On the Present in Literature

by Ernst Bloch

If you want me to show you the vicinity,
you must first climb to the roof.
--Goethe
Westostlicher Diwan
(The West-East Divan)

For the Day

It is easy to live for the day. All lazybones do that and legitimately those who have finally taken a rest and enjoy in a relaxed way what is offered to them. The more eventful the better since then it is easy to forget what happened before and since unconnected impressions can be grasped in a particularly fresh way, in a virtually raw way. And in the same way as one might live for the moment, although distracted and in a completely fleeting way, in a completely superficial way, one might write oneself equally easily and superficially into the day without worrying. Then, too, we pick and discard, every day anew and wilting whatever might happen during the day’s events. If this kind of day-picking was not effortless, then there would not be that many newly written newspapers. However, good things take time and some of it has to be in the newspapers, at least in those that are not filled with cliches. And taking time lets you gain distance from a thing in order to see it better.

A Shadow Due to Lack of Distance

For without distance, right within, you cannot even experience something; not to speak of representing it, to present it in a right way

This essay first published in 1956
From The Utopian Function of Art and Literature: Selected Essays.
Studies in contemporary German social thought.
which simultaneously has to provide a general view. In general it is like this: all nearness makes matters difficult, and if it is too close, then one is blinded, at least made mute. This is, however, only in a strict sense true for a precise, on-the-spot experience, for the immediate moment that is still in the dark as a “right-now” that is lacking all distance. But this darkness of the moment, in its unique directness, is not true for an already more mediated right-now, which is of a different kind and which is a specific experience called “present,” be it at home, in public, in the political arena, and so on. Nevertheless, something of the darkness of the immediate nearness is conveyed – if the difference has become clear – to the more mediated, more widespread present by necessity, i.e., an increased difficulty to represent it (in comparison with the portrayal of times long since gone, of past blocks of time). By not seeing the difficulty, precisely as one of the battlefront, it does not disappear. On the contrary, then one misses that which is the most important thing: to begin to transcend that difficulty of nearness in a Marxist way. We are talking about portraying, as mentioned before, not about recalling and for the moment not even about the analysis of the situation and the action determined by the need of the moment, directed and made possible by this analysis, which is a Marxist one. We are talking about an actual *formed portion of time* (*Zeitstück geformter Art*). Today such a portion of time presupposes more precisely than ever an established analysis of the situation; both certainly do not coincide. Only non-artists, although they are writing, do not notice any difficulty in regard to nearness to the very end, and also young artists, in the beginning, certainly do not notice the shadow due to a lack of distance when they, in a truly revolutionary mood, declare war on their era, or, even on the contrary, when they are absolutely positive about a good, emerging era. When the 25-year-old Mayakovsky gave a copy of *War and Peace* to the 28-year-old Prokofiev for a trip and wrote in the book, “To the chairman of the music section of the universe – by the chairman of the poetry section of the universe,” then a proud *Sturm und Drang* coincided wonderfully, closely related, and appropriate to a new era. But the problem of the concrete right-now never ceased to be relevant in the long run. In the area of landscape painting, this problem meant, Where does the “foreground” end, and where does the “landscape” begin? In poetry it meant a particularly focused creative power. As we shall see, it requires very specific means for its artistic realization, which are
critical or Utopian or combine both. If the actual material in its dimension was enormous, if it was progressive only at a heavy cost, then temporal distance to it was always the case. Even novels about World War I, which were only halfway broad enough, needed a distance of about ten years from the time of the war. *War and Peace*, the most comprehensive period novel (*Zeitroman*) of them all, needed a distance of half a century from the events to be so fresh and to have such little resemblance to a “historical novel.” But then there was also *Anna Karenina* simultaneous with its material. Actually, in the past there was a relatively large number of excellent simultaneous novellas, novels, plays. However, the difficulty of nearness existed for them, too, and always made it difficult, although the degree of difficulty varied according to the writer’s intensity, according to the power and the transparency of the social material. Nevertheless, even a moderate picture of the present had an effect, and an important one like *Simplicius Simplicissimus* did not need a lot of distance to be a mirror for the Thirty Years’ War and the postwar period, even to laugh about it. “Grab right into the full flow of human life, and whatever you grab, you’ll find it interesting.” This maxim, which is not only realistic but quite conscious of how to make use of its time, is a very smart one. Not only the frail form of the present period novels proves that but also the opulent form of the past ones. With regard to this point: in which cases does nearness make it more difficult to be creative and by what means has that difficulty been so strikingly overcome in many cases? What attitudes of a writer and which conditions of something actually present have to be especially developed and recognized so that the nearness might even give wings to the work? Particularly the latter is the question now. Let us examine our affairs. Poetry is not entirely within the hollow space (*Hohlraum*) of the past.

**Listen to the Actual Pulse**

Writing in keeping with the times is not the same as writing according to life. Since many people, who seem to listen to the actual pulse, have only heard what was marketable, not what was really going on. And only because those writers depicted widely held beliefs instead of real matters could an illusion of a period novel originate among readers, in an entertaining sense perhaps, but certainly short-lived. We are still not talking about the little scribblers. They would have even failed
with the non-actual matters. Therefore, they are not part of the problem. Looking at past writers whose names have lasted, like Gutzkow, Spielhagen, Freytag, who failed in the period novel, which they had particularly cultivated, it is not their second or third rank talent that is worth considering but mainly that which might have been urgent to them and which they, due to their semi-talents, did not notice, did not use, did not shape. Gutzkow always wrote period novels in nine volumes (Die Ritter vom Geiste, 1850, Der Zauberer von Rom, 1858); Spielhagen was an equally liberal, up-to-date fighter (Problematische Naturen, 1860); Freytag was only liberal (Soil und Haben, 1860), with a social purpose, so to speak, “seeking the German people at work” (minus the workers, being himself a craftsman). All that turned out more than mediocre, already far worse than the actual novels of Immermann (Die Epigonen, 1836, and the more important Münchhausen, 1838), who very belatedly tried to emulate nothing less than Goethe’s form. Gutzkow, Spielhagen, and Freytag tried that, too, in a doubly epigonal way. Immermann, being stronger, could merely show a mediocre, mostly unclear picture of his days, although it elucidated at the same time how such failure could be relatively independent, as mentioned before, of the formal size of the talent and even from the greatness (viability, transparence) of the material of the era itself. Obviously an era of social upswing provides more fruitful material than one of social decline, although life runs faster in the latter case, hence more likely escapes the view of the observer. It is equally obvious that mature, well-developed epochs contain certain “foregrounds,” and to make matters easier, already as “landscapes.” Therefore, they are workable on the spot as subject matter and thus portrayable. Freytag, during the empty era of German capitalist philistinism, conformed to this era, being a philistine himself, and there was nothing anyway that could detract from the superficiality of banal everyday life. But Immermann, who was not a philistine and who wanted to be close to the great spirit of classicism, saw quite explosive matters around him in the German bourgeois life of his times: smoking chimneys, the start of industrialization, a monstrous bourgeoisie along with the narrow-mindedness and reactionary attitude of Prussian feudalism. He described the literary epigonism of his era, in which the group Junges Deutschland (Young Germany) and even better were at the same time in revolt. This was the period when Herwegh’s dictum – the days of pure poetry are over, now is
the time of aspiration – could already be heard. Nevertheless, despite his complaints, Immermann, *mutatis mutandis* like Raabe later, did not get far beyond the atmosphere of morbidity around him, not far beyond the romantic, anti-capitalist externalized images of the capitalist “spirit of deception,” of the feudal “putrescence.” “Who will be able to name the current in which our day’s vessel travels,” Immermann exclaimed in one of the reflections inserted into *Münchhausen*. But there was also the lack of insight into the social sciences, which did not exist at that time, that prevented one from making changes within such “currents.” For even the great Balzac, in the middle of France’s highly developed capitalism, did not understand the “current” as is known. He was not even a romantic anti-capitalist but simply a reactionary anti-capitalist, who sided with the Tories, although he was against the usurers and the hyenas of postrevolutionary France. However, he was not confronted with a bourgeoisie that, as was the case in Germany of the same time, slowly remodeled itself from the philistine (*Spiessbilrger*) of the declining system of guilds into the capitalist philistine. Thus there was no reason for a real romantic protest by the artist. That is all the more reason why Balzac’s incomparable art of painting the attitude of *Enrichissez-vous* (Enrich yourself) was helped by two resources that were also effective at a time when a Marxist analysis of the situation, or analysis of the “current,” could not be applied. These resources were *criticism to the point of satire* and *humane Utopia*; both in fact were resources not just as mere subjective additives but at their best as the detected ingredients within the social reality itself. In a pre-Marxist sense, these resources brought about the possibility to be within that world, to exist in close creative presence, with a Balzacian “landscape,” in which the still immediate “foreground,” and especially this one, does not appear as something external but already with instances that point out what is important. Needless to say, this kind of reading into those mediated important instances in Freytag’s dabbling with foregrounds and his embellishments is completely missing (and today we find even worse examples in the present novels dealing with the East, clumsy and trashy at the same time). Something that is grasped satirically enables the reader to see clearly that which is close; something that is grasped in a Utopian way, the measure for the satirical that saves it from being the sole measure, enables the reader to have a wide, full, complementary-whole view also within the closeness. The fruit of such pre-Marxist
mastery of existence (*Seinsmächtigkeit*) within poetry might be classified under what one calls critical realism. However, by real one cannot mean the foreground and less so the totality of all foregrounds, but essentially the current, the landscape of the stream that is unveiled by this situational picture in this point in time itself. This is true, even when the anatomy and physiology of the material of the period made possible by Marxism (so that it can be absorbed in a genetically mediated way) is still missing.

It was due to this double grasping that closeness was not always difficult. That was particularly true in bourgeois poetry that did not flee the present at all. There are plenty of great period pieces. Of course, they are illuminating and penetrating to different degrees, but all of them do away with the flat dimension of reality. They give shape to the essential characteristics of the figures. They open up plots that carry on, that are pushed in a poetical way toward a decision. They pour the light, which often exists only in an idealistic sense and which is therefore not available over indicated inadequacies and against them. This is true for the novel as well as for the drama. Only the patina that some of these works have acquired prevents us from seeing them as what they had totally been during their time – their relevance in time also as material. The more recent series includes, to name the most concise *Recherches du temps actuel*, the period pieces of the *Sturm und Drang*, the exemplary *Wilhelm Meister*, Balzac, Stendhal and Flaubert, Dickens, Dostoievsky and Tolstoy, Gottfried Keller, the experimentalist Robert Musil, and Thomas Mann, the most conscious novelist of the bourgeois present. This is more than just a long, drawn-out series with enormous differences, but one with a unifying theme: how to master the present in a poetical way. It also does not matter in this context whether the average was chosen for that purpose, as with Dickens, or the extreme, as with Dostoievsky. No matter what the case was, they all tried to master the present despite the increasingly stronger limitations within the bourgeois period novel of the twentieth century, despite increasing criticism, increasing invocation of the ideal. The socially determined lack of perspective in the late bourgeois novel brought about even more obstacles in both cases. This is why Robert Musil and Thomas Mann (in whose works the revolutionary proletariat is not even marginally visible) endeavored even harder to employ the powers of critical satire and human Utopia. And it was all the more true in the major work of
the bourgeois period novel, in *Wilhelm Meister*, which is as realistic as the genre is capable of such perspective *sui generis*. The analytic understanding of the “fate of the period” (*Zeitschicksal*) is, of course, missing in this instance too. But neither critical satire nor utopia lacked their real counterparts in this novel. The attempted mastering of the present was not possible without the broad involvement with business, and since the bourgeoisie was still rising at this time, there was even an economic education of the people, not just an aesthetic education. This is particularly evident in Novalis’ well-known rejection of *Wilhelm Meister*; he called the novel “prosaic and modern” and missed “that which is romantic, the poetry of nature, the miraculous.” It is an embittered polemic, but it took its starting point from a romantic designation of the Utopian, one that looked backward and from the blue horizon of Heinrich von Ofterdingen vaguely enhanced Tasso argued once again against Antonio as if *Hie Rhodus hie scita* were always a betrayal of the dream. Yet, it was much more true that the Utopian element of *Wilhelm Meister* (together with the closely related idealistic one) not only wanted to have wings but also soles, and according to Bacon’s advice, both elements wanted some lead in them so that the idealistic in particular could stand in this world, take effect, and be mediated. The actual world in *Wilhelm Meister* is certainly limited, even filtered. One cannot find material problems anywhere. Of course, it does not show any *plebeian stratum*. There are only well-to-do citizens, wealthy nobility in the plot (except for his own dream, the other dream, of the Blue Flower concerning Mignon and Harfner). Therefore, the utopia of an “island,” of a “pedagogic province” was at least in the beginning or *expressis verbis*: limited to an elite of the higher estates whose actions and morals were to be promoted. However, as mentioned before, this did not happen without real resistance by the existing elements, namely, in a Germany that was no longer backward in a capitalist way but could nevertheless remain corroded by its feudal conditions. At any rate, all pertinent criticism of those times, especially in *Wilhelm Meister*, stemmed from a consciousness of a possible better world and everything tenable in this consciousness was derived from actual tendencies, at least from those with a lasting effect of the *citoyen*, although they had been cut off. There was already a lot of Saint-Simonism inherent in *Wilhelm Meister* when Goethe interpreted the actual tendencies as leading toward industry and simultaneously had them strive toward moral
and intellectual organizations. That was not only in *Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre*, i.e., with the medal of social respect, but already *ante rem* in *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*. Of course, given this example of a period novel in particular, it is clear that satirical criticism and the ideal Utopia alone, even when there is a strong feeling for the actual tendencies of the time, no longer suffice to master the present image that has developed since then.

Certainly, there are times when the satirical fits in an entirely objective way (which is the meaning of the Juvenal phrase during the Roman empire: *Difficile satiram non scribereli* is difficult not to write satire), and there are times when the Utopian goes all around in an overwhelmingly real way (all *Incipit vita nova* times are like that). Even though our era also belongs to these times saturated with grimaces and the red glow of sunrise, it is the most loath to insert the understanding of the currents that have been finally elaborated, i.e., the economic, causal analysis of the situation and the tendency. Only this analysis will have success in turning criticism that has mounted to satire into something truly biting, which is to say, to lead it beneath the surface of the symptoms and to make Utopia concrete. As we have seen, only satire and Utopia had been the ingredients that made it at all possible for a poetic mastery of the actual foreground, with the landscape of here and now not very far away. However, only Marxism, and above all only the true *Incipit vita nova* period, which coincides with Marxism and whose expression Marxism becomes, eliminates the lack of perspective due to the social circumstances. During the period of the rising bourgeoisie, this lack of perspective only allowed the formation of more or less abstract ideals, also in *Wilhelm Meister*. And at a time when the decline of the bourgeoisie began, when it was still possible for Keller to paint these wonderfully written pictures of his era, with a true or at least seemingly true national democracy and its supposed expectation that was invoked, the work ended in the melancholy of *Martin Salander*. Moreover, the understanding in a class-conscious sense was missing for one to be convinced of a present even behind the symptoms.

Up to now I have been talking about novels, but there is nothing in bourgeois science as well that could compare with the truly revealing analysis by which Marx and Engels captured their present, which was almost incapable of being mediated. Historically they did this in the *Eighteenth Brumaire*, philosophically in the *Communist Manifesto*. On the other hand, it is clear that, in the literature with a socialist orientation
in our days, there are no comparable parallels that can match their analyses, except for
Gorky, the rather lonely real poet (*Realpoeten*) of the vis-a-vis, and later Brecht. In the
case of Gorky, this occurred after he became the knowledgeable, involved organizer
of the proletarian revolutionary struggle and of the poor Russian peasants. But the
political theater of the communist Brecht worked with a shock similar to that of the
*Sturm und Drang* period. However, it was more like a cloud-sweeping storm and fury
of instruction, alienated and didactic, with the attempt to illuminate the next step to
take. Critical satire and Utopia gain command of existence (*seinsmdchtig*) on a poetic
level only through Marxist clarity by becoming part of the poetic process. Here clarity
certainly does not sell itself short to become a mere streetlight for the next five-year plan.
Rather, clarity cuts off criticism and Utopia from directness (*Unmittelbarkeit*), which
existed and still exists. Thus, actual song originates, preserving the genius of capability.

### The Specific Now at Different Times

The now (*Jetzt*) moves and propels itself through each day, whenever. It knocks in all that
happens, with its shortest time span, and it knocks on the door. But not every present
opens up for it. The actual impulses, the socially driving pulses, do not knock in each
present fresh and vital. Not every time opens up for the now and the next now that
stands exactly at that moment in front of the door and that has never “entered” before. It
has not unloaded its true contents with which and toward which it is on its way. These
contents have not come yet, other than in fragments, at best in installments of a more
fulfilled existence (*Da-Sein*). That which we call the propelling now evidently does not
mean anything other than the tendencies within all that exists projected onto and
atomized within the course of time. But the “point in time” isolated in this projection
begins to show itself tremendously objective in every point that is *historically* labeled,
that which in its proximity is not only invisible but also *halting*. Times that are socially
and culturally dull crawl along also in their now-proximity, which is then paralyzed,
or even suffocated. The subjective reaction to that is boredom, the objective finding is
emptiness *in actu*, seemingly immobile and without history. On the other hand, there
are the flowering high times of early classicism. It is worthwhile to come into contact
with them, with their now, that is to say, actually to ascertain that more fulfilled now of the past. Of course, this is only possible if the specific now-time (Jetzt-Zeit), as, for example, our present, is in its actuality congenial to those past openings (Aufschlagungen). That is, if it does not stagnate like most of the Victorian, also of the Wilhelmenian, “now-time,” if it also is not split up into facets and finally becomes nihilistic, as is our current West German present. In contrast, the link between enthusiasm and partiality, which takes place only during times of ascent, brings the now-time, which generates enthusiasm and partiality and which is worth it, into connection with other periods of awakening, no matter how long they were in the past and how differently embedded they were within the historical continuum. They become blasted out from that continuum, so to speak. Thus there is something else to be added to the Marxist and scientifically tendentious illumination of proximity, which is an ingredient nonetheless Marxist, that is, the concordance with past times, although times that are actually still present, with their Tua res agitur, de tefabula narratur. Thus a view from past times to one’s own becomes possible, that is to say, from times that can be objectified, which might nevertheless concern us as a now-time, and hence they concern us and come close to us – Spartacus, Thomas Münzer, but also all formed art works of the past not solely dealt with in a historical sense or even settled in a historical sense. Such traveling along during which we sometimes change our views cannot completely coincide with that which one calls the cultural heritage. Nor does it coincide with the only true heritage (which therefore is not merely contemplative, or even a quotation or from a museum), which has the phrase prescribed that is just as well known as it is still largely undiscovered: “That which you inherited from your fathers./ Acquire it in order to possess it.” Of course, with the really indelible past there is no acquisition at all. Now-time in the past cannot be a possession: it is help and warning. Let the misunderstanding remain far away on the margins, as if the historical novel were a step toward the intended way of thinking, since the historical novel, as is said, revitalizes the past. This means that Howard Fast’s Spartacus may make the now-time within the past recognizable, but something like that is not really part of the entertaining historical novels with their antiquated episodes. Most of these novels deal almost exclusively more with escape and decoration than with contemplation. This
is true despite or because of the colorful historicist images (Historismen) of the prime models provided by Walter Scott or the developmental precision contained as truth in Flaubert’s *Salambo*, his most questionable work. This kind of genuine vitalization does not occur because of the writer’s moving into a past, into which he must by necessity bring his present, a past that is ultimately almost arbitrary. Rather, he migrates from a past now-time into a present of ours and by shaping such past as something indelible.

In this way the difficult closeness becomes especially broadened, indeed, re-illuminated. Even retrogressive companions think, because of the fact that they go backward, that they have something to say in this matter. For Robespierre conjured Aristides as if his remnants were from today. Shortly after there were plenty of imitations of Christian-Germanic knights. And since big capital, which is completely unromantic in itself, had not died yet, they are still living happily today. But the genuine broadening of the now-time does not relate to that as does the original to the counterfeit; the Montanunion (The European Coal and Steel Community) as Carolingian Occident is so ridiculously wrong that it does not even imitate genuine points of contact. The concordances of the genuine now-time refer exclusively in form and contents to the future in the past, that which has not become, which is in process. In there we find the repressed, the interrupted, the indelible on which we can in one and the same act fall back upon while it reaches forward to us in order to develop in a better way. “And also the others return in an altered form, the dead return, their deeds want to become at one with us again. Münzer stopped most abruptly, and yet he wanted to go the furthest. Whoever actively studies him has thus the present and that which is definite about it more steady, more observable than in an event that is experienced much too quickly and has not had the steam taken out of it. Above all, Münzer is history in a fruitful sense; he and his cause and all things past that are worth recording are made to obligate us, to enthuse us, to support more and more that which is always meant to be for us” (Bloch, *Thomas Münzer als Theologe der Revolution [Thomas Münzer as Theologian of Revolution]*, 1921, p. 13). According to this kind of “tradition” all historical concerns want to and can live only in the now-time of history, bear testimony — a warning that comes from searching, getting lost, possibly finding (Vor-Finden). All this touches upon the highly significant apercus Walter Benjamin dedicated to the category
of now-time (*Jetztzeit*) in his last works. Here actuality simply becomes a postulate, but, of course, not in the usual sense, chronologically actual sense, but rather in a historical, philosophically accumulative, more striking sense. H. H. Holz demonstrated that correctly by remarking that the real philosophical history is not inscribed into the linear time any longer, but that it is a kind of concentric time that in perspective wraps itself around the present. In Benjamin’s words, “And basically it is the same day that reappears in the form of holidays which are days of remembering.” The revolutionary, the historical materialist, “leaves it to others to exhaust themselves with the whore called ‘once upon a time’ in the brothel of historicism. He remains in command of his forces: Enough of a man to burst the continuum of history. ... He understands the constellation into which his epoch has stepped together with a specific epoch of the past. He thus justifies such a concept of the present (*Gegenwart*) as the ‘now-time’ (*Jetztzeit*) into which splinters of the messianic time are scattered” (Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften [Collected Writings]*, I, 1955, pp. 503ff).

As is obvious also in this sentence, of course, the emphasis as well as the messianic content of “now-time” will be placed senselessly on one point if it is not defined within an objective “anticipation.” If the aim is to explode the continuum of history, then it certainly does not mean also to explode the context, which is called the “current,” the “tendency” of history, and which is interrupted and yet, time and again, keeps going. For only within this tendency of the course, which time and again makes itself felt, cracks the crust, the corresponding points of the now sparkle and transmit each other. Therefore, to explode, in this instance, does not mean to focus on one point, not even to turn something into a monad. Rather, to explode is a liberating act that frees all essentially related, Utopian moments from before and after within the respective dawning of now-time and relays their directions. Only this actual emphasis and messianic content (as Benjamin called the flowing, ultimate ending) can finally make the distinction between the partiality of the true point of the now-time and the historicism of collected dead pasts that are to be done away with again. And the respective now-time, if it really is one in this sense, understands itself either as a connecting corridor that has been prepared again, much better prepared, or even as the first stop of a time that has to be fulfilled, that is, one wherein appears what has not appeared, was not yet able to appear. “*Le jour de gloire est arrive*” could therefore be the great cry of the
French Revolution; the conditions for the emergence of the day related to all days like that seemed to have been met. The establishment of a new, better world, which is here always the ultimate content. That is why the now-time of this most decisive sense is certainly the most revolutionary time, also in its religious and chiliastic form. Therefore, the time “that was fulfilled,” namely, the “kairos” (the right moment) of John the Baptist, belongs to this form and is hardly different from the later, apocalyptically covered feelings of deadline such as those during the German Peasants’ War in regard to the year 1525. All this involves a quasi-higher carpe diem (makes use of the day), as if “remain though” (Verweile-doch), where not only the intention toward the essential had to arrive during a “supreme moment” but also all former contents of now-time would unravel in this moment. But, in regard to a poetic mastery of proximity, those borderline problems have been left out as a consequence, although they did appear also in the final verses of Faust. What remains important for the specific problem of a poetry of the now-time is that the contemporary person who, at a sufficiently important moment, shares in the creative process is not only the comrade of his now-time, participating in a turning point in a Marxist sense; but since this moment is understood as a turning point, it contains all the indelible corresponding elements gathered within this time that is to be shaped. This is the resource that enables now-time to be seen and yet not contemplated, thus without the loss of goal, without the loss of its frontier characteristic. On the contrary, now-time reaches an unexpected as well as legitimate resonance of the past that is none – it is actuality, seen through consideration (Eingedenken).

Again, Literature in the Now-Time Today

But why then is it that today the difficult closeness cannot be surmounted very much in depiction? Why are there so few good novels dealing with everyday life or with festivities? Why so few successful period plays (Zeistuck) dealing with a contemporary social and human conflict, at least one that is non-antagonistic? There is certainly no lack of writers, and even if there are so many important ones, well, we do not always have to have great love or a completely convincing work. Instead, even the acceptable products
are few and far between today, more difficult to find at least than even the authorities would like it to be. Some people believe that those requests by the authorities, that is, the public “directives,” have a paralyzing effect insofar as they provide singular guidelines for the writers. This is regarded as a patronizing manner, as if the index fingers, which cannot write, were prescribing to the writers how they are supposed to write by threatening them with utmost disfavor. Yet, even this explanation of the weaknesses of present-day writers is in the long run insufficient since the socialist has a goal that is so earnest, rich, and keen that it simply does not require someone out of touch with the times, but rather someone who knows the essence and the distortion, also in order to penetrate the un-eternal yesteryear (unewig Gestrige) through the now. As long as we are in the midst of an era of building and reconstruction, this era can generate the highest interest in its representation and consequently in its orientation. Therefore, it can advance itself like no other era before, despite all possible institutional hindrances. At the beginning, in view of so many formerly successful period plays and novels, the question was posed: Which attitudes of the writer and which feature of the actual, specific situation have to be particularly developed and regarded so that the closeness might give wings to the work? After the attempt was made to answer this question somehow, although only in rough outline, by referring to “attitudes” and “features” – i.e., satire, criticism, human utopia – we must now pose the question in reverse: Does the “frail form of the present period novel” lack those long proven ingredients and hormones of representation? Here, contemporary literature has a quality that could not be of any help before but is now grasped in the world, namely, the Marxist situational analysis and the economic and dialectical research of tendencies as well as the concordances that ultimately can be understood: now-time. Both, situational analysis and economic and dialectical research of tendencies, should make satire, criticism, and human Utopia poetically more effective, putting it more in command of reality (seinsmdchtiger), providing that both, standing on their feet, are able to walk sufficiently and do enough.

Of course, even in this sense closeness as such still remains difficult. This is also true even if there is no obstruction of inherent developments, even when the time has come for lifting the eyes as objectively as possible. In a purely epistemological sense, the now as well as the here is that swiftly occurring immediacy. As such, it needs its very own careful cultivation,
given its contents that move so strongly and are rich in mediation. Oedipus was the wisest of humans: he solved the riddle of the Sphinx concerning the “human” in general, not a specific living one and particularly not one who is standing here. But the same Oedipus was the last person to understand that he had married his mother. It was exactly the fact of being personally involved, short distance, not only the shock of the contents, that make it harder to understand. To be sure, portraying now-time does not require as great an effort as Oedipus required, because the writer cannot become identical with any of his figures to the same degree as Oedipus, even if a writer’s poetry, according to a saying by Ibsen, should be a day of judgment upon himself. But in regard to painting the present these days, a careful writer like Thomas Mann in The Magic Mountain and especially in Doctor Faustus had to employ a distant view with great deliberation, a peculiarly tricky kind of secludedness, and even an ambush in order to grasp the now despite his well-known critical realism (or because of it, as bourgeois realism): In The Magic Mountain, a sanatorium high up, far from the coming events; in Doctor Faustus, making entries into a diary, somewhat posthumously in regard to those current events. In addition to the two overlapping periods in Doctor Faustus, one of the contemplating master Zeitblom and the other of the active Adrian Leverkuhn, Mann was conscious of the reader coming later (see Doctor Faustus, chapter 26). These are quite intriguing practices or ways of looking, and they are, of course, with a writer so distant as Thomas Mann, neither pure chance nor of minor importance to today’s writers who are not so distant.

There is no way of direct shipping – that is what this kind of actuality means – of these goods, to these destinations. It requires many harbors as stopping-off points, also of a oratio obliqua, as has never been common in any representation of the present, and perhaps not even necessary. Mann’s trap-door-like, concordant copying of Luther’s German, the late Gothic setting of actual coldness, greatness, and decadence demonstrates in any case how much echo, how much vineta, it takes to advance to understand expressions of the now-time, at least of a late-bourgeois selection of it. Although there is no social rising forced in this late amazing book by Mann, the homelessness of the transitional period is portrayed more precisely in an indirect way than in those contemporary novels attempting a direct approach and doing justice to the social ascending forces, and yet – even in the great art of Anna Seghersthey do not even come
close to the other side of the homelessness: the twilight between night and the more than possible day. In an epical way, the now seems to have more potential if it contains a lot of transitory matters of historical substance. That also holds true even when favorable conditions, without troubles and limitations, bring forth the true mirror of the period. At any rate, the situation is the following in a methodical sense: a contemporary novel that succeeds in a unique way pays the price for that success by reflecting everything in a particularly complicated way on different levels of distance, and most of all: the novel’s present can be more easily portrayed than a completed present, even though there is a transparently represented decadence that appears as a rise with embellished obstacles.

But how come the day was written about and set in verse all over in the past without much hesitation? The critical Utopian look from the roof was enough not only to see far, but particularly to see the vicinity around the house more clearly. Today, apparently, that does not work so easily anymore, as I have already emphasized, not only because of the difference between minor writers and major ones – since there were minor ones, too, who dared to climb on the roof in the past. And if censorship is brought up, then this was almost exemplary during the feudal, reactionary times, whereas capitalism, on the other hand, was directly hostile to art and literature according to Marx. And should it be that today, even in the progressive camp, there are lesser important writers than during the good times of the bourgeoisie, there is the now-time, which is of great revolutionary concordance in the aforementioned deeper sense, although not for the incompetent but for the smaller votaries and also for Apollo’s new apprentices.

In contrast to the flowering juste-milieu or even the nihilistic decadence, there is the attraction of the socialist perspective. Yet, it seems to be particularly the absence of such a perspective that explains why even gifted writers appear to think the contemporary novel is a lead article furnished with a plot, and this is why a powerfully loaded now is so inadequately administered, disclosed, and formed by poetical praxis. This is the case, despite the wonderful possible unity of microscope and telescope in theoretical Marxism – moreover, with a telescope that is needed in order finally to see the planet earth with the maximum range, which means in this instance the study of tendencies. One would expect that it would be a plus for the writer in regard to his concrete relationship to the
now. One would expect a contribution by a Marxist approach in recognizing the real laws of motion and tendencies adding to the methods of earlier period pictures (Zeitbilder), adding to their criticism, which was bound to the symptoms, adding to the still abstract human utopia. The fact that this is not the case might be due exactly to the “directives” and the weakness, namely, to the too narrowly perceived presence of the perspective. For, if this does not remain sufficiently conscious, then the criticism of the close circumstances fades beyond the pressure, and the Utopian contents, instead of becoming concrete, wear down to the degree and become their opposite, that is to say, embellishment – often done in a completely irreal manner. The specific premises in regard to art have apparently not been sufficiently worked out in Marxism, and vulgar Marxism often obstructs these premises completely. But the Western world, as long as it remains barred from the future, regards only the grand hotel called sadness as the field mostly for its muse, be it a frivolous or a comfortable one. Thus the present time, which is currently in an extreme transitional period, is reduced in its perspective, the latter being its most genuine poetical feature. The mere means turn out to be reified ends in itself and are thus praised, even those means that are not always unavoidable or still necessary. *Hie Rhodus hie salta*, this ultra-solid phrase holds certainly true for every production or depiction that has a concrete relation to the now and therefore not least for literature. But particularly socialist closeness will never exist other than in conjunction with the future bearing features of reality.