subjects enmeshed in a new pattern of social mobility which could push the individual downward as well as up.

The French writers, too, reacted to the radical social changes of their times. Their viewpoints, however, are focused on a progressive state where the monarchy is firmly established and the middle classes have begun to flourish. Corneille's individual stands in need of a powerful state authority for guiding his acts—a dependency on outside authorities that would have been alien to Shakespeare. Racine rebels against all authority in favor of the individual, whom he sees as frustrated by submission to the powers that be. Molière sees man feeling his way through the new order to individual autonomy. The French dramatists thus represent three stages in the middle of the development of increasing social control: the bourgeois ethos is more apparent in Racine than in Corneille, and in Molière it is virtually all-pervasive.

Sociologically, Goethe is Molière's direct successor. His work is a progression from the revolt of the Storm and Stress period to his acceptance of middle-class responsibility in *Wilhelm Meister's Travels*. His final view is that the individual is worthy of the name only if he performs a useful social task. Goethe knew the price of adaptation, however, and in his old age became particularly concerned with the growing problem of the alienation of the artist from society at large.

The curve ends with Ibsen and Hamsun. Ibsen was an incisive critic of middle-class society, and the main question he posed was whether society has lived up to the claims of

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its apologists. His answer was almost invariably negative. In every sphere of life he found the results of competition and specialization to be pernicious. In all of their personal and social encounters, his characters emerge as losers. The institutions and façades of public life become incompatible with individual needs, and man is torn by this conflict. Ibsen explores the classical image of the autonomous individual found in Shakespeare and Cervantes, only to see him break apart under the impact of the very forces that were supposed to help him to realize his potentialities.

If Ibsen presents the dilemma of liberalism, Knut Hamsun implies its authoritarian resolution. There is, in all his novels, an anticipation of the Nazi ideology. He rejects modern, urban, industrial society with its frustrations and responsibilities. His solution is a flight to nature in the form of submission to forces beyond human control, with which he combines admiration of "blood, race, and soil." Such values led him finally into the Nazi movement.

It is striking that in the works of all these periods—underneath the fashions of classicism and romanticism, of rationalism and empiricism in taste and thought—there is a certain continuity in the changing relationships of the individual to his society. Studied separately, the works of each writer yield impressive insights into seemingly timeless universals. Considered together, they testify that man, as he has grappled with the ever-changing problems of his adaptation to society, has become increasingly preoccupied with his own integrity and increasingly aware of the forces which threaten it. The Western ideal of freedom that emerged in the late Renaissance was at first thought to be boundless. That this ideal was found to be subject to the manifold limitations of economic laws, social pressures, and the vagaries of political history may in part account for the fact that pain and anxiety are predominant themes of creative literature. The question the artist asks of mankind is whether pain and anxiety are necessary elements of human destiny, or whether they are mainly a consequence of social conditions.

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Chapter I: THE SPANISH WRITERS

Paradoxically, the nation that more than any other inaugurated the modern age did not long enjoy the fruits of this era but fell rapidly into economic and political decline. Spain is closely linked to the discovery of North and Central America, to the ensuing importation of colonial products, and, above all, to the increase of precious metal in Europe. But Spain's brief period of unprecedented expansion was badly mismanaged; neither the court nor the nobility recognized that only the creation of strong national industries and a firmly centralized government could guarantee her continuance as a major world power. The ruling strata had developed a type of economic parasitism which found ample nourishment in the wealth of the old and new worlds. But with the devaluation of precious metals, what had for a brief period been a comfortable over-abundance for parasites now became a ruinous over-abundance of parasites.

Although Spain played an ever more negligible role in the new order, the three most eminent Spanish writers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries represent the three social points of view prevailing in the Europe of that time. The chronology of their appearance is, however, the reverse of what one would expect. The oldest, Cervantes, is the most critical and the most forward looking of the three while the youngest, Calderon, looks to a society that has already been superseded. Lope de Vega, as spokesman for the absolute monarchy, looks neither backward nor forward but tries to adjust to the prevailing conditions. Of the three, Cervantes is the most rewarding for the purpose of our analysis, namely, to trace the social origins of individual expectations and anxieties.

I.

LOPE DE VEGA (1562-1635)

Background

Lope's life might be described as that of an intellectual entrepreneur. He was born into a family of the metropolitan aristocracy, with excellent connections at court. Educated by the Jesuits, he enjoyed the special tutelage of an uncle who, as Inquisitor, belonged to the upper bureaucracy of the Church of Spain. Then, in quick succession, Lope became active as a soldier, bishop's page, and secretary to the Duke of Alba, a most influential political figure of his time. In early middle age he suffered the sole setback of his career when scandals about his love affairs resulted in a few years' exile from the capital. This trouble, however, seems to have cast no shadow on Lope's future; he returned to Madrid neither sadder, wiser nor more chaste, and there he comfortably spent the last forty years of his life still pursuing his erotic activities. After two marriages, terminated by the death of both wives, Lope was ordained a priest and assigned to one of the fashionable metropolitan churches. His deviations from the moral code did not prevent his earning many honors; he enjoyed the favor of the current power cliques, and the Pope bestowed upon him an honorary doctorate for having extolled Mary Queen of Scots as a Catholic martyr in one of his innumerable plays.

Lope participated in the proceedings of the Inquisition, and was able to reconcile his religious activities with the colorful private life to which seven illegitimate children bore witness. His literary production, too, was nearly inexhaustible. More than two thousand plays came from his pen, of which a third have been preserved. Cervantes