Culture as Politics

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Selected Writings of Christopher Caudwell

Edited by
David Margolies

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Introduction

Christopher Caudwell died in defence of the Spanish Republic, covering the retreat of his company in the Battle of Jarama. He was only 29 when he died, yet he had already published five books on aeronautics and seven works of crime fiction under his real name of Sprigg, and his most important work, *Illusion and Reality*, written under the pen-name of Caudwell, was in press when he died. *Illusion and Reality* and the essays subsequently published as *Studies in a Dying Culture* were widely read and admired during the war and in the post-war spirit of democracy. For people concerned with creating a fairer, better world Caudwell's work had strong appeal. He saw the problems of the world not as inherent in the human condition but as susceptible to change, and his prose had an attractive energy and optimism. Today, amidst increasing corporate dominance of everything, unstable democracy and rising right-wing populism, Caudwell's analyses show not only how culture is shaped by the social-economic structure of the time but also how it is important in shaping public attitudes. His explanations make sense at the level of human experience.

Caudwell was an autodidact. He left school at 15 and gained a wide knowledge of science and literature on his own. When he left school, he moved with his journalist father, whose career was in decline, from London to Bradford. His father took up a position as literary editor on the *Yorkshire Observer* and Christopher himself started work as a cub reporter on the same paper and also wrote occasional book reviews. Father and son led an unsettled existence in boarding houses, which is reflected in some of Caudwell's best short fiction; one of his stories suggests that he secured his own space by constantly retreating into a book. In 1925, he returned to London to join his brother in aeronautical publishing. The choice may seem strange for someone so orientated to literary culture and who considered himself a poet, but it was not accidental – both brothers had a strong interest in engineering and technical innovation and aircraft still had the excitement of a pioneering industry. As well as writing technical reviews, Christopher gained his own pilot's licence and wrote five books on flying. For him, flying was

never just a means of transportation – there was a thrill in flying: 'There is nothing in the world like being in complete charge of that responsive creature, an aeroplane, with all the air in front of you, and confidence in your power to make it obey your will,' he wrote in *Let's Learn to Fly!* (*LLF!*).[1] The crime novel considered by some specialists to be his best is set in a flying club and conveys the attraction of flying. Aircraft design and production involved the most advanced engineering of the day; he was exploring new territory – 'behind it all is the thrill of mastery of man's latest and most difficult conquest, the ocean of air' (*LLF!*, p. 209). There was adventure in flying: 'The older pilots … are the real heroes of the air,' he wrote, 'although one hears little about their work. They faced all the dangers of early commercial aviation in the 1920s, in rickety, temperamental aeroplanes, with uncertain engines, and almost no ground organization. It is their splendid tradition that is inherited by the younger pilots who follow them …' (*LLF!*, p. 208). It is probably this appreciation of testing the limits of machine and man that accounts for his friendship with Clem Beckett, his partner on the machine gun at which they both died. Beckett was a national hero of motorbike racing, someone who had been cheered by crowds across European circuits, whose appearances were well paid but who had also organised the exploited speedway riders into a union.[2] The close relationship between the intellectual and the daredevil racer may seem improbable but both had chosen – one at the height of his fame, the other on the verge of recognition – to risk their lives to fight fascism; they shared a strong attraction to speed, they wanted to know how things worked and they admired courage.

Caudwell's orientation towards practical matters is of central importance to his theoretical work. He was concerned more with the concrete explanations of how things functioned, than with their philosophical implications. Aeronautics is an obvious aspect of this, as is the article he published in *Automobile Engineer* in 1929 – 'Automatic Gears: The Function of the Moving Fulcrum in Determining Design'. But he was also intensely occupied with psychology, with anthropology and sociology, and with the economic organisation of society – with how things worked on a larger scale. His involvement with crime writing began when he said that anyone could write a crime novel overnight and was given the challenge of writing one in a fortnight – which he did, and went on to write six more. Crime fiction is a part of his concern with practice; for him it was not simply a matter of ingenious clues and

making the pieces fit together, but how the psychology of individuals functioned in a social context. He was very successful as a crime writer and most of his books were published by an American crime fiction club. The books gave him a platform for incidental social comment. In the earliest, *Crime in Kensington* (1933), he positions his characters to make a comment on the narrowness of a justice system that ignores the context of the crime. The killer, an older woman who has killed two people who have been blackmailing her daughter, decides not to kill a woman who could expose the daughter, on the condition she does not reveal the information. The victim, about to be released, reflects on her captor: 'she was not fundamentally a killer, but a harassed mother with the atavistic fixity of purpose of a less squeamish age.'[3] *Fatality in Fleet Street,* also from 1933, deals with the murder of a bully, a war-mongering press baron.

This My Hand (1936) he regarded as a 'serious' novel and signed it Caudwell (his mother's maiden name) rather than Sprigg because he joked he couldn't risk losing his credibility as a crime writer. The novel received praise as a brilliant psychological case study; unfortunately, it reads rather like a case study. The characters are usually presented in an external analytic perspective without much dialogue that would individualise them, and the writing lacks the light, stylish tone that gives personality to his crime fiction. However, throughout there is a strong sense of class injustice and the conclusion makes a moving argument against capital punishment through the responses of the condemned hero, the prison staff and the governor.

Caudwell's crime fiction undercut conventional views of colonialism, empire, class and gender. Unusually for the time, he also displays a proto-feminism in all his fiction. Women in his crime novels are given demanding roles and never are merely objects of masculine interest; they are shown to be the equals of, and sometimes superior to, the men they have to deal with. Thus in *Death of an Airman* (1934), the heroic figure, a female drug-runner, is a skilled pilot, intelligent and courageous. In *The Corpse with the Sunburnt Face* (1935), Caudwell mocks the misjudgements made by the vicar of the Berkshire village of Little Whippering, which are based on the racist and sexist assumptions common in his parish. In his first flying instruction book – though his nominal co-author, Capt. H. D. Davis AFC, wrote a classically sexist introduction: '… a really good or reliable woman pilot is extremely rare. Most of those who passed their tests seem thereafter to alternate between a sort of blindness,

unconscious recklessness and a tendency to lose their heads'[4] – Caudwell does not draw gender distinctions in regard to flying and, as his *Death of an Airman* shows, he believes women can be as competent pilots as men.

CAUDWELL AND MARXISM

Despite his curtailed formal education, Caudwell was certainly an intellectual, and the fact of his self-education had some advantages. He was less exposed to the indoctrination suffered by people who go through the educational system, whose learning takes place in a context of received ideology, of shared assumptions about the world. He was freed to form his ideas and make his intellectual connections without pressure to conform. This is not to deny that there would have been things to be gained from more formal education, nor to claim that he remained completely unaffected by the dominant ideology; but because he was outside the confines of institutional learning, he would have escaped much encouragement to conform his thinking to the received patterns of the day. Caudwell's ability to look at the world in a different way proved a great strength; and, coupled with his interest in how things actually work, it enabled extraordinarily creative thinking.

Caudwell's coming to Marxism was an important step in his creative vision. In 1934, during a period of social deprivation and unemployment, of rising fascism and military expansion, Marxism's view that capitalism will destroy itself must have made obvious sense. But Marxism probably also attracted Caudwell because of his desire to understand how things worked. He realised that capitalism, as an economic system, had inherent design faults: it failed not because of individual greed or because its objective was to create personal wealth, but because its fundamental principles produced the opposite of what they were intended to produce. Unemployment, misery and war were not supposed to be features of capitalism. Marxism gave him the key to this complex of contradictions. It provided a unified vision of the social system and also, of obvious importance to Caudwell the poet, a guide to understanding the place of poetry in society. In the introduction to *Illusion and Reality* (*IR*), he wrote, 'There is only one sound sociology which lays bare the general active relation of the ideological products of society with each other and with concrete living – historical materialism. Historical materialism is therefore the basis of this study.'[5] His intended subject was the historical development of English poetry and his intended method was historical

materialism, that is, Marxist examination of historical development in relation to the economic structure of society.

But simply to say that Caudwell was a Marxist, when the term covers such a diversity of intellectual behaviour, is insufficient. Many people's acquaintance with Marxism comes from university courses that treat Marxism abstractly as a philosophy but neglect what Marx himself considered its essential element: practice. One of Marx's best-known statements is his eleventh Thesis on Feuerbach: 'Philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point, however, is to *change* it.' Caudwell accepted this as a call to action, as did many others, but, unusually, he also adopted it as a principle of analysis. He looked at social processes in terms of their relation to change – the nature of mankind was to deal with the world in an active way, to change things. Caudwell's experience in aeronautics and his productivity as a writer meant that making and doing had a fundamental place in his thinking, and his focus on poetry in *Illusion and Reality* emphasised its relationship to material life. 'Poetry is what happens when it is read,' he said, a distillation of his active view. He saw that concreteness and social practice were fundamental to the development of Marx's thinking: 'the understanding of concrete living came to appear to Marx as primary to the understanding of the products of concrete living' (*IR*, p. 15). That is, if you wanted to understand what people made and did, if you wanted to understand their poetry, Caudwell, following Marx, said you had to understand how they lived. Of course, people's thinking was individual – but only to a degree; in shared social conditions that shaped thought the focus shifted from individuals to class.

For Marx, class was a central point in this understanding:

> In the social production of their means of existence men enter into definite, necessary relations which are independent of their will, productive relationships which correspond to a definite stage of development of their material productive forces. The aggregate of these productive relationships constitutes the economic structure of society, the real basis on which a juridical and political superstructure arises, and to which definite forms of social consciousness correspond. The mode of production of the material means of existence conditions the whole process of social, political and intellectual life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence,

> but, on the contrary, it is their social existence that determines their consciousness.[6]

For Caudwell this meant that poetry had to be understood in terms of class as well as individual motives. In his paraphrase, he extracts a simple, experiential notion of class:

> For a class, in the Marxian sense, is simply a group of men whose life-experiences are substantially similar, that is, with less internal differences on the average than they have external differences from the life-experiences of men in other classes. This difference of course has an economic basis, a material cause arising from the inevitable conditions of economic production. Therefore the artist will necessarily integrate the new experience and voice the consciousness of that group whose experience in general resembles his own – his own class. (*IR*, p. 226)

Caudwell saw that literature has a function in sharing consciousness and transmitting class values. In terms of conventional literary studies, this is obviously revolutionary: not only does he move away from the habit of literature courses which focus on the individual works and treat them as independent, he also presents literature as having a practical function. Again, 'the point is to change it.'

Caudwell takes a similar position in regard to language, rejecting the philosophical position that language exists simply to assert facts. He says that language does not only present information: 'The business of language, as an extension of life, is to decide what facts are worth asserting or denying …' (*IR*, p. 218). As a product of social activity, of people doing things, language necessarily acquires an emotional content:

> It is precisely because language expresses feeling, is a judging as well as a picturing of parts of reality, that it is valuable. Language expresses not merely what reality is (what reality is stares man in the face) it expresses also what can be done with reality – its inner hidden laws, and what man wants to do with it – his own unconscious necessities. Language is a tool to express what reality is in relation to man – not abstract man but concrete human beings. (*IR*, p. 219)

Language, too, is part of changing the world. Intellectual production is rooted in practice, and its purpose and development are tied to activity in the material world.

FROM 'VERSE AND MATHEMATICS' TO *ILLUSION AND REALITY*

In relation to his writing, Caudwell's commitment to Marxism was already present when he was working on the predecessor of *Illusion and Reality*, 'Verse and Mathematics', an extensive study (unfinished and unpublished) of the balance of emotion and rationality in different intellectual fields, psychology and imagination. The study provided a basis for *Illusion and Reality* but was transformed analytically and politically by his developing Marxist orientation. (The residue of 'Verse and Mathematics' is seen most obviously in the analysis of the formal characteristics of poetry and of the relation between science and art, sections which are less integrated into Caudwell's developing sense of literature as action, are less original and are less relevant to our contemporary concerns and therefore have not been included in this volume.) A more immediate stimulus for the directional shift from 'Verse and Mathematics' to *Illusion and Reality* was an article by C. Day Lewis in *Left Review* of July 1935, 'Revolutionaries and Poetry'. Day Lewis argues that writing poetry is not just satisfaction of personal desire but has a social role: 'For centuries before this poetry represented the clearest insight into reality possible to mankind, and the poet was honoured as the spokesman of his social group and he expressed what they were feeling both as a group and as individuals.[7]

This accounts for poetry's value as historical evidence, 'even if it had not been underlined by Marx and Lenin … It discloses for us emotionally, as science does intellectually, the hidden links in nature' (*IR*, pp. 51–2). Although he makes clear that poetry is not propaganda, it still has a social effect; in its personal quality, poetry lodges in the reader's emotions:

> Poetry was a necessary activity of primitive life. We still find the most vivid, poetical use of language amongst peasants. Now these emotions, based on the fear of cold and hunger, are as keen to-day as they were ten thousand years ago: they have grown a little more complex through the increased complexity of economic conditions: but their sources are the same. Poetry was one of the chief instruments through which

> primitive man, by expressing his emotions, gained strength to fight against the economic conditions which gave rise to those emotions. It is bound up therefore with our emotional life, and there seems no reason to suppose that it is less necessary to us than it was to our early ancestors. (*IR*, p. 56)

Day Lewis's article was short, only six pages, but it provided the perspective that Caudwell needed to anchor his own argument: poetry gives people the emotional strength to deal with, and change, their reality. And, of course, as the reality changes, so will the poetry needed to deal with it.

With what he learned from Marx and the focus supplied by C. Day Lewis, Caudwell developed his theory of function, that literature was not merely a reflection of the world in which it was created; it was also an imaginary transformation of that world – an 'illusion' that gave an emotional impulse to making change. The theory was revolutionary and thoroughly Marxist. But even though as he believed poetry, through most of human history, had been an important tool in focusing social attitudes, by the mid-1930s the audience for poetry had become too small and certainly too specialised for it to be an effective agent of change. There is no reason to dispute that conclusion, but poetic composition was not the only form of creating the 'illusion' that could help change the world. Cinema was recognised by Lenin and by Mussolini as exceptionally important social tools of the modern age; Caudwell neglected it. His justification could have been that, as the sub-title indicates, *Illusion and Reality* is about the sources of poetry. Fortunately, the principles he advanced for poetry apply at a general level to most of the arts, and, except for specific poetic techniques, are as helpful for understanding cinema as for poetry.

PROBLEMS OF RAPID DEVELOPMENT

Caudwell was a phenomenally fast writer. Much of this can be attributed to his work as a journalist where he managed several writing jobs at once. He edited and wrote under various pseudonyms articles in *British Malaya*, the journal of the Association for British Malaya. Working with his brother in their firm Airways Publications, he edited or wrote for the magazines *Airways* and *Aircraft Engineering*, and for *Who's Who in Aviation*, at the same time as writing his books on aeronautics. We know

he managed his first crime novel in a fortnight and while he was working on 'Verse and Mathematics', he wrote to a friend, 'The ideas have been pouring out at the rate of 4–5000 words a day![8] But his *thinking* had been developing over a long time. He wrote to his brother, 'I have had bits of it in my mind for a long time. It incorporates all the biological, psychological, etc. etc., theories I have been forming in the course of my reading during the last few years.' Although the ideas were in gestation over a number of years, the writing was accomplished in little over a year. The speed of composition was extraordinary – he told his brother he was averaging 4,000 words a day, not counting his bread-and-butter writing. It is unlikely that much revision could take place under such conditions, which helps to explain why the expression is sometimes unclear and he is occasionally repetitive.

Caudwell also uses a lot of specialist expression drawn from his reading in different fields which he doesn't explain (this is more frequent in the chapters of *Illusion and Reality* not selected for this volume). Some terms are unclear simply because they are long outmoded (Caudwell died in 1937; much of his reading would of course have been written a good while earlier). But it is possible that his employment of a battery of semi-scientific terms was also a defensive measure. That is, Caudwell – as an autodidact, commercial writer and 'writer of low-brow detective tales' (his term) – might have expected to be seen an unlikely author of an important theoretical tome, and in such a situation it is understandable that he might have had some uneasiness about his book's reception. He described the work in a letter to his brother, in his usual facetious style, as 'a super-technical copper bottomed piece of literary criticism, too frightfully fundamental, very revolutionary and disgustingly erudite'. In another letter to friends, he wrote that he had given *Illusion and Reality* 'a very impressive bibliography of 200 or 300 learned books I have drawn on (intended chiefly to strike terror in the heart of the reviewer!)'.

There is also in Caudwell's work a problem with major terms that shifted in his writing, especially 'bourgeois' and 'illusion'. Thus he writes that England is the paradigmatic bourgeois society: 'It is no accident that this same country, England, has also been notable for the volume and variety of its contribution to modern poetry' (*IR*, p. 66). The early use of 'bourgeois' in *Illusion and Reality* refers to a forward-looking class, transforming society in a positive way. Initially, it seems that it will benefit all individuals, freeing them from the restrictions of feudalism, but when capitalism, the bourgeois economic structure, ceases to develop, it

becomes a brake on society and produces the opposite of what it intends, not freedom but wage-slavery, waste, slumps, depressions and war. By the time he is writing the essays of *Studies*, 'bourgeois' no longer conjures up the picture of a class thrusting its way to freedom but the opposite: a class with an ideology of individualism that blocks the possibility of achieving the very freedom it is supposedly advocating. It is obviously the same class but in a different context different aspects have become more important for Caudwell.

The change of Caudwell's use of 'illusion' can be better understood in reference to the change of value he attaches to 'bourgeois'. When he explains the functioning of poetry in a pre-industrial context, 'illusion' is a vision, a fantasy, something that is not a material reality. He uses it as a quasi-technical neutral term that has to do with the mental state accompanying the tribal, pre-industrial poetry-music-dance experience – a hyper-reality. However, when he moves to his own period, the focus switches from the form to the content; i.e., 'illusion' is still a vision but now what it envisions is false. Thus it acquires a negative meaning – 'illusory'. It is still immaterial and fantasy but misleading – more 'delusion' than simply 'illusion'. This confusion led the German translator of *Illusion and Reality* to add *Bürgerliche* (bourgeois) to 'illusion' in the title. This misses Caudwell's point, of course, that the poetic illusion has a general function – it is not tied to bourgeois consciousness – it can be a vision that helps to create the consciousness and unity that not only offers a picture of reality which is shared and common, but helps to make it deliverable. It helps to realise – i.e., make real – the 'reality' in the vision. It is that process of an emotionally charged vision directed toward reality that he sees as the general function of poetry. Two other terms might create some confusion – 'dialectics' and 'determined'. 'Dialectics' has become mystified, a term with magic resonance but with unclear application. Caudwell uses dialectics to convey studying things in movement and in context. Motion or change is the natural state of things and in actual life there is always context. Dialectics sees the interaction of things that are bound together in such a way that a change in one of the elements necessarily involves change or re-positioning in the other elements and therefore in fact in the whole configuration. At the simplest level, in the abstract, dialectics concerns the relation between front and back, or inside and outside, etc. When the subject involves humans, instead of an abstraction, the variables will be greater and the matter therefore significantly more complex. And if there is a macro-scale subject (society or the

economic system), the variables are massively increased, are less stable, change at different speeds and move in different directions. The whole becomes extremely complex. This is why economic forecasting, for example, is considered to have so little chance of being accurate in a real world. But there is in popular media a habit of abstraction, of reducing the number of real factors or freezing their movement into a snapshot. This simplification is a falsification. The real world is in constant change – and this is what dialectics addresses.

Caudwell showed a dialectical turn of mind long before he came to Marxism. His invention of an automatic gear based on a moving fulcrum illustrates this. Most people probably learned something about the theory of fulcrums in primary school maths or science and, at a practical level, understood fulcrums through, for example, the see-saw. In regard to the see-saw, the problem of balance is not complex because there are few components and also because the fulcrum does not move and thus the only variables are the weights and the distance from the fulcrum. However, it is easy to imagine that, if the fulcrum were moving, the problem would be complex. Seeing dialectics in material terms does not make it less complex but it removes the mysticism.

The popular prejudice that 'determinism' denies the possibility of free will is, for Caudwell, a species of mystification. It is effectively denying the possibility of control by making mysterious things that are potentially explicable. At various points, he argues against religious mystification – faith is essentially mystical because it rejects the role of evidence – but his rationalist concern is more with an anti-scientific attitude. Cause and effect are an aspect of the material world. Every effect has a cause, and to designate an effect as 'random' or 'accidental' means only that the cause is not yet specified. There are no uncaused effects; an effect results *necessarily* from a cause. If we understand causation, then some choice of effects is possible. But if we reject cause and effect, then we cannot make a meaningful choice. Science and rationality are determinist. Caudwell's view is clear in *Illusion and Reality*'s epigraph, taken from Engels: 'Freedom is the recognition of necessity.'

THE ORDER OF COMPOSITION

We know from his letters that Caudwell wrote *Illusion and Reality* first and wrote the essays of *Studies in a Dying Culture* shortly after, just before leaving for Spain. *Illusion and Reality* is, however, theoreti-

cally more advanced although *Studies* is more orderly and seems more finished. The explanation, I think, lies in Caudwell addressing two different sets of demands. Through most of *Illusion and Reality* he is explaining his theory of the function of the arts but in the final chapter, where he deals with the present, he changes his tone and direction – he moves further into political persuasion. He had been living happily with his brother and sister-in-law in Surrey, in the London commuter belt but then moved to the working-class east London district of Poplar and joined the Communist Party. He lived in a house with other comrades and shared party tasks such as selling the *Daily Worker*. He had become an activist and his life was now organised in terms of political struggle.

'The Future of Poetry', the final chapter of *Illusion and Reality,* praises the Soviet Union as the model of the post-capitalist society of the future. Caudwell also points out that artists and professional intellectuals in all disciplines are allying themselves with the proletariat in the People's Front, an umbrella organisation of anti-fascists. The chapter fulfils political duty but suffers from rather forced arguments about Soviet democracy and what writers must do as writers to meet their political responsibilities. Caudwell constructs a speech addressed to 'all bourgeois revolutionaries' and spoken by 'the conscious proletariat'. The logic of the demand to accept proletarian discipline is a bit abstract but the change in the form of presentation of the argument is striking and significant: it is highly unusual that in non-fiction he should speak through the voice of a character; its awkwardness suggests some difficulty with the argument. The conclusion of the address says: 'You are not now "just an artist" (which means in fact a bourgeois artist); you have become a proletarian artist' (*IR*, p. 319). Although he sees what has to be done in the art world, he also sees that the artists are 'not fit for purpose' – he is caught in an impossible position. For poetry, the time is out of joint: the poet cannot be the leader of revolution 'because his world has become by the pressure of alien values too small a part of the real world and it is part of the task of the revolution to widen it' (*IR*, p. 326).

Caudwell's analysis of the way the development of economic structures has shaped cultural production and the functional role of the arts is indeed revolutionary, but it was clear in his last chapter of *Illusion and Reality* that he had already recognised that the rise of fascism made demands of a different order. The problem now was immediate and demanded a more direct style. In *Studies* he refocuses, assuming a more militant posture and making better use of his journalistic skills. The

essays deal with what is wrong with bourgeois culture in the present. They have a better pace than *Illusion and Reality* and their statement is sharper and clearer. Caudwell is also more attuned here to other people's ways of looking at things; he realises his task is not just to construct an argument that can be persuasive but actually to persuade, to persuade people who may well see the world in quite a different way. His theories as a critic have at this point led him to a different practice. The energy of the essays in *Studies* comes across well; this is vigorous argument that makes them attractive to read. It should not be surprising that in the current crisis-riven period they remain relevant.