

The Literary Artist and the Question of Commitment'

By Brita Lindberg-Seyersted

Robert Frost once told an anecdote about himself and the question of commitment. The episode dates from the early 1930's; this was of course a period when artists felt very strongly their obligation to commit themselves politically and socially. Frost was spending some time at a college as writer in residence. On one occasion a young student challenged Frost on the question of the changed role of literature in society; the student thought that literature was moving away from formalism to active commitment and that this was reflected in the content of literature; he summarized his viewpoint like this: »Whereas we once thought literature should be without content, we now know it should be charged full of propaganda.» And Frost, in his laconic manner, commented: »Wrong twice.,)But the student insisted and said: »Surely art can be considered good only as it prompts to action., »How soon?» Frost asked.²

This anecdote poses two questions which relate to our subject: (1) Is it the duty of the artist — and here we are considering the literary artist — to »prompt to action*?

(2) If we answer this first question in the affirmative, we may have to answer a second question: Is this purpose — of prompting to action — fulfilled only if we can see or hope for an *immediate* result, this year or this decade?

¹ An earlier version of this paper was read at a weekend seminar arranged by students of English in the University of Oslo (Nov., 1970).

² See »Education by Poetry: A Meditative Monologue,» *Amherst Graduates' Quarterly*, XX:2 (February 1931), 75—85; quoted in Lawrance Thompson, *Fire and Ice: The Art and Thought of Robert Frost*, New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1942, pp. 19—20.

One thing I think we can all agree about when we consider the role and function of literature today: the ivory tower is definitely an old-fashioned structure. *Commitment* is a key word for critics and readers. In fact there seems to be today a very strong pressure put upon creative writers to commit themselves, and this pressure seems to come very much from the outside. Literature is to an increasing extent expected to do things that political acts, speeches, tracts, etc., can achieve. Stepping across a rope into a forbidden area at the Pentagon — as Norman Mailer did in October 1967 — may be equalled by writing a nonfiction or historical novel about the attitudes and circumstances that caused this act of rebellion.

But even if creative writers today feel a growing pressure to write in a certain way, some of this demand is a natural part of the writer-audience relationship. The writer is free to write whatever he pleases; the reader is free to accept or reject what the writer produces. But the writer is of course highly dependent on his audience, in a very elementary way: people must *buy* his books for him to be able to continue his job.

When I am talking of commitment here I am thinking in the first place of *political* and *social engagement*; most people seem to interpret the word in this way today. But we can also think of moral commitment, cultural-ethnic commitment, and perhaps also of commitment of a religious kind (commitment to God, as in Flannery O'Connor's work). Finally one can stretch the term to include also a purely artistic commitment, that is, the artist's commitment to his art, something à la Hemingway's code of artistic honesty and skill. But some of us may not wish to stretch the term as far as that.

In this paper I shall limit myself to contemporary American fiction. But, in discussing the documentary novel, for instance, contemporary Swedish fiction could provide many examples, literary »reports» of various kinds. It seems to be an international trend. American fiction actually serves extremely well for this discussion. In a recent French history of the American novel (Marc Saporta, *Histoire du roman américain*, Seghers, 1970) the author claims that American writers have always been politically, socially and economically active and effective *as writers*, that, in short, American fiction

has always been revolutionary. A French reviewer of this book (L'Express, 9—15 nov. 1970) calls America »ce pays où même les jeux de l'écriture aspirent à changer la vie.»

In this discussion of political-social commitment we might use the black writer in America and his attitude to this question as an illustration. Langston Hughes, the dean of American Negro writing, as he was called, has said that »The Negro writer in America has all the problems any other writer has, plus a few more.»³ These additional problems can perhaps be summed up in two issues that the black writer inevitably will be faced with: (1) What is he to write about? and (2) *Who* is he supposed to write for?

As for the choice of material, many blacks feel that a black writer should write only about the experience of being black in America today. Most of these writers do; I would say that more and more of them do. Saunders Redding, prominent Negro critic and novelist, is one of those who insist on the Negro writer's duty to depict the black experience. But there are divergent opinions on this obligation. Langston Hughes did not recognize the duty of restricting one's material to only this experience. Nor does Ralph Ellison, who speaks of this stance as »the uneasy sanctuary of race.»⁴ James Baldwin long ago expatriated himself just to avoid the trap of Negroess. He said of his motive for expatriation: »I wanted to prevent myself from becoming *merely* a Negro; or, even *merely* a Negro writer.»⁵

Ellison's obvious difficulties in completing his long awaited second novel may indicate a dilemma arising out of this pressure put upon the Negro writer. And Baldwin is another case in point. Most readers feel that after *Go Tell It On the Mountain* (1954) he has done his best work in the genre of the essay. After 13 years in the United States where he returned after his first exile, he is now back in Paris and just completing a non-fiction account of the life and death of the civil-rights movement?

³ Quoted in Saunders Redding, »The Problems of the Negro Writer,» *Massachusetts Review*, V: 1 (Autumn-Winter 1964—65), 57.

⁴ *Shadow and Act*, Signet Books, 1966, p. xix.

⁵ »The Discovery of What It Means to Be an American,» *Nobody Knows My Name: Move Notes of a Native Son*, Corgi Books, 1965, p. 17.

⁶ See Richard Lingeman, »Baldwin,» *New York Times Book Review*, LXXV (Oct. 11, 1970), 38.

It is thus easy to see the black writer's dilemma arising out of his dual commitment: to his people and to his art. There are obvious hindrances, it appears, for the literary artist in having to be *a priori* a social protest writer.

Let's look at Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) from this viewpoint. Ellison, the novelist, revolts against social protest; he expects his novel to be interpreted as a search for identity, not primarily the Negro's identity. To stress this intention, he addresses an unknown »you« in the last sentence of the novel. He lets his protagonist say, after the loud and wild confession that makes up the bulk of the novel: »Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you»⁷ I'd like to ask: How relevant is this suggestion? Do we feel that the protagonist's search is similar to our own? I myself feel that Ellison, through his protagonist, speaks not *for* me, but *to* me. And in my view Ellison's achievement is to have told us white readers what it means to be a Negro, psychologically and intellectually, as well as sociologically. This way he may actually have done more for the »cause« than most outspoken propagandists.

So who should he write for? Most buyers of his book will be white middle-class people. Here, too, there is great pressure put upon the black writer: the white reader usually expects him *either* to be very *angry*, and angry all the time, *or* to make very little of his experience as a Negro.

I realize that so far I have stressed the risks and difficulties attached to the demands for social-political commitment; and one might extend the field surveyed to include *all* protest literature that pretends to be art as well as propaganda. But we must also recognize the advantages of these demands. When I'm talking of advantages I have artistic results in mind, not actual political and social acts. There is often in this kind of literature a heightening of temper, a passion and seriousness that impress and engage the reader. The literary artist feels useful, he is not isolated; this commitment may be a way out of alienation and meaninglessness.

As we survey American fiction written in the 1960's we will of course realize that it is not only the Negro writer who feels this need or obligation for commitment. In his quiet way the Jewish

⁷ *Invisible Man*, Penguin Books, 1965, p. 469.

novelist Bernard Malamud also commits himself. Here I should like to say a few words about *The Fixer* (1966). In this novel the Jewish protagonist Yakov Bok undergoes a development. In the early part of the book, he is made to say: »... I dislike politics. . . .r but at the end, as he is being brought in the carriage towards his trial, he thinks to himself: »One thing I've learned . . . there's no such thing as an unpolitical man, especially a Jew.» Now what are we to expect from the end? Will Yakov if he is acquitted, enter upon a life of political activity as a revolutionary? He does recall Spinoza's words about the right to destroy the state if it »acts in ways that are abhorrent to human nature. . . ,» and Yakov silently joins in the triumphant call: »Long live revolution!«⁸

But to some readers — and I'm one of them — the question is unclear. It seems to me that Malamud has — whether he intended it or not — made his protagonist into a man who is *morally* committed to his fellow beings, not into a *political* revolutionary. Through his suffering Yakov has undergone an education towards responsibility and moral commitment: now he is ready to protect his wife and her illegitimate child. In spite of the emphasis on suffering, at least one critic feels that this is not a Jewish story — »thank God«, he exclaims — but that it's »a political story ultimately about all men.«⁹ When I don't agree, it's because I here take »political,« to mean something like »being concerned about and/or working actively for the management of the affairs of the state.«

Now I just don't know for sure what Malamud puts into the phrase »a political man*«; but when I learn that before hitting on the Beiliss case in pre-revolutionary Russia, which closely parallels Yakov Bok's case, Malamud had thought of writing about Dreyfus, or about Sacco and Vanzetti, it's hard not to think that he wished to write a kind of political novel. But as I said, for me this intention is not fulfilled in the novel as we have it. Elsewhere Malamud has formulated what he considers to be the purpose of the writer; it is, he says, »to keep civilization from destroying itself.«¹⁰ This may suggest a commitment that is more than *moral*, to encompass also

⁸ References are to the Penguin edition, pp. 19, 299.

⁹ George P. Elliott, review of *The Fixer* in *New York Times Book Review*, Sept. 4, 1966.

¹⁰ Interview with Malamud in *New York Post*, Sunday, Sept. 14, 1958.

politics. His use of »civilization» instead of, for example, >>humanity or »mankind», might support such an interpretation.

However we may read the intention of *The Fixer*, it is important to note that Malamud, too, should want to commit himself politically as a writer. It seems characteristic of the writers of the 1960's to do so. The critic Alfred Kazin has complained of this trend and said of the 1960's that it was a decade »When the World Was Too Much With Us.»¹¹ Kazin finds in summing up the achievement of American fiction in this period that the writers had been under too great a pressure from »politics» and »history», and that this resulted in less emphasis on high art. (It's interesting to note that ten years earlier Kazin complained that the fiction of the past decade, that is, the 1950's, often lacked an interest in society; he found the writers self-centered and self-pitying. Social protest was unfashionable in the fifties.¹²)

When Kazin mentions the word »history» within quotation marks — to denote its slightly perverse meaning in the context of fiction? — he probably has Norman Mailer in mind. Mailer, who, as Kazin says, shares his contemporaries' »passion for political influence» and »passion for documentation», will serve here as one example of the numerous non-fiction novelists of the period. His most recent works belong to the genre of the documentary novel, which may be the genre that is most typical of the end of the 1960's and the beginning 1970's. Kazin has observed Mailer's career as a writer of committed non-fiction works, and he passes the verdict that »with so much riding on them, each of Mailer's nonfictions seems to be less good than the one before it.»

The Armies of the Night (1968), whose two parts the author calls »History as a Novel» and »The Novel as History,, is Mailer's account of the March on the Pentagon in October 1967. It has been characterized as »a kind of autobiographical novel with a protagonist called 'Mailer'»(Richard Foster), a nonfiction novel, and a »diary-essay-tract-sermon, (Alfred Kazin). Kazin says in his review of the book that »the times demand a new form. [Mailer] has found it.»¹³ Most readers agree that the first part is superb reporting, a

¹¹ See *New York Times Book Review*, Dec. 21, 1969.

¹² See *Harper's Magazine*, Oct. 1959.

¹³ *New York Times Book Review*, May 5, 1968.

novelist's reporting; there is less agreement on the relevance of the second part. In my view Mailer's special kind of passion for documentation and his passionate engagement in the affairs of the state have made him leave his real domain, which is that of the creative artist. It seems that the very pressure for first-class »propaganda«, for facts fully documented, led Mailer into the trap that the form of the non-fiction novel turned out to be.

Richard Gilman, who in his review of the book is full of praise for Mailer's achievement, nevertheless finds the distinction between »novel« and »history« unconvincing. And the reproaches Mailer for thinking that the novelist can »see more deeply than other men into society or human organizations,« and that therefore fiction is »a superior way of agitating for change and helping bringing it about.«¹⁴ Gilman thinks this is an outmoded conception of fiction. He holds an extreme view, it seems to me, when he says that »novelists who are artists expect nothing to change, do not imagine that their work can safeguard or resurrect men ...« He doesn't say, of course, that the works of novelists never do bring about change; he only says that this is not or should not be the aim of the literary artist. *His* obligation is to create »new kinds of truth and pleasure., Gilman might enlist William Faulkner to support his view. Faulkner once said in an interview:

... I think the writer is not really interested in bettering man's condition. He really doesn't care a damn about man's condition. He's interested in all man's behavior with no judgment whatever. That it's motion, it's life, the only alternative is nothingness, death. And so to the writer, anything man does is fine because it's motion.¹⁵

Evidently there is disagreement on the role of the novelist in society. I myself can't subscribe to Gilman's view, but it should be obvious from the preceding remarks that I can't join in the demand that all fiction be politically or socially committed. The literary artist must be granted his freedom. He should be responsible first of all

¹⁴ *The New Republic*, June 8, 1968.

¹⁵ *Faulkner in the University: Class Conferences at the University of Virginia 1957—1958*, eds. Frederick L. Gwynn and Joseph L. Blotner, Charlottesville, Virginia: The University of Virginia Press, 1959, p. 267.

to his art. But because he is a social being, because language social phenomenon, and because the writer can't exist without sponse from the community, we can say that *any good novel , forms a social function*. In an article where he suggests an explanation of G. Lucács' failure to understand Joyce's *Ulysses*, C Lagercrantz warns against too restricted a definition of social sponsibility. According to Lagercrantz, many of those who to discuss the social function of art make the mistake of defining social responsibility much too narrowly. («Detta är ett misstag som många av dem som idag debatterar konstens samhällsuppgift sig skyldiga till. Det samhälleliga ansvaret ges en alltför snäv definition.»¹⁶) I sympathize with such a view, and if we do this more, shall we say, »liberal», definition, we might even, *rabile dictu*, find a place among our »committed» artists for arch-conservative Robert Frost with his question »How soon?

¹⁶ *Dagens Nyheter*, Aug. 24, 1969.