

THE YOGI AND THE COMMISSAR

ARTHUR KOESTLER is a writer of great intelligence and strong convictions, who has for years been carrying on a single-handed fight against that modern mechanical mystery of ingenuity, the Totalitarian State. He fights alone because he is a writer of the Left, even of the extreme Left, who refuses to accept the myths and rationalizations of his party and is just as outspoken in his condemnation of the totalitarianism of the Left as he is of the totalitarianism of the Right. He fights alone, also because he feels acutely the spiritual tragedy of modern man and the need for spiritual reintegration, and yet rejects any positive religious solution of the problem. His diagnosis of the situation is expressed in the title of his book⁽¹⁾—the polar opposition of the passive contemplation of the naked Indian ascetic and the ruthless activism of the Communist bureaucrat.

No doubt the opposition is psychologically justifiable in terms of the pure introvert and the pure extravert, but I do not feel that it really fits the modern situation, and particularly that aspect of the situation to which Koestler devotes so much of the present volume. For what he is mainly concerned with is not the opposition of action and contemplation, but rather the frustration of the modern intelligence in a world which it has done so much to create. The revolutionary intelligence created the Marxian ideology, which in turn produced the Communist State. But something has gone wrong in the process. The intellectuals believed and taught that the Dictatorship of the Proletariat would be followed by the "withering away" of the State. In fact, however, what has happened has been the development of a State power more absolute than any absolutism of the past, and it has been the intelligentsia which has "withered away". All Koestler's books have been a running commentary on this process by one who has personally witnessed and shared the slow crucifixion of the revolutionary intelligentsia in the concentration camps of Europe, and, as he shows in his present book, the process has not ended with the defeat of Fascism. On the contrary, it has only meant the swallowing up of one Leviathan by another, and the extermination of the minorities which had maintained a precarious marginal existence between the two.

Mr. Koestler is very insistent that the elements which are marked out for extermination or suppression in the two types of Totalitarian State are precisely the same. The revolutionary intelligentsia constitute the first category on both their prescription lists, while both capitalists and clergymen come in quite a low

(1) *The Yogi and the Commissar*, by Arthur Koestler. (Cape; 10s. 6d.).

category. Thus, in the deportation list for Soviet Lithuania, which Mr. Koestler quotes, category No. 1 consists of "members of the Russian pre-revolutionary parties: Social Revolutionaries, Mensheviks, Trotskyites and Anarchists", and it is not until we come to categories 13 and 14 that we find "clergymen, aristocrats, landowners, bankers, industrialists, wealthy merchants, hotel keepers and restaurant proprietors".

Needless to say, Yogis do not figure on the list, unless they can be brought into the category which consists of "people who have travelled abroad, Esperantists and Philatelists". For the Yogi has no quarrel with the Commissar. All that he asks is to be allowed "to live in a fertile country, ruled by a virtuous king—or an efficient Commissar—where he will not be disturbed". The real enemy of the Commissar is not the Yogi, but the idealist who refuses to accept the world as it is, and is consequently a nuisance alike to the party boss who wants everyone to shout the same slogan and to the scientific bureaucrat who wishes to treat mankind as so much material to be organized and conditioned according to the requirements of his large scale social planning. And this is a bad outlook for humanity, since the Commissar-mentality has very little sense of human values and is often incapable of discriminating between the social reformer and the anti-social type, between the idealist and the criminal. In fact the totalitarian state is, by its very nature, intolerant not merely of criticism but of diversity; so that it combines all the intolerances of the past—the intolerance of the absolutist state for the rebel, the intolerance of the orthodox state for the heretic, the intolerance of the police state for the criminal—into a massive weight of social pressure that forces everyone into the same mould of total conformity.

In the past, Western Civilization was based on the assumption that man had an immortal soul, and however much the state demanded, it admitted, at least in theory, that the destiny of every human being reached beyond the extreme limits of political society, so that human conduct was ultimately governed and judged by super-social laws. The secularization of Western Society did not immediately destroy the consequences of this belief. On the contrary, the more men lost their faith in God, the more desperately did they cling to the belief in the liberty and value of human personality which was the fruit of a thousand years of Christian culture. The present plight of Western culture is due, as Mr. Koestler recognizes, to the fact that the real values that we are defending against the totalitarian state are values that have been divorced from their religious and metaphysical foundations, and are in so far indefensible, but which remain the highest values which we possess. "Human

rights and moral traditions," he writes, "which 50 years ago we took for granted, are abolished in large parts of the world, and are in the process of abolition in others. Habeas corpus, freedom of speech, civil law, respect for the individual life, the unwritten codes of certain minimum decencies—how stale and ridiculous all these appeared at a time when Utopia seemed at hand, and how desperately important they are now, when we stand with our backs against the wall! The tragedy is that only those realize what oxygen means who have known the torture of suffocation; only those who have shared the life of the ordinary native in Nazi Germany or Stalinite Russia for at least a year know that disintegration of the human substance which befalls people deprived of our basic liberties . . . The English public, disgruntled but secure within the law, does not know the shivering insecurity, the naked horror, of an autocratic police state. They only know their own frustrations. The atmosphere of democracy has become a stale fug, and those who breathe it cannot be expected to be grateful for the air which it contains. The predicament of Western civilization is that it has ceased to be aware of the values which it is in peril of losing."

No one has done more than Mr. Koestler to bring home to the English and American reader what this loss of the fundamental liberal and humane value entails and how complete is the resultant disintegration of human life. But on the positive side his treatment is much less satisfactory, since his own mind has been affected by the atmosphere of frustration and scepticism from which it is so difficult for a member of the intelligentsia to escape. He does not fully realise how heavy is the responsibility of the intellectuals themselves for the situation he describes in such a masterly way. For the truth is that if the totalitarian state had been constructed by the men of action—soldiers and policemen and politicians and engineers—it would never have become so formidable a threat to man's spiritual freedom. It would have been at least an external threat like the despotisms of the past. It was the revolutionary intelligentsia which invented the dictatorship of the proletariat, and it was romantic idealists like Nietzsche and Sorel who invented the Fascist mythology of creative violence. And the transformation of the revolutionary idealist into the commissar type took place at a much earlier stage in the development than Mr. Koestler recognises. It is already evident, as far back as 1862, in Turgenev's Bazarov, who more than any of Dostoievski's characters represents the real dynamism of the Russian revolutionary tradition. The denial of God by the intelligentsia was the turning point in western civilisation. From that point the road has led without a turning to the concentration camps and slaughter houses of the totalitarian

state. For it is obvious that any atheistic socialism, whether of the Left or the Right, can only think in terms of the whole and not of the individual, and that it will seem as reasonable and just for it to liquidate a class or exterminate a few million of social or racial undesirables as it is for a surgeon to conduct a major operation for the health of the organism as a whole. The revolutionary realist has an unanswerable case against the revolutionary idealist when he accuses the latter of willing the end and refusing the means on sentimental grounds, and it is as difficult for a Christian to judge between them as it was for Alice to make up her mind between the attitude of the Walrus and that of the Carpenter towards the oysters.

It is true that humanitarianism of the modern intelligentsia cannot be written off as a mere matter of sentiment. It was based on deep and sincere convictions with something of the nature of a religious faith, and there are few movements in history that have had so great an effect on human life. Nevertheless, it belongs to the age of transition between Christian and secular culture and its chief successes were the result of a working coalition with the forces of organised religion such as we see in the case of the abolition of slavery or the factory acts or the movements against the exploitation of uncivilised peoples. When humanitarianism is left to its own resources in a purely secular environment it tends to wither away like political idealism.

Mr. Koestler is well aware of this fragility of the intelligentsia and of their work. But he does not fully recognise their exceptional and unrepresentative position in European culture. After all, "the intelligentsia" is a Russian expression coined to describe the strange hot-house development of a class without social roots and political responsibilities, which was the result of the introduction of western culture and ideas into Tzarist Russia. It was a specifically Russian phenomenon for which we can find no true parallel in the development of the educated classes in Western Europe or even in the student class in the Far East or India, where the conflict of hereditary and imported cultures is even sharper.

Now in this vanished world of the prerevolutionary Russian intelligentsia, the Yogi and the Commissar correspond to a real conflict of human types and social ideals. The Russian intellectuals saw on the one side the German drill sergeant and the Anglo-Saxon engineer who were bringing an alien efficiency and method into Russia, while on the other side the popular tradition still preserved the ideals of the desert monks, of the ascetics and hermits and "fools for Christ's sake", whose life had no meaning to the modern mind and no relation to the facts of modern society. The Russian

intelligentsia lived in the vacuum between these two worlds and the Russian revolutionary tradition arose out of their tension. But in the west it has not been so. We have had rationalists and we have had mystics, but we have never had a highly conscious intellectual class that was separated alike from popular religious tradition and from political responsibility and control. At no point in its history was western civilisation a Yogi civilisation inspired by the ideal of static contemplation which characterised the oriental world. It was a civilisation built by faith on the solid earth, which maintained the complementary values of the contemplative and the active life. Western Christendom had been inspired from the beginning by an active missionary spirit which alone gave it the power to survive the catastrophes of the barbarian invasions and to initiate the new peoples into the Christian tradition. But its action did not stop at this point as did that of Byzantine Christendom. Already in the middle ages it had conceived the specifically western idea of the systematic exploration and control of nature by reason and art, and in the following centuries Western man achieved the immense task of conquering and transforming the world. And when Western civilisation lost the faith that formerly inspired it, it did not lose the dynamic character that it had acquired in these centuries of struggle and achievement. Indeed, the more it lost its spiritual aim, the more it clung to its material achievement and the more fiercely did it concentrate its energies on the conquest of power. And thus it has come about that the immense progress of our civilisation in material resources and in the scientific control of nature and human life has become a blind movement to destruction which finds its embodiment in the Frankenstein monster of the totalitarian state. For dynamism without spiritual purpose or guidance must inevitably be destructive. And the responsibility for this development rests finally with the intellectuals who are the brain of society and not with the officials—commissars or bureaucrats—who are its executive arm. It is true that at the present time the natural order of the body of society has been inverted, so that the temporal power has usurped the functions of the spiritual, and the scientist and the thinker and the artist have become mere instruments or servants of the men of power of the commissar or capitalist type. Nevertheless, this perversion of order is itself, in the last resort, the work of the intellectuals. It is the fruit of a false philosophy and a false education which originated among a small elite of intellectuals and which were gradually diffused and popularised by the leaders of "enlightened" and "progressive" opinion. And, as Mr. Koestler recognises in the last section of his book, the malady from which our

civilisation is suffering can only be remedied by a reversal of this process which will restore the true hierarchy of spiritual ends and recognise the autonomy and irreducibility of the higher levels of spiritual reality.

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LITERATURE AND CRITICISM

THERE are obvious difficulties about reviewing a dictionary, especially when the dictionary approaches the status of an encyclopaedia in the variety of the matters covered and the method of treating them. The most useful way in which I can deal with the *Dictionary of World Literature*⁽¹⁾ is first to indicate the general scope of the book, then to consider the various forms which the discussion of literature may take and to use examples from the book to point or illustrate my remarks.

The dictionary as a whole is not concerned with judgments on particular or collective works of literature, but with general ideas bearing on literature, literary forms and technique, ancient and modern criticism, schools and movements, and rhetorical terms. Thus Dante and Milton are not appraised as poets, but their poetical theory is resumed, and the forms they used are considered under such headings as *Epic*, *Sonnet*, *Terza rima*, *English versification*. The amount of actual information given is large and wide-ranging, and the Editor may be praised for his general planning and his marshalling of contributors.

Of the various ways in which literature may be discussed the most important is the most general—the examination of the nature and purpose of literature in the light of metaphysics and morals. This may be called the philosophy of literature, and its value evidently depends on the truth of the higher principles it appeals to and the skill with which deductions are made. False principles to begin with, or inexperience in application, may render it nugatory or harmful. It is nowadays rare to find a writer on literature whose general philosophical training is adequate for the attempt, and Mr. Shipley has been fortunate in securing a leaven of such work for his dictionary. Dr. Coomaraswamy contributes three articles which are steeped in metaphysical wisdom (*Indian drama*, *Indian literary theory*, *Symbolism*); and there are Catholic contributors who, without showing such mastery of their tradition as he does of his, have yet been well enough grounded scholastically to give their articles a solidity of background usually lacking in the

(1) *Dictionary of World Literature: Criticism, Forms, Technique*. Ed. J. T. Shipley. (Routledge; 35s.).