

# The Writer: commitment and alignment

## Raymond Williams

Some people, when they see an idea, think the first thing to do is to argue about it. But while this passes the time and has the advantage of keeping them warm it has little else to recommend it. If there is one thing we should have learned from the Marxist tradition it is that ideas are always representations of things people are actually doing or feel themselves prevented from doing. So that the first way to look at the idea of commitment is not as at some general notion about which we can at once argue, citing this or that historical case, but rather to see why the notion of commitment was developed and against what alternative ideas it was directed.

In fact the matters at issue have been discussed in many terms. Commitment became the normal term, in our own time, because of the famous intervention by Jean-Paul Sartre at the end of the war when he wrote:

'If literature is not everything it is worth nothing. This is what I mean by "commitment". It wilts if it is reduced to innocence or to songs. If a written sentence does not reverberate at every level of man and society then it makes no sense. What is the literature of an epoch, but the epoch appropriated by its literature?'

It was in this sense that a long standing argument was concentrated around the notion of commitment. But immediately with a certain difficulty. First that Sartre, quite wrongly in my view, said that this should only apply to prose, that poetry was something else. But it is very difficult to argue this case for one kind of writing in ways that make it clear why you should exclude the same demands on another kind of writing. The distinction between prose and poetry that Sartre tried to make confused the argument from the beginning. Second, and much more seriously, the unstated background of Sartre's intervention was a very specific historical and political context. It was within the climate of the Resistance. It was moreover at a time of real possibilities of significant movement, in France as in other parts of Western Europe, towards a new kind of democracy. The engagement of intellectuals of all kinds, and especially writers, in those great collective movements which had come from anti-fascist war and resistance, had an immediate, concentrated and urgent social resonance. On the other hand in England, by the time the idea had taken its usual inordinate time to cross the Channel (because that must be one of the longest cultural journeys in existence by comparison with the physical distance) it fell into the most difficult times.

### The cold war

Then it sounded like, and of course correctly sounded like, a well-

known position in the 1930s. The positions of the British Left writers in the 30s, although they were not normally assembled around the term 'commitment', were directed towards the same essential idea. But in the late 40s and early 50s it was another time. It was the beginning of the cold war. There were then three kinds of backlash against the idea.

First, and we should not forget this, a backlash against the cause to which those writers had been committed. This was the time when we had to look at the other face of that generation of the 30s. It is true that many of the best had died in Spain or in the general European War. But we had also the beginning of that extraordinary and terrible period in which one writer after another from the 30s renounced what he had then believed in, and explained in what was meant to be a charming and pathetic — anyway an apologetic — manner how he had been taken in or fooled or something of that kind. There were some writers who didn't move in this way but their views tended to be less publicised. By the early 50s you could line up a whole series of writers who said 'Yes, of course, I was like that in my foolish youth, but now I know better.' And from that it was no distance at all to saying that writers should keep out of that kind of political and especially left-political thing. That was the first reason why the argument got off to a very bad start after the war.

Second, there was one very severe problem that ought to be intellectually distinguished from this but of course was not. For there were phases, including the Stalin phase, in the Soviet Union, when the notion of commitment could easily be related to the practice of an authority above the writer which was telling him what to write and how to write. 'We know what you mean by commitment. You don't want to be a real writer, you want yourself and others to be party hacks.' And the fact that some — too many — real historical instances could be quoted to support this made clarity very difficult to sustain.

Yet at its best this was always a dispute *inside* the socialist movement. There is still no better statement on this whole matter than that of Brecht, a communist writer, in the 1930s, replying to an article by the Hungarian Marxist then in Moscow, George Lukacs. Brecht said of that whole tendency:

'They are, to put it bluntly, enemies of production. Production makes them uncomfortable. You never know where you are with production; production is unforeseeable. You never know what is going to come out. And they themselves don't want to produce. They want to play the *apparatchik* and exercise control over other people. Every one of their criticisms contains a threat.'

So there was a principled position, inside the socialist movement, which could enable a totally committed writer like Brecht to make the necessary distinction between a commitment to production linked to a cause, and on the other hand subservience to some version of desirable production arbitrarily decided by a party and its ideologists. This remains a crucial distinction, but it was very difficult to sustain it in the period of cold war and that mood of confession of errors which was weakening the confidence of a whole generation of writers. In practice the two very different ideas — of commitment and of subservience — were pushed together and seemed to support each other.

### Good writing

Third, there was a certain backlash among those few Left writers who kept their heads through this difficult period. And it was an intensely difficult period, because it was so complex. There was an understandable wariness of what can quite properly be called opportunism. This, then as now, was not the reality of commitment but a careerist version of it. Commitment still meant, at its best, taking social reality, historical reality, the development of social and historical reality, as the centres of attention, and then finding some of

the hundreds of ways in which all those processes can be written. On the other hand, at its worst, it could be a superficial kind of writing which took care to include the political references that went with the cry of the moment. If we want an authority on this we have in one of his grumpier moods no less an authority than Engels, who said:

'It became more and more the habit, particularly of the inferior sorts of *literati*, to make up for the want of cleverness in their productions by political allusions which were sure to attract attention. Poetry, novels, reviews, the drama, every literary production teemed with what was called "tendency".'<sup>3</sup>

This was only a few years after Marx had referred to work like that of Eugene Sue as 'the most wretched offal of socialist literature.'<sup>4</sup> And Engels, in an even grumpier mood, thirty years later, talked about 'a worthless fellow who, due to lack of talent, has gone to extremes with tendentious junk to show his convictions, but it is really in order to gain an audience.'<sup>5</sup> Now I don't quote these remarks because we should believe everything Marx or Engels said. In fact, in the later mood, Engels was moving, as in his literary tastes he often did, towards a slightly grumpy bourgeois position rather than necessarily towards a Marxist one. But it is very important, if we are to have honesty on the Left, that we should be quite clear that there is a kind of opportunism which can usurp the idea of commitment, by catching the political cry of the moment whether or not it has any significant reference to the central experience or the integrity of the writing. This is the false commitment of the inserted political reference. It is not what Sartre or anyone else who has taken the idea seriously can mean by commitment.

#### What kind of commitment?

Anyway this third backlash, this wariness, developed, and in the middle of it one further fact was discovered, one which was memorably expressed by the German Marxist Adorno. He made the point that if you propose commitment you have to recognise that it is what he called 'politically polyvalent'.<sup>6</sup> That is to say, if you ask writers to commit themselves, you can have no certainty at all that they are going to commit themselves to any particular cause. It would have been easier if it had been true that writers of significance could never commit themselves to fascism, or to the most archaic kinds of conservatism, or to the softer kinds of liberalism. But indeed if the idea of commitment is there but undefined, as in the rhetoric it often is, such writers indeed come out, take a position about social reality, engage with political struggle. Indeed this is happening from the Right all the time. Then if that is so, at whatever level it is done, in actual writing or in some more general capacity, there can of course be no guarantee that commitment is intrinsically progressive, as some people had assumed. On its own, that is to say, the usual idea of commitment is bound to be polyvalent. We used to have arguments at the end of the 30s about whether a good writer could be a fascist. It seemed to us then that there was something wrong if that could be so, and some people found themselves in quite extraordinary positions, saying either, 'yes, he is a fascist but then he is not a very good writer', or 'he may be a good writer but of course he is politically naive'. It is better to recognise social reality, which in our own time as in others has produced good and even great reactionary writers, as well as all the others whom we may prefer, for different reasons, to honour and remember.

Those were bad, confused times. Yet it can happen that the bad times teach us as much as the good times. When there is intellectual confusion, when you undergo a great deal of political rhetoric, when you have all sorts of recriminations and divisions inside your own movement, there is still a chance to learn, from within such developments. In the case of a general idea there is a chance to learn what is significant in it and what on the other hand is insignificant or

meretricious. And that I think, although people are still nervous of it, is what has been happening in more recent thinking.

#### Freedom of the artist

There has been a change from the 60s onwards after the end of that confused and frightened period. Actually 'commitment' is still not the word most commonly used because, given that history, there is still a lot of nervousness about it. What we have come to understand, I think, is that commitment was not, for the most part, a positive proposition. It was mainly a response to another position, which had become very general and which it wanted to challenge. This was the position that the artist, by definition, must be a free individual; that to be an artist is to be a free individual. Of course there is a version of commitment which can include that, because if you are a free individual you can choose to commit yourself. This was really what Sartre was saying. But to others such commitment was a cancellation of freedom. How can you commit yourself to anything except the practice of your own heart? Is the artist then not necessarily the very type of the free individual?

Now this is an important general case. And one of the advantages of looking at it within Marxist thought is this, that we can see when the idea of the artist as a free individual arose, and this in turn throws important light on the history of the practice of writing and of its always difficult social relations. For the idea of the artist as the type of the free individual in fact arose in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries; that is to say in the period of two very important changes. On the one hand there was the emergence of a new libertarianism in literature, primarily in the romantic movement. On the other hand the conditions of writing and publishing were

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changing in unprecedented ways, which on the one hand gave a new professional independence to successful writers, and on the other hand marginalised certain sectors of writing to such an extent that the possibility of feeling related to and wanted by society — either as a whole or by any part of it — had for that kind of writer been in effect excluded.

Now we should not reduce this development to any one of these three factors. All three are crucial in the developing notion of the free artist. The free artist of the romantic movement was arguing for a kind of freedom which identified itself, in many cases, with the most general human liberation. He was arguing against the tyranny of Church and State, indeed against any authority which tried to dictate to the artist what he should think or write. He was also arguing against the tyranny of artistic rules. There is a standard romantic complaint against what they defined and opposed as classicist imitation: rules of how to write well; rules of what to write about; rules of how any particular subject should be handled; rules which had been taken to a point, at least theoretically, as definitive, so that the test of good writing was the extent to which you showed the qualities of this known craft, with all its rules and its skills. The new claim that a writer must be free to break the rules, must be free to innovate, free to create works as the experience required, whether or not this corresponded with pre-existing notions; that was the important claim

<sup>1</sup> JP Sartre: *Between Existentialism and Marxism*, NLB 1974 pp 13-14.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in W Benjamin, 'Talking to Brecht', *New Left Review* 77 p55.

<sup>3</sup> Engels, *New York Daily Tribune*, 28 October 1851

<sup>4</sup> *The Holy Family*, cit *Marx and Engels on Literature and Art*, ed Baxandale and Morawski 1973 p119.

<sup>5</sup> Engels, August 1881 cit *Marx and Engels on Literature and Art*, p. 123

<sup>6</sup> TW Adorno 'Commitment' *New Left Review* 1974 pp 87-88.

of the romantic movement, and it was accompanied by a conscious revolt against any authorities which would try to seize or suppress or discriminate against new writing of such kinds.

### Growth of the literary market

On the other hand the literary market which was then becoming more organised had a very curious double-edged effect. If you were a certain kind of novelist, from about the 1830s, you could become a successful professional man in a way that very few writers had been before. And although this was obviously most true for the most successful, still, given the extraordinary expansion of magazine-publications, the cheapening of books and the huge growth of the newspaper and periodical press, the opportunities for a very large number of writers were much wider than those in any preceding period. But of course this was a freedom to go out and compete in that market. So that what came through at this level was the professional ideology of the independent artist, who was defining freedom in this very special sense, that he must be free to compete in the market. In effect he was then taking the market as a definition of his social province, his real social relations. And since society was represented by the market, there could be no question of any other significant social commitments. This is a classic bourgeois definition of freedom.

On the other hand, in other areas of writing, and notably in poetry, the economic situation of writers was moving quite the other way. Certain kinds of writing were marginalised, for the market was replacing earlier systems of patronage, and in the market such writing as poetry was at best a marginal product, at worst quite unwanted. So alongside the newly successful literary professional, claiming his professional freedom but claiming it so that he could enter the market (which would tell him what society wanted) was the unwanted writer, who was soon mythicised as the starving genius. There were indeed some of these, and the starving would-be genius, there were some of them too. But at its worst it became a model of what a serious writer ought to be. You can still find people who think it is something which proves you are a real writer. It was a myth which seemed all the more attractive in this market society in which the leading writers were becoming more and more professionally established solid citizens.

Now we can see what a very complex idea this proposition that the artist must be free is. In one sense who would wish to dissent from it? Who would suppose that we are likely to get better writing if some appointed authority is at the writer's elbow, looking over his shoulder, advising him what to do? It isn't that writers don't benefit from advice; it's that there is an almost insoluble problem of getting the right advice and the right writer together: it is always more likely that you will get the wrong writer with the wrong advice. What we have really to understand is the set of ideas that were being fused in this notion of free independence, which we have really to take apart again if we are to understand the real situation. For the acceptance of the market as the guarantee of freedom is of course largely illusory. Although it is true that, at the point of success, the independent professional writer can operate very freely in the market, becoming himself a seller with a certain real independence, the average writer, and in these conditions these were the great majority, was dependent on the market in ways which were at least as severe and sometimes more severe than the earlier dependence of writers on patrons.

### Patronage

Patronage itself had passed through several stages, only some of which were deeply restrictive. In the very earliest forms patronage was an obligation. In feudal society, for example, it was the obligation of a household of a certain dignity to support and to give hospitality, to sustain the livelihood, of artists, poets, painters, musicians. Later

there was a different type of patronage, in which courts, households and similar authorities hired writers and artists for specific commissions. In the course of that hiring every complaint came up that was subsequently heard in the market, but in the most favourable conditions there was a certain diversity; that if you ran into trouble with this patron you could take the work to another, as indeed in the early capitalist market. It was not a comfortable situation, it was not a good situation, but it does not necessarily compare unfavourably with the market. There is also another phase of patronage, which didn't depend on monetary exchange at all but was simply the offering of social support, social protection, and where necessary early encouragement. It often happened, of course, that support and protection were only offered to certain kinds of writing, from the notion that this was a good kind of writing to have done. But this was always potentially a *different* calculation — let us leave aside whether it was a better calculation — from what became for the market the single criterion, of whether this writing would *sell*. As the market developed this became and is becoming the only criterion. Indeed we are passing through now the biggest change in the writing and publishing market since the early nineteenth century. The criterion of desirability is the promise to sell, and, increasingly now, to sell *fast*, so that there are no expensive warehousing costs and other accounting considerations. This development set up, within the very conditions which appeared to guarantee freedom to the successful, constraints of a new kind, which however could not be recognised as obstacles to freedom because this was the very competitive area which most writers had sought. A bourgeois writer could not say 'it is the market which is restricting my freedom', because for him the market was his freedom. Yet it has always been clear that the market guides writers, restricts them, pushes them this way and that. It can be a very simple or a very complex process. It is extraordinarily difficult for any of us, as writers, to be honest about it.

### New kinds of public support

The situation now, for example, at a very organised late stage of the market, is often this: that you want to write a particular work which happens to be of an inconvenient length, that length being your best estimate of what handling that material would be. You talk to a publisher or an editor about it, and he often says: 'Well, it's a pity about that length. But we've got an idea for a book in one of our series. Surely you can do that *meanwhile*.' And suppose this is, with luck, something which you thought someday you might write, but which you wouldn't have written just then, by the time you have decided to do it — and many people do — it has become what *you* want. Indeed unless you are absolutely ruthless with yourself, ruthless in your examination of your motives and especially your more complex adaptations, these pressured decisions come to take on the plausibility of your natural wishes, of your free development as a

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writer. And of course people say: 'Why should you be a primadonna?' 'Why shouldn't you write what people want?' Indeed the familiar phrases of commitment come back in the rhetoric of the sharply commercial editor: 'Don't you want to write what people are interested in?' 'What's the point of writing for yourself and a few friends?' So the market comes to seem a definition of social duty, even though, with respect to any who may be present, publishers usually know a good deal less than writers about what people will like to read, as distinct from what they *have* liked. They are at least as often wrong as they are right, but in any case the notion of what people want which has passed through the market comes back as a strange kind of

freedom. Yet many writers are afraid that if they say 'the market is not really free', then they deny the accessible basis of their own freedom. So what they talk about instead, in relation to freedom, is not of where they are. They talk about other situations, where the constraints are different: where there is state support of writers, for example, but of course not the state's support of all literature, indeed the refusal to publish certain kinds of book, and that is totalitarian. So indeed it often is. We have all to recognise the faults and deformities — sometimes the crimes — of such systems. Most of them are limited by the fact that public support operates only as *state* support; that will have to be changed, by new and more open kinds of procedure. Yet in any case we have also to look at freedom, and at its enemies, where we ourselves are.

### Alignment

Now I said at the beginning that it is a mistake, when you see an idea, to go straight into an argument about it. The trouble with most arguments about commitment is that they confuse two pairings. Either they confuse the notion of the artist having his own autonomy, which commitment is held to undermine, with the notion of being ordered by some central authority to do something. Or they confuse both with the idea of professional independence, which has been the historical situation of fortunate writers in our own kind of society. And at that point we have to attempt a further disentangling. I put into the title of this lecture not only the word 'commitment', but also the word 'alignment'. Of course in one weak sense 'alignment' is just another word for 'commitment'. But there is another sense of alignment, which I take very seriously and from which, I think, any serious contemporary argument about commitment must begin.

Marxism, more clearly than any other kind of thinking, has shown us that we are in fact aligned long before we realise that we are aligned. For we are born into a social situation, into social relationships, into a family, all of which have formed what we can later abstract as ourselves as individuals. Much of this formation occurs before we can be conscious of any individuality. Indeed the consciousness of individuality is often the consciousness of all those elements of our formation, yet this can never be complete. The alignments are so deep. They are our normal ways of living in the world, our normal ways of seeing the world. Of course we may become intellectually aware that they are not normal in the sense that they are universal. We come to recognise that other people live differently, were born into different social relationships, see the world differently. Yet still, at certain deep levels — and this matters very much in writing — our own actual alignment is so inseparable from the constitution of our own individuality that to separate them is quite artificial. And then for a writer there is something even more specific, that he is born into a language; that his very medium is something which he will have learned as if it were natural although of course he eventually knows that there are other very different languages. But still it is the medium in which he will work, the medium which he shares with his own people, and which has entered into his own constitution long before he begins to write. To be aligned to and by that language, with some of its deep qualities, is inevitable if he is to write at all. So, born into a social situation with all its specific perspectives, and into a language, the writer begins by being aligned. Yet alignment goes deeper again, into the actual and available forms of writing. When I hear people talk about literature, describing what so-and-so did with that form — how did he handle the short novel? — I often think we should reverse the question and ask, how did the short novel handle him.

### Writing and working-class consciousness

Because anyone who has carefully observed his own practice of writing eventually finds that there is a point where, although he is

holding the pen or tapping the typewriter, what is being written, while not separate from him, is not only him either, and of course this other force is literary form. Very few if any of us could write at all if certain forms were not available. And then we may be lucky, we may find forms which happen to correspond to our experience. But take the case of the nineteenth-century working-class writers, who wanted to write about their working lives. The most popular form was the novel, but though they had marvellous material that could go into the novel very few of them managed to write good or even any novels. Instead they wrote marvellous autobiographies. Why? Because the form coming down through the religious tradition was of the witness confessing the story of his life, or there was the defence speech at the trial when a man tells the judge who he is and what he has done, or of course other kinds of speech. These oral forms were more accessible, forms centred on 'I', on the single person. The novel with its quite different narrative forms was virtually impenetrable to working-class writers for three or four generations, and there are still many problems in using the received forms for what is, in the end, very different material. Indeed the forms of working-class consciousness are bound to be different from the literary forms of another class, and it is a long struggle to find new and adequate forms.

### The content of commitment

Now these are alignments of a deep type, and really I think the most serious case for commitment is that we should commit ourselves far enough to social reality to be conscious of this level of sociality. It means becoming conscious of our own real alignments. This may lead to us confirming them, in some situations. Or it can often lead to changing or shifting or amending them, a more painful process than it sounds. Some of the most publicised cases of 'commitment' are when people shift in this way from one set of beliefs and assumptions to another, and this can involve a quite radical shift in real practice. In fact even when we confirm our deepest alignments, but now very consciously and deliberately, something strange has happened and we feel quite differently committed. Because really to have understood the social pressures on our own thinking, or when we come to that wonderful although at first terrible realisation that what we are thinking is what a lot of other people have thought, that what we are seeing is what a lot of other people have seen, that is an extraordinary experience. We can make this point negatively against all those people who appeal to the freedom of the individual artist within their own isolated terms. It is one of the most surprising things about most of them that they say, 'I only write as a free individual, I only write what I want to write', but in fact what they write is, in majority, already written and what everybody already knows. That of course is an illusion of freedom. But beyond it, under pressure, there is a very high kind of freedom. This is when you are free to choose, or to choose to try to alter, that which is really pressuring you, in your whole social formation, in your understanding of the possibilities of writing.

To be committed to that is nothing whatever to do with submission to anybody. It is the discovery of those social relationships which are in any case there. It is what I think Sartre meant by reverberation, resonance: that active consciousness of those social relationships which include ourselves and our practices. It is never likely to be a convenient discovery, in our kind of world. It permits very little in the way of being immediately signed up for somebody else's market or somebody else's policy. But when it really happens, in the many different ways that are possible, its sound is usually unmistakable: the sound of that voice which, in speaking as itself, is speaking, necessarily, for more than itself. Whether we find such voices or not, it is worth committing ourselves to the attempt. •

Note: This article was given as the Marx memorial Lecture in March 1980.