motifs
Tariq Ali

Literature and Market Realism

These are strange times. Capitalism, crippled by its own contradictions—there are thirty million people out of work in the OECD countries alone—is nonetheless triumphant. From New York to Beijing, via Moscow and Vladivostok, you can eat the same junk food, watch the same junk on television and, increasingly, read the same junk novels. In the newly marketized counties of Eastern and Central Europe, a book can be consumed just like a McDonald's hamburger. Indigestion and an excess of wind are no longer a preserve of the stomach. Just as the rival hamburger concerns advertise their respective wares, so the giant publishing concerns of North America and Britain buy authors and exhibit them like cattle. Potential bestsellers are auctioned by a new breed of literary agent. Such books need to be sold and it is at this stage that the hype-merchants enter the fray and the promotion begins.

Many self-proclaimed postmodern writers have entered the spirit of the new times. Without any sense of shame or modesty they tout their own work and pander to a literary culture of consumerism. Why shouldn't they? Hasn't Lyotard, one of the high-priests of postmodernism, declared that capitalism is an orgasm? Can't you see them quivering with pleasure, those citizens of Mogadishu or La Paz, as they deconstruct this offering from Paris?

Is it particularly surprising, then, that in the face of today's prevailing winds many a European or North American novelist has consciously or subconsciously begun to write in the language of advertising? Mass-market fiction, like the indigestible filler in junk food, is meant to be consumed quickly and then excreted. Don't misunderstand me. Good books, even great books, are still being written and some, believe it or not, are even being read, but in most cases these are the products of writers who either live in marginalized countries or have themselves been marginalized by the dominant culture of a triumphalist West.

More and more one finds oneself re-reading old books, if one wishes to recapture the critical tradition. None of us will have exactly the same old books on our shelves, but as the century reaches its conclusion one turns to them more and more. And what do we find? We may be married to the time in which we live in many different ways. We may regard ourselves as modern or postmodern or whatever else. Lost in an old novel written a century or more ago one is often startled by the parallels and analogies with our own times. 'Ethnic cleansing' in Bosnia, the revival of anti-semitism in Germany and Russia, the Gulf war . . . the loud and unbearable noises which pierce our eardrums. Are they not echoes of the Crusades or what happened in Spain in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries? The postmodernists may want to forget history, dismiss it as a set of random incidents, but history refuses to fall silent. Read the novels of Joseph Roth, writing in the thirties, and see how he describes the disintegration of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Serbs and Croats flit through his pages in the wake of the collapse. The story, alas, is only too familiar.

Historical echoes are very pronounced in literature. Juan Goytisolo has written of how it is difficult to read Cervantes in isolation from the real Spain of that time. The great novel is full of allusions to what had happened and what was happening even as the author was composing his text. Take for example the episode of the Morisco Ricote, the shopkeeper from Sancho's village, expelled from Spain by royal edict because he is a Muslim. The homesick Ricote returns to his country in disguise and Cervantes gives him the following lines:

> 'Wherever we are we weep for Spain, for in short here were we born and this is our native country. We nowhere find the reception which our misfortune requires. Even in Barbary, and in all other parts of Africa where we expected to be received, cherished, and made much of, there it is we are most neglected and misused . . . We knew not our happiness till we lost it.'

The speaker could easily be a Bosnian, a Kurd, a Palestinian, a Somali, a Sudanese. I will now suggest to you a writer of a different nationality and a later century, the Frenchman Balzac. In what for me is the high point of his Human Comedy novels, *Lost Illusions*, one of Balzac's most demonic characters, Vautrin, speaks thus:

> 'Well, would you like to know what a politically-minded man finds inscribed above the doorway to this nineteenth century of yours? In 1793 Frenchmen invented popular sovereignty and it ended up in imperial absolutism . . . Napoleon was a Jacobin in 1793; in 1804 he donned the Iron Crown. From 1806 onwards the ferocious champions of "Equality or Death" acquiesced in the creation of a new nobility, which Louis XVIII was to legitimize. The emigrant aristocracy, which lords it today in its Faubourg Saint-Germain, behaved worse still . . In France then, in politics as well as ethics, all and sundry reached a goal which gave the lie to their beginnings: their opinions belied their behaviour, or else their behaviour belied their opinions. Logic went by the board, both with the people in power and private individuals. So you no longer have any ethics. Today, with you, success is the ruling motive for all the action you take of whatever kind.'

Balzac is telling us that in his world, an unstable world reflecting the

* This is an edited version of a talk given at a Conference of Young Writers from Latin America and Spain, in Mollina, Spain in February 1994.

old Revolution and the Restoration, the aim of power is no longer determined by any principles. Power is for itself and for its own sake. And if you happen to believe that this is wrong then you are part of the problem. How close this feels to our world today. Change a few sentences and dates and you could describe the former Stalinist bureaucrats turned millionaires in Poland, the Ukraine and Russia. Nor is this addiction to success, measured largely by the size of one's bank balance, restricted to the former Soviet Union or Eastern Europe. It was only a few years ago here in Spain that a surreal event occurred. A Bourbon king telling a Socialist government that the level of corruption was far too high. Even as we talk, the leader of the Italian Socialists, Bettino Craxi is being charged with corruption on a grand scale and only last week the Socialist Minister of Justice in the same country resigned because of his own involvement in the wholesale corruption of Italy's political class.

This is our world, but it is also Balzac's world. It can make us very cynical. It can lead to the view which says that all societies are simply power-stuff. However understandable such a view may be it is wrong. Demography—the production of persons; economics—the production of goods; cultural systems—the production of meanings, have not stopped. How can this be halted? Society can never be a simple reflection of any power system. It is the sum of its parts, even if some of them seem invisible. A good storyteller must possess several hundred eyes and ears, to spy and eavesdrop continuously. The result is not always a continuous narrative, but one which compels the reader to think and sometimes to read aloud the writer's words so that the rhythm and flow of the language can help us to understand the true meaning.

A few years ago the English-language translation of the first volume of Abdelrahman Munif's epochal five-volume series *Cities of Salt* was published in London by a well-established publishing house. Munif's aim is to depict the transformation of Eastern Arabia during the course of this century from ancient Bedouin homelands to modern Gulf states. The novel went unnoticed on the London literary scene. Naturally. The critics were preoccupied with slender, wistful accounts of middle-class life in New York. A short, light-weight, but clever book about a man warming his baby's feeding bottle was the rage at the time. Next season the topic might be the epic narrative of a campus murder, with the asocial individual again furnishing the writer's point of view. Let me be blunt. Munif's work is worth much more than most of the junk being turned out by the publishing houses in Britain and America. Does it worry the author who has already been deprived of his nationality by the ruling family of Saudi Arabia? Not much. Why? Munif lives in exile in Damascus. But he has the satisfaction of knowing that his books are read throughout the Middle East, that they circulate clandestinely in Saudi Arabia itself where they are read and appreciated. He has a very close relationship with his readership and that is something which is worth much more to the author than accolades from Western critics.

Why do we write and for whom do we write? Each of us will answer

these questions in different ways and with differing emphases. For those, and I count myself amongst them, who refuse to distance themselves from history and world politics, the answer is simple. Writers should not run away from reality. In the face of horrors old and new we must fight back with our literary fists.

The historical process is discontinuous. Revolutions, wars, counter-revolutions, economic blockades, carpet bombing of recalcitrant liberation movements. It is this which profoundly affects individual psyches and thus saves art from eternal repetition. Even when a revolution atrophies and degenerates into its own opposite, the attempt to straitjacket its writers is rarely successful.

'Socialist realism' produced a monotone literature devoid of real conflict. Writers who broke the rules were declared 'enemies of the people'. Some were shot in the camps. Other survived by abandoning literature. One of these was a novelist whose work had to wait half a century before being published. Andrei Platonov's novels were regarded as so subversive that they were kept in a special section of the archive which was sealed off and unavailable even to specialists in the field. Platonov wrote in an experiential mode, his style very much influenced by modernism. *The Sea of Yuvenilnoye* was written in 1934 and published in 1986; *The Foundation Pit* was written in 1930 and published in 1987; *Chevengur*, a savage satire, was rejected in 1929 and published in 1988. In *Chevengur*, a small town with exactly eleven Bolsheviks who have already established communism, Platonov depicted the total bureaucratization of the state machine and saw it as a disaster for the revolution. It was a cancer. If it was not destroyed in time, it would kill the revolution. Curiously the writer's attitude to the eleven Bolsheviks is remarkably detached. There are no enemies in Chevengur. There are the victims of history, products of an illiteracy that is centuries old and children of absolutism. Platonov gave up writing. That saved his life. He was given a job—doorman at the Writers' Union Club in Moscow, where he doffed his hat to the writers patronized by the state. Small wonder then that the Writers' Union building is set on fire in Bulgakov's satire *The Master and Margarita*.

Another novelist, Vasili Grossman, belongs to a later period. Born in 1905 in the Ukraine, he studied chemistry and worked in the Donbass mines as a safety engineer. In 1933 he moved to Moscow and was befriended by Maxim Gorky. He published a couple of novels and dozens of short stories. None of these were exceptional. During the Second World War he was a correspondent of the Red Army newspaper in Stalingrad. His mother was killed by the Nazis, an event which made Grossman aware of his Jewish roots. This loyal Communist was shattered by Stalin's postwar antisemitic outburst and the purging of Jews from the state apparatus. He broke from orthodoxy and, in the process, wrote a masterpiece, *Life and Fate*. It was closely modelled on Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. The work was finished in 1960, confiscated by the secret police a year later. Grossman wrote to the Politburo demanding the return of the manuscript. Suslov informed him that *Life and Fate* could not be published in the Soviet Union for another two hundred years. Every state which has a monopoly of ideas, fears the written word. Grossman died in 1964—a broken man.

Life and Fate was published posthumously, first in the West in 1985 and then in Gorbachev's Soviet Union. It is a moving and savage denunciation of Stalinism and fascism. The besieged city of Stalingrad is really a metaphor for the twentieth century. The only people for whom the author reveals a real sympathy are the officers and men in House 6/1, men and women who hate the Commissars. They possess independent minds and a fiercely critical spirit. They are members of former Oppositions destroyed by Stalin . . .

Even as I speak of all this, it seems dated. After all, that whole edifice has collapsed. Platonov and Grossman. How are they relevant to us today? I think for many writers in the great continents of Asia, Africa and Latin America, the parallels are obvious. It is difficult for a thinking writer to be detached from reality. But even in the West, there are lessons to be learnt. There is a growing tendency to uniformity of thought and style. Trivia reigns supreme and literature becomes a branch of the entertainment industry. Instead of 'socialist realism', we have 'market realism'. The difference being that it is a self-imposed straitjacket. 'Market realist' literature needs to be resisted every bit as strongly as the old 'socialist realism'. It demands literature that is treated as a fetishized commodity, self-contained and self-referential. The upmarket commodity fosters a surrogate religion, while downmarket kitsch prevails. But such is the velocity at which commodities circulate that soon all such boundaries are broken down. Instead of indicting the arrogance and corruption of power and wealth it fawns before the media magnates. At its most brazen it simply celebrates shopping, while in the hands of a bold exponent, such as Tom Wolfe, it turns Balzac upside down, becoming the literary equivalent of that new code called for by the Oxford philosopher, John Gray, when he wrote, 'the successful defence of market capitalism requires a revision in conventional morality in which despised occupations and practices—such as those of the speculator and middlemen—are morally rehabilitated'.[1]

The resistance to market realism must be, has to be on the level of ideas, not on the basis of gender or race or class. I am not at all sympathetic to the version of political correctness which denounces the whole of European literature as racist and sexist. The logical corollary of this is to say that anti-racist and anti-sexist works are automatically good. Relativism of this sort dissolves all critical judgements and should not be indulged. Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* is a great book, not because she is a black woman, but because she is a powerful writer who has written a most moving account of what it must have meant to be a slave. Would a white writer—a person without Morrison's historical memory—have written such a book? I doubt it, but then nor could most black people. Steinbeck wrote about the grape-pickers and the Depression. Faulkner concentrated on the decadence of the White South and the gulf between poor and rich. Morrison has evoked slavery. All three are great writers because they are able to weave a multi-layered narrative, which includes as well as transcends forms of social intuition and political intelligence. As

[1] John Gray, *Hayek and Liberty*, London 1984, p. 132.

Galvano Della Volpe wisely insisted in his *Critique of Taste*, the aesthetic should neither be reduced to sociology nor counterposed to rationality and politics.

Those of us who were born outside Europe or North America know full well that there is not and there cannot be any Chinese wall between literature and politics. I remember, as a child, being taken to 'mushairas' in the town of Lahore in Pakistan. These were public poetry readings, performed not in salons, but in the open air before audiences which numbered tens of thousands. Much of the audience was illiterate and the words of the poet meant a great deal. The poets, for their part, understood only too well that their true critics were those assembled before them. As the night wore on poets were cheered and heckled, till in the early hours of the morning we chanted the name of the poet who had pleased us the most and he returned to recite once again. Writing a novel is a lonely task, even more lonely than reading a novel. In that sense it is the polar opposite of a public poetry reading. And yet when I write, I must confess, the image I usually have in front of me is that of the audience in Lahore of which I was once a member. The problem for the writer in the West today is that they have no equivalent of such an audience, capable of sharing with them the toil of creation by validating their vital intuitions. Instead, if they are to reach their readers, they must ingratiate themselves with a whole series of professional intermediaries—from agent to editor, publicity person to chat-show host—who will judge their work, usually without having read it, by the canons of market realism.

Once they have run that gauntlet they will be in the hands of critics and academic pundits who have many ways of keeping at bay what they find disturbing or unfamiliar. Where the editors and the publishing houses like an established brand name, the critics have their own prescribed genre models. The way this works is instructive. Recently two established writers took a step outside their allotted patch—Brian Moore exploring poverty, resistance, corruption and power in *No Other Life*, a novella based on recent events in Haiti, and Julian Barnes exploring the paradoxes of post-Communism in *The Porcupine*, a novella based on recent events in Bulgaria. It might be thought that these authors would be congratulated for attending to important matters as best they could, but instead they were exposed to a lofty critical barrage. In withering terms it was pointed out that Moore *was no Graham Greene* and that Barnes *was no Kundera*. Writers from the first world who write about the third must, it seems, write like Greene; and if they write about Eastern Europe then Kundera or, failing that Bradbury, set the standard. The havoc caused by free market economics in the East, or the predicament of popular revolutionary movements in the South, are not fitting material for literature, it seems, because the critics have no comforting models to allow them to exist as such. Does it not occur to these critics that there might be new problems to address? And that writers should be encouraged to tackle these problems rather than settle for pastiche? But, of course, to do so would be to unsettle the market with its carefully allotted and predictable niches, its conformist messages and comfortable sterotypes. The literary culture of market realism is not good for criticism and that is another reason why it is not good for literature either.