

By the same Author

TARR

ROTTING HILL

THE REVENGE FOR LOVE

THE LION AND THE FOX

THE WRITER AND THE ABSOLUTE

by

WYNDHAM LEWIS



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PART I

TRUTH AND FREEDOM

CHAPTER I

OBJECTIVE TRUTH

As far as I personally am concerned, I am paralysed the moment I try to write something I do not regard as true. I should be useless as a propagandist. My propaganda would so reek of insincerity that it would irretrievably damage the cause it was intended to further. Other writers have told me that it is like that with them too.

No moral scruple in writing something false would be present: for an understanding of the writer's dilemma what has to be recognized is the paralysis induced by the unreal—our nature's rootedness in *fact*. And the shoddy, the wooden style which finally would emerge were I to give myself up to propaganda would have an aspect at once repellent and spurious, corresponding as it did to nothing real, nor to the outright opposite of the real.

A writer whose country fell under the domination of a gang, was forced, he told me (his life and liberty in the balance), to write propaganda for a year or more. At the end of that period he made his escape into a free country. But he declared that as a consequence of what he had been forced to do he became (sexually) impotent. I do not, however, advance this as a serious contribution to medical science. All I mean is that, whether true or not, it serves to demonstrate the attitude of the man of letters to the dragooning of his pen.

What holds the true apart from the false is a great force. This can be illustrated in the works of famous writers, but it is in the case of the great masters of painting that the operation of this instinct occurs with all the publicity of the visible, within sight of all of us, and so it is there that it may be studied to the best advantage. Chardin, with a bland intensity, fastens his eye, impacts his gaze forever, upon some object of daily use. Van Eyck, with the same intense animal absorption and austere tenacity, upon

Arnolfini and his wife. The *true* image must be put down. Delicate, minute, must be the inventory of truth. Is this imitation? Because of a pressure as irresistible as gravitation the artist cleaves to the truth. Writers are under identical compulsions in their creative life to those governing the practice of the masters of the visual arts I have just mentioned.

It would be an error, however, to regard these compulsions as privileged. Everyone, in one degree or another, experiences the kind of 'gravitational pull' alluded to above. It is not only felt by some exquisitely sensitive person of the order of Chardin, Bach, or Crabbe. Truth is as necessary to everybody as the air we breathe. Naturally it is much more difficult to explain why this is so. There are no lungs, visibly pumping up and down, that correspond to it and illustrate its use.

But no sooner had I written this than I saw that I was wrong. Gigantic lungs are indeed there, making the counter-demonstration easy: no anatomical machinery perhaps, installed in every chest, such as stamps the atmosphere a human necessity, but a universal word-machine operating throughout the earth, lung-like inhaling and exhaling—hour by hour taking in facts and pouring them forth again—each day an *event-full* day. The Press!

It will seem a great paradox, I know, having affirmed that truth is as necessary as air, to go on to couple truth with—of all things—the Press. But that supercilious reaction to such a coupling is a XIXth Century hangover. Twentieth century Man has made a bleak discovery: namely, *Better a bad Press than no Press at all*. There is such a thing as *No Press*—or as-good-as-none. That is the discovery. Everything short of that is *free*, in some measure, dimly, or clearly. A 'Free Press' is any Press at all—in 1952. We have come to think of freedom as not-being *not-free*. A millimetre this side of servitude.

The printed word is, then, as it were an element. The Press on account of its size, as well as to sustain my image of a Public Lung, had to be taken first. Its printing presses go on pounding out, in limitless quantity, what is imperfectly accurate, even a lifeless parody of fact—though crime and sport come through sharp and

clear. Its values, we know, are those of children, its emphasis upon what interests the childish adult.—For the more accurate, or somewhat more so, and the more grown-up spawnings of the printed word, we go to smaller weekly or monthly publications.

I am involved with a man I know in a cold war of fact against fiction, in which I battle for fact. My friend is chronically untruthful. That is not all; he betrays a barbaric appetite for untruth. So I bring up my legions of hard facts: these he would soften, if possible dissolve. Nothing such as ethics is at stake.

Truth, for the purposes of this vocabulary, is *what is*. Accordingly, with his *is not*—his zero principle—my friend would rot, in its totality, the temporal *is*, the real. The fictive can be deadly, like dry rot, developing at a great pace. To dread it is everybody's instinct—to uphold and to cleave to the accurate, even as those great painters I have named made a fetish of the object.

Freedom to write what one regards as true is my subject throughout these pages. Words being charged in the way they are, being social and political dynamite, the problem of their unlicensed use must of necessity arise. Writers have blown the world up with words. In consequence, although extremely few writers are of a destructive sort, a Marx or a Rousseau, a page of type essentially is a less innocent thing than a musical score.

This is not a subject of mere professional interest and inquiry. Writing is twin-brother to speaking. And speaking is everybody's profession. We are about to discuss problems of human communication, or of its absence: the bridges constructed by means of words between one mind and another, or the isolation and darkness that are there when veracity becomes a crime and writing dictated like a business letter. Then, if people write to order they speak to order likewise. And if as they converse they fear one another, if words are a danger, spoken as much as written, it would be better to refrain from speech, to become a silent people, a people of mutes.—But the speaking, and the writing, all the time, go together, that is what I want to say.

Books were of course for Thomas Carlyle (one of those obvious

brawny minds), public and promiscuous. In a letter to Goethe he wrote: 'wherever men seek Truth, spiritual Clearness and Beauty, there *you* have brothers and children.' Truth, Clearness, and Beauty, naturally are public matters. Indeed, Truth (but written truth), as understood in the passages you read earlier, is as public and as necessary as the air we breath. Truth or Beauty are as much public concerns as the water supply.

It is true that the writer in our day—succumbing to the glamour of cryptical techniques and the lure of easy reputation—has allowed himself to be edged into a dark corner of the forum. Progressively he has been pushed away from the centre of things. Whatever style he adopt, daily he tends to lose his worldly place. Yet the writer belongs where the public is, with his bag-full of words, as much as the orator, with his mouthful of same. In one way or another truth, or, what is the same thing, clearness—not as big Victorian abstractions but rather the logical definition of the classic mind—must be the major object of his search.

Goethe would find no 'brother and children' in a totalitarian state. 'Nor—can you ever be left *alone*', writes the big pessimistic-looking optimist, Carlyle, when the world was still very young, in 1828, to the conceited old god in the Schloss Dornburg. We today, in 1952, stare in surprise at this distant rhetoric. We experience no difficulty at all in imagining a society in which Goethe would be childless and brotherless and perfectly alone. Not only Goethe, however, but all the poets and prophets of the West.—It is a crisis of coincidence in the survival value of truth.

What is a book, very often, but a long letter to some friend? Yet no great writer even in posterity has many friends. It is the small ones, like Lamb, who collect a posthumous circle. In common with letters, books can have anything for their subject, the baptist missions in China, XVIIIth Century gallantry, the chemical elements, or social revolution; often they are anything that two people wish to say to one another, but, being in different places, must write instead of speak. Many books answer to that description.

Books are not always of necessity in their form promiscuous.

But they are quite as much so as the most communicative citizen, seeing that everybody receives them whoever they are intended for. And the effect of intimacy they convey is valuable, socially, quite extraordinarily so. Everyone reads them and everyone enjoys a unique privacy as he does so. That is if he reads them with a proper attention, I ought to add, as he would a private letter containing family matter.

I have been conversational. In the manner of easy discussion, there has been no question of precision. Naturally, it would not be difficult to pick up my opening sentence, to go no further than that, and to inquire what makes me so confident that what I 'regard as true' is not in reality false: or again, a little further on, what significance I attribute to the identification of my personal truth with the factual? In any but language of the utmost circumspection you expose yourself to the attentions of the policeman of the logic-squad, on the watch for careless talkers.

What I wish to show is precisely the kind of subjects that a writer—in a transitional society—may, (1) without danger of interference select—that *he is free* to select: and (2) the kind that he is NOT free to select: that he treats of at his peril.

Where a subject should be marked *dynamite*, as some medicine bottles are labelled *poison*, there are, as a rule, alternative treatments, one being fairly innocuous, while the other it is best not to touch. Then every sort of 'toning-down', or of watering down, is open to the writer. But if the most insignificant part, if even a single syllable of his text, must be left out for reasons of expediency, the writer should forthwith abandon his project altogether. He should do so because once concessions start there is no end to them, until everything that lends force to the writing has at last disappeared, and nothing remains but an insipid shadow of the vigorous creative entity with which the writer began.¹

In this connexion I always have practised what I preach, insofar

¹ The writer can disregard the danger entirely. No one could say this was wrong (men are not children), only very imprudent. Imprudence on occasion pays.

as refusing to trim or to 'tone down' or delete so much as a single syllable or letter in the interests of expediency. But I cannot claim that, in cases where trimming and emasculation were imperative, I have at once given up the idea of treating that particular subject. More often than not I have gone ahead with what I set out to do, the writing has proceeded without falsification, and eventually has appeared in print in all its pristine tactlessness. So my work may be taken as the reverse of a model of prudence. As a result of my having failed to observe the simple rules I am laying down here, I have attracted to myself every description of malevolent interference. My books have suffered suppression and boycott. I may be taken as an object-lesson of what one cannot write. (In that capacity, it is as satirist I excel.) What has befallen me, or rather my books, proves what is my contention: namely that the mid-XXth Century writer is only nominally free, and should not fail to acquire a thorough knowledge of the invisible frontiers surrounding his narrow patch of liberty, to transgress which may be fatal.

CHAPTER II

IT IS MORE DANGEROUS TO WRITE

It is dangerous to live, but to write is much more so.—That statement sums up the situation, though it would never have occurred to Bulwer Lytton, Ruskin, or Mrs. Gaskell, let us say, to look at writing in that way. Had you pointed out to them, indeed, that writing made living more dangerous, they would have wondered what on earth you were talking about. In the days of Guelph and Ghibelline, or of the Inquisition, or in XVIIth Century England, on the other hand, such a view of writing would have been accepted as a truism. '*Think what you like: but for heaven's sake do not write it down!*'—such an exhortation would have been received, too, as sound advice and greatly to the point.—We still trail clouds of glory, unfortunately, from the XIXth Century. Few have cleared their minds sufficiently of Victorian furniture; even today, when writing actually is *very* dangerous, people mostly take up the pen as if every rattle-snake bowed to the sanctity of free speech, and never bit a man of letters or a journalist for fear it should be accused of interfering with it.

Men do not take their lives because living is so risky, of course, and has such a sinister conclusion; nor has there ever been a writer who refrained from writing because he knew it made living more dangerous. And I should add, perhaps, that this book is *not* like the *safety-first* publicity campaigns of the Police, warning people to be more circumspect when they are crossing the road—and admonishing motorists to be a little more particular about killing pedestrians—although it may seem like that at times. I should like to see writers bolder, if anything, occasionally. They pursue this very risky calling so warily that they are like men who take their carcass around as if it were full of eggs which they fear the least jolt will break. It is a long time since anyone in England said 'bo' to a goose.—All I would do is to bring out the limits, and the

true character, of liberty, as that concerns the writer. Airing the misadventures of the free mind, martyred for liberty—which involves truth—in the pursuit of literature, may, who knows, improve the position a little.

Now, in discussing the writer's freedom, one must be careful to distinguish between, (1) his freedom qua writer, and (2) his freedom qua man. These two varieties of freedom are extremely different: though, in practice, they may be said to some extent to merge.

Unquestionably freedom for the writer qua writer does exist.¹ There is a sort of freedom that is his: the unadulterated quality of the truth secreted in his writings is responsible for it. Yet the moment he *publishes* what he writes, the problem of his freedom ceases to have as much to do with that quality as the sentimentalist believes.

To this puzzling question of *quality*, a political-journalist, a short while ago, in a casual remark, made, quite unintentionally, a novel contribution. Voltaire's often-quoted assertion was the starting-point: Mr. Tom Driberg, M.P., expressed the hope that he too (the honourable member) would lay down his life in defence of Mr. T. S. Eliot, greatly as he abhorred the politics² of the author of *The Waste Land*. Since here it was not Mr. Eliot's right to hold different political views from those of Mr. Driberg that was in question, obviously we are dealing with a quite different proposition from that of Voltaire (though Mr. Driberg does not appear to have noticed this). Voltaire was only concerned with the question of the right to *write*. Mr. Driberg was, in fact, introducing a new principle of freedom for the writer—aesthetic, where Vol-

¹ So many claims are advanced to what we know to be aimless and illusory liberties, that such phrases as 'The freedom of the writer', left undefined for long, would run the risk of appearing to belong to that claptrap order of things. The attempt will be made to secure for those words a less empty sound.—The writer's complete independence of received opinion, or of the most aggressive beliefs of his contemporaries, is mythical. But *any* claim must rest upon more than aesthetic considerations.

² Mr. T. S. Eliot has described himself as 'a royalist'.

taire's was political and ethical. Voltaire did not specify that this right was contingent upon the high literary reputation of a writer, or that he should be the author of some work of unusual quality. With Mr. Driberg, quality is recognized as a deciding factor in the bestowal of *right*. Because the quality of Kipling's writing was high, for instance, revealing an unusual mastery of his material, he would be at liberty to wallow in detestable imperialist politics. That is the idea—though Mr. Driberg is not responsible for using Kipling to illustrate it.

It would be very unwise for a writer to place much reliance upon this principle, although quality does play its incalculable part. The fact that Shakespeare had written a number of plays of extremely high quality would be no safeguard at all for him under totalitarian conditions. Russian communist critics recently indulged in a picturesque 'value judgement', for instance, regarding typical Western writers—Mr. Eliot among them—describing them as 'hyenas'. *The Waste Land* therefore would not in Russia provide immunity for its author, the value it still retains, it seems, for Mr. Driberg, being transformed in Moscow into a minus quantity.

The *quality* factor is only valid where men, even if violently absorbed in other values, as they are in a society in transition, still care after a fashion for civilized values. While recognizing that quality must be counted in, it is best not to insist on it—for all practical purposes indeed to disregard it. It is the function of writing—conditioned only by the understanding that *writing* means serious writing—with which we are concerned.

A great measure of freedom would be allowed the writer, provided a restricted number of topics (to be specified in every case) were avoided: let us start with that assumption. As an example of the kind of topic to eschew: in England the King and Queen, it is agreed, are not so much above, as outside, criticism. As a subject for a serious writer they are tabu.¹ They have been described as super-civil servants. They are the summit of the Protocol:

¹ Unless they are dead. Lytton Strachey, for example, without offence could discuss Queen Victoria. Had she been alive that would have been impossible.

symbolic of the nation in terms of etiquette. They are if you like, official screen-stars the nation has inherited.—Another example, I think, is the Jews—very different, however, from that of the King and Queen. They have suffered for so long such dreadful persecutions that they should be out of bounds for the critic, like a person cursed with physical deformity.—Another example would be whatever was peculiarly dear to the *de facto* ruler or rulers of the state you live in. In 1952 for the writer to avoid *that* is elementary—unless he wish to be boycotted, starved, or murdered.

It is as a sort of guardian of the public stock of truth, of the purest objectivity (clear as it is, at its best, of all that clouding and distorting induced by the pressure of material interests in newspaper or magazine) it is upon this that the writer's claim can be most sensibly based. Men make no difficulty in recognizing that a bad Press, or no Press at all, is fatal to civil liberty, and removes all prospect of social justice. Does the same understanding exist regarding *books*? Do you ever see it stressed that, if the writer's—the *book-writer's*—freedom is tampered with or stamped out, democratic institutions, even the very idea of democracy, must perish? Is it realized that far more than the Press, the *book* is a symbol of liberty?—The answer is, of course, No. I do not remember ever seeing this stated, much less stressed. 'The freedom of the Press' is one of the standard, essential freedoms. The form this slogan should take is—'The freedom of the Press and of Literature.' The superior quality of literary-freedom to newspaper-freedom is obvious: a finer truth is plainly involved. What is circumstantially demonstrable is that invasion of the rights of the man of letters is an even more certain sign of the anti-libertarian character of a ruler or a régime than is muzzling the Press.

The writer's freedom to speculate, to criticize, to create, on the same terms as those enjoyed by the men of science—that is a quite reasonable claim, and one I should like to be able to make without qualification. Words are social dynamite: writers—like Rousseau or Marx for instance—have blown the world up with their words.

It is true that it is only a civilization that the writer may shatter in that way, whereas the physicist, in his bombardment of the atom, may ultimately be responsible for the destruction of the earth. But people somehow do not mind that so much. The man who, with his words, is liable to produce social disturbances—or even in the purgative processes of satire, to make them feel outrageously uncomfortable—is regarded by people as more of a menace than the man who may blast them with a death-ray, or disturb the functioning of the terrestrial ball upon which they live and bicker.

The writer can never hope to go of a morning into his working room with the same carefree detachment with which the man of science enters his—free to investigate our most moronic peculiarities without protest, or to devise how best to wipe us out in bulk by means of radiation or atomic fission. A relative freedom can be attained by the writer if he come in a fairly mild period. He has, in many periods, enjoyed it.

There is a class of man who is not a scientist, whose work has many analogies with his—who is himself, indeed, a writer (but of a highly specialized variety) with whom the man of letters might profitably compare notes. He is more privileged, however, on quasi-scientific grounds, than is the novelist, for instance. Yet he suffers from some of the same natural disadvantages. I refer to the historian. To examine the causes of those disadvantages, and the grounds of the historian's title to quasi-scientific status, may well be of assistance in framing a claim on behalf of the man of letters to greater political indulgence, and greater latitude as social-historian or critic, actually as sociologist.—All writers, however, are not novelists: and this may seem at first a roundabout way of getting at the question of the freedom of the writer. It is not really as roundabout as it might seem.

The big romantic historian who thought he was called upon to be a novelist is a thing of the past. History was so obviously biased as to be worthless as history—if by history, that is, we are to understand a medium for the ascertaining and recording of the

objective truth of past events, rather than an instrument for the manufacture of opinion or the weaving of a chauvinistic melodrama, with heroes (our lot-protestant English) and villains (our foreign enemies).

The 'scientific' doctrine (as opposed to the humanistic) for the writing of history—expressed in von Ranke's pronouncement 'Er will bloss sagen wie es eigentlich gewesen'—is finally in the ascendant. Once you admit, in however mild a degree, the legitimacy of approaching history from a fixed philosophical or theological or partisan position, you are using the past in a way that you would not wish your own present to be used—or, to make it more personal still, the events of your own life.

Tendenz-history is concerned to conceal, in its record of the past, anything likely to influence the mind of the reader unfavourably with regard to those institutions and policies it serves, or, with the same object in view, to blacken or to whitewash all the figures it pretends truthfully to portray. It is common knowledge however how biased have been the men of letters who availed themselves of this medium—Carlyle, Hallam, Macaulay. But until this century (for von Ranke's good intentions had little effect upon the ineradicable chauvinism of the German historian of the Sybel or Treitschke type) the 'scientific' doctrine was apt to be made us of, only to produce a deceptive appearance of factual authenticity. Where history was not any longer merely an incantation, it became something worse, namely, a counterfeit, a 'tricked' photograph.

Today, I believe I am right in saying, the historian has definitely ranged himself beside the anthropologist, entomologist, and archaeologist: has come to the decision to regard his métier as belonging rather to the realm of science than to that of saga. It is Professor Bury of Cambridge more than anyone else who was responsible for the writing of history in England taking this direction; though with the damping down of the optimistic exuberance of earlier days it would in any event not have been long delayed.

Such an interpretation of the business of the historian would exactly agree with the instinct of a majority of the great novelists.

In their case, it is true, there is as a rule not the same temptation to introduce into the delineation of their characters a religious or political bias, since the characters in question are not, usually, historical personages. Their only bias is the bias of their temperament. But there is in all those arts which parallel nature something like a law obliging the artist to a fanatical scrupulosity, as it were a physical incapacity to depart from nature's truth in exchange for any other. This is as inescapable as the requirements of geometry. The writer Flaubert as much as the painter Chardin provides an impressive illustration of this law. The operation of this law was the subject-matter of my first pages, and it will throughout act as a guiding principle.

Naturally a novelist does not *have* to depict people and things as they in fact are—to be, in his kind, a historian. All men are not realists: they may have no taste for the 'real' in that sense at all. But if a realist like Flaubert has been obliged, let us say, to portray some particular class as noble, he would have been lost, for from long observation he had formed the lowest opinion of all of them: had Tolstoy—a very great realist, too—been compelled to show people otherwise than as he saw them, he would have been lost: had a discipline been imposed upon Dickens which reined in and sobered down the exuberance of his humour (for fear of giving offence) *he* would have been lost.

The truth of the great novelists is different from and more personal, certainly, than that of the contemporary 'scientific' historian. But in each case a meticulous fidelity to life is of its essence. To ask it to falsify nature would be to destroy it.

What the contemporary historian's difficulty is, is really of a most obvious nature. He is like a newspaper suddenly become conscious of the fact that *news* is what it is supposed to be purveying. And Tory news, or Communist news, or Catholic news, is not news properly speaking.—We all want to know at any given moment what is in fact happening—not what some Blimp or some Crypto would like us to believe is happening. We thirst for truth, it depresses us to feel—to know—that the image we receive of events from the Press and radio is distorted, truncated, or

deliberately blurred. We want our party-news too, of course. But if we knew that there was a daily newspaper full of unadulterated, factual reports—just a *newspaper* and nothing else, we all should buy it.

Returning to our historian, the kind of facts about which he must come to a decision are of the following nature. Martin Luther cuts a very different figure in history for a Catholic or for a Protestant. The Boer War, again, looked awfully different to the Dutch from what it did to the English. Then Marx and Engels would not be such historical giants, I suppose, in a history of the XIXth Century selected for use at Groton, U.S.A., as in one we should discover in a budding commissar's academy in Moscow. —What then is the serious historian to do?—It must at times present great difficulties, but as far as possible he will banish personal reactions and put down all he can find out, good, bad, and indifferent, about the group or the person he is studying. He will make his mind a virgin receptable for chronologic truth. If this sounds like going back to something naïvely scientific, the method of Descartes for instance—too abstract a 'truth'—the answer is as follows. If you are repelled by truth uncoloured by mysticism, economic theory, or political passion, you are not obliged to pay any attention to it. The fact remains that most contemporary British historians show a marked preference for that type of truth. And a reality of the same order underlies the art of the greatest writers.

In a very interesting broadcast¹ Professor Herbert Butterfield of Cambridge outlined his idea of the mission of the historian, which was nothing less than to dissolve the walls isolating human beings: party walls, national walls, or religious divisions: 'We see human beings apparently at times locked away from one another in their separate worlds of thought.' It is because he underestimates the dimensions of the gulf separating them from one another that the historian usually fails. And of course what primarily separates them is race, nationality, religion, or politics. The historian himself must be impervious to those estranging factors, it follows.

¹ For text see *Listener* June 26, 1947.

Professor Butterfield drew a striking parallel between the historian and the actor. Here is the passage in which that occurred:

I remember one man who told me that he was so convinced that Oliver Cromwell was in the right that he could not bring himself even to attempt to see things with the eye of Charles I. The man who is so much the prisoner of his ideas that he must always side with Oliver Cromwell—for ever unable to summon the imaginative sympathy to enter into the mentality of men who are not like-minded with himself—is the very antithesis of what is required in history. He is no more a historian than that man is an actor who cannot play Othello as well as King Lear—in fact, he is only like that bogus kind of actor who . . . is always the same, always only himself.

You cannot have the doctrine of the impersonality of the historian more plainly stated than that. To approach Charles Stuart and Oliver Cromwell with god-like impartiality, and in the year of grace 1952 to weigh the divine right of kings against a people's dictatorship, in a scales unaffected by the climate of opinion of the day, would be a considerable feat. And—for argument's sake, and I am not by the way now quoting Professor Butterfield—to recall that French autocracy, the model for the Stuart kings, was, in its turn, modelled upon the Roman imperial pattern: that Cromwell was in reality an emperor, a XVIIth Century English example of caesarism akin to our XXth Century Caesars—and that *therefore* what Charles I and Oliver Cromwell both wanted to be was much the same thing—this, which is the historical common sense of the matter, would not help in the least. It would be like reminding people that the present occupant of the Kremlin is a potentate very like those who formerly were to be found there.

I have yet to find an historian, as a matter of fact, who would approach—to take contemporary counterparts, more or less, of Cromwell and the last doctrinaire autocrat English history has to show—Franco and Perón, Stalin and Tito, with the angelic detachment advocated by Professor Butterfield. I am sure that, like the man the Professor knew who was convinced that Cromwell was right and Charles I wrong, even the most detached contemporary

historian would find the universally execrated Caudillo more than a match for his historical impartiality. But it is an ideal of course, that is all, towards which we must strive. And one must not ask impossibilities of what is after all a human instrument.

These remarks—for which the casual confrontation just now, in Professor Butterfield's broadcast, of Charles I and Cromwell has been responsible—I will conclude by saying this. Today a king like Charles I is as unreal as a griffin or a unicorn. Yet—and although for me too he is a queer laced and booted heraldic puppet—the City magnates who are reputed to have been the decisive factor in his execution, or the dark swarms of Puritans who inflamed the people against him on religious grounds, were both far more formidable than he was. Charles was, in fact, an infinitely less dangerous creature than some of our XXth Century despots.

He planned wars. But what inexpensive little wars compared with ours, the last of which has entirely gutted the country of all its inherited wealth. He imposed taxes—the most notorious case being the ship-money. Yet today such a tax as the ship-money would seem hardly a tax at all, but a timid and apologetic reminder of the existence of government. Knowing Hobbes to have been a rabid royalist partisan as we do, nevertheless it is impossible not to feel that there was more than partisanship in his ironical comment:

'Mark the oppression: a Parliament-man of £500 a-year land-taxed at 20/-!'

For that was the modest sum involved in the ship-money.

There is much contemporary evidence of the emancipation of the historian from the parish pump. Arnold Toynbee was reported as telling a Canadian club audience when he was there in '47 that it was desirable to transcend their merely British reactions to world events. He was speaking as a man who had seen so many civilizations flower and decay that he had come to look upon such events as a small matter. Also no doubt he wished to console them. What response his empire-audience would accord to this lofty detachment I can only surmise.—Toynbee's teaching has been

consistently relativistic. His method has been compared to H. G. Wells's *Time Machine*. This is because he abstains from emotional judgements, and to some he has seemed too aloof a guide. This universalism recommends itself to others, among them myself.

But as an outcome of these remarks regarding the historian, we can turn to the question of the independence of the man of letters with perhaps a better chance of understanding. For why should it be recognized that a man called an 'historian' has the right, even duty, to be the purveyor of 'God's truth' about events—not a Catholic truth, or a Protestant truth, an English truth, or a Japanese truth, a bourgeois truth, or a proletarian truth, but what in fact happened, and why it happened: but this objectivity be denied to another class of man—the man of letters—usually concerned it is true with more contemporary happenings; or, of course, to the historian when he turns to the present day? How long must a statesman or other notorious figure be dead before he becomes an object of truth, as it were? What is the time-interval needed to make an event a rational property of the mind? Is it denied us to live otherwise than irrationally?

The man of letters—novelist especially, and essayist or critic—deals of necessity a great deal with history-in-the-making. We live in a period saturated with politics; politics must therefore play a greater part in his work than he might wish. In this matter I do not say he can attain to the detachment of the historian—with his Cromwells and his Charleses. If the historian, after all, were liable to be denounced by the Harrison and Lambert faction and clapped in a concentration camp, even the most successfully impersonal would develop some subjective emotions, in spite of himself.

The high principle to be adhered to as much by the man of letters as by the historian,¹ as that concerns events in the world about him, is to preserve the individual judgement intact, immune from contagions of popular hysteria, and undistorted by anger or fear. Such is the ideal, that is all one can say. He must be of no

¹ Naturally these are often one and the same. But referring here as I do only to the contemporary specialist the distinction is valid.

party; of no *nation* (in the aggressive, competitive sense); of no *religion* (if with that goes bigotry and intolerance).

This must not be mistaken for an extreme statement of 'individualism'. It is an extreme statement, rather, on behalf of a universalized individual (whom his more 'rugged' cousin would regard as no individual at all): one who is emancipated, as only an individual can be from group-superstitions and group-loyalties. If the kind of people we are talking about are not like this, they must be in the position of the man Professor Butterfield knew: their judgements would be prejudices. It would be a mistake for them to engage in occupations where their pronouncements enjoy the authority of *the truth*, for then of course they would all the time be lying.

The value placed upon the individual here is, in other words, not on account of his *identity*, but because of his remarkable capacity for non-identity, or abstraction. To that the Group can never attain. How French the French are, how American the American! They are seething with prejudice, for that is the Group: members of both those nations, however, have possessed as virgin an eye as you could find anywhere.—A million people are far more concrete than is one person: paradoxically, it is that which is furthest removed from the Whole (i.e. the individual, the least part of the Whole) which is most capable of total apprehension.

Further, to distinguish the Individual of which I spoke from the 'rugged individualist':—it is a much more attractive proposition, most people would find, to be a standard American, or typical insular Briton, than to be something less groupish. It is to the groupish order of things that the 'rugged individualist' belongs. His individualism is merely his personal version of some groupish prejudice: his 'liberties' are groupish idiosyncrasies.

CHAPTER III

FREEDOM IS NOT METAPHYSICAL

FREEDOM is not metaphysical, a mystery; it is what, in the first place, enables me to write this book, and enables you to buy it and read it. But it is more than that on any count: and there are some things about it that it is necessary to recognize from the beginning.

Perhaps in order to make more acceptable the disastrous decline in our civil liberties, my friend Mr. Herbert Read would deny the commutative character of the words 'freedom' and 'liberty': would restrict or forbid the use of 'freedom' in reference to politics—also suggesting that mere liberties are, comparatively speaking, matters of small importance. Let me discuss this interesting point, and, at the same time, start another discussion.

Owing to the fact that, unlike *Liberté*, the English equivalent possesses no adjective, this circumstance would almost alone I am afraid dispose of any attempt to confine 'Freedom' to non-political usage. 'Liberty' would still have to borrow from 'Freedom' all the time the indispensable vocable 'free': 'free speech', 'free elections', 'free trade'. And where would the Tories be without 'free enterprise'? But of course the whole of our colloquial usage would have to be reshaped, in order to reserve the word 'freedom' for some elect category of experience.

Man's elementary rights or liberties are plebeian assets which in the plebs we shall find we need, when we come down out of various little middle-class clouds. Do not let us despise them. So at the same time that the omnipotent state, with its now openly recognized successes in certain countries, is causing some nervousity, it might have been better to refrain from quoting with approval a contemporary philosopher (as does Mr. Read) who speaks disparagingly of liberty. ('I do not believe in it'). Mr. Read recognizes however that something has miscarried: after having

manufactured an exclusive metaphysical glamour for 'freedom', in contradistinction to liberty, he very rightly endeavours to correct the unfortunate impression. 'Nevertheless,' he says, '... it is far from the purpose of these notes to elaborate a freedom which is a compensation for *lack of liberty*.'¹—All one can say is that in that case it was unwise to quote Lord Acton's words: 'A generous spirit prefers that his country should be poor, and weak, and of no account, but free': *and* at the same time to make no disguise of your view that liberty is something of small account, or even not to be encouraged. It is in the following passage that this sentiment is introduced. Read is turning, as he does throughout these notes, to Professor Martin Buber, a teacher who has influenced him considerably, it would seem. 'Buber says: "I love freedom but I do not believe in it", and he adds that we must not make freedom into a theorem, or programme. But here clearly he is using freedom in our sense of liberty; and in that sense I can agree with him.'

The English live now in a country that is 'poor, weak', and of rapidly diminishing account. Overnight, as it were, it has become that, from being one of legendary wealth and power: and for such a country the population is twice as large as it can afford to be. The curtailment of liberties does not improve matters—that fact cannot be shrugged off. Mr. Read it is evident had these facts in the foreground of his mind as he wrote. It was his most creditable impulse to revive the spirits of his small anarchist public: his kind intention to contrive a tonic for those mourning over lost liberties—over vanished frocks and fags, 'fully-fashioned' stockings and big juicy week-end beef-steaks. That he went about it the wrong way was partly a tactical error, partly the result of a penchant for 'austerity'.

These are not his words of course, but the sense of his remarks might be paraphrased as follows; 'You may have lost your liberties, but what does that matter? Look at this beautiful "freedom"! You may in the economic and liberal sense be ruined and "in chains"—while the Americans, for instance, are as we know well-

¹ The italics are his.

fed and free as once we were. You may have bankrupted yourself by wars, and have as a consequence been obliged to accept every kind of oppressive discipline and restrictions. But see—you still have your *freedom*!' To pursue this Readean picture to the bitter end: the naïve delight of the poorly housed, ill-fed, ill-clothed wretch, who discovers that although he has lost his liberty his freedom is still intact, may readily be imagined.

As regards the composition of this compensatory 'freedom', that is shrouded in some obscurity. It is described as 'activist', as 'existential'. Then at one point we find it, apparently, identified with love.¹ How shall we apply this? Shall we say 'You may no longer be very free, but you still can *love*'? Associating this with the 'poor, weak, and of no account' quotation above (and I should perhaps have said that this is an article of barely seven pages) we should arrive at something reminiscent of the Victorian 'love in a cottage'.

Mr. Read's announcement that he is for 'activism' and for the 'existential', is a reaffirmation only of a position that has been his for thirty years. He began, under the influence of T. E. Hulme, as a bergsonian (classifiable as 'existential'). Hulme's Sorelina 'activism' found in him a sympathetic echo.

So when Jean-Paul Sartre asserts: 'il n'y a de réalité que dans l'action',² although Herbert Read might 'faire des façons', he would agree in principle. About the 'existential' there would be even fewer details to be discussed of course. In the critical field for the past fifteen years or more he has, in this country, been one of the main supports of the existentialist, of the militantly irrational, of intuitionist extremism. Heidegger and his disciple Sartre (who dominate the article from which I have quoted—for Buber is almost a private mentor) spring from the same tortured and romantic roots as does the work of Mr. Read's predilection in the visual arts.

¹ 'Free is derived from De Freom, to love (Sanskrit root, *pri* to love). By quoting this etymology Mr. Read seeks to show that Freedom and Freiheit have always been nicer words than that deriving from the coldly legal Libertas.

² *L'Existentialisme*, etc. J. P. Sartre.

The facility with which this friend of mine commits himself to *doctrines* is superficially surprising. He does not change (I am happy to say) but the doctrines do. Also he will move immediately from one advocating a maximum of disciplines to one traditionally abhorring all control. I stare in polite perplexity: but he remains his same gentle and reasonable self—though behaving most irrationally: this should not perhaps be a subject for surprise, seeing that it is only the most irrational, childish, and undeveloped forms of art that attract his mind.

Many people in our time, it is true, need a political doctrine as a one-legged man needs a crutch: as the latter is helpless without his crutch, so are they without their doctrine. Or perhaps what is even more indispensable is a label. Very naturally I speak only of our Western society, and especially the 'intellectuals'. In Russia many millions, and millions outside it, obviously live in the observance of the dogma of communism: in Spain the anarchist doctrine is adhered to, all their lives, by millions. But it is very difficult for an intellectual, who has read much, studied different theories of the State, travelled, and who is living in a Western democracy where life up to now has been easy, to be sincere about an absolutist political doctrine which he does not live.

Now Jean-Paul Sartre, as will be found, plays a prominent part in this book. He invites criticism for an opposite tendency to that displayed by Herbert Read: for lacking, namely, that facility that is the latter's for entering into association. If M. Sartre and Mr. Read could get together it might have a wonderful effect, loosening the one, so to speak, and tightening up the other. But Sartre is not only a non-marrier: he is an outrageous political flirt.

'The word (freedom) implies obligation.' Before Mr. Read, not only Sartre and his masters but very many other people have made this assertion. It is from any point of view a truism: but some have loaded the obligation with so much weighty and burdensome matter that no free man would go near it, and even a galley slave would grumble. If I wanted to name its political

father I should choose Jean-Jacques Rousseau. If this freedom is to be regarded as metaphysical, however, it seems more particularly the property of Kant. The unconditional imperative of the kantian moral consciousness would be the modern classical source, when pondering freedom, for the Germanic thinkers to whose teachings we are beholden for the present stir in the literary world.

According to Kant there is only one possible kind of freedom, for it is all that there is that does not belong to the 'order of nature'—to what is determined and unfree, and subject to the laws of external necessity. Just now we heard *liberty* scorned for its compromising associations with jurisprudence. But the 'freedom' of the metaphysician is a legal-sounding freedom too. In Kant the 'law of freedom' (as he calls it) is likewise the 'moral law'. Man is only 'free', it transpires, in order that he may with *his own* hands tie himself up.

The overwhelming responsibilities and obligations which accompany practically every action of man's life, as outlined by Sartre (and which are responsible specifically for man's *angoisse*) reach him from a long way off. They come to him via Heidegger, and Kierkegaard (who, like all Hegel's contemporaries who did not like Hegel, read much Kant). Sartre receives these tragic legacies with calm.

In no system presided over by Jean-Paul Sartre would they, as a fact, have any rationale, for upon the genial creator of Mathieu Delarue and Daniel Sereno moral responsibilities, one would say, sit with an exemplary lightness.

In Kant's chilly ethical utopia, which he called a *Kingdom of Ends*, he imagines a society of rational beings as 'legislatively' endowed as the 'man' of whom Sartre treats in his existential philosophy. But all the freedom (in the ordinary sense of the word) that these creatures of Kant's fancy enjoy is limited to ethical action: in recognizing what is good and lawful, and acting (and 'legislating') in obedience to that insight. Any other actions but these would be classified as pertaining to 'private ends' (instead of to Universal Ends). And in engaging in such other actions as those,

our rational beings would once more have passed over into the order of nature, and be no longer 'free' (far jollier, but no longer free).

Kant was not using the term 'free', of course, with any emotional overtones—of the kind we invariably encounter when such words are used by Sartre, for instance. Kant was—among other things—answering (with less rigour than usual, as a concession and somewhat untidily) the old question as to whether as human beings we are responsible for our actions, or not: whether we act under the compulsion of an external necessity, or as free agents. So it would really be more accurate to say of a member of this rational society he adumbrates, this *Kingdom of Ends*, that he was *responsible*, rather than that he was *free*.

Freedom for the existentialist is an affair of God's absence, which leaves man in command so to speak. So he is *free*.—Heidegger having denied that man *is*, asserts that he is always in-the-making-by-himself (reminiscent of Alexander's 'God in the making' and much other evolutionist theory). His doctrine of freedom centres in that assertion—namely that man creates himself out of nothing. There is no God (or He is not there): man it seems is the principal creator—though a dog or a dromedary also is creating himself all the time I suppose, and it is difficult to see (1) why man should experience any more responsibility than a dog or a dromedary, both capable of at least as much 'anguish' as man, and on the whole more responsible; or (2) why in a considerable percentage of cases he should be thought to be engaged in 'creation' of a more elevated order.

But existentialist theory—although later on I have a good deal to say about it—is only indirectly my affair here. The use made by Sartre of the emotional appeal of the words *libre* and *liberté* however—where he is supposed to be referring to something no more exciting from the popular standpoint than Kant's *Kingdom of Ends*—is my affair, of course, at least in this first part. His novels, *Les Chemins de la Liberté*, are a joke about Freedom. If it was felt by some publisher that a 'Candide' should be written about Sartre's existentialist Freedom, Sartre would be the man to get to

do it. As it is *Les Chemins de la Liberté* would have been that, had it been quite short instead of very long.

My freedom-liberty interlude, again, had I think its uses. I felt it would be a good thing to show how I was denied the use of the word 'freedom'—and by a good friend too!—seeing that that was the word I was to use when speaking of 'the freedom of the writer'. I could not say 'the liberty of the writer'. That was not what I meant. Yet I have nothing very marvellous in mind when I say 'freedom', except in so far as all freedom is very beautiful.—I was to use it to signify *to be free* in the sense of unimpeded. But this involved many other and complex considerations: for there are so many ways in which a man may be impeded, though technically and legally perfectly free: and there are such a number of types of liberty—even mental liberty. It is I think Mr. Read who says how, in certain countries, men's *minds* are 'conscripted': and, if I remember, the United States is that conscript land. There is no 'freedom' that can withstand the blow at 'liberty' involved in any too persistent conscription.

For a writer's freedom very much more is required than the right of free speech. Everywhere in the West we still have that: but we are not everywhere equally free. The writer's audience, for instance, is an integral part of his freedom. Other writers enter into it as well.—It is not a problem of civil liberties (though without them we all perish). Nor are those circumstances which assist the emancipation of the mind an object of inquiry here. How delightful it would be if that could be so. But we are in no position to plan for new conditions of increased intellectual emancipation: our thoughts have rather to be directed to ways of preserving in some reasonable shape what is left to us.

We all know that it is what you do with your freedom, or your liberty, that is important. But the quality of the freedom, or the liberty, comes into it too. We should not be led to treat those basic human liberties as homogeneous or nondescript, like so much cement at the foundations of a building. As we have just seen, there is a tendency to think of them as an abstract and uniform support, only capable of awaking our interest if suddenly

removed. Under the common label, 'liberty', there we can leave them.

There is however more than one way of being free (as there are many different kinds of servitude). So although the freedom of the writer is a simple problem of human freedom, in one sense, yet, since all freedom however simple is various in character, and owing to the fact that the occupation involved (that of writing) is anything but simple, the freedom with which we are occupied here is unfamiliar.

CHAPTER IV

CLAIMS TO POLITICAL FREEDOM ILLUSORY

FREEDOM of the writer to speculate, to criticize, to create: such is the ultimate desideratum of the writer, as man-of-letters. To speculate, among other things, about social questions; to criticize, on occasion, the conduct of public affairs. But if one includes the free expression of *political opinion* in one's claim, all history is against one. There is no security anywhere there, and philosophers and poets have always touched politics at their peril.

There have been many instances of great and comprehensive freedom enjoyed by writers, as I have observed: even an idyllic absence of restraint. But one only has to remember that there were such stern limits upon the political freedom of both Plato and Aristotle that both exiled themselves from Athens, greatly against their will, as a measure of personal safety: that the earlier man-of-science—as Galileo—at a time when politics and religion were one and the same thing, had no security or freedom to speculate: philosophers, like Descartes and Spinoza, speculated, and published, but it was both uncomfortable and dangerous: and Pascal had not got far with his denunciation of the Jesuits in his *Provincials* before he was threatened with death if he persisted. These few names do not represent exceptional destinies; such conditions have always been the rule.

As to the English, the philosophers of the XVIIth Century, like Hobbes, one is apt to think of as packed and ready for flight across the Channel at a moment's notice (Hobbes living on the French side for eleven years in enforced exile and Locke in Holland for seven years): and though the XVIIIth Century was an easier one for those addicted to free speech, poor Tom Paine only embarked for Calais a few minutes before the arrival of a Government order for his arrest. ('Individuals have a right to investigate the principles

of government and to publish the result of their enquiries,' he believed.)

Do not let us make the same mistake as the author of *The Rights of Man*, who had too romantic an idea of the word 'right'. Individuals have no right whatever to 'investigate the principles of government'. There is no law, human or divine, that will protect them if they do.—So reason dictates that Politics be excluded altogether: that freedom is the privilege of the purely political writer, the mouthpiece of a party, protected by that Party. It is not, as Tom Paine believed, the privilege of any private individual, not enjoying the backing of a Party, or a very powerful group.

This may cause surprise, and the necessity for so drastic a qualification not at first sight be apparent. It might for instance be objected that Mr. Bernard Shaw, a playwright, for a number of years published subversive tracts. His freedom to do so no one ever dreamed of challenging. He did not, to escape imprisonment or death, have to go into exile.—But those were very exceptional circumstances. The society he had to deal with was tremendously rich and self-confident. Its tolerance was proverbial: its attitude to any criticism, his or another's, was that of a self-satisfied rhinoceros to the activities of a gnat. Besides, it labelled all that as 'shavian' horseplay. To take another figure of a man-of-letters who thrived on speaking his mind, there was Voltaire. His case was rather different. How it came about that he could in the most resounding manner express views so displeasing to the autocratic government of France was because of the disaffection of at least half of the nobility, and most of the rich *bourgeoisie*, who soon were to be the beneficiaries of all that subversive zeal. The autocracy, again, was not the effective kind of despotism we are familiar with today. I can think of at least eight or nine states in Europe at the present day who would tolerate neither a Voltaire nor a Shaw. I cannot see Tito encouraging a Yugoslav man-of-letters who wrote books explaining what a detestable form of government his was: that writer would not write again, or the printer print. The manners have to be very *doux* for such things to happen.

Wherever you note, in history, some instance of great freedom of political expression on the part of a prominent man-of-letters, examine the circumstances with care. You will always find that there was some interest that supported him (without his necessarily being its mouthpiece) as powerful as the interests offended by his criticism or far more so. The tolerance of the late-Victorians and Edwardians is an historical anomaly. So for the existence of such freedom of expression as I am considering there have to be two, or more, distinct, recognized, rival ways of thinking: or another doctrine attempting to overthrow the doctrine technically in the ascendant, but too feeble or too foolish to forbid open expression of dissent.

When there is only *one* interest—as when the Catholic Church was supreme—there is no public criticism or speculation or widely disseminated dissent, in those areas where its writ runs. By their nature human beings wish everyone to think exactly as they do. It is a mania, a power-complex phenomenon. Wherever a sufficient number of people are possessed by the same idea their pressure becomes intolerable upon those in their neighbourhood.

Were a sufficient number of people suddenly to get it into their heads that the earth was flat, I should hastily look through my books to see where in their pages I had quite obviously implied that, were you to start off in a straight line due west and to go far enough you would reach (coming from the east) the point from which you had departed. I should make sure that these passages in future should be deleted. For I know to what extraordinary lengths people will go if there are enough of them. They would be quite capable of burning all copies of my *Childermass* if it offended in this matter of global interpretation: so I should, so to speak, put my writing in the clear.

What has been said above has disposed of all possibility of the writer making good a claim to the objectivity of the contemporary historian. But to go into this more carefully, why should a man-of-letters other than an historian—a Dickens, a Hazlitt, or a Coleridge—desire to turn aside from his fictional creations, his

literary criticism, or his poetry and criticism and metaphysics, and direct his attention upon the contemporary political scene? These are not men like Hobbes, who was a political writer above all else, or philosophers like Locke. It is a freedom with which they certainly could dispense, in a general way.

There are however periods, and surely this is one of them, when it is difficult to refrain from employing one's mind in an attempt to unravel what all other men around one are puzzling over. Some writers there are who would not turn their heads if somebody were putting a torch to their workroom. But a more realist or inquiring mind reacts differently. The problem of what is really activating men engaged in some movement or manoeuvre awakens his intellectual curiosity, perhaps. Then present-day politics have a way of coming into your bedroom and getting you up in the middle of the night: or entering your larder and going away with most of your provisions. They will cut your income into six parts and take away five of them or change your pound into a dollar, dress you up as a fireman, or when it approaches zero cut off your fuel supply. And whereas before they only had a bomb that would blow you to pieces, they now have a device which peels off the skin of your trunk and limbs, after which cancer supervenes.—They have never been easy to ignore, but in our time the difficulty has greatly increased.

However let me turn away from such considerations as these—since obviously once the writer begins to act as a citizen his rights and liberties are then identical with those of other citizens. But let me put before you—I should have done so at an earlier stage—the proper way of looking at the creative writer, however, to arrive at what writing is.¹

All the time this writer is engaged in translating into words, and storing away, human experience. His mind is trained to register and to reflect upon human experience in detachment from merely practical considerations. In this he is unique. He has nothing to gain by assessing men's actions in this way rather than in that—as has, for instance, the lawyer, the politician, or the businessman.

¹ This has been touched upon already, but in passing only.

It will not put a penny piece in his pocket, or improve his standing in the community, to convince himself that a ruffian is after all rather a decent chap; or that a certain theory of the State is better than it has seemed to him to be, since politics is not his métier. What other mind, except that of the philosopher or scholar (who are also however writers), the scientist or the artist, is so directly in touch with truth all the time, seeing that with him expediency does not interpose, nor power tempt.

This mind, under favourable conditions, becomes an instrument of infallible accuracy, allowance made for the individual coloration. It probably is as near as we can get to truth: for there is no multiple, or collective, truth of anything like the same intensity or clarity.—These rather strange products of the human mind are not forthcoming at the best of times in any great quantity. And just as interference with the instinctive habits of birds or bees has destructive results, so any attempt to direct or modify these creative processes stops them altogether. For they are a wild internal area of life (though the personalities involved may be those of very civilized men).

To return to the dilemma that imposes a modification of any sanguine claim.—I would not demand for my man-of-letters the right to comment, in so many words—as does the historian in his account of past events—upon events occurring around him. Complete freedom within his imaginary universe (if a novelist or poet) to do what he likes with the essences he has extracted from observation of the human scene, is what is required. If he is a political writer, he works for some great interest or at least has its protection, and there is the end of the matter—Hobbes for the royal prerogative, Tom Paine for the social revolution: Maurras (or now Mauriac) Catholic and reactionary France, Aragon for the marxist intellectuals. All are great interests, capable of protecting their spokesman.—The detached observer is not allowed. And I speak here *en connaissance de cause*.

Mr. Shaw asserts, so I see in a newspaper, that 'Little Dorrit is a more seditious book than *Das Kapital*'. As there was a great deal of radicalism in Shakespeare, so was there in Dickens, though Mr.

Shaw's regret that the latter did not blossom out as a 'revolutionist' I cannot share. Had Dickens advocated the overthrow of society at the beginning of the XIXth Century he would not have been allowed—or, the same thing, encouraged—to write his novels: all the housekeepers and governesses who wept over Little Nell would never have opened a book written by a man who advocated the suppression of the 'Gentry'. Far from claiming such a right for him, I should deprecate the granting of it.—We should run the risk of having no Dickens at all, but instead just another economist—an article in far more plentiful supply.

Throughout this book, however, I am preoccupied not so much with the State as with something else. As to governments and great institutions (as we have known them up to now in the West) no rights can be extracted from them for a kind of man of whom they are, traditionally, not over fond. But does all freedom for the writer—or likewise interference—derive from governments or from religious communities? By no means—not in any case today. Like painters and scientists, writers do, in a certain measure, settle their own affairs, within the internal organization of their craft. And the writer has to look for his freedom to the community of writers—except, of course, when the Government is an insanely authoritarian one.

The only people who understand about science are scientists—when all is said and done—and the great freedom enjoyed by the man-of-science is something to do with the extreme inaccessibility of his subject. The difference between a good painting and a bad painting is only known, in the last analysis, to painters; and I know with music it is the same, being myself a musical ignoramus. Much of the most successful painting today is done solely for other painters, since no one else, whatever they may say, could possibly understand it. So, to a less extent, it is with writers. No one would ever have heard of such people as Henry James, and James Joyce, had it not been for other writers.—Of course this isolation in technical matters raises another question: but it serves to emphasize the extent to which these are autonomous communities.

The community of writers exercises a major influence over the freedom of expression of its members. And it must therefore be to the community of writers that finally we make our appeal, in a period when total or absolutist habits of mind have penetrated deeply into every department of life, although government itself is not yet totalitarian. It would be a terrible thing for writing—not merely for this or that writer—if authoritarian methods were introduced into this microcosm of ours, though we were still free men in the political world outside. We must appeal to that community therefore to preserve enough tolerance and good sense so that the paths of creation are kept free.

CHAPTER V

RETROSPECT

IN Western countries governments have given the writer no trouble in recent years, he has been completely free as far as they are concerned, except when books have found their way into print recording sexual experience in too intimate detail. Even then there has been no fanatical pursuit of those selling such publications 'under the counter'. Otherwise the writer has gone his way in peace. Religion has had no power, even if it wished, to dictate to the writer. And, lastly, our politics, up to recently, have been no more aggressive than our religion.

Our time is cut up into compartments by great wars. The present chapter is to be retrospective. I shall look back into the compartment just behind us: that is not difficult, the partition is not very high. But to commence with I shall go back behind World War I—a very different matter. In 1913—an extremely significant date—people did not approach writers with political labels in their hands. They did not, I mean, regard Tolstoy as a Christian Socialist and pacifist, Dostoevski as a reactionary mystic, Thackeray as a left-wing Tory and so on. If Henry James was a violent social snob, that was a recognized American type: but it was very uncommon to meet anyone who wrote so well—and the snobbish poisons even stimulated his genius. Good writing, it was recognized, was done by all kinds of men—there was no standard political man to write books for you, or a standard religious belief for writers.

Today it is otherwise:¹ yet it is worth remarking that we read books by Frenchmen, Germans, Russians, even Chinese—or books by authors of other times: we do not dismiss them at once because

¹ Cf. J. P. Sartre, *Situations II*, p. 12, where he says, 'What is Flaubert for us but a talented rentier?'—'Flaubert, qui a tant pesté contre les bourgeois... qu'est-il pour nous sinon un rentier de talent?'

their outlook may differ greatly from ours. We read them as we watch actors, to appreciate their skill and imaginative insight: and as actors do not have to play always parts that appeal to us ethically, so we do not expect the foreign author to 'play the game' quite as scrupulously as a Briton would. These are instances of the same kind of catholicity, which still survive. They may be used for the purposes of comparison.

I began to be a writer myself in 1913.¹ (I was to have my first book *Tarr* published in 1918). In the matter of genuine politics there was nothing but the Fabians: nobody had to take a sleeping draught on account of *them*. Christianity has, in England, been for many years no more than a ceremonial adjunct of power. The young man with unsatisfied religious impulses had only the Church of Rome to which to turn: that was never more than a steady trickle of conversion, in response to a great deal of very intelligent missionary work. The reason for that I think is that the youthful person feels, with Roman Catholicism, that he is moving back into the past. Usually he will be enough imbued with the ideology of progress to be repelled by the breath from the far-off catacombs, and the sepulchral rattle of a dead tongue.

So at the time when I began to write anyone who placed freedom very high on his list of necessities had cause for thankfulness, although undoubtedly that freedom, as I have suggested above, was secured as a result of a running down and petering out of every formerly vigorous institution, and the incidence of a sort of blissful vacuum. Still, the most perfect absence of restraint, certainly, was enjoyed by the writer.

Then came World War I, etc. (but ETC. should be in capitals, world war remaining in lower case). Python-like the world required some time—a few years—to digest what had somehow got into it. When it had, there was a great change. There was a very steep plunge indeed from that deceptive freedom to speculate, to criticize, to create, down to what amounted to the beginnings of dictation. We plunged from a social vacuum into a scene packed

¹ 1909 first published work in *Eng. Review*.

with partisans, where everyone was saying the same thing in the same tone of voice, like a chorus of parrots.

The mercenary and frivolous emptiness provided by the social scene of 1913—to stick to that date as symbolic—was the reverse of propitious for the creative mind, except for that one circumstance, that *coercion* was unknown. At that date I was myself—with 'Blast', 'The Rebel Art Centre', and such things—the incarnation of scornful rebellion against that environment. But what a decade later in the 'twenties had suddenly arrogated to itself the title of successor to the dying civilization, in too many respects resembled it. A social *something* appeared where before there had been *nothing*. Certain of its most obvious components seemed to me products of the advanced corruption of the society it proposed to replace, rather than material with which to build a new society. There were many other things that made me uncomfortable about it.—At all events, within a decade, counting from the outbreak of World War I, a great uniformity of thinking was developing.

I cannot here undertake the analysis of 1914–18. But I must draw attention to the coincidences for which these figures stand historically. 1913 was just the other side of a cyclopean dividing wall in time: a thousand miles high and a thousand miles thick, a great barrier laid across our life, known to the Press as the 'Great War'. This Great War made possible something far greater than itself, namely the Russian Revolution.

Why 1914–18 is so dense and towering an obstacle for anyone whose life it traverses admits of no simple answer, for this wall was complex in its composition, as in its origins. To take the least of the innovations coeval with it first, the very aspect of everyday life was radically altered. The internal combustion engine alone was a great revolution. It changed the streets of our cities into roaring machine-age gullies, literally from one day to the next, and broke into the remotest beauty-spot with a bang. Then the great development of the radio, the cinematograph, and the telephone all can be integrated in this almost mystical barrier.

But such novelties as these could not alone have produced this Great Divide. Europe was turned upside down politically as well

as physically, and these revolutions were simultaneous. First, there was the collapse and disappearance of the Central Empires, while the great German state became a chronically embittered slum. Great Britain was fatally shaken, economically and morally. The French people deeply demoralized and resentful: lastly—and above all—the Russian Empire of the Czars had gone up in smoke and out of its ashes a new religion had been born at once hard-boiled and puritanic, savagely militant and proselytizing.

I must now refer to a circumstance which has, first and last, led to much confusion. This suddenly emerging Unity, produced by the coalescence of many influences, which I described above, hitched itself on, as it were, to Russian communism—not identifying itself, but relating itself to it. Among intellectuals of the late 'twenties and the 'thirties, 'fellow-travelling' became the rule. It had very little to do with bolshevism. There is not much bolshevism in Mr. Auden, to take an obvious example.¹ The massive social imagination of Lenin which brought into existence a great puritan State-machine—requiring when Lenin was gone a self-styled Steel Man to pilot it—counted its disciples here as elsewhere. They were sometimes intellectuals, but were not of the intellectual 'fellow-travelling' type.

Though it was *not* that, there would be, on the face of it, nothing unlikely about such a fashion as 'fellow-travelling' being purely political. A hundred and fifty years of revolutionary ferment, from Babeuf (or from Rousseau) to Jaurés and the Spartacists, had culminated in the setting up of a great socialist society in Russia. Whenever there is a human society, there are terrible injustices. All the injustices accompanying the development of industrialism, contrasts of extremes of wealth and poverty in the great capitalist cities, the voices of all the crusaders for social justice, contributed, in the background of everyone's mind, to make what happened in Russia an event of prodigious significance. Is it surprising, therefore, that young men of the educated

¹ *Journey to a War*, by Auden and Isherwood, makes dazzlingly clear how much fellow-travelling was a mere fashionable sport.

class, in great numbers, in a traditionally liberal country like England—with its Byronic and Shelleyan libertarian traditions—should catch fire? That aspect of it was but a fresh demonstration of how, for all Englishmen, generous, impulsive, and quixotic as they are, the idea of freedom rings their bell.

But this usually has occurred when it was a case of succouring the distressed, or helping the 'Freedom-loving' but weak in numbers hold their own against the ogreish despot: *not* cashing in on a colossal success, clambering on to an outsize bandwagon, like the Russian Revolution. *Success* would attract a different type of man—one who loved power, not one in love with the cause of the weak and helpless.—The moment a revolution is successful, the Englishman of tradition loses interest. That is the rule.

In any event, the movement I am speaking of was of another order entirely to the quixotic responses of tradition. If by nothing else, its unlikeness was proved by the presence of other, highly complicating, stimuli; as also (today) by the surprising ease with which the 'fellow-travelling' part of it has been discarded—in great haste—by the majority, without changing anything much. If you take up a thing cynically, you drop it lightly. If *power* is what interests you, when the wind changes you change too.

However, for a short period (say 1929–39) 'fellow-travelling' was *formally* a capital interest of the intellectual. No young man with intellectual ambitions when asked 'Do you go my way?' could do otherwise than say 'yes'.—That other people were criticized for not going that way, not fellow-travelling, goes without saying.

The manner in which 'fellow-travelling' affected writers other than those responsible for it—to confine myself for the moment to that point—was various. None of those writers who had made their appearance immediately prior to the Great Divide of 1914–18 were fellow-travellers originally, for no such thing as communism had existed prior to 1917. But all the best-known of the older 'pre-war' writers, Bernard Shaw, H. G. Wells, and Arnold Bennett, were very active Socialists, with the exception of the

neo-Catholic group, of which the principal figure was G. K. Chesterton.

It is a noteworthy fact that *none* of the young writers, who had started publishing only a short time before the war of 1914–18, or were beginning to write just before it, were Socialists. Politically, they adhered to no particular theory of the State, although highly unorthodox as writers. Consequently, when an extreme Socialist doctrine suddenly became a violent fashion among the 'post-war' young—not only among the writers but in the universities and elsewhere—this new social climate was favourable for such veterans as Shaw and Wells, rather than for them. Shaw, with the usual gentlemanly buffoonery, endorsed communism, recognizing in Lenin a belated Fabian. Wells did not like the Soviet—'It's not my idea of liberty,' he protested in his high-pitched voice, once when I was present. But, doctrinal details aside, the older writers were no longer prophets of social regeneration in a society either indifferent or unconvinced. For the young group of writers for whom, the so-called Great War over, the main period of their production was to begin, it was another matter. Politics did not enter into their scheme of things, as a first-line issue. Let us however take them one by one.

Of the three or four eminent writers with whom I was in one way or another closely associated, neither Joyce nor Eliot was favourable to communism. For Joyce it was something that touched him in no way—it was a dreary irrelevant convulsion, which had nothing to do with Dublin in 1905. Eliot's aristocratic propensities it repelled; and for his catholicism, to dialectical materialism there could be but one answer, an uncompromising negative. As to Ezra Pound, previous to his incomprehensible intervention in World War II (when in some moment of poetic frenzy he mistook the clownish Duce for Thomas Jefferson), he never revealed any interest at all in politics, only in Douglasite economics. Those economics are however allergic to communism as to capitalism. Richard Aldington's attitude to the partisan politics of the 'twenties and 'thirties was expressed by his comment, 'a plague on both your houses!'

D. H. Lawrence, with whom I was not acquainted, wrote *Pansies* certainly, but did not go fellow-travelling: sexual interests, anyway, leaving very little room for anything else. Aldous Huxley, liberal of course, when he came to give expression to his views upon such matters in *Brave New World*, turned out to be an uncompromising sceptic.

Probably more than any of the above, I felt, at first, some sympathy for the Bolsheviks. Upon closer examination no one would be mistaken unless they wanted to be: the Russian was too hopelessly power-ridden a system for my liking—though, so many turn-coat ‘fellow-travellers’ are insisting upon this at present that I hesitate to say it.

In referring to the above half-dozen writers, at that time young, emerging from World War I and from behind it, as a group, I do not mean that such as Pound and Joyce had any common aim and understanding which united them, as had for instance the *sur-réalistes*. In England in the ‘twenties those I have named were the literary *avantgarde* (this clownish word must be used since what I describe would be meaningless without it). I do not turn out and parade the *avantgarde* of the ‘twenties idly. By doing so—by showing untidily advancing in the van—neither in step nor uniformly armed, nor decorated with a uniform blood-red cockade but with a diversity of emblems—this heterogeneous undisciplined though dashing militia, it is my object to contrast them with the homogeneous fanatically disciplined avantgardists mobilized between the wars, from those then emerging from schools and universities.

To be of the *avantgarde* is another way of saying to be ‘advanced’. There is however a difference and the nature of this difference is very significant. Darwin was an ‘advanced’ thinker: but he would not have been describable as a member of the *avantgarde*. It is a term that gained currency about the time of the switch from individual ‘advance’ to collective ‘advance’. ‘*Avantgarde*’ suggests a unit rather than an individual—a unit of maximum militancy.

The switch, as I have called it, occurred in England in the late

‘twenties. Prematurely (as far as England is concerned) both Mr. Pound and myself were establishing *groups*—what would now be described as avantgardist groups—immediately before World War I. I refer of course to the ‘Imagists’ and the ‘Vorticists’: both craft-groups, with no political implications—except in so far as all revolution in literature or art involves a radical bias, especially if it takes a group form. Eventually all avantgardism became deeply coloured with politics—in England rather an aesthetic phenomenon than a political, but inspired by political models.

The more politically ‘advanced’ people became, however, the less ‘advanced’, on the whole, they were technically. It was as if political unorthodoxy dispensed with the necessity of scandalous novelty in the technical direction. For there is no use denying that in the field of the arts—literature among them—prestige plays a most important part: in this case the prestige of being ‘advanced’. Technical advancedness today is not much bothered about except perhaps in America: all the emphasis is upon politics. Had Picasso for instance engaged in political extremism at the beginning of his career, there would have been no cubism I expect. Were Sartre less of a political snob he would be more of a literary snob.

Before the coming of Politics, Science dominated our scene. Artistic extremism, prior to the ‘twenties of this century, always was in some way related to Science. The Impressionist revolution for instance in the last century was purely scientific in inspiration: or to take an illustration from literature, the unorthodox form taken by the narrative art in the hands of Henry James derived from the new science of psychology, in which his brother William was a pioneer.¹ Artists behaved as if they were attempting to outstrip each other in novelty of technical invention—as though

¹ From one of the most unlikely sources, namely Paul Valéry, evidence of the same kind can be derived. Writing of Valéry in 1907, Paul Léautaud wrote as follows: ‘At long intervals one sees his name, in the *Mercure de France* at the foot of a paper, the title of which, “Méthodes” is significant of the abstractions and mathematical speculations into which he has thrown himself. M. Paul Valéry has in fact given himself up for some years now to extra-literary researches, not easy to define, for they appear to be based upon a deliberate confusion of the methods of the exact sciences and of artistic instincts.’

they were men-of-science, and art were an affair of technical discovery. This pseudo-scientific snobbism still haunts the notion of being artistically 'advanced': but that is as it were a time-lag in publicity technique.

The fact remains—to return to the English scene in the 'twenties—that *Finnegan's Wake* (as difficult and *byzantine* as Mallarmé, and far superior in bulk) is still today more technically avantgardist than any writing since, here or elsewhere. Indeed it is highly improbable that that form of artistic 'progress' in literature, or in the visual field as represented by Mondriaan or Picasso, will be pursued. The 'progressive' feats of tomorrow will be of a quite different order. Today even, except in backwaters—or in America, where there is in 'progress' of this sort a time-lag as in material progress the time-lag is with us—the scientific approach, and individual competition (of the 'lonely discoverer' type with which the sagas of science have made us familiar) is in a sense dead.

Historically, then, there was no conflict between the *avantgarde* of the 'twenties, issuing from the 'Great War', and the fellow-travelling 'intellectuals' of that compartment of time lying between 1918 and 1939: they did not mix, that is all: a break had occurred—a new genus of 'collective man' was in the making. Meanwhile the latter took over, of course, the purely intellectual armoury from us, using for their own very different ends the *réclame* of 'advanced' revolutionary techniques. But, to express it baldly, to be asked to become a Bolshevik would have seemed just as irrelevant to most of the literary *avantgarde* of 1925 as it would have to Rutherford or to Eddington (since there is no essential connexion, of any kind, between State capitalism or primitive democracy, on the one hand, and mathematical theories regarding the structure of the universe, or 'difficult' books or pictures on the other—as has been very well understood by the Russians). These writers were not prepared for this sudden question, 'Do you go my way?'—So the ways of those whose minds were fixed upon more abstract and impersonal types of 'progress', and the ways of those who all went one concrete way, were not the same way. This was no common bifurcation. A new era had

begun. For the politics were secondary: the one-wayness was the important thing.

Let me make what will seem at first an abrupt transition.—Such a publication as *The Little Magazine, A History and a Bibliography* (1947) and the reviewer's comments have an air of finality—though whether *Polemic, New Writing, Now, The Mint, Politics, The Partisan Review, The Hudson Review, The Tiger's Eye*, etc., would have considered that the day of the little magazine is over I do not know. In one of them I read a review by Mr. Julian Symons of this *History and Bibliography*, which leaves nothing to be desired on the score of pessimism.

The little magazine has seen, I think, its best days. As kitsch advances further in our society, as it offers more and greater rewards to the young writer of promise—'Wouldn't you like to write a film script for Mr. Rank? There are some nice *cultured* jobs in the B.B.C.'—the little magazines will be less and less able to attract talents. . . . It is not very likely . . . that the little magazines will sponsor any more Hemingways, or Faulkners, or Eliots.

Which means, as Mr. Symons suggests, that there will be no more Hemingways, etc., either. But Mr. Symons has, it seems to me, put this in the wrong way. The cause he assigns to this absence of Hemingways in the future is in part correct. That however is not by any means the whole story, or the most significant part of it. The *switch* of which I have spoken, and the conditions involved by that alone, almost exclude the possibility of the emergence of such writers, in Anglo-Saxon countries at least. We may hope that there will be writers as fine, but they will be of a different kind, and come about in a different way.

Little Magazines belonged essentially to the period before the switch, or before the new climate of opinion or however we describe it—in the early 'thirties—had fully developed. The recent war produced a factitious atmosphere of cultural boost: little magazines sprouted in the unhealthy inflationary lavishness of those bonfire days. Since writing the above paragraph, however, where I listed a few contemporary Little Magazines, most of them

have ceased publication. It is doubtful if any will survive, in England, for long: England and America are two such different propositions now, that it might be that the United States would have dozens of Little Magazines, and we none.

The extent to which, in my judgement, Mr. Symons is right, in his account of the inroads of *kitsch* upon our intellectual capital, is that certainly there *is*, in England, great intellectual demoralization. It is when he attributes *everything* to the new lure of easy-money that I consider he is accepting—consciously or otherwise—an explanation that is obvious, but inadequate, and in fact incorrect. There is a new outlook: it is not that which produced Hemingways, etc. This war, for instance, will have no *Farewell to Arms* written about it. Everyone knows they can never say farewell to war. Behind Mr. Hemingway's 'farewell' there is the assumption that a man can decide to bid adieu to war, or not, as a man can decide to 'go west' or to stop where he is: that to that extent he is a free agent.—This is however a minor point: what brings that kind of book to an end, with us, is more complex than a question of a sensation of freedom.

It may be as well to mention the purely animal reason why Little Magazines (and some, by the way, were more remarkable by reason of their bigness than of their littleness) are unlikely to flourish here again. It is obvious enough. With the pound sterling worth five shillings more or less (and its depreciation in value continues), with the cost of living doubled in America, so that a dollar is only worth fifty cents, but with the money the intellectual normally can come by stationary or almost so, conditions on the physical level have altered so greatly for the worse that the outlook is immeasurably less promising than when the era of the little magazine was beginning. I spoke of the great freedom enjoyed by everybody except the workman prior to 1914, and to that must be added the fact that with a small sum of money a great deal could be obtained, in the way of daily necessities. In England a cottage could be bought for a few pounds, or rented annually for a few shillings. So, although really the opportunities of selling-out were then much the same as now, the difference lay

in the hardships to be endured now by not selling-out, or in a sense the physical impossibility.

To conclude this retrospect, a carefully documented analysis of our mushroom Enlightenment of the late 'twenties and 'thirties should some day be undertaken. All I shall add to what I have said up to now, in the course of this chapter, is a few words. In recapitulation, what distinguished that period from those that went before it was the fact that politics took precedence over everything else, and these were ostensibly the politics of marxist revolution. They were in fact, as stated above, not that at all. Our political aesthetes were a hybrid of Western ('bourgeois') cultural elements of a special kind, and a small quantity of marxism adapted for the middle classes.—It was sought to compress people in one mould: there was certainly pressure, of that vague but effective kind which it is one of the purposes of this study to examine. The composition of the mould in question was of highly selective elements. In a few words little can be done except to give the sort of clue that will be at once understood by those conversant with the circumstances, but which probably will mean little to the general reader, unfortunately.

The theories of Freud and his followers were holy writ. To respond to the irrational, as others do to the rational, was a sign of grace: as also, in sexual matters, the perverse to the normal. To prefer the Child to his grown self, and the unconscious to the conscious, was *de rigueur*: as also the primitive to the civilized. There is no need to take this catalogue further. It would be difficult to imagine anything more unlike (1) that robust good sense which we must recognize as characteristic of marxism, however reluctantly and however little that doctrine may appeal to us; or (2) typical Russian reactions to life. Was the entire thing, then, on the political side, a swindle? The answer to that is not yes, or no. There was much insincerity (proved by the dropping of the 'fellow' by the 'traveller'). The founding of another Church, but starting that way, may have been the idea.

In a sense all that is over. There are no fellow-travellers any

longer. In another sense nothing has altered. A particular kind of hybrid was produced in our British literary scene. In the young the familiar outlines of this type are happily diluted. Meanwhile, that cross, smart, shallow, excitable animal, the history of whose mind I have been endeavouring to disentangle, is still with us everywhere, entrenched in broadcasting, art-racketeering, the literary reviews, and even the most stately of the daily and weekly press. Which is just too bad for those upon his black list (a list at least twenty years old). May the Lord have mercy upon those books of mine which fall into his hands.¹

¹ It will interest the literary historian of the future to know that these lines were written at least six months before a very significant date in publishing history—and in the annals of conspiracy and boycott: namely July 30, 1948.

PART II

THE 'REPUBLIC OF LETTERS'

CHAPTER VI

THE COMMUNITY OF WRITERS

I CAN now take up again the question of the writer's freedom. How is that inquiry advanced by what I have discussed in the last chapter? That freedom may depend as much upon the community of writers, I have pointed out, as upon government, or upon some great institution like the Church. And should the corporate mind of the community of writers become stereotyped, or should it come under the domination of an irrational cult, worst of all, if it grow intolerant and obsessed, the individual man-of-letters will be penalized if he does not conform.

Civil liberties—their presence or their absence—apply in equal measure to the writer and to anybody else. No privilege can be solicited on behalf of the writer, nor would it be very pleasant if he possessed it. So civil liberties can be dismissed from our minds altogether here, being an interest common to all men. There is however a matter which lies solely between the writer and other writers. And his freedom is deeply involved in that relationship.

To what extent can writers be described as a community? They do not (thank heaven, I was about to say) live together. They are apt to dislike one another most heartily. That however would not disqualify them for description as a community: it is doubtful whether a great deal of love is lost between the inmates of a nunnery or of a monastery, and it must be assumed that the community of writers are even less prone to mutual forbearance than is a religious community, who deliberately practise it.—However, I experience no anxiety on this point—I am not suggesting that you should regard writers as a brotherhood—their cells dispersed over the country, libraries standing with them for chapels, and that sort of thing. I use the expression community because all writers do one kind of work and have in common the literary life and literary interests: although not so consciously corporate and



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craft-proud as are doctors the fact still remains that Mr. Raymond Mortimer, Mr. Nathaniel Gubbins, Mr. Koestler and myself earn our living in that way, as our respective physicians earn theirs by counting us among their patients.

A writer does not live in isolation from the rest of writers. They are his first public—if it is a book he is publishing, copies of which are sent out for review. No book is offered to the Public (for which we use a capital) without the judgement of this inner public accompanying its appearance, in the form of hostile salvos or cascades of honeyed words, from the pages of the Press.—But the critics are not the only consideration. The quality of a work of art is very difficult to assess. It requires a great deal of experience to be able to do so. In the times when a sizeable population of courtiers and other ladies and gentlemen had much leisure, a certain number—in addition to those who wrote themselves—reached the point at which they could tell a good book when they saw one. The country gentleman or country parson sometimes could do that too. But at the present day, apart from the universities, where could we find anyone competent to evaluate a work of literature, except in the ranks of those who write themselves?—At that it would have to be the better kind of writer, and one for some reason unspoilt and uncorrupted.—Whether the cow is still in the field after you have turned your back and gone away, or whether when no longer seen at all it just ceases to exist, will be debated by philosophers till the end of time. However it may be with the cow, the writer writes for *somebody*, and would cease to write if nobody was there. In our day that somebody is almost infallibly another writer.

It will appear from this what a tragic matter it is for the writer, if other writers ('intellectuals') begin to fail in those integrities upon which good workmanship depends and creation itself. Some people in order to forestall the danger of total barbarity, have spoken of educating the Public, some of educating those who rule us, and so forth. My idea would be rather to strengthen the organization of what used to be called the 'Republic of Letters'. I should advise that the last precarious refuge of the civilized

intelligence, the small world of writers (scholars and members of the teaching profession being of course an indispensable part of this not very easily demarcated whole) should somehow acquire a better sense of corporate responsibility. It is quite certain that if it did so it would as far as it was able secure for its members that unimpeded latitude of expression which it knows to be a condition of the best work. It would also seek to provide some master prophylactic against obsessional contagions.

In this country there are still many men-of-letters who, as critics, would not tell lies about a book,¹ who when they write a book themselves will not use the slick techniques of the U.S.A. nor cheapen and dilute their handiwork to pull off a wow. These writers are turned by the times into authentic martyrs, seeing they are not workmen who can strike as the cost of living doubles and then doubles again. These writers are the hard part of the literary body. The soft part is often so soft it liquefies and runs away somewhere else.—They may be religious men: but they do not make a parade of their piety by way of self-advertisement: they may not believe in the existence of God, but are not always speaking of His 'absence'; they may somewhere in their minds nurse this or that theory of the State, but knowing their judgements to be fallible, it does not infest their writings with a feverish passion. It is those relatively incorruptible and judicious literary men who would form one of the most valuable elements about which to organize. Such minds are the most steadfast obstacle, also, to attempts at intolerant interference (from *within* the community of writers) with the free movement of the writer's mind.

Mr. Hemingway offered writers in general, a short while ago, a sound piece of advice. He warned them that they ought to 'stick together like a pack of wolves'.² In the next issue of the paper carrying this salutary advice was a letter recalling that some twenty years ago Mr. Hemingway wrote *Torrents of Spring*, in

¹ Though there are—it cannot be denied—even more dishonest *clerks* who spray the honeyed words of their mercenary pens upon what they know to be worthless daily.

² I quote from memory. *Time* asked him for a statement.

which a fellow-writer, Sherwood Anderson, was (most admirably) satirized. To this Mr. Hemingway did not reply.—He could have done so quite easily had he wished. A wolf usually lives in savage places. The choice of that animal by Hemingway implied that he regarded the literary scene as a wintry waste. As to what Hemingway or anybody else did twenty years ago, that is neither here nor there. The landscape has changed out of all recognition. We are in a different place entirely which demands that we tear up past rules of conduct and write them anew.

In proposing a reinforcement of the writer's corporate consciousness—or since one hardly exists, the creation of one—I did not mention wolves but doctors, almost as good an illustration however of solidarity. It would be preferable, as it seems to me, if the organization were cemented by instinct as with the wolves rather than governed by a Council as are the doctors. Again, there is no writing-for-writing's-sake theory at the back of my mind. Literature reaches out in all directions and has tentacles connecting it with every human activity. It is not an art like painting that can lock itself up in an ivory tower. By a re-emphasis upon the writer's corporate sense he may become less disposed to forget altogether that he has a *métier*, or imagine it is something else—like politics—dragging literature with him or a little piece of it.

Let it be our aim to make of the 'republic of letters' a kind of Switzerland; the 'great neutral'. This 'republic' is such a shadowy and unsubstantial territory at present, that is the trouble: which is my reason for urging that we begin to build it up in our consciousness and give it body. The need for such action will not be immediately obvious, nor probably will some people see my object at all. 'What is this *Switzerland*?' they will inquire—'this place where it is recognized that a person does not have to be this or to be that: and—provided he does not provoke those living all round him—may advertise his neutral mind?'—I feel however unless I show you the *opposite* of this area, where you go about labelled in this way or that, and in all its uncomfortable concreteness, my proposal may too often encounter questioning similar to the above. So let us pass at once to the contemporary literary

scene and observe how, as things stand at present, the *opposite* of what I propose works out. There will be no better way of conjuring up before what may be an indolent imagination my beautiful neutrality, than exhibiting its contrary ably assisted by M. Sartre.

If I choose in this instance the French literary scene rather than the English it is because only there does one find that stark opposite of which I am in search. In Great Britain we just have—even now—novelists and poets, as we have bakers and tobacco-nists. I mean by this that I am quite unaware whether the baker who has the best bread in this neighbourhood, and with whom I deal, is Labour or Tory: or whether my tobacconist believes in God or how he votes. (I should not stop buying cigarettes there if I heard he did not believe in God and voted Tory.)—Now, according to Jean-Paul Sartre, in France it is quite otherwise. There is no such thing as 'a novelist', or 'a poet', there. Literature being purely political in its patronage, as also in its character, a novelist would be 'a Catholic novelist', 'a Communist novelist', or what not, and the same thing would apply to the poet, the critic, the historian, etc. The situation as I expound it for you here may sometimes be presented by implication rather than in so many words by Sartre, but I have added nothing to strengthen the general effect of the picture.

If in France you are a novelist or poet, or any other kind of writer, your public is strictly confined to the political party to which you belong. Thus if you are a Radical-Socialist, you will be read only by Radical-Socialists. If the party—in the way that it often happens with the French, and as a consequence of the late war the Radical-Socialists actually did—suffers sudden disaster at the polls and begins to fade away, the novelist or poet in question is without a public: or his public is so shrunken a one that he stops writing. He cannot, apparently, slip over into the Socialist public, or that of the M.R.P., without a violent readjustment of his manner and matter. For of course if you vote M.R.P. you write M.R.P. novels and poems, if a Blumist (right-wing) Socialist you

will be read only by right-wing Socialists, if a Communist only by Communists.¹

Such one gathers is the way in which politics decide everything literary in contemporary France.—But let me quote from the monthly review *Les Temps Modernes* (June 1947), which Sartre runs. 'What is literature?' is the title of the article. The following is his interesting account of a group of writers—Prévost, Pierre Bost, Chamson, Aveline, Beucler. These poor chaps (very brilliant some of them) picked a political party to write for which looked very powerful until more extreme parties began growing at its expense. This party, the Radical-Socialist, was anti-clerical, republican, anti-racist, individualist, rationalist. About 1927 these gifted writers formed themselves into a 'club of the under-thirties'. 'The fact (of their almost complete disappearance) is so striking that it demands an explanation.' That explanation is none other than 'the public chosen by them'. In other words, they picked the wrong party.

The Radical-Socialist party was a self-contained community with its mutual aid societies, the 'League of the Rights of Man', its daily paper *L'Oeuvre*, its literary weekly *Marianne*. It even had its secret society, Freemasonry. But 'two wars and the exacerbation of the class struggle, was too much for it, . . . more even than the party the *spirit* of radicalism has been the victim of circumstances'.

'Thus', concludes Sartre, 'history has robbed them (the writers in question) of their public, as it robbed the Radical-Socialist party of its voters. All these writers became silent.' For, robbed of his public, what can a writer do? And that is the end of Sartre's story: a 'striking' one, as he observes.

¹ To what political party if any Sartre himself belongs I have not been able to discover, though he is, I suspect, of Radical-Socialist origin. He is not a Communist; he directs a violent polemic against Marx—who abolished good and evil he tells us. There is no one after World War II who could doubt the existence of Evil—so Marx is wrong. Sartre is not an 'extremist' (his way of referring to the Surrealists). But he says in reply to Communist attacks that he could not join the Communist party because it is not revolutionary enough. When he came to London recently he informed a reporter that all the 'eighteen-year-olds' in the Paris bars were for him. So perhaps his party is just Youth.

One can understand how a writer who was a Catholic, were the Church of Rome suddenly to disintegrate and there were no more Catholics, might feel that his life as a writer was at an end: or, if as a result of some sudden social convulsion, the great Communist empire fell to pieces and there were no more Communism in the world, a Communist writer would lay down his pen forever. But it is extraordinary to find how writers in France are dedicated for life to a mere party-machine, and how dependent they are upon a politically specialized public. The above account by Sartre has the stamp of truth: and he details all the attitudes that this group of radical writers would have to adopt in order to continue writing. But he concludes that these sturdy honest radicals cannot or will not adapt 'leur sagesse aux folies de l'Europe'.—Sartre himself had no scruples about exploiting the 'madness of Europe': but he is an eminently reasonable man and sees that other people might be more fastidious. He speaks with great respect of the remarkable integrity of these talented radical *normaliens*, suddenly left suspended in the void of an electoral landslide.

This plunge into the concrete will at least have made it sufficiently clear what was in my mind. By demonstrating, in detail, the operation of its *opposite*, I have made it possible for the reader, by the simple proceeding of reversing everything occurring in the demonstration in question, to get some idea of what I propose.—Were it an accepted principle that the writer should not participate in those seething gallic party-politics: were a *neutral* island provided for writers in the midst of them, standing above them as Switzerland does above Europe, how much more satisfactory it would be—rather than to have to die like a Mogul's harem when the Mogul dies and meanwhile to be labelled a marionette. Also he would then be free to work at his writing.

It may seem unfortunate that I was obliged to go to the French literary scene for my perfect opposite. We do not live in France—the argument is apt to be used—and until such time as those conditions you describe obtain here we need not bother our heads

very much about any *Switzerland* of the imagination!—Moreover, the foreign scene cannot provide as effective an opposite—however perfect in other respects it may be—as if I were able to show, massive and evident, that opposite in our midst.

Neither in England nor the U.S. has literature been party literature. The novels of Dos Passos, Steinbeck, Caldwell, and Faulkner, for instance, are not republican novels, or democratic novels. The verse of Mr. Eliot is not conservative verse or labour verse. This is simply because parties, and indeed politics altogether, have not been taken as seriously in these countries as in France. Were it otherwise, there would probably be in America a Republican Book Club, and a Democratic Book Club: bookshops that would not stock books by authors of the opposite party, and publishing houses whose lists would be strictly either Republican or Democratic. Stated in this way, the absurdity of it (as it would appear in our eyes) is apparent.

It must of course be recognized that in the English-speaking countries party-politics up to very recently have been only the sport of playful grandes, which is why they were not taken seriously. Ours has been virtually a one party system, with alternating flavours to bestow upon it a spurious duality. With the social-democratic government that came to power in England in 1945 there is now an authentic duality: and we must henceforth expect our politics increasingly to resemble continental politics.

But in France for some time the parliamentary issues have been of a very different kind of reality from anything here or in America. The French parties represent profound divisions. The fact of a very big Communist party, such as they have there, would in itself be sufficient to guarantee extreme discord.—It is necessary to understand how *total* are the claims of the more militant French parties—all operating with sublime indifference to political terms, within the framework of parliamentary democracy. With them it is the group or the party *seen as truth* more especially at the present time: or seeing itself as truth, rather. We are shown by Sartre even an ordinary left centre party in a parliamentary democracy (the radical socialist)—although its fiats

are unsupported by the firing-squad or the gas-chamber for the *incroyant*—dealing in a species of absolutism.

Recapitulating: how absurd it would look to us were Tories and Labourites, or, in America, Republicans and Democrats, to become so embittered and doctrinal that each of them required an exclusive literature of their own. But that *us* has to be qualified. Such a situation would not seem in any way odd to the writer should it occur—not of course with those particular parties. Within the community of writers all the rigours of absolutism were studiously aped during our Enlightenment. Then there was a 'Left Book Club', too, and there was a (much feebler) 'Right Book Club', even. These of course were ordinary publishing ventures—not confined to intellectual circles—and the former must have been very profitable.

CHAPTER VII

'ABSOLUTE UTOPIAS'

THE French today are equally divided, for and against extremism. French writers are divided upon the same lines. Without being more conservative than we are, fewer go all the way to the Left. Polemics against the absolute in politics are not infrequent. For instance Albert Camus will say:

Our period marks the end of ideologies, that is, of absolute Utopias which destroy themselves in History, by the price they ultimately exact. It will then be necessary to choose a more modest and less costly Utopia. At least it is in these terms that the refusal to legitimize murder forces us to pose the problem.

There is much feeling everywhere against extremist methods and even extremism itself. 'A man with whom one cannot reason is a man to be feared.' 'One cannot appeal to an abstraction; i.e. the representative of an ideology.'

But the fundamental difference between 'doctrine and theoretic dogma'—as we say 'ideology'—on the one hand, and mere parliamentary groupings representative of various great domestic interests (say a country-party against a mainly urban one) and pretending to no more mystical monopoly of the truth than a couple of hockey teams or two rival commercial concerns: this is a matter of priority interest, to be thoroughly understood, where the transitional society is in question in which we live and write and have our being.

The former of these made its appearance upon our scene for the first time about a century and a half ago. The words I used above, in inverted commas, are Burke's. They are taken from *Thoughts on the French Affairs*, written in the early part of 1791. I will quote what he says on the subject of the novel theoretic and doctrinal aspect of the French Revolution—for it was during that period that ideology, and indeed the word itself, was born. The French

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king had not yet been executed but was the prisoner of the National Assembly. I will, besides quoting those passages in which Burke defines this new, and to him alarming phenomenon, summarize his general argument:

There have been many internal revolutions [Burke points out] in the government of countries . . . the revolution [however] turning on matters of local grievance, or of local accommodation, did not extend beyond its territory.

The present Revolution in France seems to me to be quite of another character and description; and to bear little resemblance or analogy to any of those which have been brought about in Europe, upon principles merely political. *It is a revolution of doctrine and theoretic dogma.*¹ It has a much greater resemblance to those changes, which have been made upon religious grounds, in which a spirit of proselytism makes an essential part.

The last revolution of doctrine and theory which has happened in Europe, is the Reformation. It is not for my purpose to take any notice here of the merits of that revolution, but to state one only of its effects. . . . The principle of the Reformation was such as, by its essence, could not be local, or confined to the country in which it had its origin. . . . Neither are questions of theoretic truth and falsehood governed by circumstances any more than by places. . . .

These divisions, however, in appearance merely dogmatic, soon became mixed with the political. . . . They [in the case of the Reformation] gave a colour, a character, and direction, to all the *politics* of Europe.

So the 'last revolution of doctrine and theory' was religious—namely the Reformation. But it soon invaded politics. Now, in the French Revolution, here was another revolution of doctrine and theory, the doctrine of the *droit de l'homme* and so forth, which was militantly atheistic, not religious, but anti-religious. Yet its very atheism had as it were a religious fervour. And this body of abstract doctrines was destined, mixed into local politics everywhere, to produce all over Europe an emotional contagion comparable to the Reformation. 'That this doctrine has made an amazing progress in Germany there cannot be a shadow of a doubt.' But 'the independence and equilibrium of the Empire' is of

¹ The italics are in Burke's text.

the very essence 'of the system of balanced power in Europe'. Burke sees the prospect of the whole of Europe being engulfed in this theoretic enthusiasm, and rallying to the mad cry of Liberty—like a crowd of children lured into some ecstasy of unrestraint—to play truant, break bounds, burn in effigy their masters and mistresses, and, acquiring supplies of alcohol, end in a saturnalia of destruction.

Like an echo from our own times, when Hitler was starring as a world-menace, Burke then turns to England. 'There are several who are persuaded', he asserts, '*that the same thing cannot happen in England.*' He warns them that it can very well do so, and enumerates the various classes of people—among them Whigs and 'even Tories'—who would provide a very redoubtable Fifth Column.

It is true that in the 'modern world . . . there has been no instance of this spirit of general political faction separated from religion'. But this is really not a difficulty. There were the Guelphs and Ghibellines, 'political factions originally in favour of the emperor and the pope, with no mixture of religious dogmas'. And the ancient world, he says, was shaken by as violent and mischievous a fever of antagonism, without a religion to help them, as ever we have seen as a result of doctrinal disputes within Christendom. He cites the aristocratic and the democratic principle—the former championed by the Lacedaemonians, the latter by the Athenians—whose opposition ravaged the Hellenic world, just as the Guelph and Ghibelline factions kept in a ferment the late middle-ages.

Burke's was anything but an illiberal mind: he sided for instance with the American colonists, protesting the justice of their contention that 'taxation without representation' was illegal and unconstitutional. He stands however as the great pioneer of what we now call 'reaction'. To have epitomized his views upon the emergence of the Theorist, the 'intellectual', upon the European scene, may, I think, prove helpful.

The gravamen of his objection was as you see the international character of the new techniques. The doctrinal and theoretic

revolution in France did not confine its attack to the question of the absolutist monarchical system of that country (which would have been excusable): it directed it against all the institutions of civilized society everywhere. It was not a 'French affair' only: the *genre humain* was involved. The 'philosophes' had naturally produced a *philosophic* revolution. *Intellectual*, abstract revolution was very displeasing to Burke.

As we know, Burke's polemics influenced great numbers of people in England. The prospect of a political union of all the continental states, with French paramountcy, rationalism supplanting christianity, filled them with fear and animosity. The Government subsequently treated with great harshness, both in England and Scotland, persons advertising their enthusiasm for the Revolution—Tom Paine making his get-away only just in time. England then proceeded to play the leading rôle in the defeat of Napoleon's plan to unify Europe, in the end locking up the arch culprit on a rock. Many people, among whom I must be counted, have considered it perhaps a misfortune for Europe that France did not have its way.

There have been three attempts so far to unify Europe. *First*, there was the French attempt with the magic slogans of Liberty, and all the prestige of French civilization behind it. The *second* attempt was Hitler's; a much less attractive proposition. Doctrine and theoretic dogma pretending to universality were present also in this second attempt: but instead of the warm generalities of the French revolutionaries, there was only a squalid appeal to *interest*, and to fear. It had the fatal flaw of originating in glorification of the German at the expense of other nationals.—The *third* attempt I believe we are witnessing today: namely that of Russian communism, doctrinal and theoretic as well. As in the other two cases, England is again the main obstacle—in association, as in case two, with the U.S.A. England and America are lying across the westward path of the Communists, in Germany, Austria, Greece, Italy, Turkey, and so on. Whether the dyke will hold is problematic, seeing the economic condition of England, already near to exhaustion. There is always the threat of the customary slump in the

United States, which would paralyse Europe too. That, however, is idle speculation.

The words of Edmund Burke will be placed in a proper perspective by these few observations. In his analysis of the nature of that novel 'doctrinal' and 'theoretic' convulsion in France, in his insistence upon what we now should call its messianic character, and how fundamentally it differed from the ordinary blamelessly unphilosophical politics obtaining in the post-feudal society of Europe up till then, he was perfectly correct. It is his reactions which, from our standpoint, were wanting in sagacity.

There was something else he saw, however. He recognized that it was above all the French *bourgeoisie* that was at the bottom of the whole affair, that it was in short a question of a struggle for power: the 'theoretic' and 'doctrinaire' aspect of it being a device to attract the city mobs and peasantry with the promise of sport and gain. The Rights of Man—fraternity and equality—were like the slogans of a commercial advertisement, a sales device. He even pointed to the 'Bengal Club' and other portents in Britain which might provide the nucleus for a bourgeois plot of the same type. Even Fox, his friend and political ally for so long, saw in the French Revolution 'the most stupendous and glorious edifice of liberty which had been erected on the foundation of human integrity in any age or country'. A potential 'collaborator'. In spite of Fox's tears, he publicly broke his friendship with this enthusiast for revolutionary principles.

In England the *bourgeoisie* employed other methods: and now against that same *bourgeoisie* the torrential force of the machine-age proletariat has been mobilized and harnessed in preparation for action. One may eventually get down, in very reality, to the *genre humain*, in the course of this progressive blasting away of layer after layer. It is not cynicism to say that, in this case as in the other, the myths employed are myths. As in a war, the 'cause' is embellished with exalted verbiage, generally of an ethical character: behind the spells and incantations is the usual power-motive—not a saintly purpose, madly altruistic. (It would not however be necessary to say this, if some intellectuals were not so dishonest.)

Humanity is clumsily, and very brutally, divesting itself of the traditions which have dominated it since the dissolution of the Roman Empire. It needs another set, to correspond to present conditions. Revolutions are a violent means of demolition: they are as repulsively stupid as wars, but men are lethargic and always in arrears with their garbage.

The French Revolution introduced into Europe something of the magnitude of the discovery of gunpowder. It was a technique—but it was also a substance, as intangible as a gas. What was discovered was the explosive power of *ideas*. It was seen how, properly used, they could burst open kingdoms and disintegrate societies, so that sons would massacre their fathers and virtuous women carouse with street-walkers and mix blood with their wine: but especially one particular chemical grouping of ideas did this.

Burke saw and shuddered. How mild and indulgent, he remarked, was the government of the German states ruled by the Electors—'but good government is as nothing when the *rights of man* take possession of the mind'. These demonic ideas, he foresaw, would lead His Majesty's Government a pretty dance before they were laid by the heels. Although that great and unique discovery (for there was no supernatural machinery whatever involved) given its trial spin in 1789, was successfully countered, the secret of its power was not lost or forgotten, and has been utilized wherever an opportunity offered, sometimes for noble, and sometimes for ignoble, ends.

America is even more insular than England, and conditions in both those countries differ from what is found elsewhere. On the continent of Europe, however, politics never anywhere quite regained what Burke would have regarded as normality. That is of course why a humdrum nondescript French party like the radical-socialist is found on examination to possess such a thing as a literature of its own. It issued, in the first instance, it is true, from what has been called 'la révolution dreyfusienne'. But there is no party in France today which deserves to be called 'political', in the XVIIIth Century or the Burkean sense. They either represent

a universal church, or else interests that are everywhere *anti* that universal claim, or they are Communist, with a universal solution for the problem of human government, or what amounts to Fascists (for of course the vast body of Marxist voters automatically turns what would otherwise be Tories into Fascists). Without exception these parliamentary parties reach out beyond the local and parochial interests of the French people. In whatever degree—more or less—they are absolutist. For the English and the Americans, so much more ‘political’ in Burke’s sense, these conditions are not easily visualized.

I began with a quotation from an article by Albert Camus.¹ He is the author of *La Peste*, of *L’Etranger*, and other books, was active in *la résistance*, and has been an editor of *Combat*. His books are probably the best that are being written in France today, of the new writers. To what he says we are therefore bound to listen attentively. His objections to political absolutism—to the man who refuses to discuss anything with you, whose theories are fiat—are shared by every civilized man. ‘We suffocate among people who think they are absolutely right’. What pleasure it gives one to read those words—gives us who suffocate. But let us hear him again.

We suffocate among people who think they are absolutely right, whether in their machines or in their ideas. And for all who can live only in an atmosphere of human discourse and sociability, this silence is the end of the world.

... we should consider it as one of the basic factors in the situation, and try to do something about it. No task is more important. For it involves the fate of a considerable number of Europeans who, fed up with the lies and violence, deceived in their dearest hopes and repelled by the idea of killing their fellowmen in order to convince them, likewise repudiate the idea of themselves being convinced that way. And yet such is the alternative that at present confronts so many of us in Europe who are not of any party—or ill at ease in the party we have chosen—who doubt socialism has been realized in Russia or liberalism in America, who grant to each side the right to affirm its truth but refuse it the right to impose it by murder, individual or collective.

¹ ‘Combat’, 1946, from translation in *Politics*.

After this Camus discusses the dilemma of the French Socialist party, which up to now have shared their ideology with the Communists. ‘The Communists’, he asserts, ‘have solid logical basis for using the lies and violence which the Socialists reject’: namely in the simple doctrine that ‘the end justifies the means’. Since the Socialists have become increasingly uneasy about the *means*, they are in a quandary. They are almost a utopian party *without an ideology*. Or such is Camus’ account of the matter.

My reason for going into this is to show how literature is literally bedevilled by politics in the France of today. The French writer should really be commiserated with—if we had any pity to spare, for in our different way we are just as much bedevilled. In Camus we have a writer of great distinction who declares himself as *not of any party*: or at least desirous of being that. Yet there is nothing in the world so difficult today as not belonging to a party. It is easier to grow hair on your head if you are bald, or to add a foot to your height if uncomfortably short, than not to belong to a party. Remain outside of party, and you flout and affront all the beautiful (and extremely touchy) groups who would like you to succumb to their attractions.

Sharing the disgust excited in M. Camus by the spectacle of endless violence, nevertheless his pacifist position is almost meaningless I think today. War is now quite a small problem, overshadowed as it is by all the problems that stand behind it. Then his words are honest and moving: yet as one reads one is obliged to recall how unpopular the first theorists of modern revolution became because of the *sansculottes*, the hordes of destructive ragamuffins, the Corps of Justice and the ‘flying guillotine’. Today may be worse—we do appear at the moment as it were to excel. Hitler’s blitz on Warsaw or subsequently our ‘saturation bombing’ of Reich cities: then transcending everything in the record of contemporary criminal violence, Auschwitz and Belsen: at first sight it would seem that the palm was ours and that we were the prize brutes of all time.

Perhaps quantitatively the XXth Century may be ahead. But

the Thirty Years War was productive of atrocities which cannot be exceeded, except quantitatively. History is prudish and reticent; but we all have read of the mercenary armies which carried their women and children along with them—'vultures of the battlefield' to rifle the dead and dying: of how these armed rabbles left great areas of Germany a wilderness, the death-roll among the peasantry being very great. A little imagination enables one to lift the decorous veil, but one is able to read in any history of those peasants suspended over fires of straw, of mutilated women and children: or how this predatory soldiery 'would tie a cord, in which a piece of wood had been twisted, around the victim's head, then they screwed the cord up tight by means of turning the piece of wood until the blood spurted from the nose, the mouth, the ears'. Such tortures had for object to extract information about hidden valuables of gold, or of course were just a form of martial fun. Nor were our Britons exactly squeamish: the British Army grew very angry with the inhabitants of Badajos—who overdid their patriotism and civic pride it was felt—for their obstinate defence of the city. The sack of Badajos is a classic atrocity. I will spare our blushes and mention no more, though there are juicy details enjoyed by foreigners and not repudiated by our military historians, most bearing upon the good old standbys of murder, torture, robbery, and rape. There is a sad monotony about what one can do to a human being.

It is no consolation to a man awaiting his turn before the firing-squad in the morning—or having reason to expect the arrival at any moment of the torturer, with his hot irons, thumb-screws, etc.—to know that untold numbers of men, like himself for no adequate reason, have been in the same situation in the past: that this is not exceptional, but being part of the animal creation, after all, which is 'red in tooth and claw', these proceedings are normal. But it is necessary for *me* to keep this type of fact steadily before me: it is important for a writer like myself to know that men are incorrigible, since you cannot correct what is innate. I know that the owl and the bat fly out at night to seize other creatures and eat them (creatures with a structure similar to my own, though only

a fraction of my size): that the spider spreads his web to catch live things in it and eat them just as the trapper in the woods arranges his traps. I make it my business to keep all this in the front of my mind, and not to react too impulsively. After all, I hear the sheep bleating and the cattle mooing as they are driven past my window in the early morning: shortly I shall be buying bits of them at the butcher's and eating them. I am however a *pacific* cannibal (by nature but not by profession). That is because I am a thinking animal, like M. Camus, instead of a man-of-action animal. At least that is part of the reason—for thinking animals are often abnormally bloodthirsty. (Mixed types no doubt—not pure thinking animals.)

Finally, I loathe revolution, as I do war: at one with M. Camus in both cases. But I see quite well that it is people's brutal way of getting rid of the rubbish or garbage—and if there are bits of human flesh in their ash-cans in the morning, well after all it's *natural*, isn't it? What earthly reason is there to suppose that they will ever grow more gentle or more rational?—As a close-up even Tom Paine disliked revolution so much that he got himself flung into jail and almost lost his life. Theory being one thing, practice another, he would have liked more social justice without so much brutality in securing it. He overlooked the fact that it is the violence, not the social justice, which attracts, calling into being the wolfish multitude, which is the *body* of the revolution. The thinking animals who are the *brain* cannot make revolutions alone. Had attendance at the abattoirs been obligatory, I should not for quite a while enjoy a nice rumpsteak. And liberty would have a bad taste in one's mouth if one had been present at its birth. All the liberty I personally have enjoyed is hundreds of years old. At one time I felt exactly as does Camus, *and no more*. I have built upon impulse and revulsion, however, an intellectual corrective. I do not suggest that he should do so: it might not be to the advantage of his writing. But philosophically such a corrective as I have outlined seems to me indispensable.

If one is inclined to think that men can be changed *in themselves*—apart from mechanical changes in their institutions, which are

largely adventitious, one first should think of changing their treatment of one another in normal times, of securing social justice and domestic peace. If that could be achieved, automatically wars would no longer occur, revolutions take another and more rational form. The replacement of anachronistic institutions could be conducted without wholesale murder—quite pleasantly in fact, like having a haircut. It is completely useless inveighing against wars and revolutions. For my part I shall never waste my breath talking about war or other forms of organized violence. There will *of course* be a war again soon, just as there will be another thunderstorm before August is out.—‘The Atom Bomb?’ Naturally! Put a monkey in a cage with a lighted taper and a keg of gunpowder and—having placed yourself at a safe distance—see what happens!—I mean a monkey who knows perfectly well what ensues if one brings these two things together and realizes fully that he, as well as other things, will go up through the ceiling.¹

This is an epoch of wars and revolutions. ‘An Asylum looked at from within,’ observed Martin Heidegger, ‘presents a more rational spectacle than the present epoch.’ To which very restrained and moderate statement, for some extraordinary reason, great exception has been taken. Yet it is obvious that the majority are obsessed. People murder and organize elaborate persecutions and go unconcernedly about their business. The moron-as-hero, the M. Meursault who blandly reveals himself to us in *L’Etranger* represents one important fact of contemporary demoralization.

A period which began inoffensively enough with the spinning jenny is reaching its full development under the shadow of atomic war. As for revolution—for the *utopian* direction of our politics,

¹ The reader who is familiar—perhaps through having read him recently in literary reviews—with that most amusing of logical positivists Mr. Ayer, will remember what short work he makes of metaphysics wherever he encounters them. He goes after them like some efficient sporting dog. I mention this because it suggests an analogy to my own attitude to the moralistics in which all modern politics are clothed (though of course I have no Ayeresque feats to my credit). If I take no notice of ethical trimmings and sauces it is that I have ceased to be conscious of them. I thought I ought to say that such things are not ignored by me out of cynicism, but rather as one takes no notice of the *meaning* of conventional expressions, of ‘sincerity’ or ‘faithfulness’ at the end of a letter.

so hateful to Camus—the fabulous leap effected by technology has brought into existence specific evolutionary ambitions: at the same time it has endowed statecraft with the intoxicating power of a titan. Our society is an out-of-date machine, it is dimly realized by everybody: the social engineer follows in the footsteps of the creator of the skyscraper and flying-machine, just as Trade used to follow the flag. In the great convulsions that have begun nothing is to be expected of men except their usual behaviour when the restraints are removed. ‘In normal times’, as we say,—that is when everybody’s energies have not been directed into homicidal channels, people are peaceably engaged in slugging each other economically in ‘trade wars’ and what is referred to as expansion, squeezing each other with ‘pressure groups’, entrenching themselves behind tariffs and so forth: in private life they are quietly attempting to get the better of one another—to slander, rob, out-smart, and ruin as far as lies in their power, quietly enjoying their neighbours’ misfortunes and dirtily feathering their nests. These ‘peaceful’ occupations are naturally very greatly keyed up if sandwiched in between global blood-lettings. In view of these aggravations of *la condition humaine*, in such a time you are extremely lucky if you get through without losing an ear, an eye, a nose or a leg. The earth becomes a place like a mad-house in which all the most dangerous lunatics have been released simultaneously—for some inscrutable reason—from their strait-jackets.

Has what I have just been saying been intended as an answer to the pacifist? And is my conclusion that we should do nothing whatever then?—To that I should answer that many persons in their private life can exercise a restraining influence—mitigate the horrors to a small extent. I for instance attempt by my books to diminish, by however contemptible a fraction, the massive confusion. M. Camus strikes a match or two in the darkness of a certain number of French and English brains. But no writers except those who incite to murder and persecution enjoy a very wide influence in a period of great violence.

CHAPTER VIII

WHERE ONE EXPECTS TO FIND GOOD BOOKS

THERE is one aspect of these quotations from Albert Camus to which I must refer. Camus reacts with extreme energy against communism, and about that kind of resistance to pressure I have very little to say. The writer in such circumstances goes outside his *métier*: he is acting as a citizen. In France there are many more writers of distinction who think like Camus and Sartre than there are Communist sympathizers. No doubt this is because there are more Communists than over here. Without expressing any opinion upon his politics, one can congratulate Camus as a *writer* upon not being politically ambitious like Sartre.

Pressure exercised by intellectuals upon other intellectuals, or writers on other writers, and not the more comprehensive pressures of the political world at large, is that to which theoretically I limit myself in this essay. But with the French writers the two seem often to become one. What has to be said, once and for all, regarding the political world and the writer, reduces itself to something very simple: namely that under a straightforward despotism—any typical asiatic government, the theocracies of ancient Egypt or of Carthage, or the empire of the Osmanlis—there is no literature at all as we know it, and there is an end of the matter. If a writer lives under a non-despotic régime, where there is literature, the writer avails himself of this heavenly opportunity to write. For despotic conditions of some kind are the rule.

If, for argument's sake, a writer should discover he has passed beneath such an arbitrary rule, he would be wise immediately to put his pen away, to sell his typewriter and to occupy himself otherwise than in writing. The subjects of an *authentic* absolutism do not talk of civil liberties—they do not write books. These two things go together, liberty and books. Where in history you find

a lot of books, you find a lot of liberty. There were no Plato's or Aristotles in Fascist Sparta. The milder political climate of the Attic democracy encouraged a mass of writers and talkers. The first effect of the Reformation, again, was to banish humane learning, the works of Plato and Aristotle, 'that destroyer of souls, who knew next to nothing of philosophy', were ordered to be burned. In these islands the Renaissance court of Queen Elizabeth was responsible for a flowering, the Puritan for a blight: this is so generally recognized a routine pattern that there ought to be no question of literature wherever absolutism in politics, or religion, has made its appearance and firmly established itself, as there can then be no question of liberty.

Without the absolutism being political or religious, however, or without there being anything deserving of that name to which one can point, it is perfectly possible for literature to wither and disappear. I wonder whether New York is to become an exponent of this insidious variety of blight? For the United States I experience such a great personal regard that I am apt to try and gild its enormous faults.

In America a considerable creative literary period, comparable to that in XIXth Century Russia perhaps, is coming to an end. James, Hemingway, Faulkner, Dos Passos, Cummings, Eliot, Pound, and others make up an impressive list. Contemporary New York might almost be regarded as a madly materialist maritime republic—carthaginian in its contempt for the writer.

In the past twenty-five years we have seen it stamping out the promise of a splendid literature, of which the Hemingways, Faulkners, Pounds, Eliots would have been the first arrivals, and which when World War I ended was an unmistakable enough presence, for the first time for many decades American books receiving excited recognition in France and Germany, as well as influencing the English. But this abnormally tall city has become a worse and worse place for a good book, until today there is no more chance of a literature existing there than of a sunflower blooming in a cellar.

New York is not the cultural centre of the United States, it is the United States as far as literary reputation is concerned and the publishing of books. What it is there that is not religion nor politics—traditionally responsible by their absolutist temper for the suppression of liberty—which has some of the effects of an absolutism, is not in any way mysterious. It is simply high-pressure business and the vulgar cynicism that goes with that. That is the tough, insolent, coarse Something inimical to literature, which we find in New York—or in the film-capital of the U.S.A. Hollywood.¹ Yet a few good books still make their appearance in America. There is all the apparatus still for a literature—many publishers, a number of highly trained writers, plenty of type-writing machines, and even papers supposedly devoted to literature. This may be called Dollar-ideology: but my point is that it is not a thoroughgoing absolutism—yet.

It must not be lost sight of however that these are everywhere transitional conditions we discuss—a transition to *what* it is impossible to say. No one has the least idea (not Mr. James Burnham or Mr. G. D. H. Cole or whoever it is) what kind of society will be in the ascendant in America, Asia, Europe, in a hundred years' time. All that is certain is that it will be a new variety. Meanwhile at present everything daily increases in violence: we writers have to ask ourselves if we are going to follow suit. It is Sartre's view that we should, after a fashion. Camus, as we know, is just as strongly in favour of the intellectual setting an example of restraint.

¹ The educated American looks on in horror—as did Henry Adams: what is happening to publishing and other things appals him. But nothing can be done to halt the rackets.

PART III

SARTRE, MALRAUX, AND CAMUS

CHAPTER IX

'PLUNGED BACK INTO TIME'

FOR some time in these pages the scene will now be France. Further, I shall not depart from the concrete henceforth, until the conclusion of the Sartre evidence. This evidence will be of how *not* to be free, or how impossible it is for a writer under certain conditions to be free, or how paradoxically his freedom can be threatened. Everything which regards the independence of thought of the writer, whether in France, America, or elsewhere, is relevant to what ultimately I hope to settle: but France, where more serious writing still is done than in any other country, has always had, after England, first claim on our attention. The French are our nearest neighbours, France is the cultural leader of Europe, its political destiny is involved with ours. So apart from the fact that in this instance one has no choice, as France alone provides the hard logical contrasts required, I do not have to excuse the foreignness.

When I exchanged the method of attempting to conjure up some neutral realm of the mind—a lettered Switzerland of free writers—for the concrete, for Sartre's reporting, I decided to make use of Sartre because I had just been reading his articles in *Les Temps Modernes*. Such contemporary French books as are obtainable also have been occupying me lately: as is quite the rule, in all things of that sort the French astound one by their vitality—whereas the English tend, if not to sag, to fall silent beneath the crushing burden of debt, their kidneys stunned with watery cataracts of beer. Whatever the cause, the literary scene in London resembles a Butlin Camp in an off-month, or a mews in a once prosperous quarter taken over by small-time spivs and hard-up swells (both sexes, from *Debrett*). Had it occurred to me to make use of the London literary scene instead of Sartre's Paris, patriotism would immediately have stepped in and dissuaded me.

Now Jean-Paul Sartre is as it were the hero of the present volume—or if hero is not exactly the word, I can think of no other. He is one of the least free men of whom I have any knowledge: which is why I have starred him in this book.

The kind of independence of mind which it is essential for the writer to possess cannot be secured in such a society as is depicted by Sartre—and to which the case of Sartre himself bears vivid and exquisite witness. As one watches him feverishly attempting to arrange himself to the best advantage—in accord with the conditions of the post-war forties in France—upon the political scene, which is identical with the literary scene: as far Left as possible without being *extrémiste*: accepting many Communist attitudes but railing at the Communists: peddling an individualism of sorts in the collectivist camp: in a word, attempting to secure all the advantages of an all-out Left position without sacrificing his independence—watching him, one feels what a pity it is that a writer of great talent should have to deflect so much energy into this stupid game. It is even worse when one comes to his novels, for there his talent is unmistakable, they are of great interest. Luckily the damage is not as pervasive as it might be. Still, this admirable observer often falsifies a situation to satisfy some political requirement.

In Russia, I believe, making allowance for the drawbacks of totalitarian life, a writer of this temperament would be better off. Because of course it is not that he is on the side of a new social order that is the trouble. It is the nice and anxious adjustments, the literary falsifications entailed by life in a society which is intensely disturbed politically, but politically hybrid. As a soviet writer he would find that Daniel, the hero of *L'Age de Raison*, had to go, because of his unorthodox sexual habits (as he would also of course here or in the States). This would be a grievous loss; Daniel is a great figure of comedy. But the swarm of excellently observed, clearly differentiated, creatures, which come to life beneath his pen would recommend him strongly to the countrymen of Gogol and Tolstoy.

Sartre ought to live in a one-party state, or in a *no-party* state. That is my considered opinion. Above all, what is needed for his

talents to show to the best advantage is a society where a man who announces himself a 'revolutionary' immediately has his head cut off. In other words, in a nation that has already had its revolution, an ambitious writer does not have to be worrying about *that* all the time, but can transfer such energy to his *writing*. That is why I suggested Russia.

There is yet another kind of 'pressure', with which my reading of Sartre has made me acquainted. I refer to *la pression de l'histoire*¹—the pressure of history. That is the subject of this chapter.

I would like to emphasize that the great prominence Sartre has been given in this study is due to something altogether distinct from his literary achievement, which is another question entirely. It is as a *case* that he enters into the scheme of this book. (I do not use this word offensively. His is a *mal du siècle*: we all are in the same century, and all, in one degree or another, in one way or another, sick.) But since I am obliged frequently to refer to his work, in the course of what I shall have to say, I will briefly outline it.

Sartre has written, as I suppose my readers will be aware, novels, plays, stories, and philosophy. His philosophy is one of the French offshoots of German 'Existenz Philosophie'. Martin Heidegger, the most prominent German exponent of this school of thought, is the thinker closest to Sartre, who is merely a gallic variant of Heidegger. If Sartre has borrowed his metaphysics, existentialism owes to him its main international advertisement. Since 1939 any German thinker needs a chaperone or escort to circulate in the outside world, or even someone who will *impersonate* him. Sartre performed this office for the most recent great German pessimist.

We may wonder how a man of Sartre's temperament found his way into the bleak labyrinth of 'Sein und Zeit'—or at least how he came to take up his quarters there permanently. There is no spiritual congruity between the creator of Daniel Sereno (*Monsieur Lalique*) the de facto hero of his novel *L'Age de Raison*—

¹ P. 1629, *Les Temps Modernes*, June 1947.

between this master of farce, devotee of the absurd—an amused analyst of life's lazy surface (ignoring its fiery centre), picking his way with delight through all its unexciting paradoxes—and a philosopher who is the sub-zero climax of German pessimism, whose theme-word is not 'existence', but 'anguish'.

This anomaly may be accounted for in the same way as the others which are discussed in this chapter and those that follow. He seems to possess a talent for getting into compartments where he does not belong and then experiencing much difficulty in getting out again—or in feeling that he ought to be something that he is not. So he neglects the excellent material which is by nature his, because of these romantic aberrations. Among the heretics—that is to say those writers who are neither Catholic nor Communist—he stands, with Albert Camus and André Malraux, for what is most alive in contemporary France. Sartre is much the most genial and human of these three. As a novelist he has none of the dry, concentrated force of the novels of Camus, of *La Peste*, of *L'Etranger*: nor the power of that extraordinary play, *Le Malentendu*. Both Camus and he have compiled metaphysical treatises, the principles of which they have developed in their creative writings. But their metaphysical notions resemble each other much more than do the novels and plays that allegedly issue from them. Then the philosophy of the Absurd, as we find it in Camus, is reminiscent of the theories of the Absurd which haunt the pages of Malraux. Sartre's answer to those who assert that his and Camus' philosophy are one and the same is that this is not at all the case: and Camus says the same thing. Camus is more French, says Sartre, than himself, his is the classical Mediterranean pessimism: whereas—presumably he means—his (Sartre's) pessimism is of the modern German nihilistic type.—For the rest, Sartre's activity as editor of a fat existentialist monthly (who says there is no paper in France?) as *chef d'école*, lecturer, playwright, etc. etc., is a wonderful testimonial to the intellectual vitality of a bankrupt society.

Now I can return to this new 'pressure' of which I have spoken:

'the pressure of history'. In reply to an inquiry as to what that might signify, some quite elaborate explanation would be forthcoming. What is in fact involved is something as unmysterious as the following. Had you happened to find yourself in the Black Hole of Calcutta, or in the camp at Auschwitz when the gas-ovens were working; were you a member of a Hindu working-class family in Lahore in the summer of 1947, a few hours after the announcement of the decision of the British boundary commission, and discovered yourself unexpectedly in Pakistan—even more so were you a poor Moslem in Amritsar about the same time: or had you been a private in a Russian regiment defending Stalingrad—you would be experiencing a great deal of 'historic pressure'. I do not believe that Sartre could dispute the validity of my illustrations.—Again, had you been a French writer in Paris at the time of the German occupation—were you an active 'resister'—you would undoubtedly have experienced the pressure of History, in the form of the Gestapo. I may have overlooked something, but this I believe conveys the idea. History, pushing up against what History is for—Man.

Sartre in this article asserts that we must not 'abdicate before what the unspeakable Zaslavski refers to in *Pravda* as the "Historical processus"'. Yet it seems to me that Sartre *does*, after all, abdicate precisely to the 'historical process', in a way that Camus does not. It is far from my wish to find fault with Sartre: but in this particular respect I will again compare his attitude with that of his Algerian contemporary, whose fortitude one cannot but admire. The latter does not, like Sartre, waste time pretending to be something that he is not.

Like those who assert that 'war brings out the best in people' (it is a saying of which I am not very fond) Sartre tells us that 'L'homme tout entier' (man, *all* of him, or total man—a first cousin of 'L'homme tout nu', another objectionable abstraction) is only visible during bombardments or massacres, at the moment of a *coup d'état*, or in the torture chamber. This total man is to him so momentous an entity that one cannot help feeling that he 'says Yea'—as Nietzsche would put it—to wars, plagues, revolutions,

massacres, etc., since these things produce, what nothing else does apparently: 'l'homme tout entier', or total man. He agrees¹ that *he* has never suffered the fearful martyrdoms upon which he dwells. ('Certes nous sommes bien loin d'avoir tous ressenti cette angoisse.') But it has 'haunted us all like a menace or a promise'. (From this word *promise* we are to conclude that he longed for martyrdom.) So vicariously and by virtue of a 'haunting', we are men whole and entire—'entier' and 'toutnu': such is the idea.

Our forerunners knew no such excitements as have been ours. 'Those who immediately preceded us, who bequeathed us their culture, their wisdom, their customs, and their proverbs, who built the houses we live in, who planted the statues of their great men all over our cities, practised modest virtues, and confined themselves to temperate regions.' Whereas we, the people of the world wars, of the massacres, bombardments, *coups d'état*—we are necessarily of a heroic mould. Our virtues are either terrific, or else we are submen of the vilest kind. These immediate ancestors of ours, of comfortable prosperous periods, before 'air-power' held forth the promise to dash you to pieces or shrivel you up from the sky, or the revolutionary brought back the thrilling atmosphere of the Inquisition or the *auto-da-fé*, are to be pitied (and, however we may protest, looked down upon) for never having had the opportunity to be 'metaphysical' or to have felt 'the pressure of history'.

Was not one of those proverbs bequeathed us by some ignoble ancestor (it is not referred to by Sartre—it has just occurred to me): 'Blessed is the nation without a history.' That's the sort of men they were! They did not love History. They were men of peace.

Now Camus, as you will see from what I have quoted of his, has quite different reactions from these. Far from welcoming 'the tragic' as 'heroic' material for the literary artist, he is against those things in men which produce it. Incidentally he produces great tragedy that way, as a literary artist, which Sartre does not.

¹ P. 1629, *Les Temps Modernes*.

He does not wish to see men living in terror—in the midst of massacres, bombardments, tortures, and *pressure*. We find him reacting as violently against those conditions, as Jean-Paul Sartre with a fatalistic gusto exploits them.—But let us patiently follow Sartre upon this path, and allow him to convince us if he can of the beauties of *cyclone literature*.

'Circumstances', he asserts, 'have plunged us back into our time.' Whereas the novelist of before-the-wars removed himself outside (or above) the contemporaneous, so that his characters might retain their due proportions, and that—thus advantageously placed for all-over observation, judgements might be arrived at (and Sartre in *L'Age de Raison* was of those who thus abstract themselves) this same helicopterizing author would be kicked back into his time in short order.

What happens to the author 'plunged back into his time' in this unceremonious fashion? How can he focus this period of his if he is *inside* it—swallowed by it as Jonah was by the whale?—Well, the following is Sartre's account of how the author converts this necessity into a glorious virtue.

If we are going to handle such a time as the present, we must, as novelists, abandon the Newtonian system, as it were, and pass over into the General Theory of Relativity. (This is not a very original step, even for a novelist to take). In this way 'we people our books with half-lucid, half-dim intelligences'.

In pursuance of this theory of historical immersion Sartre moved into the cinematographic method (known as *simultanéité*) of 'Le Sursis'. The obvious inconvenience in writing 'au sein de l'histoire', covered with blood and sweat and tears—of treating of an epoch which is 'incomprehensible' because you have your face jammed up against it—the difficulty and inconveniences of this theory and of all of its class may be explained as follows.—You are in a fire at a theatre, say: caught in a stampede you find yourself at the bottom of a pile of struggling bodies. That is the kind of situation that Sartre postulates in his expression 'au sein de l'histoire': were it yours and were you able to express

yourself, you could certainly give to this 'événement' a 'brutale fraîcheur' all right—its 'opacité menaçante', as likewise its 'imprévisibilité'. The hot and passionate immediacy of the crudeness of living would be there: and all its *blindness* too.

Of this blindness Sartre makes a great deal: of the beauty of not understanding what is happening to one. Not only helplessness, but non-comprehension, is somehow an asset. At this point another and quite distinct issue becomes visible. It is that issue which possesses most relevance for my present argument. Before turning to it, however, I will attend to the purely aesthetic objections to Sartre's theory.

His 'cyclone aesthetic', as we may call it, offends of course against the classic rules of restraint and intelligibility: but it is not for that reason that it fails to recommend itself to me. My criticism would be this: what this fragmentary peepshow may gain in sensational intensity, it loses in the more comprehensive satisfactions which intensity rules out (or perhaps intensity is not the word but a technique of the naïve close-up). Though it may feed—perhaps over-feed—the senses, it starves the intellect. Then since there is no person of vigorous mind who does not possess the will to understand, nor does anyone care to be left permanently in the dark, this method must always leave a disagreeable sensation, as also will its kaleidoscopic chaos. Any art which condemns its public to the stunned confusion experienced at the climax of a 'great historical event' can hardly satisfy for long.

Even apart from all question of shock, or the character to be expected of 'crisis literature', there are the unalterable objections to any impressionist technique, the piece of pioneer impressionism—which is a landmark in literary history—to be found in *La Chartreuse de Parme*, is the classic illustration.¹ It showed people that all that need be done is to cut a little bit out of a material: the entire bolt of cloth is not indispensable. So you get a minute fraction of a great total event—namely the Battle of Waterloo.—For myself the massive totality, Napoleon in his hat pointed laterally, Wellington in hat pointed fore and aft, Blucher stuffily

¹ It is the battle scene of course to which reference is made.

Prussian—these with all their respective hordes slowly clashing, weaving and reclashing, alone would satisfy me.—Impressionism is too doctrinally the art of the individual.

Having disposed of the purely aesthetic problem, I will now return to the blindness—the 'non-comprehension'—of Sartre's victim of History. This type of writer is supposed, you recall, to be confined to the heart of a cyclone, and to know no more than a new-born earth-worm would know in that situation. He does not know what a cyclone is—he does not even know it is a *cyclone*.

He apparently does not *want* to know what causes cyclones, or to consider how best to guard against their accidence. All he wants to do is to experience their awful *pressure*—and to express his profound pessimism at the thought of this meaningless adventure between two Nothings. It is an attitude that might recall the Puritan, for whom life could not be disagreeable and wild enough to suit his taste. What makes it so exquisite for Sartre is that it is purposeless.

'An author who two centuries hence decided to write a historical novel about the war of 1940'—he would know a great deal more about it than we do, Sartre affirms. Therefore he would not have to act as if he were practically flattened out beneath 'the pressure of history'.—But this is strange. I should have thought myself that I know more about it than will anyone two hundred years hence. And I should have said, too, that we knew a good deal now about the causes of wars in general. Of course we feel their *pressure*. Indeed, they leave us ruined, loaded with debt, on each occasion with far less freedom than before. But there is nothing mysterious or, as Sartre calls it, 'enigmatic' about them. It is a pretentious affectation, I think, to call them that.

If in a war I had my leg blown off by a bomb I should know perfectly well how that bomb had come to be made. Its historic pedigree I should have no difficulty whatever in drawing up. I cannot believe that Sartre is more innocent than I am.

Sartre is too much a man of policy; an opportunist where Camus is not. It is, however, today in France difficult for a writer

not to adopt, for political reasons, all kinds of unnatural attitudes. In Sartre's creative work these pressures are not, as I have said, present to the same degree. But whenever some false position has to be taken up, in a novel, to satisfy opinion, a dead patch is there in his writing—wooden and studied as the photo-group of a newly-wedded pair.

When I was analysing the hero in Hemingway's novels, in an essay which had for title 'the Dumb Ox'¹ I described the characters in his books, I remember, as being invariably the kind of people to whom things are done, who are the passive (and rather puzzled) guinea-pig type—as remote as it is possible to be, for instance, from Nietzsche's 'super' type. The young soldier, in what has been called, not inappropriately, 'the greatest love-story in modern literature', would have none of his melting Pagliaccio-like pathos were it not for this. But he is of course—as he *must* be—cattle and not butcher.

This is not a shortcoming in a work of art: it defines it merely. It says that the work in question is classifiable as lyrical. As we know, the *jeune premier* must not be unusually endowed with anything but looks. *Bel canto* is allergic to superman. Then Hemingway has been a chronicler, of exceptional genius, of folk-emotions. It is quite a different matter when a writer adopts the outlook of a bi-valve *for himself*. To draw attention to *that* is not complimentary: he is after all not a pathetic figure in a book. The writer is in life (whether you say he is without intermission making himself out of Nothing, or, contrariwise, that his past and future lies outstretched like a temporal landscape across which he crawls). There—in life—one has to acquire a knowledge of the functioning of the social machine. If, for instance, the writer throw a metaphysical mist over the otherwise easily identifiable operation of power-politics, or cultivate the attitudes of primitive man towards the violence of the elements, and apply it to the more violent phenomena of social life,² he is highly artificial.

¹ *Men Without Art*, 1934.

² It is in M. Meursault, Albert Camus' little clerk, that this 'crisis literature' reaches its ultimate expression.

Social action would be altogether paralysed, that is what I mean, were everyone to adopt the attitude that they were feeling their way about in their time like lost children, describing all that occurred as 'inexplicable', or 'enigmatic'. To which of course it is necessary to add that there have been many other catastrophes in our world prior to world wars *one* and *two*. It is a result of this reasoning that, although the pacifism of Camus seems to me too narrow a position, I prefer it to Sartre's glorification of the 'heroic'.

Existentialism is of course involved to some extent in the subject-matter of this chapter. Existentialism has been called 'the philosophy of crisis'. Therefore, whatever was its origin, it is regarded, in its effects, and especially because of its phenomenal success, to be closely related to the tragic situation in which men suddenly find themselves everywhere. This resolves itself into a question of how 'crisis' should be met: or, to put it in another way, what is the best philosophy for crisis. I think I ought to add, since I have mentioned Hemingway—who with Faulkner has now for some time exercised a considerable influence upon young Frenchmen—that the hero of *L'Etranger*, Albert Camus' admirably written (though not otherwise I am afraid very admirable) novel, is a moron. A moron is not the same thing as a 'dumb ox': but they are of the same family.

CHAPTER X

MALRAUX AND ESCAPE THROUGH ACTION

IN André Malraux we have another extraordinary case, even more so than that of Jean-Paul Sartre, of a political flirt. His was a far more *violent* flirtation, as everything about him is more violent. Malraux never became a member of the Communist party—and now he is publicity chief in the entourage of the French Franco, General Charles de Gaulle. He did everything that can be done *short of* becoming a party member. He took part in the Communist revolution at Canton: he was with the Russian air force in the Spanish Civil War; he went to party rallies in Moscow. Why did he not regularize this long-standing relationship? I know the answer in Sartre's case: but as regards Malraux I do not think I know it. I can only suppose he is one of those men-of-action who is really only an actor.

Although Malraux is not an existentialist, he is more *existent* and *concrete* than most. 'Il n'y a de réalité que dans l'action,' Sartre insists: Malraux's life has been all action, the penalty of which—from the writer's standpoint—is that the vitality in his books is only borrowed from his life, and less dense than it otherwise would be. Yet Malraux studied and wrote of 'the Absurd' before Camus, or Fondane, or Sartre: the influence of his mind has been very considerable. My purpose in writing about him here, however, is mostly to fill out the Sartre picture.

When Sartre aspires to be violent he goes to the brain (as in *La Nausée*): he uses madness as Thomas Mann uses disease. His dramatic power is very small: an example of this is *Huis-Clos*, which has the familiar air, from the first page, of a Palais Royal farce, written with great spirit. The stock figures and stock dialogue of the *Garçon d'Etage* and the *Locataire* reek (delightfully) of the French theatres which cater for those who wish to give themselves up to laughter. Comedy it remains to the end,

where another writer would have made it Grand Guignolesque. *Les Mouches* though philosophically interesting, is as unpurgative as a play by Mr. Shaw. The most dramatic thing in it is where the murderer of Agamemnon, seeing Orestes with drawn sword, receives him kindly, saying among other things 'I am glad it is too late (to call for help). I want you to assassinate me': which of course Orestes does. Sartre outdoes the classical fatality in the flatness of his dénouement.

Having read most of Sartre's books, I find him a gentle philosophic spirit (which is what I like most about him—I am paying him a compliment)—with a great salacious appetite for life, like many Frenchmen. He is not a bad man, of that I am sure. In his best-known novel, *L'Age de Raison*, the hero Mathieu steals 3,000 francs from a woman performer in his favourite night-spot: Mathieu's favourite pupil is thievish—books is what he mainly steals; this young man's sister, Ivich, is a lesbian, who squeezes her thighs together and has an orgasm while sitting in cafés; the de facto hero of the book, Daniel Sereno, is a very active homosexual indeed, who among other drolleries, has an amusing fight with a scrubby little *tapette* in whose room he is passing the night: and so on. In order to play a major rôle in a novel of Sartre's you have to be able to do some parlour trick of this sort (though homicide is barred). Sartre must not be blamed for this. He writes faithfully about what he knows. If a hospital-nurse wrote a book, there would be something the matter with all her characters: one would have ulcers, another would be incontinent, a third would suffer from epileptic seizures.

When Malraux aspires to be violent it is a different matter. Homicide is *not* barred with him. In fact, homicidal propensities are an indispensable qualification for starring in one of his novels. I have here a paper-covered volume, from the cover of which one is vamped by a very interesting dark brooding young man. Its author is M. Claude Mauriac (son of François Mauriac): but he is *not* the dark-eyed young man. That is André Malraux *jeune*, in the days when he was starting his career of political filibustering and Byronism up-to-date. The title of this study is *Malraux*.

Le Mal du Héros. It seethes with romanticism, like so much French writing. Malraux is of course the 'Hero'. The personalities of M. Mauriac (*films*) and Malraux, in contact as we find them in this book, provide a demonstration interesting to the critic; for the critic cannot fail to remark that Mauriac's is the sort of mind for whom Malraux's books were destined. We may observe his books in action, as it were, within the mind of an admirer, who may be regarded as a reagent. I look upon this book as a critical 'find'.

With regard to the Hero's 'mal', one of the principal forms it takes is a blood-obsession—he is 'haunted by blood'. But Mauriac has not selected this particular hero to write about without having as we shall presently see a certain taste for it himself. Action appears to him to be the highest good. And M. Mauriac is in no doubt as to the *kind* of action which is the most worthy of our admiration. 'Perhaps even', he writes, 'the intelligence does not reach its final perfection except in action, and pre-eminently in what is its ultimate form, namely combat.' The fighting-man is the flower of mankind: the human intelligence only reaches its perfection when it plunges its sword into a human body, or blows it up with a bomb. If no war is going on at the moment, and an *exceptionally* intelligent man is waiting (rather wearily) for peace to stop, he can always pick a quarrel with a stranger in the street, and try to bash his face in.—M. Mauriac does not like people who do not share these views. He growls: 'There is no literature more abject than that which speaks ill of war.'

Murder is not quite the same thing as spitting your man in a charge, or blowing him up with a landmine, or dropping a bomb on his head: however, let me quote M. Claude Mauriac, where he is considering his hero's penchant for assassination.

Malraux's obsession with murder assumes the form alternately of temptation and remorse. Do the heroes of his books wish to liberate themselves by a subterfuge from the memory of one of their murders: or do they in fact see in crime—already committed or in prospect—an indispensable experience?

All these writers suffer from the disadvantage of never having

killed anybody, says one of (Malraux's) heroes, in speaking of the Russian novelists. He expounds as follows:

If the characters in their books suffer after having killed somebody, it is because the world has hardly changed at all for them. I say *hardly*. Had it happened in life, instead of a book, the world would have been transformed for them completely, all its perspectives altered: it would have become not the world of a man who 'had committed a crime', but that of a man who had *killed*.

(I shall comment as I go along; in the above passage Dostoevsky is doubtless the Russian author most obviously involved: *Crime and Punishment*, the book that would first come to mind. The first thing to remark is that Dostoevsky was very actively a Christian, and none of Malraux's heroes are that. Secondly, to suppose that Dostoevsky was incapable of imagining the state of mind of a non-Christian murderer is to under-estimate the insight and imaginative faculty of a great creative genius. But that is not all. The implication of course is that Malraux himself has murdered one or more people. This seems to thrill M. Mauriac (though it by no means follows that Malraux *is* a murderer): he even believes, if I have not misunderstood him, that the murder done by Tchen (in *La Condition Humaine*) is in fact one done by Malraux—his favourite one. Probably his *first* (when he lost his virginity as a man-who-had-not-killed)! This is our point of departure—for M. Mauriac's book begins with the passages I am quoting: that André Malraux was a murderer. A real man—an *homme tout entier*, as Sartre would put it.

I may be mistaken, but I should say that very few of the writers I know have cut a man's throat or plunged a dagger into his heart. Even Hemingway has probably murdered no one. Except for the murdering that a great many of us have to our credit as soldiers, I very much doubt if Hemingway can claim to have taken life—a humiliating thought, which puts him in the same category as Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Gogol and Tchekov).

I continue my quotation—M. Mauriac is still speaking of *La*

Condition Humaine, which he describes, correctly, as one of Malraux's best books. His best, I should say.

Tchen, asking Gisors if he had already killed, and receiving a negative reply, suddenly had the feeling 'that there was something lacking in Gisors'.

Gisors asked:

'The first woman you slept with—what did you feel afterwards?'
'Pride.'

'At being a man?'

'At not being a woman,' Tchen replied. . . .

'And you were right to have mentioned women. Perhaps one has a great contempt for the person one kills. But one despises him less than one does the others.'

'You mean than those who do not kill?'

'Than those who do not kill—than virgins (*les puceaux*).'

(Practically all the readers of this book of Malraux's must have been in this sense virgins, or *des puceaux*. What would their sensations be, I wonder? From the great success accorded to it, shame must have been experienced, I suppose. Its readers were intended to feel small, and they did feel small—if writers they must have experienced something of the feeling of the sexually impotent. Being French (with vanity as a national vice—*vide* Stendhal) they must have promised themselves at the first opportunity, with a reasonable assurance of impunity that is, to correct this oversight, due to a cissy upbringing).

M. Mauriac tends to suggest, however, though he does not say so outright, that Malraux only committed *one* murder.

It is always the same murder that these executioners of Malraux's commit, as if a precise recollection, a constant and immutable reference, forbade the novelist to change in the smallest particular narratives of which the intangible contents were once and for all fixed.

Hong asked me once, said Klein, what my feelings had been in executing Kominsky. I replied that all the time I was thinking I ought to have used a revolver. . . . With a revolver I should have finished him off without touching him. . . .¹

(The idea in this last passage is that when he was committing

¹ *Les Conquerants*.

his one and only murder he used a knife and that he found contact with his victim's body disagreeable.)

Leaving murder, we arrive, under the guidance of M. Mauriac, at sadism.

'To humiliate is one of the principal pleasures of the erotic heroes of Malraux. . . . This madness—dry, meticulous, reasonable even in its ever more imperious unreason—this gloomy fury has a name, which is *sadism*.'

M. Mauriac quotes all through the book from Col. Lawrence who greatly influenced Malraux it would seem, and with whom he had, according to this writer, many points of resemblance: except of course that Malraux was not his own hero. He had Garine, Perken and so forth to stand for him. Chapter II of *Le Mal du Héros* opens with a discussion of these parallel destinies; and then an incident in *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom* is placed in evidence. It is Lawrence's account of the execution which he carried out, the victim being an Arab called Ahmed, a member of his escort who in a dispute with another Arab had killed him.¹

Lawrence pushed Ahmed into a damp and sombre gully: standing at the entrance he gave him a few moments of respite, which the condemned man spent upon the ground weeping. Then, having made him stand up, he fired into his chest:

'He fell bellowing into the grass: the blood spurted out in bursts, running over his clothes: the convulsions of his body flung him almost up to my feet. I fired again, but trembling so much that he was only hit in the hand. He continued to cry out, but with less and less force, now lying upon his back, his feet towards me. I leant forward to give him the coup de grâce, beneath the jaw, in the fat of the neck. The body gave a shudder and I called the Ageyls. . . .'

Two sub-titles accompany this page (in the *Seven Pillars*) A MURDER (this refers to the Arab's act): ANOTHER MURDER (namely the execution).

A lot of dialectic accompanies this ecstatic taking of life in Malraux's stories, however. The second line of the first page of

¹ I translate from the French, since a copy of the *Seven Pillars* is not immediately available.

La Condition Humaine contains the word 'angoisse'—anguish ('L'angoisse lui tordait l'estomac'). This is one of the words some people get tired of reading in his books: it occurs very often. Tchen is discovered about to murder a man lying inside a mosquito net. I speak of this event most humbly as a mere *puceau*: but would a tough Chinese have quite so many sensations (of a European kind) while going about this little bit of revolutionary business? Would he experience 'une atmosphère de folie', etc?

In the 'twenties, in describing not only himself but those who shared his temperament and outlook, Malraux wrote: 'pensée nihiliste, destructrice, foncièrement négative'. According to a critic, M. Gaetan Picon, he built for himself in contemporary literature a place beside Chateaubriand, Byron, d'Annunzio, Barrès, Montherlant. This unsympathetic critic speaks of the romanticism which entered into his revolutionary *parti pris* (and this is what the Communists found embarrassing too): of the 'goût du spectacle, de l'apothéose, de l'apocalypse'. Then 'le néant' was haunting the pages of Malraux long before it took up its quarters as the major concept of Sartre's system. And did he not write: 'In imposing his personality upon the external world man finds the only outlet which remains to him, his one and only chance of escaping—imperfectly—from Nothingness (*au néant*)'?

Here you see in this *escape through action* theory none other than J.-P. Sartre's conception of Freedom. How this *action* theory of 'imposing your personality upon the world' may very easily develop into a quite substantial *power-complex* may be judged by pondering these further words of Malraux's. 'To lead, to be he who decides, to coerce. That is to live!' Those ways of feeling are contagious, who can doubt? How many people were there in Western Europe between the wars nursing feverish power-complexes, besides the Duces and the Führers? Malraux's account of his own power-impulses represented them as an *escape from Nothingness*—on the part of a 'nihilistic' and 'negative' thinker—would not some such formula have accommodated

Hitler very well? The filling of a void with shouting crowds, and tramping feet, by a man who was convulsively wrenching himself out of Nothingness?

What was—and is—this Nothingness, which began filling Europe at the beginning of the 'twenties like an evil fog? Which plunged all kinds of people into acts of violence—which were in a sense acts of escape? Which caused men frantically to snatch at power? All men are able to examine this intangible, dark and chilling emanation, and answer that question for themselves.

At the time of the publication of Malraux's *La Lutte avec L'Ange*, a certain M. Mounin, what Sartre would call a Communist watchdog, described it I gather as a 'backsliding'. But here are his words.

'All that Malraux, we had thought, had got out of his system—'anguish' regarding man's destiny, the 'absurd' obsession of death—erupts into his work once more, without other opposition than that of fragile emotions, of brief evidences *fulgurants* such as we get with Sartre.' Another Communist, Pierre Hervé, speaks of his 'degradation of man': which is the same criticism that Henri Lefebvre, you will recall, brought against Sartre. In all cases these Communist critics approach the writings in question from a basis of hard debunking good sense. It is a pity these people seem to have almost a monopoly in France of that firmness—where so much is jelly. Why Sartre wrote his *Existentialism is a Humanism* was to counter such criticism as this. So I think I have been able to establish how close is the relationship between Malraux and Sartre, but that both come out of the same Night and Void as the Western European politics of the past quarter of a century.

Postscript. Again I should point out that these writers—Sartre, Malraux, Camus and others of this group—are unusually gifted, remarkable both for their creative ability and philosophical ability. I should be very sorry if it were thought that I was treating them with insufficient respect, or throwing doubt upon their genius. It is their *Weltanschauung* which I deplore. More particularly let me repeat, it is as cases that I have been studying them;

namely, as XXth Century writers, with what is obviously a complaint, a *mal*, environmental in origin. The freedom problem is implicit in this. In such a study the more we know of the sort of writer involved, and of his milieu, the easier it will be to arrive at a valid judgement.

CHAPTER XI

A DERELICT AUTHOR IN SEARCH OF A PUBLIC

I NOW begin a somewhat extended analysis of the contents of what were, in the first instance, two chapters in *Temps Modernes*. These articles, with unexpected promptitude, were re-published in book form (in England, *What is Literature?*—Methuen). Here I retain the translation I made from the articles: also I retain the full complement of quotations to facilitate analysis. The significance of this material is my justification for including so much of Sartre's text. In these spontaneous journalistic outpourings he is quite at his best. For the rest, he never deviates from his curious tight-rope performance: *ad nauseam* denunciations of 'la bourgeoisie', and those writers like Flaubert, who were, he insists, saturated with the bourgeois ethos: unceasing claims to 'proletarian' status, re-parading of the main Marxist dogma in Marxist jargon—but simultaneous repudiation of Marx, denunciation of the Communists, and so forth (with infinite verbosity) without end. One of the things he never tires of attacking is 'style'—fetish of the writers who achieved 'fame' in bourgeois days (i.e. before 1939). There is a reason for Sartre's dislike of style. It is a very obvious reason, which it is entirely unnecessary to specify more fully.

The pressure—and the submission to pressure, accompanied by a rationalization of same—which I was studying in the last chapter, was pressure truly of the most comprehensive kind: the pressure exercised by 'great historical events'. It was my contention that the writer should refuse to allow his freedom of thought or of vision—whatever might happen to his other freedoms—to be affected by the most oppressive conditions of which history is capable. Mine was I believe—regarded from that angle—a more *heroic* counsel than the somewhat theatrical cult of the hero out-

lined by Sartre: though, as I said, this should not be held too much against him since everybody, whether Communist, Catholic, or heretic, has the word 'hero' on his lips with a frequency that I have never encountered before.

As to the employment of existentialism as a mental specific for a period of great crisis: a pessimistic metaphysic actually invented for History's helots would be, as it were, *lyrical thinking*. The Volga Boat Song, or the Welsh 'Bottle Song', would answer the purpose better than a metaphysic: and of course any thinking must be discredited which dresses Truth up to accord with the bleak inclemency of History at a given moment.

In the present very long chapter Sartre will be seen in what is at least a more active rôle: that of the soberly defiant heretic. Without necessarily sympathizing with his heresies, one could approve of the independence he displays, provided that independence were logically grounded, which I am afraid in one respect it is not. But I shall come to that later on.—In the course of his analysis of the brilliant but desperate position in which he finds himself, he does succeed in teaching us a great deal about the fundamentals of the writer's destiny in the contemporary world. It is with a shock of surprise that one listens to a writer who, within two or three years, has become one of the most discussed personalities in the world, explaining how unfortunate his lot is—deriding his international fame, which he looks upon as a particularly scurvy trick played him by fate.

In the first place Sartre is quite clear about his irretrievably *heretical* position.

In the XIXth Century the writer had to lead an exemplary life and give many pledges of his good conduct to the bourgeoisie, in order to wash himself clean of what in their eyes was the sin of writing. For literature is in its essence heresy. The position has not changed, except in this respect that now it is the Communists who, on principle, regard the writer as a suspect.

He is a heretic for the Communists, as also for the Catholics, though it is the Communists who present by far the graver prob-

lems for him: and as you see here, it is only the Communists he mentions. And that is the situation with which we are concerned in this chapter, in all its aspects.

I do not believe that at any time Sartre was very near to joining the Communist party, but he was often no doubt as near to it as he could get without becoming a member. In his novel *L'Age de Raison* (the first of a trilogy, entitled *Les Chemins de la Liberté*), in the attitudes of his hero Mathieu Delarue we obtain I believe a close approximation to what must have been his own experience in the 'thirties. There is a scene for instance where the hero's brother Jacques is giving him a piece of his mind. He says:

'You condemn capitalist society, yet you are a civil servant in the employ of that society: you advertise your sympathy for the principles of communism, but you take good care not to join the Communist party. You despise the middle class, yet you belong to the middle class . . . live like a *bourgeois*.'

There is another episode in the same book where Brunet, one of his two or three closest friends, for whom he not only feels great affection but for whom he has an almost superstitious respect—has come to see Mathieu at his flat: come with the avowed purpose of leading him off to the Communist party headquarters to be signed on as a party-member. Brunet is an official of the party: he uses all his great influence with Mathieu to persuade him to take this one more little step—instead of fellow-travelling (and getting a great deal of cheap and easy fun out of it) . . . instead of using all the Communist jargon, experiencing rages and Communist exultations, to quite simply (and why not?) *become a Communist*. Anything rather than the perpetual flirtation—or so the exasperated reader is bound to feel. But I will quote a page or so—it is Mathieu replying to his friend.

'I should like nothing better than to work with you,' Mathieu agreed; 'I need to forget about myself for a while—I am sick of myself. And then I think like you that one is not a man so long as one has not found something one would die for.'

Brunet had lifted his head.

'Well—so what?' he asked almost gaily.

'Well! there it is: I cannot engage myself, I have not sufficient reason

to do that. I rail like you against the same people, against the same things—but not *enough*. I can't help it. If I joined a procession raising my fist in the air and singing the Red Flag, and if I declared myself satisfied with that, I should be lying to myself.'

Brunet had assumed his most massive air: most peasant-like—he resembled a tower. Mathieu gazed at him with despair.

[Brunet hopes that a more propitious occasion will present itself and that that, as he remarks, will be as soon as possible.]

'I hope so too,' Mathieu replied.

Brunet looked at him with curiosity.

'Are you sure that you hope that?' he asked.

'Why yes. . . .'

'Yes? Well, so much the better. Only I fear that that moment will not arrive so quickly as all that.'

'I was thinking the same thing,' Mathieu said, 'I was thinking to myself that it perhaps would never arrive: or too late, or that perhaps there is no such thing as a *propitious occasion*.'

So Brunet departs. Mathieu is left alone to brood over this situation—of being the 'fellow-traveller' who never gets anywhere since he only travels to give himself an air and to amuse himself.

He comes however to the following conclusions, as he leans out of the window—disgusted with his apartment, the comfortable furnishings of which (especially the armchairs) Brunet has said *corrupts*.

'I refused', he tells himself, 'because I wish to remain free: that's what I can say. I can say . . . I love my green curtains, I like taking the air, of an evening, upon my balcony and I do not want to make a change in all that: it pleases me to swell with indignation against capitalism and I should not like to see capitalism abolished, because I should no longer have any excuse for getting indignant: it pleases me to feel myself disdainful and solitary: it pleases me to say *no*—always *no*: and I should be afraid that they would try and construct for good and all a livable world, because all I could do then would be to say *yes* and to do like other people.'

This self-analysis—if that is what it is—will at a later stage, only, acquire for the reader its full significance. I have quoted at such length because Sartre's hero—a professor of philosophy like himself at Lycée, as he too was at the time, and extremely tall, as an

author so lacking in inches as Sartre would be certain to make his mouthpiece—exhibits what must have been almost exactly his creator's state of mind in the 'thirties, before a definite position had been taken up, while he was still a young unknown professor.

With photographic distinctness we see the stages through which he passed (if I am right) to reach his present position—one of acute discomfort. For there is no ease to be had for a French writer today or reasonable degree of security—no status at all in fact—outside of the Catholic fold or the Communist party, unless his personality is a very strong one. This he makes dazzlingly clear in these articles.

The chain of quotations which will follow will show him desirous of being as far to the left—for tactical career-reasons—as it is possible to be, while criticizing Marx and denouncing the Communists. Superficially it is reminiscent of the Anglo-Catholic, employing a liturgy as far as may be identical with the Catholic, but obstinately shy of taking the obvious step and entering the Roman communion. The resemblance would break down at once if examined attentively: for whereas the Anglo-Catholic is sentimentally attached to and full of admiration for the great professionals of religion he imitates, Jean-Paul Sartre most heartily detests the Communists: about that there is no question. He angrily complains that they are keeping him away from the People.

This complaint of his has a distinctly comic sound. Whether he is conscious of this or not it is difficult to say: I suppose he must be. He explains how the proletariat are the writer's natural and necessary public. But he is *without a public*, he protests, since between himself and the People stands the Communist party. 'Malheureusement, de ces hommes, à qui nous *devons* parler, un rideau de fer nous sépare dans notre propre pays: ils n'entendront pas un mot de ce que nous leur dirons.' An 'iron curtain—in our own country, separates us from our own people'. But let me quote the rest of this paragraph, translating as I go.

The majority of the proletariat, corseted by a unique party, encircled by a propaganda which isolates it, forms a closed society, without doors or windows. There is only one road, exceedingly narrow, by which

one may gain access to it: namely that provided by the Communist party.—Is it desirable that the writer should take this road? If he does so as a citizen from conviction and out of disgust with literature, that is all right: he has made his choice. But can he become a Communist and remain a writer?

This rhetorical question he answers in the negative. 'Since we are still free,' he declares, 'we will not go and join the watchdogs of the Communist party.'

Or again: 'If one asks whether the writer, in order to reach the masses, should offer his services to the Communist party, my answer is *no*. The policy of stalinist communism in France is incompatible with the honest exercise of the profession of man-of-letters.'

Before proceeding I should perhaps offer an apology.—Quotations are more attractive for the student than for the general reader, it is obvious. But if one gives only a digest of what the writer under discussion has said, uninterrupted by quotations, in order to effect its introduction into the system of the reader with the minimum demands upon his attention, much is lost in the process. There is a tone of voice, a manner of delivery, which only direct quotation can communicate, the importance of which cannot be exaggerated in such a case as the present. So I shall pursue the method of verbatim quotation throughout. If he check the impatient reaction provoked by a bumpy road—since one is all the time bouncing one's way over bits of text enclosed in quotes—I am sure the general reader would at the end be in possession of a much sharper and more accurate picture of the French literary scene he is invited to examine than would otherwise be the case.

The reason, then, given by Sartre for desiring with an almost pathological intensity the proletariat as a public is because 'a revolutionary public' is essential (he does not explain very clearly why—though we should of course be great fools if we could not guess, in the year 1952). 'Today', he writes, 'we turn towards the working class, which constitutes for us a revolutionary public, such as was the bourgeoisie in 1780.' A public like that enjoyed

by the XVIIIth Century *philosophes* is indispensable. No explanation. Some might have thought after all that one might prefer to be a XVIIIth Century writer *without* a revolutionary public. But Sartre takes it for granted you understand why it must be an XVIIIth Century writer and public.

Or is this an explanation?

In 1780 the oppressor-class was the only one that had an ideology and political organization: the bourgeoisie possessed neither party, nor political self-consciousness, the writer worked directly for it by his criticism of the ancient myths of monarchy and of religion; by presenting it with some elementary notions, mainly of negative content, such as those of liberty and political equality and of *habeas corpus*. In 1850 (on the other hand) in face of a fully conscious bourgeoisie furnished with a systematic ideology of its own, the proletariat remained without form and without a clear notion of itself, shaken with vain and desperate angers. The First International had only touched its surface: everything remained to be done. The writer could have addressed himself directly to the workers. He missed the opportunity, as we know, . . . the circumstances permitted him to bear witness for the oppressed before the oppressor, and to help the oppressed to become conscious of themselves: the essence of literature found itself in agreement with the requirements of the historic situation.—But today, everything is transformed: the oppressor-class has lost its ideology, its consciousness of itself vacillates. . . . The oppressed class, squeezed tightly into a party machine, strapped into a rigorous ideology, becomes a closed society: one can no longer communicate with this class without an intermediary.

Here, as you see, is a Marxist interpretation of history, apart from the last few sentences, where he becomes a raving heretic. The world for him begins in 1780 or thereabouts; so far so good. But it ends for some mysterious reason at the October Revolution (even though elsewhere Sartre explains that this oppressor is, in France, dying a natural death, is *in extremis*, and has to be propped up for tactical reasons, by the oppressed)! 'The workman seeks to liberate himself,' he cries, 'and in so doing to liberate men everywhere, for all time, from oppression.'

No one at this date could be found who would question the dark facts of industrial slavery, no 'intellectual' that is. All the more is this the case in an era of inflation and Black Markets. The

gulf between the haves and have-nots is shamefully visible to everybody. Yet the last-quoted sentences of our author, 'to liberate men everywhere, for all time': what is it makes him use such empty words? One knows why Mr. Lloyd George in World War I made use of a phoney lyricism, to enjoin men to persist in so exceptional and wearisome a massacre (and why Hitler admired those speeches so greatly): called them 'heroes', gilded their horizons with the promise of perpetual peace. But philosophy has a different language from politics. As a rule it is less flowery.

I should think that living in Algeria is a good thing for a Frenchman—seeing that Camus has not these troubles of Sartre's—if it were not that plenty of French writers who have never been to Algeria do not suffer from them either to the same extent. It would probably help Sartre if he knew it was quite unnecessary to go on as he does. The great majority of educated men understand that if you place within easy reach of a large and greedy and stupid baby, entirely uncontrolled, masses of sweetmeats, it will quickly die. This is what Sartre's enemies the Communists, and most other people call capitalism. All men—I do not speak of the Communists, who are professional trouble-makers—who would be respected by Sartre know that the world is run as a casino and is not a very stable proposition: further, social change has been greatly speeded up by technology. Sartre incurs the risk, he ought to know that, by his vulgar displays, of discouraging those minds he should most wish to attract.

Because of a law as constant and invariable as the upward movement of the hot and dirty air in a crowded room, leaving the purest air right on the floor, in human affairs what is least desirable rises to the top. This is a scientific fact, the result of the elaborate checking and rechecking of phenomena.—Constant measures have to be taken against bad air, which gets *very bad* at times: this is hygiene. But we have reached a point where heroic programmes of purification have been begun. Without being promoters, there are few who are great objectors. There are few who can find Sartre's self-righteous diatribes about the dirty air, the

purgative intensity of *his* enthusiasms, etc., etc., other than tiresome.

I always feel with a man like this who, for reasons of policy, adopts an extreme position—in his case borrowing all of Marx except Marxism—that it would be more interesting for him if he devoted some thought to the subject, making it correspond more to the present situation. There is, for instance, a very obvious way in which the analogy breaks down, which would represent the working masses in the XXth Century as playing the part of the *bourgeoisie* in the XVIIIth. The XVIIIth Century French *bourgeoisie* was very rich and influential as was the London *bourgeoisie* in the XVIIth Century which virtually decreed the execution of Charles I. The working-class by itself is powerless. Nor is it actually the next class in succession, nor the next but one, beneath the capitalist-class.

Sartre's 'working-class', in the last analysis, is very like Georges Sorel's. There is the same hollow, spurious 'heroism' in both cases: although there may be no need to go so far afield.—The great ascendancy exercised by André Malraux upon him should always be present to our mind. Claude Mauriac, for instance, where he is refuting an unfavourable criticism of Malraux, cites the first number of Sartre's magazine, *Les Temps Modernes*. There 'a fecund although partial humanism' was proposed by Sartre. 'The greater part of this', observes Mauriac, 'comes from André Malraux: its paternity is so obvious that it was not considered necessary to mention it.'¹ But I shall take up this aspect of Sartre's work later. Meanwhile there remains a simple question to be asked. Why—one is obliged to inquire—since this writer has borrowed the Marxist language and outlook, does he not belong to the Communist party? What does he want to say to the working-class that he could not say as a Communist?

Next let us hear Sartre upon the state of the continent. It is difficult to go far astray upon the subject. He begins with the *bourgeoisie*.—The *bourgeoisie*, Sartre tells us, is the 'sick man of

¹ *La Trahison d'un Clerc*, 1945, Claude Mauriac.

Europe': analogous to what was once the decrepit régime lingering on at the Sublime Porte. Its fate was bound up with European supremacy, and white empire in Asia and Africa. The *bourgeoisie*, however, 'loses its colonies at the moment that Europe loses control of its destiny . . . Two world-states, neither of them bourgeois, neither of them European, dispute possession of the universe.' These states are of course Russia and the United States. 'Ruined, but still oppressive, the European bourgeoisie govern in a hand-to-mouth manner.' But the 'era of national revolutions is past'. The revolutionary parties far from wishing to finish off this 'sick man', do all they can to prop up the decomposed spectre of what, so short a time ago, was the greatest aggregation of power on earth. The reason for this paradoxical support of a power so obsolescent that it could be blown over by the puniest *coup d'état*, is because its overthrow would spell *world-war*. Neither Russia nor America is ready as yet for that trial of strength.

All this is probably more or less accurate. On the occasion of the expulsion of the Communists from the French Government in the spring of '47, Thorez, asked by reporters if the General Strike would be declared, answered 'Do you take us for fools!' Togliatti, the Italian Communist leader, when his party was cheated of power, used almost the same words. He said, 'Do you suppose we wish to commit suicide!' and Malraux, in his capacity of public relations officer to General de Gaulle, about the same time expressed himself in the same vein: there would be no civil war in France—that Stalin would not allow the French Communists to take extreme action, knowing that the U.S.A. would not tolerate it, and that the Gaullist faction would not proceed to extreme measures either. All of which tallies with Sartre's account, which may therefore be accepted.

Consequently there we have poor M. Sartre, the inmate of a transition which may endure for a decade, with what is practically an idealogic corpse upon one side of him (the *bourgeoisie*) and a working-class on the other confined in an ideological strait-jacket, and mounted guard over by a group of fierce Communist 'watchdogs': as a third party to this distressing scene there is the

Vatican imparting a little spurious life to the *bourgeoisie*, in the form of a powerful centre party, the M.R.P., resembling the German Catholic Centre in its last and least solid phase.

Under attack by the Communist watchdogs, Sartre reluctantly admits that Existentialism is a part of the bourgeois decomposition.

I make no difficulty about agreeing with the Marxist description of Existentialist 'anguish' as a *phénomène d'époque*—as a phenomenon of period, and of class. Existentialism, in its contemporary form, makes its appearance upon the decomposing carcass of the bourgeoisie, and it is of bourgeois origin.

Then there are members of this putrefying class who escape from it to a sufficient degree to live decent, intelligent lives. This intelligent fraction of the *bourgeoisie*, Sartre says with disgust, is his public. 'Ceux-la forment notre public. Notre *seul* public.' This is an admission fraught with great bitterness for our author although he hastens to add: 'We have nothing to say to these people. They belong, in spite of themselves, to an oppressor class. Victims no doubt, and innocents, but nevertheless still tyrants, and guilty.'

Were the author an Englishman, we should here know that our leg was being pulled. (Such piously pink rodomontades have not been heard here since the 'thirties, the Pink decade. This is a most unusual case, of a French silliness outliving an English.) But Sartre does not smile, I think, even to himself. For he is really at his wits' end what to do: it is for him a matter of capital importance. While in London in 1950 he was interviewed: his followers, he told the reporter, were 'the eighteen-year-olds in the Paris bars'. A bar-public—in its nonage—is not a very solid background for an author: but to these we have to add the *avantgarde* of the *bourgeoisie* (see above) who might at any moment go Communist. Then the bourgeois is very apt to be a Catholic. Two of them wrote a very ugly little brochure about him the other day!¹ The authors were devout and they greatly objected to him. They wrote for instance:

¹ 'Sartre, est-il un Possédé?', Pierre Boutang et Bernard Pingaud, *La Table Ronde*.

Never has a *mal du siècle* presented itself in a less attractive, nor in a less interesting form. Montparnasse cafés, girls pigheaded or mad, tough little libertines . . . knives stuck into open palms, token mutilations—but nothing of all that sings like the last page of Faulkner's *August Light*.¹ It seems that the Devil has taken the shape of a notary . . . He holds up for our inspection an empty will and testament. He disinherits nobody, but the empty testament is in itself a declaration that there are *no heirs*, and that it is drawn up for *no one*. This life is the only life, that is *all there is*. . . . He storms 'objectively', the little notary, beneath a transcendental wind, he denies us 'essences' . . . He brandishes his act of Nothingness. The act that he has drawn up is 'for nothing': he is not even any longer a notary: he will vanish with the dawn, he has summoned no one, he will act for nobody.

His Catholic adversaries show him, even, denuding, as a philosopher, his master's *Existenz* doctrine of its emotional colouring, and transforming it into a dry university thesis.

The [Existentialist] theme of anguish, and that of abandonment (or of dereliction) such as one can trace them from Kierkegaard to Jaspers, and to Heidegger, retained an affective sonority; they constituted one of the elements of what may be called the existential pathetic. These philosophers remained attached to a tradition of poetic humanism. . . . But when we come to Sartre, it is not at all the same thing. With him existentialism repudiates all that is lyrical. A very gifted product of the Ecole Normale takes in hand all the existentialist concepts, accentuating the abrupt technique, but at the same time he undertakes to present them in a purely 'objective' tone. The human situation becomes merely 'a little factual item': the suppression of the divine is effected in an assured and efficient tone of '*c'est comme ça*'—that's how it is—which annihilates the tears of tragedy as also those of pity. Heidegger's word *dereliction*—abandonment—no longer (in Sartre's hands) suggests that woman who in a Florentine painting despairs in front of a closed door. No, it signifies now merely that man is dispossessed by God—that henceforth he only has *himself* to rely upon, and that is that.

From the Sartre standpoint the trouble about the more educated and liberal fraction of the *bourgeoisie* as public is here made

¹ Sartre's novels, *Les Chemins de la Liberté*, have to withstand, from the opposite camp, the Communist namely, blasts of equal severity. His *infantilism*, we read there, '*se traduit alors par un goût vraiment excessif pour l'ordure. C'est la magie et la métaphysique de la merde*', (*L'Existentialisme*, p. 82, H. Lefebvre).

glassily plain. The bourgeois, however liberal, belongs politically to the party of the Vatican. Too aggressive an atheism—or rather too offhand an attitude about the non-existence of God—is apt, in the long run, to upset him. He may even be a religious man.

It is upon the contemporary Youth that ultimately Sartre depends: 'The Young': the student youth of Paris not necessarily 'fellow-travelling' as it was here until recently and as it is apt still to be in the States. Probably even more are Catholic-Fascist. If it is true that considerably more than 50 per cent. is either Communist in sympathy, or of Catholic-Fascist complexion, that is a disastrous situation for an aggressive *front-populaire* atheist who has a bitter quarrel on his hands with the Communist party: in other words for Jean-Paul Sartre.

But let us return to the text of this 'derelict' author in search of a public—or with a large nondescript public which causes him great anxiety, because he feels it is too unsolid and uncertain a support.—That Sartre has devoted much careful thought to the burning question of the 'thirties *to be or not to be a Communist*', the Brunet—Mathieu interview, a fragment of which I have quoted, will have sufficiently suggested. But readers of *L'Age de Raison* will remember how the stern image of Brunet haunts Mathieu like an incarnated conscience. What Brunet is as a man, the Civil War in Spain is as a war. One is Communist integrity incarnated in a man, the other Communist integrity incarnated in a war. The Spanish battlefields, beside his Communist friend Gomez, is where he *ought* to be: the night-spot named 'le Sumatra', beside the ravishing little Russian lesbian Ivich is where he *is*.

For instance there is that time Mathieu picks up an evening paper: Valencia has been bombed by Franco airmen. News of this kind invariably produces the same conflict, if he happens to be unoccupied at the moment. It is as if Brunet had entered the room and had said, sternly pointing an accusing finger at the newspaper: 'You see Valencia has been bombed!' Mathieu's is the story of a very boring would-be Malraux.—So in this case what is a routine situation—ridiculous as he seems to recognize it as being—develops.

Mathieu is angry: he crushes the newspaper. Angry people crush newspapers. But he is by no means angry *enough*. He falls far short—as always—of getting up sufficient steam to move very far from the Quartier Montparnasse. It is really getting a perfectly blood-curdling situation! In Spain he had been presented with a clear case of Privilege outrageously suppressing the long-suffering Many. Every day almost the newspapers drew his attention to it anew in huge leaded type: and every day he put the paper down and went away and forgot about it. He gets up, roused at last: he is very angry. But it is *with himself*. Not quite realizing this and feeling that at last something is happening, he rushes out into the street. It is a lovely evening: men and women are moving up and down peaceably (petty bourgeois that they are!). They have had a tiring day working for the capitalists and they are bathing themselves in the fresh sweet air—but he glares at them. Why are they not shouting with rage, instead of peaceably taking themselves out for a walk as if nothing were happening? He nearly knocks them over, he is so indignant with them. He dashes along apparently for miles and miles, pushing people that he meets out of the way, his mind concentrated in a constipated impotence upon events in Spain. By means of this dramatic locomotion he is attempting to reach the boiling-point. Alas it is no use! He is a kettle that gets a little hot and bothered, but *will not boil*. He cannot reach that mad point at which he throws up his appointment, goes to Spain and joins the International Brigade.

On these occasions he could part company with himself for being so unimflammable. He calls himself a *salaud, un type foutu*, and goes and gets drunk. As a Popular-Front conscience his was a washout.—In these parts of *L'Age de Raison* Sartre seems to be ridiculing people who in the European civil war, which had begun in Spain, felt themselves obliged to demonstrate their zeal even when by themselves, and to go through the gestures of flying towards the fray. I say it *seems*: for sometimes it does and sometimes not: but is a muddled and intellectually rather squalid self-reproachful comedy. Before leaving this phase of my subject I will exhibit Mathieu on a bench in the Luxembourg Gardens,

where he has been dejectedly considering the problem of how to find the money to pay for an abortion. When *that* problem becomes too oppressive, he always thinks of his Communist conscience, Brunet.

Mathieu stopped brusquely (considering this problem): he *saw himself* thinking. He experienced a horror of this self. 'At this moment Brunet marches along the streets, at his ease in the light: he is at ease because he waits. He traverses a city of spun glass that he is going to break. He feels strong: he walks gingerly swaying a little, with caution, because the hour has not yet struck to smash everything up—he waits . . . And I! And I . . . Here I am slumped on a chair. . . . Nevertheless, I also, even I wished to go to Spain.

So he begins as usual to think about Spain: but he becomes very bitter. 'Spain, castles in Spain: that is—what? A tepid little lay religion for my use? The discreet and seraphic accompaniment of my real life?'¹

I will now give part of Sartre's polemic, upon the undesirability of joining the Communist party to which I have already alluded, and his account of how inexpressibly disagreeable it is, if you in a misguided moment do. You will observe how far he has travelled *away from Brunet* since the period in which *L'Age de Raison* was written (whenever that was, for I do not know, but it was long enough to make him change his views quite a lot).

For Communists a writer is suspect on principle. Even if his conduct is irreproachable a Communist intellectual suffers from this inalterable defect: namely that he entered the party *of his own free will*. What has led him to take this decision is a careful reading of *Das Kapital*, a critical examination of the historic situation, an acute sense of social justice, generosity, a taste for solidarity. All this reveals an independence of mind which has not a very good smell [for the Communist nose]. This man has entered the party as the result of a free choice: therefore he may leave it in the same way. He joined the party because he disagreed with the politics of the class to which he belonged; consequently he might criticize the politics of his adopted class. Thus in the very act by which he voluntarily elects to start a new life, a curse is put upon him which will weigh him down during the whole of this

¹ *L'Age de Raison*, p. 54.

new life. From the very moment of his ordination, as Communist, a long trial will begin for him similar to that described by Kafka (in *Das Prozess*), in which the judges are unknown and the nature of the charge never revealed, where the only part of the proceedings which is clear is the sentence. It is not a question of his invisible accusers offering, as is customary, proofs of his crime: it is for him to prove his innocence [without knowing what is the nature of his crime]. Since everything that he writes can be held against him as evidence—and of this he is perfectly aware—each of his works will necessarily display an ambiguous character, as being at the same time a public brief for the Communist party, and a secret brief for himself. What appears to the public to be a chain of peremptory affirmations, appears inside the party—in the eyes of his judges—to be a humble and clumsy attempt at self-justification. When he seems for us the most brilliant and convincing, it is perhaps then that he is in reality the most culpable. It seems to us at times—and perhaps it also seems to him, that he is rising in the party hierarchy and that he has become its mouthpiece. But this is a test merely, or a trick. The steps of the ladder are so constructed, that when he believes himself approaching the top he is in fact still down at the bottom. Read what he writes a hundred times, never will you be able to decide what is its exact value . . . The Communist writer is expected to display wit, lucidity, invention, to be mordant. But at the same time that one requires of him these gifts, one blames him for their possession, because in themselves they imply criminal leanings.—How is he to play his part as a critic? His guilt is in him like the worm in the fruit. He can neither please his readers, his judges, nor himself. . . . This [unfortunate man] is not only one *présupposé coupable*; he takes on his shoulders all the past errors of the party too, since his signature is attached to those errors: and he is the scapegoat of all the political purges.

It is not impossible all the same for him to survive a long time, if he learns to hold his good qualities in leash, and to pull on the leash when they threaten to lead him too far. Further, he must never make use of cynicism: that is almost as grave a vice as good will. . . . Let him always keep before him the fact that the mind is everywhere shut in by magic frontiers, by fogs—as is the case with those primitive races who can count up to twenty, and are mysteriously deprived of the power to count beyond that: this artificial mist that he must always hold himself in readiness to deploy between himself and undesirable evidence—this we will call without searching for another word *dishonesty*. But all this is not yet enough: let him avoid referring too often to dogmas. It is not a good thing that they should be seen in too strong a light—the works of Marx (like the Bible with the Catholics) are dan-

gerous for anyone approaching them except through an intermediary: in every cell such an official exponent is to be found, and should doubts or scruples supervene, it is to him that you must address yourself. Then if you are a novelist or playwright, guard against putting too many communists into your novels or plays. Should they have defects, they will quite likely give offence. On the other hand if they are without faults, they will be boring. Stalinist policy has no desire whatever to discover its image reflected in literature because it recognizes that a portrait is a challenge. The writer escapes from the difficulty by depicting the 'permanent hero' *en profil perdu*, arranging for him to appear at the end of the story, to bring it to a close. Or else he suggests the presence of the 'permanent hero' everywhere, without actually showing him. . . . Avoid, as far as possible, evoking the Revolution: that *dates*. . . . One must slowly wean the people of Europe from their old dreams (of revolution), disaccustom them, and very gently replace the perspective of *insurrection* by that of *war*. If the writer conform to all these prescriptions, he is not loved for it. He is a useless mouth to be fed: he does not work with his hands. He is aware of this; he suffers from an inferiority complex, he is almost ashamed of his occupation, and puts as much zeal into abasing himself before the working class as Jules Lemaître did in 1900 in bowing down before the generals.

If Jean-Paul Sartre proceeds with these polemics—and what he calls the 'Communist watchdogs' have bitten him so severely he is in a highly irritable condition just now—he should in the end have something on the lines of the *Lettres Provinciales*, the Communists replacing the Jesuits for this XXth Century moralist. It will however be confined to crimes against culture. He displays no interest whatever in what has furnished the sensational material of the anti-stalinist campaigns of Max Eastman and Arthur Koestler. What is good about Sartre is that first and last he is the writer. The Paris cafés we learn have been his workshops, his public, we have seen him say, are in the bars. He comes down to the brass tacks of the man living by his pen. He speaks of sales—of the price of a cup of coffee—of the scarcity of paper. He is a man of the *métier*. To listen to him is like hearing a guildsman endlessly expatiate upon the affairs of the Guild. If people would not interfere with his writing—take away, or lock up, his public, as he sees it, rightly or wrongly—he would never bother himself, I think, with politics. He really is of a philosophic temper, too. He is not at all

a naturally angry man: there is very little *Angst* in him, which as his Catholic adversaries indicate, may disqualify him as a theorist of existentialist despair—he is denied the slightest possibility of ‘dereliction’ by an enthusiastic entourage in which the other sex is not conspicuous by its absence. While exercising himself at his punch-ball he sportively lashes out at Mlle de Beauvoir, so American reporters tell us, fetching her a friendly wallop so that she falls into the bulbous red eiderdown of his modest hotel bedroom (an example of his *infantilism* M. Lefebvre would say). One cannot visualize Heidegger engaged in lighthearted play with his favourite lady-disciple!

It is because Jean-Paul Sartre impresses one as a man not easily disturbed, that it is with a shock of surprise one finds how dissatisfied he is with his position as a writer. He appears even as remarkable an example of literary success as could easily be found. As to his *international* fame, that he dismisses as rather a bad sign than otherwise.

At first sight, certainly [he agrees], it would seem that the writers of the past would find our condition most enviable. ‘We profit’, Malraux once observed, ‘from the sufferings of Baudelaire.’ I do not believe that that is altogether true. . . . Plays by Cocteau, Salacrou, Anouilh are performed everywhere: I could cite numbers of works which have been translated into six or seven languages in less than three months after their publication. Nevertheless, that is only brilliantly successful on the surface. One reads us perhaps in New York and Tel Aviv, yes: but the scarcity of paper has limited our printing here in Paris. Thus the public has been spread out rather than increased. Perhaps ten thousand people read us in four or five foreign countries and ten thousand more in our own. Twenty thousand readers—a minor success *d’avant-guerre*. These world-reputations are much less solid than the national reputations of our forerunners. . . .

If we are famous outside France there is no cause for rejoicing: . . . The nations today, more surely than by oceans and by mountains, are separated by disparities of economic and military potential . . . in the end Americans get to know of literary or social theories professed in Europe. . . . But as one knows, American intellectuals collect European ideas together into bouquets, sniff at them for a moment, and then throw them away. Bouquets fade more rapidly over there than in

other climates.—As to Russia, she gleans, she takes what she can easily convert into her own substance. As to Europe, it is defeated, ruined, its destiny has slipped out of its hands, and consequently its ideas are confined within it. The only concrete circuit for ideas today is through England, France, Scandinavia and Italy.

It is, as you will agree, a bleak picture. And it astonishes. There can scarcely be a high-school boy or girl in the United States who does not know something of Existentialism, in the same way that twenty years ago Relativity penetrated everywhere. The person mainly responsible for this ought surely to be elated. But nothing of the sort: he is disappointed, and deeply depressed. Clearly Sartre is not a vain man: he has, I conclude, in the back of his mind something quite concrete—what the Americans call ‘dough’ or ‘jack’. Which is as it should be—he is after all a writer. Then he appears to dread the consequences of being ‘the fashion’—and being so spectacularly fashionable. He feels rather like a very eccentric Paris hat—which has swept the world and been a ‘wow’, but can *never* be repeated.

‘In the degree in which an author reaches an ever-wider public he touches it less profoundly, he recognizes himself less in the influence he exerts. . . . And since our reputations extend much farther than our books—that is to say our merits, great or small—we must not see in the passing favours accorded us, more than a “literary inflation.”’—Then he adds: ‘It depends upon us to see that literature does not become industrialized.’ Finally, having enumerated other disadvantages of distension, he says: ‘But there is worse yet: we have readers but we have no public.’

The vanity of international celebrity is the subject with which he opens. All the problems confronting this man ‘with readers, but no public’ follow on from that: eventually reaching his outbursts against the Communists, for locking away from him the public of his choice: for not handing over the proletariat to *him* and themselves going out of business.—It is the overall picture that is so striking: of a man who in a period of ‘literary inflation’, has his ideas (or is it Heidegger’s?) exported to America, where *all* ideas fade in a few weeks—are taken a good sniff at by perhaps

a million people, then thrown away. As to the home-scene in this extended panorama, we have had potential publics reviewed for us by this professional taking a world-wide stock of his position. We see the *bourgeoisie*, which he disdains and would not touch with a barge-pole. (Also its background is apt to be Catholic.) There is the proletariat—only available if he becomes a Communist. (But the Communists would hardly encourage him to go on depicting man as a pathetic 'derelict', shivering between two *néants*, one before and one behind, inconsolable because of the death of God!)—In this bird's-eye view of Sartre we see, at the centre of a vast panorama, extending from Tel Aviv to San Francisco, an indomitable but anxious speck. Granted a close-up of this speck, we find a man shut out, for one reason or another—either voluntarily or involuntarily—from all regular publics: but writing at top speed book after book. Should you, having completed this chapter, fail to understand how infinitely complicated is the life of a writer in the modern age—however famous, for that only makes things worse—in the midst as he is of several ideologies fighting to the death, you are unenlightenable.

But let me turn again to this small energetic figure. 'If', we hear him saying, 'the two terms of the possible decision are in fact (1) the bourgeoisie, and (2) the Communist party, then *the choice is impossible!*—we are at once against the Communist party and against the bourgeoisie. That means clearly enough that we write *against everybody.*'

There is another choice that is likewise impossible. 'The present historical perspective being *war*, we are summoned to choose between (1) the Anglo-Saxon bloc, and (2) the Sovietic bloc. We refuse to help either the one or the other in their preparations for this war: so we have fallen out of history—we speak as in a desert.'

I do not know if I have succeeded in evoking the image of a man so consumed with this agonizing problem of where to take up his stand (and how to shuffle a little away from the Left without losing the benefits of his leftishness), that he exhibits, makes a parade of, his anxiety in the paper he edits. Since he is symbolic,

and something of these difficulties beset all of us, in one degree or another—though few can have succeeded in getting themselves in so involved a situation—we must not too self-obliviously smile.

'Sometimes the view is advanced that our books reflect the hesitations of the *petty bourgeoisie*, which cannot make up its mind whether to come down on the side of the proletariat or of capitalism. It is false—*c'est faux!*' he cries. 'Our choice is made!'

Sartre is beside himself as to whether he is a patch of putrefaction upon the ignoble cadaver of the *bourgeoisie*, or (as he claims) purveyor of 'liberté' to the working class. The poor fellow cries: '*It is false! I have made my choice.*' But he knows that the implacable 'watchdogs' of the materialist dialectic will not take for an answer however passionate an affirmation. They stand upon their terms. 'To this they reply', he wearily continues, 'that the choice thus made is abstract and inefficacious, that it is merely an intellectual game unless one at the same time lends one's adherence to a revolutionary party.' So we come back, as always, to the same infinitely vexatious predicament. 'I agree—I know it is only an intellectual game,' is his angry retort. 'But is it my fault that the Communist party is no longer revolutionary?' *He* is the great 'revolutionary', you see, and the Communists are a lot of bourgeois!

Here as his words prove he even is prepared to admit that to claim to be a revolutionary assisting the proletariat to liquidate the 'oppressor' is nonsense, so long as he remains politically in splendid isolation. He could not for long maintain the contrary: for confronting as he does the 'bourgeoisie' with Marx's 'proletariat' is an essentially Marxian proceeding—the extermination of the former, in a dialectical paroxysm by the latter, being *de rigueur*. But the Communist organization is alone capable of effecting this: so *why not join the Communist party?* There is no escaping from this logic: and the 'Communist watchdogs' as he knows, will never allow him to escape.

All readers of this *writer's complaint* cannot but join in our refrain: *why not join the Communist party?*—Otherwise for heaven's sake

stop continually talking about the 'proletariat', the 'bourgeoisie', the 'petit bourgeoisie', and the other Marxist concepts—concepts to which you have no right. The farther one goes in this reading, the more one feels that Sartre must loathe these monotonous vocables, which are responsible for so much idiotic anguish.

'The drama of our epoch' is his way of describing this conflict.

But we, although we have for the moment nothing to mediate, are nevertheless in the position of mediators: torn between one class and the other, we are condemned to suffer, as it were a Passion, this dual exigence. It is our personal problem, but it is also the drama of our epoch.—One will say of course that this antinomy which lacerates us . . . is the effect of revolutionary snobism (*le snobisme révolutionnaire*).

Sartre has said it for me. He is even as fine a specimen of this *snobisme* as can be found anywhere: and, as is sufficiently plain, it is a serious ailment—the analysis of which, let me add, would tell us more about these times than anything else I can think of.—A last quotation, where he answers the question which must present itself to any reader:— why should this novelist, playwright, and philosopher have engaged with so much personal feeling in these controversies?

We live in the era of the Hoax. Some of these mystifications are fundamental and belong to the structure of our society, others are secondary. In any case, the social order today rests upon hoax, as also does disorder. National-Socialism was a hoax, Gaullism is another hoax, Catholicism is a third: it is beyond question, at present, that French Communism is a fourth. We are not obliged, needless to say, to take any notice of it: we could get on with our work honestly, without aggressiveness. But as the writer is concerned with the liberty of his reader, and since every hoaxed and deluded consciousness—in so far as it is complaisant with regard to the delusion which holds it captive—tends to persist in its delusion, we can only safeguard literature by undertaking the task of disillusioning or enlightening our public.

As to this passage, I should be the last person to assent that the public has not been deceived, corrupted, and poisoned, in one way or another, and in every country. It is not, as Sartre says, very good for literature. I have myself (most 'aggressively') purged, or attempted to, the section of the public with which I was most

concerned: I even think it is a very difficult age indeed to write in because of this septic condition of every public—either harmed and degraded with the tainted offal fed to it by monopolies, or the equally poisonous pabulum of politics. In that particular I should not feel disputatious. All politics are more like a conjuring trick than anything else—innumerable silk stockings coming out of a top hat, that kind of thing. Then as I said just now, there are none of us who have not had most disagreeable experiences, consequent upon these violent times. If writers, we do not require Sartre to tell us that a writer's politics are of far more consequence than his literary ability: if the author's politics are unpopular, no book is safe, even one on bird-life in East Anglia, or the history of Rugby football. All recognize that propaganda is deadly to a literary talent: but none realize that intolerance unless discouraged amounts to the same thing.—If there are many statements of Sartre's that would be recognized as true by any truthful man, the fact remains that he takes up a false position all along.

For him Gaullism, catholicism, and communism in France are rackets—are hoaxes, mystifications. Very well. Suppose he had adopted the jargon and the myths of Gaullism, but, for some inscrutable reason, conducted a violent offensive against General Charles de Gaulle. That would, I think, have seemed very illogical. Or had he installed a *prie-dieu* and called his room his *cell*: peppered his writings with quotations from Aquinas, at High Mass in the view of everybody had accesses of ecstatic weeping—but violently attacked the priesthood, charging that they were keeping him from God, objected to confession and denounced the liturgy as a hoax (also jeered at the Vatican and sneered at the Pope) people would undoubtedly have regarded him as inconsistent.

I do not see that his public hostility to the Communist party differs in any respect from the above hypothetical cases. He believes all that the Communists believe: but he did not wish to convert this *collage* into a marriage. With him and communism it is an affair of Mathieu and Marcelle. He makes excuses: it would feel quite uncomfortable to be associated with such a *bourgeois* as M. Thorex!—But to look at it for the occasion from the standpoint

of the Communists—would he have the Communists erect barricades in the streets of Paris, bring on a show-down, and thereby precipitate a third world-war—at a moment when Russia is in no position, as yet, to wage it?

In the 'thirties Sartre drifted fashionably into the *front populaire* watershed, was the French equivalent of a fellow-traveller. Was that pink aftermath of the revolution in Russia a 'hoax'—a mystification? He engaged in a path in those days which leads either to communism, or to nothing. It was 'le Néant' that he chose.

CHAPTER XII

TWENTIETH CENTURY NIHILISM

THERE is one thing I feel quite certain I have succeeded in doing in the last chapter: I have shown how the contemporary writer can call his soul his own *but* that at least two remarkably powerful institutions lay claim to it, and that at least one of them will not leave him in peace until he has given it up to them. And I have been demonstrating this by quoting from the works of a man who peddles a doctrine of liberty as absolute existence: who asserts that (quoting Dostoevsky) since there is no God everything is permitted, and that we are, owing to this timely elimination of the Deity, paragons of freedom.

To say that freedom of thought is obstructed in the contemporary world, however, would be putting it very mildly. Freedom of thought is, in fact, a crime, according to at least two absolutist codes. And the wretched man who calls his soul his own wastes many weary hours in contriving defences for it.

In some places in Europe the writer's is an anxious and shackled freedom. In order to remain 'free'—in order to be something he wishes to be—a man will say a thousand things he does not wish to say, mutilate his thought, adulterate his doctrine, compel his will to wear a uniform imposed upon him *against* his will, cause the characters in his books (if a novelist) to behave in a manner that turns them into other characters—to associate with people they would never speak to if allowed to follow their own sweet will.—It has been my argument that to surrender his will to that one of the contemporary machines for compressing souls into given shapes which would leave him most of his original self would be a man's best policy; the machine whose standard shapes were the nearest to the native shape of his own soul.

To secure the evidence necessary to prove that these are queer times for the writer, it may be said that I might have picked a

more attractive witness. That there is much silly aggressiveness in Sartre goes without saying. 'I have suppressed God the Father' (an often-quoted saying of his) is not the sort of levity that attracts one to him, or would incline anyone to take him seriously. He is much more polite to Marx than he is to God, because he regards the Marxists as much more formidable enemies than the believers in God. He has picked Marx's doctrine to pieces: yet he has not so far asserted that Marx has been 'suppressed' by him. The value of Sartre as a philosopher, as literary artist, or as controversialist, is not however the issue. He has a momentary importance, he is quite a substantial enough person to qualify as a witness. As a pluralist—the opposite of an absolutist—I should prefer a various world. Therefore I am for liberty: I should defend the right of far more disagreeable people than Sartre to write what they liked and to be heard, so long as our society continues in theory to secure to the individual freedom of speech, freedom of worship (or of no worship) and so on.

Of Sartre's critics the most effective are the Communists. Of these Henri Lefebvre is the best example, and a highly intelligent man. Lefebvre sees very clearly what a flirt Sartre is, but his reason for being that he does not seem to see.

This dialectic brings M. Sartre [he writes] singularly close to the *materialist dialectic*: brings him near to it only. Upon the theoretic plane, as upon the political, he flirts with the (Marxist) solution of problems: he brushes it as closely as his anxiety not to compromise himself will allow—not, in fact, ever to bind himself. He gets as close (to marxism) as possible with the idea of supplanting it.

As you will observe, M. Lefebvre has a different explanation from my own: he believes that Sartre's pushing himself as far to the left as possible—short of communism—was done with the ambition of *supplanting* the Communists. I am sure this is a mistake. Sartre's affectation of more radical principles than he in fact holds is amply accounted for by the prestige and the popularity of the Left—as a protective and precautionary step, and because of great pressure leftwards when he was younger, and of his infatuation for Malraux. The only way he could have

escaped these pressures and infatuations was to move into the ranks of Rome. But there was no question of so tough a little rationalist doing that. Today Trotsky and anarcho-syndicalism offer him a respectable radical alternative to communism, or 'Stalinism'. Perhaps at last a solution has been found.

Now I will pass on, however, to my next subject. Its connexion with the problems of freedom will be less obvious at first sight. M. Lefebvre will effect the transition for me, in a passage where all of Western thought is assailed.

For a whole series of philosophers, for more than a century [he writes] in fact, since Kierkegaard and Schopenhauer—there has been a secret, a revelation, a mystery, which would unveil itself in a magical illumination. The secret of the universe is going to be delivered up to us in an instant—in a flash. This saving instant is going to install us in the absolute. Only the secret is not going to reveal itself by means of a *thought*—the object of which would be beyond, and outside, what we *immediately* experience. No, it is here and now, *hic et nunc*. It awaits us, it lays siege to us, it haunts us. Present, and enveloped in the present, we are however obliged to tear it out, and to bring it out into the light of day—rending and shattering ourselves in the process.

This is excellently expressed. Formerly ultimate reality was 'beyond and outside what we immediately experience'. The origin of the term 'existential' is to be looked for in this *immediacy*—and also *concreteness*. The hypothesis of an absolute somewhere else than in existence (as posited in classical metaphysics) is rejected by the Existentialist. For the *reason* is substituted *intuition*. The absolute, implicated with our temporal existence, is to be contacted by ultra-rational, intuitive agencies. All ultimate cognitive possibilities are removed from their traditional seat in the human reason—that characteristic endowment of man—and transferred to those means of apprehension we share with the lizard and the bee. As a knower, even the big toe or the penis has priority over the mind. The eggs and bacon we have for breakfast—that rush to cut our nails on Saturday because if we do it on Sunday the devil will be after us all the week—becomes the stuff of the *Ding-an-Sich*.

As in so much modern thinking, then, so in existentialism, the human reason is discredited, and takes its place beside the liver and the glands of internal secretion (among which the so-called 'fighting-glands' are by no means the least important). Man is no longer an essentially thinking animal. Rather he is a willing and wishing animal: so—and above all—an *acting* animal: one step ahead of himself always, existing in the fruit of his acts. The activism of Sartre assumes the strangest forms in his novels. The hero of *L'Age de Raison*, for instance, looks upon his friend Daniel with new respect and reflects how *satisfied* he must feel, because Daniel has asked Marcelle to marry him. To buy a newspaper, or to cross the street, is after all *something*: but to ask your friend's discarded mistress to marry you! *That* unquestionably is *action*. *That* must make you feel good!—To murder somebody gives you somewhat the same satisfactory feeling, in the novels of Malraux. The heroes of Sartre are nothing like so tough as those of Malraux: indeed, almost any simple little action, like asking a man for a light in the street, impresses them. If a hero of Sartre met one of Malraux's tough homicidal heroes he would almost pass out with admiration.

Then, for the Existentialist, man is solely a creature of flesh and blood (an 'existence')! And only if all the flesh and blood goes with him can he go in search of the Absolute. Even Kirkegaard's 'leap' never took him outside the walls of his body. At most it was the leap of a flea, never beyond the electric field of the palpitating integument.—Man is a reasoning animal *on the side*: to think is, as it were, his hobby. His feeling is the big thing about him—it takes him farther than his thought. Such intuitional thinking (to which grouping existentialism belongs, merging the absolute in Time) affects a break with all traditional metaphysics, and of course with Christian traditional thinking. Remote as Marxist materialism is from the latter, nevertheless the Catholic and the Marxist unite to denounce the nihilism of the Existentialist. (The nihilistic conclusions of this teaching I will speak of shortly.)

Here Marxist humanism protests [asserts M. Lefebvre] against the

dehumanization of the Existentialist. For, as anyone can see, the human reason is a capital ingredient in our concept 'Man'. And that concept withers beneath our eyes if its rational advertisement and prestige are removed from it and the intellect becomes a little clockwork plaything—highly unreliable—in place of the living breath of what otherwise would be a mere machine.

Thus we find ourselves, not entirely unexpectedly, upon the side of the Marxists, in this particular issue.

Let us now contrast the humanist objections to existentialism of M. Lefebvre, with the words of an American follower of existentialism, Mr. William Barrett. Having pointed out that existentialism is not an isolated system of thought, but merely a new expression of a widespread movement, eminent exponents of which have been Bergson, Whitehead, James, and Dewey: having remarked that 'Dewey had insisted on an existential context of thought', this American adherent announces:

What we are present at is no longer a matter of schools, or isolated figures extracting explicit nuggets of influence from one another, but the whole Western mind—Europe and America—bending before a new climate of opinion; as the biologist portrays a whole species, scattered in space and without contact, moving along the same paths of adaption before a new geological upheaval.

Mr. Barrett must I feel have formerly learnt to philosophize at Harvard with Professor Whitehead. The latter sage is very prominent in this pamphlet. I am taken back, as a result of the *Existenz* philosophy, to *Time and Western Man*. The cast of 'time-philosophers'—as they were there described—is almost *au grand complet* in the pages of Mr. Barrett. The key-word of this new school was published about the same date as my *Time* book: its title is *Sein und Zeit*—Being and Time. *Zeit* is of its essence as it is of one and all of these thinkers.

I recall that eighteen years ago, when I grouped all these thinkers together, in a solid company, with the concept 'time' as a quite unifying principle,¹ and stated what you have just seen

¹ Heidegger was not amongst them: though had I known of him then, he would have been one of my most valuable exhibits.

Mr. Barrett stating, that 'the whole Western mind' was 'moving along the same paths', it was objected that I had arbitrarily associated them. When I described them all as suffering from the effects of the same poison, I found few to agree with me except the Catholics. The intellectuals of the 'thirties were without exception hostile to such a judgement. They felt themselves quite rightly, *solidaire* with this philosophy: they were an integral part of that 'Western mind' which was 'moving along the same paths'. This involved an unusual degree of isolation for me. Yet today I am very far from being the only person who rejects existentialism as nihilistic and a symptom not of our health and sanity, but of the reverse. I even, at last, am almost upon the side of the majority.

I have spoken of the nihilism of the existential thinkers. Very briefly let me explain my use of that expression. As one or two of the critics of this system have shown, it is the *bracketing* that has in fact led to the situation we find. A man, having delivered up his soul, not to the Devil but to the tree outside his window—to his coal scuttle and 'bedroom suite' and to all the objects he can lay his eyes on, then suddenly cuts himself off from all this, from the external world. This comes about as a result of the Husserlian device called 'bracketing'. But he finds himself (suddenly, also) in an empty house—a void, a *nothing*. For this man—this philosopher—had beforehand scrupulously emptied, purified, the consciousness or ego (which is the *house* of which I speak, of which this wretched man is the inmate) of everything. When he inherited it he found that ancestors during thousands of years had accumulated in it all that a man needs for life. All kinds of quite invaluable gadgets. His vanity is such that he had cleared this out entirely—disinfected it of all tell-tale odour of 'essence', reduced the Reason to the status of a despised drudge. So—having cut himself off from the phenomenal world outside—in this empty shell our Existentialist flings himself on the floor and contemplates this echoless vacuity. Hence all the accompaniments of existential thought—'Angst' or 'Anguish', 'Dereliction', 'Lone-

liness', and 'Despair'. This is the despondent vocabulary of the most recent of these cults, with which everyone who has read a little about it will be familiar.

Or again: man has uncovered his nothingness, naturally enough, in identifying himself *absolutely* with his chairs and tables, his Ford car and his tabby-cat, producing an 'essence' in this act of union—or semi-union, for what I have spoken of figuratively as the 'empty house' still remains, and is still called a 'consciousness'. 'Existence precedes essence!' So says Sartre, after Heidegger. And when the Existentialist boils down (figuratively) his chairs and tables, his Ford card, etc., and values them, the result is not far from Zero for the philosophic mind.—It does not help matters at all to assert that man *creates* himself as he goes along (though there are some people stupid enough I suppose to feel rather puffed up at the thought of self-creation): nor is it really an advantage that man is always a few jumps ahead of himself—and in fact is not only largely *nothing* ('permeated with nothingness') but *nowhere*, too.

Upon reflection, and after the momentary elation of feeling that he is battling *his* way into *his* future—like an American marine in a tropical jungle infested with Japs; or 'creating' himself, as an artist 'creates'—the more modest and sensible man recognizes that he is not after all a work of art—that the *initial* creation was far beyond his powers or that of any man: that as to his *future* (for all his self-creation and following the precepts of action-at-any-price) all that can happen is that the Ford car may increase in size and (with luck) he may do rather more than keep-up-with-the-Joneses.

No help comes either, in the Existentialist picture, from the starring of the magical word, *liberty*. Of course I suppose people will get the usual kick at the mere sight of it. Then we are assured by Sartre that owing to the final disappearance of God our liberty is *absolute*! At this the entire audience waves its hat or claps its hands. But this natural enthusiasm is turned abruptly into something much less buoyant when it is learnt that this liberty weighs us down immediately with tremendous *responsibilities*.

We now have to take all God's worries on our shoulders—now that we are become 'men like gods'. It is at this point that the Anxiety and Despondency begin, ending in utter despair.

But let us hear Sartre.

Man is free, [he says]¹ man is Freedom. If, on the other hand, God does not exist we do not find prescribed for us values or directions legitimizing our conduct. Thus we have neither . . . justifications nor excuses. We are alone—without excuses. This I shall express by saying that man is condemned to be free. Condemned, because he has not created himself: free, because once he is thrown into the world, he is responsible for everything he does.

This is a typical Sartre argument. For why should a creature who not only has had no hand in his own creation, but has not been consulted as to whether he wished to exist or not, be 'responsible for everything he does'? This does not follow at all. On the contrary, if his life were a difficult and unpleasant one and his behaviour became very violent and disorderly, although he might be shot like a mad dog it would not be *just* to do so. The fault would not be his, since he had not asked to live, or had any choice in the matter.

Then 'man is condemned to be free'. By whom or what is man condemned? And why call it freedom? It is a most misleading word for such a condition as is subsequently described (which description I shall shortly be outlining).—As to God not existing: since many people believe that He does exist, in announcing his non-existence Sartre might have offered a few reasons for his own disbelief.

Why trouble for that matter to mention God at all? Why not ignore what he regards as this Christian superstition altogether? There is no novelty in a declaration of God's non-existence—it is a disbelief that is as old as the hills.—The answer to this very natural question is that God plays a major part in existentialist philosophy. (It is a part of it that bores Sartre considerably, but there it is.) There are excellent reasons why he has to mention God.

¹ *L'Existentialisme est un humanisme*, p. 37, J. P. Sartre.

Existentialism could not exist without the Christian background: to put it in another way, it could not exist without Soren Kierkegaard, who is responsible for its atmosphere of crisis and despair—whereas Husserl supplied it with its vitalist framework. It is surely one of the oddest mass-borrowings in the history of ideas—this removal intact of a group of expressions belonging to a mystic experience that had no relation to the system into which they were introduced.¹

That the possession of this element in his existential vocabulary is an embarrassment to Sartre is most evident. With characteristic hard-boiled bustle he tackles the problem in the book from which I quote above. He has been talking about his responsibilities.

'Ceci nous permet de comprendre ce que recouvrent des mots un peu grandiloquent comme angoisse, délaissement, désespoir. Comme vous allez voir, c'est extrêmement simple.'

I have left this in French that you may catch better the tone of this voice—exact, official, aggressively matter-of-fact. For these 'somewhat grandiloquent' words are *not* 'extremely simple' to explain away, in an offhand manner. M. Pierre Boutang, for instance, shows this very well as that concerns the Existentialist word 'anguish'.

On this point [he writes],² Sartre is much less coherent than Marx, who rejects once and for all in his 'German Ideology' the conception of creation along with *all* problems of origin. If there is no creation there is no non-creation either and the idea of an anguish founded upon the non-creation of man by himself is another example of theological nostalgia. The idea of *derelection* again can in no fashion be dissociated from its religious significance. Who then can feel himself *abandoned* without having been abandoned by somebody? Who laments his solitude, without having harboured an invincible idea of communion?

But let me return to the text of Sartre, where we shall be able to observe him at work gelding, explaining away the mystical jargon of Kierkegaard. I translate:

¹ I refer throughout to the systems of Heidegger and Sartre, though there are of course Christian Existentialists, such as Jaspers.

² *Sartre, est-il un possédé?*

First of all, what is to be understood by the word *angoisse*? The Existentialist declares without beating about the bush that man is anguish. Here is what that signifies: the man who engages himself and who is quite clear that he is not only that which he chooses to be, but also a legislator choosing at the same time as himself the whole of humanity, can scarcely escape a sense of his total and profound responsibility.

[The reader who was expecting to see a little of the 'grandiloquence' removed from this doctrine will be distinctly surprised at this. So Man (every one of us) is a *legislator* (grander and grander!) for the whole of humanity!]

Certainly [Sartre goes on] many people feel no anxiety. But what we say is that they hide from themselves (*se masquent*) their anguish—that they fly from it. Certainly there are many people who believe that in their actions they engage themselves, and when one says to them: 'But supposing *everybody* acted like that?' they shrug their shoulders.

You perceive however that we are now in the midst of a homily. A great moralist we have here: then is not 'existentialism a humanism'? This factitious curtain-lecture continues for some time: the 'anguish', however, is accounted for by the staggering responsibility: 'The Existentialist believes that man, without any support, without any help, is condemned, at every instant, to invent man.' Only a coward or a 'quietist' would sigh and murmur, 'What a pity it is you have suppressed God the Father, M. Sartre! He would have done all this "creating" and "inventing" for me. You are causing me a great deal of quite gratuitous "anguish"!—"The doctrine which I offer you is the exact opposite of quietism. There is no reality except in *action*!' When Sartre speaks of 'action' it might be Teddy Roosevelt, or Mussolini, speaking.

'Despair' he polishes off much more smartly than 'Anguish'. 'As to "despair", that expression has an extremely simple meaning.' It turns upon the relation of the two French words *espoir* and *désespoir*—hope and despair. 'Désespoir' in the language of existentialism is simply 'agir sans espoir'. When the grandiloquent word 'despair' is used all that is meant is *act*—create yourself!

—but don't hope too much. Sit down and *despair* is the last thing it means: with Sartre you would be doing that just as little as you would be doing it with the 'Bull Moose'!—*Délaissement* (abandonment) he says rather crossly, 'implies that we ourselves choose our being. It goes with the Anguish.'

To express our boredom at having to do for ourselves something that formerly was done for us, is it necessary to employ a word so charged with emotion?—we certainly should ask if we did not know how it got into Sartre's books. Is it necessary to make use of a word so weighted with misery as 'despair' to describe the man of action's justifiable scepticism regarding his actions redounding very much to his credit or furthering the interests of humanity? And it would indeed be childish hypocrisy were we intended to take him quite seriously, and believe that Sartre was weighed down with anguish at every moment of his life at the thought of the fearful responsibility of being Sartre; of how the 'inventing' by him (in the absence of God) of a *bad* Sartre would darken the outlook for the whole of mankind!

La rigueur philosophique is not to be expected of Sartre. The elaborate requirements of his publicity, his sense of a semi-official responsibility preclude that. I entirely agree with M. Henri Lefebvre that what is honest and rigorous in French atheistic existentialism is to be found in the pages of Albert Camus and Benjamin Fondane. In both cases the irrational—the Absurd—is an openly venerated principle. The unrelenting pursuit of this principle leads Fondane back to Primitive Man, and even farther. 'Biological being', I quote from Lefebvre, "'is" metaphysic and absolute. In an hallucination à la Rimbaud the slug "is" an angel, and the mole, blind and virginal, represents existence before original sin.'

Lefebvre quotes: "'There is only one means of getting rid of abstraction—it is the qualitative leap into the absurd.'" Fondane and Camus speak exactly the same language: their view of life is almost identical; a very much sterner one than that of Sartre. But 'what absurd'? asks Lefebvre: 'That of the negro (covered

with his painted mask, abandoning himself to the fury of his ritualistic dance): that of the Christian, or that of Caligula?' That is a question to which many people would like an answer today beside M. Lefebvre. I gave the answer, over and over again, in a group of books dealing with precisely these questions. For of course a state of mind does not have to be called 'existential' (though eventually it has acquired this name) to reveal all these characteristics, more or less developed according to circumstances. Lefebvre for instance quotes van der Zeew as saying that 'primitive mentality is distinguished from the mentality of modern man by the fact that with primitive man the subject and the object are separated by a very much smaller interval—primitive life is much more direct (*moins réfléchi*), it is existential'. That the young child or primitive man effects with difficulty the separation of subject and object is a commonplace, but the above quotation is a better key perhaps to existentialism than a score of treatises.

Those a little familiar with movements in the various arts during the past forty years will have no difficulty in relating to the existentialist philosophers the infantilism of Klee, for instance, or the superbly effective adaptation to the European scene of the primitive vision (African, Mexican, Pacific Islands) of l'école de Paris, or the more literary primitivism of Gauguin, or the sculpture of Brancusi, Archipenko, etc. All this is of a piece: as Mr. Barrett truly remarks, 'the whole Western mind—European and American—bending before a new climate of opinion'. It is a more violent and sultry climate than Europeans have known at any time in their history. It is an historic climate, it could be said—historic and political. As the European consciousness has expanded to take in the entire earth, with all its historic cultures, the climate of opinion has naturally become very different. A wind from Asia has blown down into Europe, and one up from Africa. The cool good sense and politeness surviving from the XVIIIth Century until quite recently has got to look like Dresden figures in a Saharan sandstorm. But the European thinks like a European: therein resides the tragedy. Culturally the expansion into

universalism has been too rapid. The logical vessel has split wide open.—Let us agree that many undesirable things have rushed in, through the breach in the rationalist defences.

No work I know of is more beautifully suited to make dazzlingly clear the inner meaning of existentialism than *L'Etranger*, by Albert Camus. To the 'Dumb Ox' of whom I wrote must now be added the 'Surd'. In little Monsieur Mersault you not only get the irrationality of the 'Surd', and the dull speechlessness of the 'Dumb', but the 'Blindness' which I discussed you will recall *à propos* of Sartre's 'cyclone literature' (the deliberate myopia of the man who would not care to show History undressed). But I am beginning to encroach upon my next chapter. Let me in ending this one ask how it comes about that M. Lefebvre, the French Communist, and myself, reveal such strange identity of outlook: why our responses to these phenomena appear so nearly to agree. The reason has nothing whatever to do with the doctrine of communism—we certainly should not see eye to eye if it were a question of that. It has been helpful, of course, M. Lefebvre being so much more intelligent than one has any right to expect of one engaged in Marxist polemic; but it is not that either.

The explanation is to be found in the fact that the Stalinist thinks in terms now of the metropolitan mother-state. But were I legislating culturally for a new and powerful society, like the Russian, I should not recommend a diet of Gide's thievish schoolboys, of Malraux's homosexual homicidal romantics, of Heidegger's 'despair' and 'anguish', of Camus's moronic little sleepwalking killers, of Klee's infantile pastiches, of Picasso's more obscene masks. Obviously I should regard them as hysterical, artificial, socially destructive. But that is political. I have always myself, since I am an artist, been of two minds. When in the late 'twenties and 'thirties I attacked the type of thinking of which Heidegger is, as I have observed, so fine a specimen, it was because I was momentarily dismayed at the prospect of the imminent collapse of the culture of the West, and with it the reduction (as a result of repeated major wars) to political helplessness and helotry

of all the Western nations, to which collapse this type of thinking was a contributory cause. The arts that derived from or reflected that philosophy were included in my attack.

For precisely the same reason M. Henri Lefebvre denounces those philosophies and those arts—except that in his case it is, as a good Party man, the Soviet Socialist Republics that he is concerned to protect from contamination (or that branch of them established on French soil); whereas in my case it is Western society I had uniquely in mind. I still automatically engage in the defence of a phantom. Then it happens—and needless to say this has its weight—I am not attracted to those types of thought—I refer to the chronologic school—and they run contrary to certain of my beliefs. But politics alone, at this moment, as we stand at the deathbed of a civilization that is after all ours, is more than a sufficient explanation.

There are other things that belong here—complications I fear. The agencies of decomposition (the philosophies and the arts) served the interests of communism of course: *originally*, in view of this, the 'fellow-traveller' defended them, violently denouncing anyone who criticized them. Another thing to be considered is that since today we are all precariously existing in the ruins of the Western nations, there would be no sense (if there ever was any) in defending this extinct life, this shell. Consequently what I have said in this chapter about the latest of the temporal absolutisms is an expression of what I believe, and in order to keep the intellectual record straight.

The parallel between the Europe of the 'twenties and 'thirties, and the Athens of antiquity after the Spartan Wars, is in some ways so remarkable and instructive that I will, I hope, be forgiven for providing this chapter with a sort of historic footnote.

Let me first quote an eminent authority in which the bare facts of Plato's position are made plain. (The Communists do not require to prove that they are not their militant opposites.) What was a Fascist régime—in XXth Century language—followed years of democratic excesses in Athens; and Plato, invited to participate, refused.

Socrates had made the close acquaintance of Plato's uncle Charmides in the year 431 B.C. and was even then familiar with Critias. . . . Plato tells us that at the time of the oligarchical usurpation of 404–3 . . . he was urged by relatives who were among the (oligarchical) revolutionaries—no doubt Critias and Charmides—to enter public life under their auspices. But Plato first wanted to see what their policy would be.

He was horrified to find that they soon showed signs of lawless violence, and finally disgusted when they attempted to make his 'elderly friend Socrates', the best man of his time, an accomplice in the illegal arrest and execution of a fellow-citizen whose property they intended to confiscate.—The leaders of the restored democracy did worse, for they actually put Socrates to death on an absurd charge of impiety. This Plato says put an end to his own political aspirations.¹

As you see, the 'lawless violence' of these militant reactionaries repelled Plato once and for all: and had he been born in the XXth Century there is no reason to believe that Fascist violence would have pleased him any better than Communist violence. It is the dilemma of the 'intellectual', in whatever age he finds himself: for power is won by violence, and theories of the State have to cut their way over the bodies of men to power.—Unless we are to say that every person who is not a Communist (or its equivalent) is a Fascist, Plato was not the latter, but he was by birth an aristocrat, and he felt and professed the greatest dislike for Democracy. He admitted that Democracy is exceedingly agreeable. 'Is not this a way of life which for the moment is supremely delightful?' But according to him it was altogether too delightful for human beings, and with Aristotle he insisted it could not continue for long, despotism invariably supervening.

So he was a Conservative, and had seen the ancient institutions of Athens overthrown and replaced by a 'popular government'. The Court of the Areopagus had been the great Conservative stronghold; the all-powerful institution (comparable to the Temple of Ephors in Sparta) into which the Archons, or supreme magistrates of the State, passed as they surrendered their kingly office. This institution Pericles attacked, and in the end succeeded

¹ A. E. Taylor.

in divesting of practically all its prescriptive authority, reducing it in fact to the status of a criminal tribunal.

That Conservative stiffening of the Athenian State removed, along with all the other popular measures introduced by Pericles, the whole mass crumbled down into the demoralized mob-city—which then proceeded to fight and lose the great and terrible war with Sparta.

The period of Plato and Aristotle was an embittered 'post-war'; the period 'immediately posterior to the breakdown of the Hellenic Civilization in the Great War of 431-404 B.C. Professor Toynbee indicates the comparison between those events and the Great War of 1914-18 (for, when he was writing, the *second* Great War had not occurred) which has perhaps been 'a mortal blow' to *our* civilization. Had Professor Toynbee been writing today there would be no need for the word 'perhaps'.—The *Republic* and the *Laws* of Plato were of course his answer to the situation, as it appeared to him. Only the introduction of a discipline comparable to that of Sparta could lift the state to which he belonged out of demoralization.

'The friends of Socrates felt themselves in danger just after his death, and Plato in particular: with others he withdrew for a while to the neighbouring city of Megara, under the protection of Euclides.' As happens today, so then—to extend the parallel drawn by Professor Toynbee—political opponents were executed: and Plato, had he remained, might have had the same end as Socrates. The recapitulation of such facts as these enables one to approach with a more intelligent interest the drama being played out in France by the rival bands of intellectuals: with less—or more—dramatic intensity all over the world.—Plato as we see him in the *Laws* and the *Republic* is undeniably a totalitarian autocrat—one of those people who wants a bee-hive and not a human city. The *Republic* is a book I should not personally recommend for school-reading. But if I constructed a Utopia myself I should not exclude Plato, though I believe he would try to break it up. This is a statement of heroic tolerance.

CHAPTER XIII

SOME ADDITIONAL OBSERVATIONS

IN the present chapter I return to a few of the questions recently discussed, there being several things I should like to add. I will start with my account of the French literary scene.—We saw how a majority of French writers are two kinds of heretic—which is one more than it is comfortable to be. One of the great absolutisms responsible for this has only been in business for a mere thirty years, accordingly it is more forcible by far, more to be feared than the two-thousand-year-old one. Literature is not, for either Communists or Catholics, an independent—or even by any means an indispensable—activity. Both absolute Church and absolute State suspect it, although only the latter says so.¹

A public—to return to that for a moment—is something organic: like a tribe or a ship's crew or a congregation. It is composed of individuals, but like them it has cohesion, it is more than a mere collection. However large, a collection of odds and ends of people—unorganized, just a casual crowd—can neither float you properly nor continue to bear you up and carry you along, in the way for instance the quite small Catholic community in England supported Chesterton, or the way in which the Jewish community will float and sustain a Jewish author.

What this discussion also involves is a problem of conscience. If a writer has compunctions, or conscientious objections, to becoming a Communist, or a Catholic or anything else (there are some particularly sincere men who find it impossible to believe in God, as some very scrupulous men find political murders and kidnappings very hard to accept), what is he to do? You have seen

¹ Sidney Hook pretends to show, in one of his books, that Jacques Maritain supports the idea—though in a veiled way—that all non-Catholics should be killed: also I heard of a lecture by a Catholic convert in which this view was advanced of a massacre of heretics. But I have met Maritain and though he knew I was not a Catholic, he looked at me very kindly. Hook I think was wrong.

how frantically exercised Sartre is about it. And *he* is a roaring success. Other writers without his sensational appeal, it may be one or two of great value to the community—what becomes of them? Like Sartre outside the big ready-made publics, attached neither to party nor to Church, is it likely they can survive as writers? I regret this wastage of the nation's genius. The only solution—if things are as complicated as Sartre says—would be, one would think, to join one or other of the big organizations: the one that would pinch the conscience least.

Now in France things are several degrees easier than in a country like Czechoslovakia or Spain: and in England several degrees easier than in France.

In Central and Eastern Europe politics have become the whole of life. They have taken the place that religion had in the Middle Ages, with all its doctrinal hair-splitting and heresy hunts: *hors du Parti, point de salut*.

The rage for politics grows ever more intense and more silly. Members of 'The Party' are happy and unafraid, except of one another. . . . Others are tolerated, used, or abruptly liquidated, as may be required by what the faithful call 'historical development'. But to some party or other nearly everyone belongs: the ticket is necessary to get jobs, houses, or other privileges.

A Socialist employs a Socialist and one Peasant party member calls in another as doctor or lawyer; if you go to the house of a Communist you may be sure that all the guests will be Communists . . . in Hungary, Czechoslovakia or Poland . . . it is unusual to find an honest and sincere man in any job of public importance.¹

That is perhaps a prejudiced picture: but a journalist used to the English scene would inevitably see Eastern Europe as portrayed above. American reaction would be different. An American visitor would be accustomed at home to Democrats refusing to have their teeth pulled out by a Republican dentist, or to take their law-business to a man not of their party. As to the remark just quoted that it is 'unusual to find an honest and sincere man, etc.', an American would lift his eyebrows at that. For he would think of State and City legislators and magistrates at home. It would be a new idea to him expecting an official

¹ 'Mid-European Notebook', *Observer*, Sept. 28, 1947.

to be either honest or sincere.—Again the naïve implication of the British newspaper correspondent is that before the Russians arrived in pre-war days, honest and sincere men were generally found in positions of importance. Having said that, however, the rest enables us to see how an East or Mid-European Sartre or Camus would feel about his situation.

One of our English intellectuals recently expressed the view that the modern Englishman differs from the foreigner in that he does not kill other Englishmen because of politics. But Sartre knows, of course, as does Malraux, that an extreme Left *Putsch* in France would mean that he would be shot. There are many people in Mid-European countries (Sartre-like people) who are almost certain to be killed in a not-very-distant future. This kind of fact has first of all to be assimilated then, not lost sight of. Opinions that are put forth and held by Heidegger or by Sartre or any other Europeans are held to at great personal risk. Neither Sartre nor Heidegger are sophists who can 'withdraw' to Megara as did Plato, or probably 'withdraw' anywhere in fact.

Although people would scout the idea of pressures or injustices or anything not entirely respectable subsisting among us—within the community of writers, in our treatment of each other—they make no difficulty about accepting accounts of these things as occurring in other places. Since the recent discovery made by the left-wing intellectuals that Russia had put the clock back instead of forward (as for twenty solid years they had told themselves was the case), when such matters now as coercion or official stupidity—political bigotry, boycott, dictation of subject-matter—come up, they naturally turn to her. No one, except of course a Communist, would question the ability of a country governed as Russia is to provide many examples of the barbarities listed above—political bigotry and boycott, coercion, etc. What is wrong with these new habits of our intellectuals is that people in the end find it impossible to think of wrong except where wrongs obviously must be.

I have a cutting before me¹ in which Mr. V. S. Pritchett, one of

¹ *New Statesman*.

the best of our critics, describes the fate which overtook a Russian writer, Yuri Olesha. The satiric power displayed by this fine writer, he tells us, alarmed and angered the politicians. Then the power in question was not relished by the Moscow 'pundits', who reacted as pundits always do to creative power of any kind. 'Yuri Olesha . . . once was regarded as one of the major talents produced since the revolution . . . but presently the party dunces—the official sausage-makers as Olesha would have called them', denounced one of his books. In 1934 he made a statement in which he confessed that the 'creation of Socialist industry' did not interest or excite him.

That should, by all the laws of despotism, have been his final appearance. And seemingly it was. 'By 1936 Olesha's name was heard no more; it was strangely absent from Alexei Tolstoy's survey of Soviet literature; and presently the only too familiar rumours went about.' The rest of the story is that, after a lapse of ten years, he was heard of again, in far-off Turkmenia, in some political capacity. So as a reward for his gifts as a satirist he was blotted out as a name, expelled from the metropolitan world of writing, but he was not killed. I have no means of checking the accuracy of this story of cruel intolerance, professional envy and malice, violent suppression and banishment, from the literary scene and almost from life itself, of a fine writer. I could however cite at least one case of this kind—and so enlarge the frontiers of persecution for this English critic—much nearer home. There has been to my knowledge the same 'strange absence' of a writer's name from 'surveys', anthologies, publishers' retrospective lists, etc. I only mention this, as I have explained, because when we talk about happenings of this kind in Russia we as a rule are oblivious of the fact that (discreetly and in general undetected) we do the same thing among ourselves, in England and America, more or less. It used, even, to be lack of enthusiasm for the Soviet Union, and its type of authoritarian State capitalism, on the unfortunate writer's part, which attracted the penalties of which I speak.

What J. S. Mill called the 'self-regarding virtues', in contrast

to the social virtues, cannot but be the virtues *par excellence* of the literary artist: only with him they are not only virtues but necessities. The social virtues particularly belong to men working in company with other men, upon common tasks. They are cells of an organism; whereas the man-of-letters has to organize himself. He is his material: he is also his only workman: his workshop a room full of books. The ideal of human brotherhood can be found more often in that isolated workshop than on the assembly line or the collective farm, since contact with others all the time is apt to put a strain upon the most virtuous.

But it is not in fact those virtues, I think, that are in question, in a discussion of the writer's position. It is the duty of the creative writer to keep himself *different* (the classic definition of 'Individual'), just as a jockey has to keep himself *small and light*. The jockey may feel no especial admiration for very small men of insignificant weight, but condemns himself to a dwarfish stature in order to ride racehorses: similarly the creative writer knows that his distinctness must be preserved in order to write books, but may entertain no exclusive admiration for *the Individual* as such. When he thinks of politics he may be a Collectivist: he may favour the idea of everybody being alike—parting with those little differences and peculiarities of theirs which make government so complicated. He might consider individuality inadmissible in a welder and riveter, a stoker or baker, but realize that for himself it is essential: not because he wants to be an Individual, but because he has to be one.

The Benthamite principles as interpreted by John Stuart Mill for instance he might find ridiculous—or even odious. The idea that the greatest happiness of the greatest number required that 'a person's own character' should be the rule of conduct, might seem to him noxious or absurd. But still he would say: 'If you want me to write, if you believe good books are a good thing for the Greatest Number, you must allow me to keep my independence. I do not like it, on principle, any better than you do. But to have it is the only way to get a really good book!'

When, with that strange mixture of optimism and despair,

that voice of our libertarian past, one hundred years ago, issued a last appeal for the preservation of the Individual, he spoke as follows:¹

The combination of all these causes forms so great a mass of influences hostile to Individuality, that it is not easy to see how it can stand its ground. It will do so with increasing difficulty, unless the intelligent part of the public can be made to feel its value—to see that it is good there should be differences, even though not for the better, even though, as it may appear to them, some should be for the worse. If the claims of Individuality are ever to be asserted, the time is now, while much is still wanting to complete the enforced assimilation. It is only in the earlier stages that any stand can be successfully made against the encroachment. The demand that all other people shall resemble ourselves grows by what it feeds on. If resistance waits till life is reduced *nearly* to one uniform type, all deviations from that type will come to be considered impious, immoral, even monstrous and contrary to nature. Mankind speedily become unable to conceive diversity, when they have been for some time unaccustomed to see it.

Well, the 'enforced assimilation' is still not quite complete. But the Individual is already regarded as 'contrary to nature': nature is groupish. When independence of mind and character are very noticeable in a man, he suffers from some of the same disadvantages as a 'monster'. A 'monster' the literary artist, the 'creative' writer, is compelled to remain: instead of evolving, as he might do, into something more resembling the orthodox average, if he belonged to a society where great uniformity of belief and outlook was exacted, or were upon a far higher level than is the average today.

Were we entrusted, by a Government for some reason desirous of seeing a great literature arise, with the task of furnishing a report, setting forth what was necessary for the production of a great literature—yet aware that the Government would under no circumstances tolerate individuality (that is to say independence) in an author—the moment we began to ponder our report we should come to a full stop. Unless our lives were at

¹ *On Liberty*, J. S. Mill (concluding paragraph, Chapter IV).

stake, we should advise that there was no possibility of securing a great literature; the first prerequisite was wanting. There is no way of getting round this difficulty. The creative mind has to enjoy the licence that court jesters were allowed by princes who preferred laughter to sensations of self-importance.

Why should the writer keep himself different or distinct, however: is it not rather his business to identify himself with other men? Here is how I should answer that question.—To begin with he must keep himself, for technical reasons, non-collectivized. This would not be on account of self-glorification or conceit: no more in fact than a painter keeps his palette clean because he is fastidious about dirt, but merely so that the pigment should not become muddy. Again, if too profoundly identified with your community, your critical faculties become atrophied: for the novelist, the playwright, the critic, the historian, this of course would be fatal. In my book *Rude Assignment* I have gone into this, however, with some care, and for a fuller analysis must refer the reader to that work.

Let us spend a few minutes reviewing the main points concerning collectivism in general as a boggy and as a reality. In some places it meets with no instinctive opposition. In the States and in Canada I have heard men who are certainly not Communists speak in favour of collective farms for instance and prophesy their introduction into American agriculture before very long. But North America is not Western Europe. It must be allowed that collectivized man (as we find him in India and China), from whom initiative has been removed, is not a very exciting ideal towards which to strive: a little cell full of identical echoes, his only original life instinctive—though he makes love even in a standardized manner.—Those great communities in decay offer no proper parallel to what collectivism with us would be: yet approximation to the existence of the honey-bee or the ant is the goal (whether conscious or unconscious) of all doctrinaire collectivism. Should a clear understanding of this fact prejudice us against all collectivist doctrine?

I see quite well that there are many objections to the free

society, which is full of noisy irrelevant argument and personal bumptiousness. The *complete* human bee-hive would be abominable: or so I say, who am so accustomed to liberty. But about the complete beehive—on the asiatic pattern—we do not have to bother ourselves. A degree of collectivization of that kind is only attained after many centuries, during which the steam-roller of political and religious absolutism has rolled up and down many billions of times over the human heart, flattening everything down to the sleek uniformity of a race-track. Our concern is with fluctuating tendencies, in a transitional period of uncertain duration, that is all.

It is possible to test out fairly accurately what your reactions would be to a more fully collectivized (and equally prosperous) society in the United States. The uniformity is there of course only relative, but sufficient for the purpose. To my surprise I discovered that I was not at all inconvenienced by the monotony. It had the effect of canalizing, and in a sense, *containing*, stupidity. Vulgarity is more blatant, it assumes gigantic proportions (as for instance the epic of *Elsie the Cow* at the period of my residence there). But the intelligent and emancipated make their sport of it, and their minds are very little affected.—Wherever you go in the U.S.A. men read the same things, see the same films, at the soda-fountains drink the same drinks, from identical cigar-stores buy identical cigars, chew the same chewing-gum, think the same thoughts. One sees very soon that this eliminates a great deal of inconsequential diversity. I even developed a taste for sameness—or rather for detecting the fine shades of difference between the tone of the *Xville Free Press* and the *XBurg Dispatch*.—Then to know exactly what a person is going to say, and exactly what he thinks—what stimulus will elicit a given response, is preferable to experiencing a lot of nasty little surprises.

Deviations from their type are not, on the other hand, regarded by Americans as monstrous, as J. S. Mill would have anticipated—indeed, much less so than with the English. They regard a deviation from their type with a patronizing indulgence: as something inferior, that is all: something unAmerican.

So much for the test case, however. There might be some dispute as to this being in fact a test case. When the present tragic period is over, there is no theoretical reason why a collectivized world-society should not be both prosperous and attractive—quite different from contemporary models. The fact remains that anyone hypnotized by radio, cinema, boogie-woogie, etc., and who has acquired standard reactions to everything (as has the rank and file American) is at the opposite pole to our hypothetical creative type, with a talent for writing. And American writers will sometimes tell you how they are obliged to make an effort (of the kind specified above) to keep themselves distinct, to reaffirm their identity: not to be entranced, to resist the hypnotism of the State that requires all its children to be identical in soul if not in body and in bank account.

If one agrees with the proposition, and it is impossible to do otherwise, that the present order is passing rapidly away, one must put to oneself the question as to whether it is not one's duty to choose between the various candidates offering themselves as successors. They differ greatly one from the other. Much will depend upon which of them triumphs. The same impulse however that would direct one to play a part in repairing a social injustice makes one scrupulous about okaying the allegedly socially just, about to take its place.

Mr. Koestler very truly points out that, exactly as there are antinomies which make the rationalist very uncomfortable (and the more honest he is the more uncomfortable) so there are political antinomies—and the more honest a man is the more conscious he is of them. For instance, I should cite this one: Power is in its very nature unjust, yet power must be conferred upon men so that they may (among other things) administer justice. I am not, by the way, quoting Mr. Koestler, who thinks rather differently from myself.

I should find myself in agreement with Jefferson that the less government the better: power is evil, it is a fever, those who enjoy a great deal of it are usually driven mad by it. Jefferson

today would be described as an anarchist, yet the great Democracy he started on its starry course with his democratic clubs has ended up as an elective monarchy.—When Lenin came to power he had in his mind a state—or a free society—not so unlike the dream of a republic that was Jefferson's. Jeffersonian democracy was the kind of state the farming communities of the valleys in his native Virginia would probably evolve if left to themselves. In his long exile in Switzerland Lenin no doubt studied what at not so distant a date had still been the primitive Swiss method of valley-government. In what he imagined communism would be 'much of primitive democracy will inevitably remain', he wrote. It was to be as little autocratic as Jefferson's. But it has not worked out like that in Russia. Lenin, however—and this is the point I would make—was not a totalitarian. He would perfectly well understand anybody if they said, 'My objection to the Russian régime is that it is totalitarian!' But with his understanding there would come no flash of sympathy. He was after all a Bolshevik: that is to say a member of a party insignificant in numbers in 1917, and the only Russian revolutionists not violently opposed to setting up a government—to clothing themselves in power.

This might be called, as illustrated by Jefferson and Lenin, the antinomy of the dream and the reality; or of theory and practice. That is inherent in all theory. There is, however, an inclusive antinomy, between all human enthusiasm and its object, a consciousness of which makes it easier for the philosophic man not to rush after every prophet who promises to lead men to happiness.

CHAPTER XIV

FASHIONS AND COTERIES

THE Sartre chapters have been a solid mass of politics. Without hoping to escape from them—for that would be like trying to forget religion if you had lived in Bunyan's day—let us in this brief chapter, concluding this part of my argument, take up the question of the writer's freedom in directions quite distinct from those liable to influences coming from militant politics. The community of writers is, for instance, periodically swept by overmastering fashions. Freud was one of these: and his theories produced for a time as massive an effect as Darwin's *Origin of Species*. There was no reason why they should: the effect was disproportionate to the cause (although I would not wish to belittle the freudian contribution to knowledge). Ultimately of course psychoanalysis developed into a mammoth racket, with ramifications of the most unexpected kinds—so that for instance a novice in a Canadian insurance company is presented, upon joining the firm, with several psychoanalytical treatises, as part of his preparation for insurance work. But writers at an early stage betrayed great susceptibility.

In a book published some years ago Mr. Slochower, well-known in the U.S. as a critic, speaks as follows *à propos* of Freud:

Most of our literature stands under the shadow of this earlier Freudianism. The themes of sleep and dream, the diseased and the dubious, magic and myth, saturate the works of our writers, artists, and thinkers. They are reflected in our Literature of the Night in which the irrational is not seen as a stage on the road but is embraced as the eternal and ultimate reality.

Whether this is being wise after the event on the part of Mr. Slochower or not I do not know. Most people now recognize that an unnecessary quantity, amounting to a nauseating excess, of Freud found its way into creative literature: looking back, it in

fact is seen to 'saturate the work' of Joyce and is present far beyond the saturation point in D. H. Lawrence. But *at the time* this might not be said, as I came to discover.

In a rather different way Charles Darwin was contemporaneously a fashion. Unlike Freud, Darwin did not build up emotional hypotheses and weave a garment for himself of literary ideas—he was a straight man of science. But the 'survival of the fittest', for instance, though a simple formula for what to Darwin seemed to happen, recalled man to a sense of his animal destiny more powerfully than going to the Erinyes to reinforce a story of 'complexes'; and its literary repercussions were prodigious, as well as its scientific. It is I suppose a commonplace to say that Nietzsche would have written (and Marx too) very different books had H.M.S. *Beagle* never put to sea. The German influence in France, so marked at the present day, began if I am not mistaken with a Nietzsche cult, which Sorel exemplifies. The impulses of brutality and despair radiating as a matter of course from Darwin, centre of biologic disillusion, were, however, much more than a fashion, though at the time, and when Butler battled against the Darwinian tide upon technical grounds, they were that.

I do not say that so great an event as the appearance of Darwin's famous book should leave the writer unmoved. I am speaking of less momentous influences which periodically fill people's minds to the exclusion of anything else, often matters of small significance. Among intellectuals these fashions mean that quite a little system of temporary laws for thinking insinuates itself: which is of course how the writer's freedom comes to be involved. It is not because he is prevented from employing his mind in any way he pleases that a free intelligence has reason to object to the great susceptibility to contagion he finds in other intellectuals. It is because fashion introduces the parochial outlook (the parish in this case being chronologic—of time not of space) and the best minds require what is entirely the opposite of that, in so far as they act outside themselves. They ask for a world in which the values are as much as may be universal. A world by decades, or by

twelve-months even—a week-end world—is one for a ten-year man, or a five-year man. Not much of a person.

Interrupted by 'total' wars and other things as our existence is and seems destined to remain, an unchanging criterion of continuous validity within the intellectual community is more necessary than otherwise would be the case. It would be a great thing if some steadying principle could be found for our writers. Paris fiddles while Europe burns. But the hush that has descended upon the British book-world perhaps is a sign that this principle is being acquired.

Another direction from which the writer's freedom may be threatened is from groupishness—not political but having power and/or business as its object—within the community of writers. Or there may be groups or ganglions half in and half out. How the writer's freedom is affected in this instance is as follows. Were you suddenly to find in your club that say 20 per cent of the members had banded themselves together and after a short while practically ran the place, and if you did not happen to like the leaders of this faction and so did not wish to offer yourself for inclusion in this favoured circle, that is the kind of situation liable to arise in literary circles. France, as the word 'coterie' implies, is the historic home of literary groupishness. The English have their groups too, none the less, but entirely differently organized and serving different ends. In the past the Lake Poets is the best known of these, and the XIXth Century ended in a Yellow Book Group with Wilde for a figure-head. But in this century London blossomed, in its second decade, into a group eventually of portentous dimensions: 'Bloomsbury'.

The word 'Bloomsbury' trips from the tongue of the lecture-hostess in Chicago, or from the reporter in Washington: my Arab guide in Fez asked me in a rather surly way if I was a Bloomsbury. When I first knew them the Bloomsburies were just Roger Fry, Lytton Strachey, Virginia Woolf and her sister Vanessa Bell and about a dozen other people. That was in 1911 or 1912. They made the district of London in which they lived—

Bloomsbury—known all over the world. Was this a feat of publicity; was it because of a compelling artistic power; or what was it? It certainly was not compelling artistic power.

With these observations upon secondary forms of the absolute, not a religious or a political absolute, but a mere social one, deriving from the intellectual ambitions of a small and moneyed coterie, I will close my analysis.

Jean-Paul Sartre has dominated Part III; in Part IV, the last sub-division of this book, the work of George Orwell will be the subject under discussion, and with that writer we return to the English scene.

PART IV

ORWELL, *or* TWO AND TWO
MAKE FOUR

CHAPTER XV

WHY GEORGE ORWELL?

My subject, George Orwell, is of the English war and post-war writers, not alone the one most worthy of attention, but he is the only one. It is however not this fact which decided me to select him for analysis. He is very much more than the only good writer of a decade or more. Then, to further the analytical aims of this book, his work offers an invaluable material. Orwell is almost purely a political writer, a political novelist, and a political essayist. Not so richly gifted a man as Jean-Paul Sartre, he is a victim of the same weakness: a weakness which, in the last few years of his life, Orwell overcame. On his death-bed, the gaunt shell of his former self, he was a free man: but Sartre will always remain the slave of a convention.

What in the XIXth Century was described as an *esprit libre* was someone who had emancipated himself from the tyranny of obsolete ideas. Many of the thinkers instrumental in freeing the men of the XIXth Century from limiting conventions and ways of thinking, fastened new conventions on them; *new*, it is true, even 'revolutionary', but actually less desirable than those they had discarded. And a XXth Century *esprit libre* would be a man who had liberated himself from the dead hand of the *new*.

No one must expect to find in Orwell, when turning to him for the first time, an interest in writing for its own sake. There is no trace anywhere of a desire to express himself with the literary competence of, for instance, *Sea and Sardinia* by D. H. Lawrence, or the stylistic resourcefulness of Conrad, though he greatly admired both these writers. Nor is there any of the expository clarity of Wells, on whom he modelled himself. Orwell's *Burmese Days* is a very rough-and-ready piece of work beside *A Passage to India*. Types interest him more than individuals; the plot is everything, the individual nothing. This is not because of a preference for

classical procedure, however: it is because character only held a feeble interest for him. Then since he was not at that time a very experienced writer, this leads in *Burmese Days*, to the six or seven figures of the Kyauktada Club being little more than coarsely painted cardboard dolls: they are a two-dimensional lot; all speak and act relentlessly 'in character'. The hero has his birthmark to identify him, he is a nigger-loving sahib with 'bolshie' ideas. But no heart beats in him, and no reader's pulse is ever going to quicken, or heart to warm, at his misadventures.

Orwell's shortcomings as a writer of fiction may be seen most clearly, perhaps, in his best book, *1984*. This remarkable piece of work is a prophetic Wellsian nightmare of events in the future. Again we have not persons but dummies. Miss 1984—but the eternal feminine as well—meets Mr. X, a rebelliously inclined robot. They 'click'. It is not a boy and girl business altogether. Unfortunately Orwell was at the time of writing about forty-five, so his last hero, though not so old as that, is nearing forty. There is, it is true, a further reason why he is obliged to be on the elderly side: it is his function to remember the good old days, when you could go to bed at night without the secret police snooping from their telesnooper on the wall of your flat, or betray a healthy sexual interest without incurring all kinds of penalties.

A little terror, but no compassion for the principal performers can be felt because they are merely convenient abstractions. If the scenario and the machinery are Wellsian, so are the personae. They are conventional properties, secondary to the menacing blueprint of a horrible world of only thirty years hence.

Of course, the leading actors could not possess personalities of such reality as to compete with the scenery and apparatus of the book, which is the big thing, or clog its expository function. At all events, such colour as they have is that drab conventional tint with which his earlier novels will have familiarized us.

Outside of essays and articles, Orwell had no real existence until he had written *Animal Farm*. The only two books of his which are worthy of any serious consideration are *Animal Farm* and *1984*. In that sense he is strictly speaking a post-war writer (the war being,

of course, World War No. II). You may ask why, under these circumstances, I have taken the trouble to examine the books he wrote prior to 1945. Since I am only interested in what he wrote subsequent to that date, since my main purpose is political analysis, and since what I have described as his only two good books are also purely political books, why not confine myself to them and ignore his earlier work altogether? But to confine myself in this way to his post-1945 output would be to miss what is of very great interest, and what suggests him as a figure to pair off with Sartre, namely his political evolution, his lengthy subjection to a fashionable convention and his remarkable emancipation in the last few years of his life. Indeed, I should hardly have troubled to set aside time to examine critically his two major works at all had it not been for the curious graph his career reveals.

A deathbed wish of Orwell's was that he might have no biographer. This wish may not, I hope, be too strictly observed. But I hope that his biographer will not omit to read this essay first; for I am sure that what may be of enduring interest concerning Orwell is what I shall be indicating here; the story of a man who rescued himself from a convention, and finished his literary life in a burst of clairvoyance.

Biographically the essence of George Orwell was, perhaps, that he was not George Orwell, but Eric Blair. To understand why when Eric Blair began to write he selected as a *nom de plume* the name George Orwell is to have advanced a considerable distance towards an understanding of this writer. For Blair, after all, is a quite pleasing name. It has not the sleepily orotund appearance of Orwell certainly. It is a Scottish name, though personally I should not have been aware of this had I not set myself the task of expounding Orwell. He did not like his Scottish name: he speaks rather snootily and slightly of the Scotch throughout his written work. Orwell was the name of a pleasant stream near the place in southern England where his family, on their return from India, lived. And Orwell preferred to appear before the public as Mr. Orwell rather than Mr. Blair, as a south English gentleman rather than as a Scottish gentleman. If you will imagine, for a

moment, Sir Walter Scott for purposes of writing calling himself Walter Cherwell, or Thomas Carlyle turning himself into Thomas Titmarsh, or David Hume becoming Henry Hobbes then you will see how significant a biographical fact it is for a man called Blair to become Orwell, not to mention George. So much more English than Eric, being, in fact, the name of the patron saint.

Orwell was, as he expresses it in *The Road to Wigan Pier*, a member of the impoverished middle-class. His father only attained a very modest position in the Opium Control of the Bengal Government service. He was a small Anglo-Indian official. When he died his family, returned to England, lived at the bare subsistence level, in middle-class terms. In the pages of *Coming Up for Air* he describes their class as that of people with between £300 and £2,000 a year, his own family coming near the bottom of these income-brackets. We may be correct in visualizing Orwell's family as one keeping up appearances on about six or seven pounds a week. Now, I have no information on these matters except such as may be derived from his books. But it is generally agreed that his pre-war novels are largely autobiographical, although the information thus derived is somewhat blurred and distorted. Gordon Comstock ('Sharply the menacing wind sweeps over') is short, Orwell was tall. George Bowling ('I know I'm fat') was a vulgar bouncing commercial gent, George Orwell was, I imagine, a typical ex-public schoolboy. Nevertheless *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* is full of self-portraiture, and *Coming Up for Air* with its Chestertonian strain is revelatory too.

Chapter III of *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* contains what I am sure is a scarcely disguised picture of the Blair household in England. In spite of the poverty it had to meet, back in the bleak economic atmosphere of Great Britain, the soaring snobbery of the Anglo-Indian family refused to submit to hard facts. With stern snobbish purpose it contrived to get Eric into a very expensive preparatory school, at greatly reduced terms. Here it is said he suffered a great deal from his anomalous position. Children can make things very uncomfortable for a gate-crasher. He had not the excuse for being there which an impecunious but distinguished family would have

provided. There was not even an Indian Judge, or a reckless polo-playing cavalry officer to point to. So it was a tragic mistake on the part of Orwell's family. Next came the scholarship to Eton. That was no doubt better. But the fact remains that a scholar, with no social or economic background, was surrounded by boys who had not got there by the back door, and many of whom were aristocrats or the offspring of the richer *bourgeoisie*.

But I will quote a few passages from *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, in which this situation is eloquently reflected in fictional terms.

Gordon Comstock is the name of the hero.

Since the Comstocks were genteel as well as shabby, it was considered necessary to waste huge sums on Gordon's education. What a fearful thing it is, this incubus of 'education'. It means that in order to send his son to the right kind of school (that is, a public school or an imitation of one) a middle-class man is obliged to live for years on end in a style that would be scorned by a jobbing plumber. Gordon was sent to wretched, pretentious schools whose fees were round about £120 a year. Even these fees, of course, meant fearful sacrifices at home. Meanwhile Julia, who was five years older than he, received as nearly as possible no education at all. She was, indeed, sent to one or two dingy little boarding schools, but she was 'taken away' for good when she was sixteen. Gordon was 'the boy' and Julia was 'the girl', and it seemed natural to everyone that 'the girl' should be sacrificed to 'the boy'. Moreover, it had early been decided in the family that Gordon was 'clever'. Gordon, with his wonderful 'cleverness', was to win scholarships, make a brilliant success in life and retrieve the family fortunes—that was the theory. . . . Even at the third-rate schools to which Gordon was sent nearly all the boys were richer than himself. They soon found out his poverty, of course, and gave him hell because of it. Probably the greatest cruelty one can inflict on a child is to send him to school among children richer than himself. A child conscious of poverty will suffer snobbish agonies such as a grown-up person can scarcely even imagine. In those days, especially at his preparatory school, Gordon's life had been one long conspiracy to keep his end up and pretend that his parents were richer than they were. Ah, the humiliations of those days! That awful business, for instance, at the beginning of each term, when you had to 'give in' to the headmaster, publicly, the money you had brought back with you; and the contemptuous, cruel sniggers from the other boys when you didn't 'give in' ten bob or more. And the time when the others found out that

Gordon was wearing a ready-made suit which had cost thirty-five shillings! The times that Gordon dreaded most of all were when his parents came down to see him. His father, especially, was the kind of father you couldn't help being ashamed of; a cadaverous, despondent man, with a bad stoop, his clothes dismally shabby and hopelessly out of date. He carried about with him an atmosphere of failure, worry and boredom. And he had such a dreadful habit, when he was saying goodbye, of tipping Gordon half a crown right in front of the other boys, so that everyone could see that it was only half a crown and not, as it ought to have been, ten bob! Even twenty years afterwards the memory of that school made Gordon shudder.

The first effect of all this was to give him a crawling reverence for money. In those days he actually hated his poverty-stricken relatives—his father and mother, Julia, everybody. He hated them for their dingy homes, their dowdiness, their joyless attitude to life, their endless worrying and groaning over threepences and sixpences. By far the commonest phrase in the Comstock household was, 'We can't afford it.'

In the above piece of fiction Orwell is describing, with perfect accuracy no doubt, his unfortunate schooldays (for he never escaped from these obsessional memories); the schools are described however as 'third-rate', whereas in his own case the schools had been first-rate, but the fees only paid in part.

There are elsewhere passages of direct autobiography. These confirm the autobiographical nature of what I have just quoted. Thus, in *The Road to Wigan Pier*, we find the following:

Here I shall have to digress and explain how my own attitude towards the class question was developed. Obviously this involves writing a certain amount of autobiography, and I would not do it if I did not think that I am sufficiently typical of my class, or rather sub-caste, to have a certain symptomatic importance.

I was born into what you might describe as the lower-upper-middle class. . . . At school I was in a difficult position, for I was among boys who, for the most part, were much richer than myself, and I only went to an expensive public school because I happened to win a scholarship. This is the common experience of boys of the lower-upper-middle class, the sons of clergymen, Anglo-Indian officials, etc., and the effects it had on me were probably the usual ones. On the one hand it filled me with resentment against the boys whose parents were richer than mine and who took care to let me know it. I despised anyone who was

not describable as a 'gentleman', but also I hated the hoggishly rich, especially those who had grown rich too recently. The correct and elegant thing, I felt, was to be of gentle birth but to have no money. This is part of the *credo* of the lower-upper-middle class.

Orwell was so impregnated with Victorian class-snobbery, which was artificially preserved in India up to the last minute of the British Raj, that he could not say simply 'middle-class'; he had to think up the ridiculous 'lower-upper-middle class' of the above extract. All this was too bad, for Orwell's was an honest mind, and he had had a virulent type of snobbery injected into him, but was not really cut out to be a snob. The socially glamorous surroundings of Eton would be as irritating as they were irrelevant. When he left Eton he entered the Burmese Police: the kind of Sahiblog to be met with in that drunken little club at Kyauktada so well described by him in *Burmese Days* was in another dimension to Eton. Eton may be said however to step into the picture, with Lieutenant The Hon. — Verrall who turns up at Kyauktada, refuses to speak to any of his fellow-white sat the Club, but noticing an attractive young Englishwoman, seduces her in the jungle, and very shortly departs owing a lot of money to a couple of grass-wallahs. It has been remarked by one of the writers in the *World Review* memorial number that Verrall is, in *Burmese Days*, the character of Orwell's preference. But anyone familiar with the book will well understand how that might be, for at least Verrall is not always drunk, and is apparently able to speak without cursing (except for 'Christ' when he perceives the 'peach'). Verrall had a rabbit face, like many of his class, 'but a martial rabbit'. His are very pale blue eyes which quell the most alcoholic of the club members. He dances divinely, just as his horsemanship is superb: yes, I suppose Orwell is a little too much impressed with his young aristocrat. But what member of the middle-class, born before 1914, could be otherwise? We have another example of Orwell's socially impressionable nature in Ravelston, the rich young man in *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*; he, too, is tall and delightfully graceful. A person in another planet reading these books would undoubtedly assume that all the rich

in England were, as young men, tall and extremely graceful. Speaking generally, however, we do not in his writings detect an undue attachment to social values.

It could, and I daresay that it will, be argued that his preoccupation with the under-dog was the result of having had too much to do with young over-dogs in his schooldays. There may be something in that: but we must look elsewhere, I think, for the primary incentive. The painful emphasis, resulting in something amounting to eccentricity in his variegated slumming, is traceable perhaps in part to Eton. Exposing himself to the parasitic visitations of bugs is not so easily explained. Like Stevenson he was a romantic Scot. It is interesting that in the last few years of his life he went to live in the western islands of Scotland: although the climate is about as bad as could be found for his disease, which was tuberculosis, he insisted on returning there. In any case his romanticism was of the rough kind we associate with the Scotch and his social conscience was of a dour pigheaded type. It apparently was H. G. Wells, the *New Statesman* and *News Chronicle*, and the Left Book Club, which awakened the dormant social conscience.

He went to fight against fascism in Spain as an I.L.P. man: for he was one of the few 'left-wingers' who took left-wingery sufficiently seriously to risk his life. The Independent Labour Party is by far the most genuine Socialist party that England has known. And Orwell was always genuine, whatever else he might or might not be.

Before that, equally dramatically, he flung himself into the gutters and stinking cellars of Paris. Later in the 'thirties we find him an inmate of the filthiest lodging-house that even the Lancashire black country could produce, only leaving it when he found a chamber-pot under the breakfast table in the kitchen. He had stomached black-beetles in the tripe, and not blenched when the landlady, spitting into small pieces of newspaper, flung them into the corner of the eating-room. Verily, this man was determined to identify himself with the 'lowest of the low'. He wore his bug-bites with a grim smile. They were the equivalent of the

hotel labels (Ritz-Carlton, Astoria-Grand) which we sometimes see upon the luggage of ardent travellers. This spirit reaches a climax of absurdity in *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*. When the hero has deliberately sunk to a job at thirty shillings a week, he inhabits a room after his own heart (and of course Orwell's too).

As for the place where Gordon lived, in Brewer's Yard, parallel to Lambeth Cut on the south side, it was a filthy kip. His bed-sitting-room was eight shillings a week and was just under the roof. With its sloping ceiling—it was a room shaped like a wedge of cheese—and its skylight window, it was the nearest thing to the proverbial poet's garret that he had ever lived in. There was a large, low, broken-backed bed with a ragged patchwork quilt and sheets that were changed once fortnightly: a deal table ringed by dynasties of teapots; a rickety kitchen chair; a tin basin for washing in; a gas-ring in the fender. The bare floorboards had never been stained but were dark with dirt. In the cracks in the pink wallpaper dwelt multitudes of bugs; however, this was winter and they were torpid unless you over-warmed the room. You were expected to make your own bed. Mrs. Meakin, the landlady, theoretically 'did out' the rooms daily, but four days out of five she found the stairs too much for her. Nearly all the lodgers cooked their own squalid meals in their bedrooms. There was no gas-stove, of course; just the gas-ring in the fender, and, down two flights of stairs, a large evil-smelling sink which was common to the whole house.

This was his kip and here is a typical episode.

One night the bugs came out of one of the cracks and marched across the ceiling two by two. . . . Gordon lay on the ragged bed, fully dressed but with no shoes on. He had scarcely stirred when Ravelston came in. He just lay there, as though there were some private joke between himself and the ceiling. The room had already the stuffy sweetish smell of rooms that have been lived in a long time and never cleaned. There were dirty crocks lying about in the fender.

'Would you like a cup of tea?' Gordon said, without stirring.

'No, thanks awfully—no,' said Ravelston, a little too hastily.

He had seen the brown-stained cups in the fender and the repulsive sink downstairs. Gordon knew quite well why Ravelston refused the tea. The whole atmosphere of this place had given Ravelston a kind of shock. That awful mixed smell of slops and haddock on the stairs! He looked at Gordon, supine on the ragged bed. And, dash it, Gordon was a gentleman! At another time he would have repudiated that thought;

but in this atmosphere pious humbug was impossible. All the class-instincts which he believed himself not to possess rose in revolt. It was dreadful to think of anyone with brains and refinement living in a place like this. He wanted to tell Gordon to get out of it, pull himself together, earn a decent income and live like a gentleman. But of course he didn't say so. You can't say things like that. Gordon was aware of what was going on inside Ravelston's head. It amused him, rather.

And Orwell enjoyed this joke too: it is this enjoyment with which we become familiar in *Down and Out in Paris and London*, *The Road to Wigan Pier* and in practically all his work; this sly glee at having attained such a low social level, where the bug is *de rigueur*. But it is here that we come to the problem of his socialism. *Slumming* was in fact the form that it took in the first instance. From the giddy heights of Eton, and the modest eminence upon which every sahib stood in India, or Burma, in the days of the British Raj, he flung himself with enthusiasm into the menial labyrinths of a great Paris hotel, into the bug-infested garrets where live the poorest of the poor, above the level—but just above—where the underworld of vagrants and beggars begins. It was a Stevensonian bourgeois romanticism. It was not the world of *Creatures that Once were Men* of Gorki. The authentic hell of the Russian novelists, where you are not amongst men, but a new species, is a very different matter.

When Orwell threw up his job as a military policeman in Burma, probably he was, to start with, obliged to accept help from his family. But during a breathing space of a couple of years, some job surely could have been found for him.

Like his hero, Gordon Comstock, he preferred the gutter. Gordon Comstock smiling to himself on the bed is the figure, I think, in this case to remember. It is the middle-class theatrically, sulkily abasing itself.

There was a rather curious factor involved in his seeking out of the lowest of the low, which must now be mentioned. While still at Eton he succumbed to the fashionable pink rash. But it took a serious turn: he asked himself what *was* the working-class about which he was supposed to be so concerned. He realized at once

that he knew as little about it as he did of the Head-Hunters of Borneo. This, oddly enough, worried him: and what he *did* know he did not like.

Socialism he interpreted as meaning the brotherhood of man, and in a quite literal way a declaration of love for the working-class; so when he became a Socialist there was a perfectly terrific difficulty which had to be overcome. I will let him explain this in his own words, and for this purpose will turn to page 159, *The Road to Wigan Pier*. It is a long passage but it is best to quote the whole of it.

But there was another and more serious difficulty. Here you come to the real secret of class distinctions in the West—the real reason why a European of bourgeois upbringing, even when he calls himself a Communist, cannot without a hard effort think of a working man as his equal. It is summed up in four frightful words which people nowadays are chary of uttering, but which were bandied about quite freely in my childhood. The words were: *The lower classes smell*.

That was what we were taught—the *lower classes smell*. And here, obviously, you are at an impassable barrier. For no feeling of like or dislike is quite so fundamental as a *physical* feeling. Race-hatred, differences of education, of temperament, of intellect, even differences of moral code, can be got over; but physical repulsion cannot. You can have an affection for a murderer or a sodomite, but you cannot have an affection for a man whose breath stinks—habitually stinks, I mean. However well you may wish him, however much you may admire his mind or character, if his breath stinks he is horrible and in your heart of hearts you will hate him. It may not greatly matter if the average middle-class person is brought up to believe that the working classes are ignorant, lazy, drunken, boorish and dishonest; it is when he is brought up to believe that they are dirty that the harm is done. And in my childhood we *were* brought up to believe that they were dirty. Very early in life you acquired the idea that there was something subtly repulsive about a working-class body; you would not get nearer to it than you could help. You watched a great sweaty navvy walking down the road with his pick over his shoulder; you looked at his discoloured shirt and his corduroy trousers stiff with the dirt of a decade; you thought of those nests and layers of greasy rags below, and, under all, the unwashed body, brown all over (that was how I used to imagine it), with its strong bacon-like reek. You watched a tramp taking off his boots in a ditch—ugh! It did not seriously occur to you that the tramp

might not enjoy having black feet. And even 'lower-class' people whom you knew to be quite clean—servants, for instance—were faintly unappetizing. The smell of their sweat, the very texture of their skins, were mysteriously different from yours.

Everyone who has grown up pronouncing his aitches and in a house with a bathroom and one servant is likely to have grown up with these feelings; hence the chasmic impassable quality of class-distinctions in the West.

Myself, I started life in a house with a bathroom, with a nurse, two servants, and a cook; therefore I had four stinkers under the roof with me in place of Mr. Orwell's one. This may have inured me to the terrible stench of females of the labouring class. But I believe that that is irrelevant; Anglo-India is the answer to the riddle of how a man can entertain such eccentric sensations as we have just seen described above. This *stink* business was obviously a first-class complex. Nothing, one feels, could quite root it out. He admits that it was in fact no *physical* problem, no affair of the nostrils, for let us hear him again.

When I was not much past twenty I was attached for a short time to a British regiment. Of course I admired and liked the private soldiers as any youth of twenty would admire and like hefty, cheery youths five years older than himself with the medals of the Great War on their chests. And yet, after all, they faintly repelled me; they were 'common people' and I did not care to be too close to them. In the hot mornings when the company marched down the road, myself in the rear with one of the junior subalterns, the steam of those hundred sweating bodies in front made my stomach turn. And this, you observe, was pure prejudice. For a soldier is probably as inoffensive, physically, as it is possible for a male white person to be. He is generally young, he is nearly always healthy from fresh air and exercise, and a rigorous discipline compels him to be clean. But I could not see it like that. All I knew was that it was *lower-class* sweat that I was smelling, and the thought of it made me sick.

What a confession! Orwell's 'niceness' is, to put it mildly, unusual. If this sickly fastidiousness had gone a step farther it would have meant that the mere sight of a navvy would have caused him to faint, and he would have been unable to hold a commission in the army because there are, in the army, so many

of the lower orders; nor could he have remained in the same railway carriage with a person of the lower orders. But what is even more significant for our analysis is that he shows, in the above passages, that he was by no means cured of his malady, in spite of his, by that time, long frequentations with persons of the most modest social standing. And this book, *The Road to Wigan Pier*, was quite a landmark in the history of the Left Book Club. That at first sight is very astonishing; but then one reminds oneself that the readers of the Left Book Club were scarcely ever members of the working-class. Many were hardly less snobbish than was Orwell himself.

Here is another passage, still from the same book, in which Orwell displays in equal measure his honesty and his mistaken approach.

A middle-class person embraces Socialism and perhaps even joins the Communist Party. How much real difference does it make? Obviously, living within the framework of capitalist society, he has got to go on earning his living, and one cannot blame him if he clings to his bourgeois economic status. But is there any change in his tastes, his habits, his manners, his imaginative background—his 'ideology', in Communist jargon? Is there *any* change in him except that he now votes Labour, or when possible, Communist at the elections? It is noticeable that he still habitually associates with his own class; he is vastly more at home with a member of his own class, who thinks him a dangerous Bolshie, than with a member of the working class who supposedly agrees with him; his tastes in food, wine, clothes, books, pictures, music, ballet, are still recognizable bourgeois tastes; most significant of all, he invariably marries into his own class. Look at any bourgeois Socialist. Look at Comrade X, member of the C.P.G.B. and author of *Marxism for Infants*. Comrade X, it so happens, is an old Etonian. He would be ready to die on the barricades, in theory anyway, but you notice that he still leaves his bottom waistcoat button undone. He idealizes the proletariat, but it is remarkable how little his habits resemble theirs. Perhaps, once, out of sheer bravado, he has smoked a cigar with the band on, but it would be almost physically impossible for him to put pieces of cheese into his mouth on the point of his knife, or to sit indoors with his cap on, or even to drink his tea out of the saucer. Perhaps table-manners are not a bad test of sincerity. I have known numbers of bourgeois Socialists. I have listened by the hour to their tirades against their own class, and

yet never, not even once, have I met one who had picked up proletarian table-manners. Yet, after all, why not? Why should a man who thinks all virtue resides in the proletariat still take such pains to drink his soup silently? It can only be because in his heart he feels that proletarian manners are disgusting. So you see he is still responding to the training of his childhood, when he was taught to hate, fear, and despise the working class.

It is certainly true and it was performing a public service to put on record as we have just seen Orwell doing, that the 'pink' gentlemen of that period identified themselves in no way with the working-class, and indeed took very good care to see as little of it as possible. It was Orwell's duty as a militant Socialist, and it was much to his credit that he recognized this fact, to pay some attention to the labouring masses out of the championship of whom he obtained so much kudos. But it was a mistake to think that he ought to spike cheese on the point of his knife, and so introduce it into his mouth; to imitate the coarseness of speech, which it was his business to correct, not to ape. He should have set out to contrive that the working man should learn to speak as nicely as himself, and that his manners should become reasonably good. The coarseness of speech, the ugly table manners, were things that had been fastened on him for generations by his crafty superiors, who wished to keep him in that condition so that they might lord it over him. It was Orwell's great mistake to treat the working-class as 'of another clay' from himself, indeed, as though they had been a tribe of savages among whom it was his duty to go, and learn their manners, and acquire their habits. This was as silly as it was insulting; for all but a few aristocratic families are, need one say, of precisely the same clay as the navvy, the mechanic, and the farm labourer. One consequence of this disgusting attitude is that hordes of inferior foreigners have poured into England, and have been accorded privileges which are denied to ninety per cent of the English. It obviously should have been a more important matter to Orwell that a man was an Englishman than to enjoy such stupid satisfactions as he might derive from some quite bogus *caste* fancy.

Orwell might be described as the Honest Snob. He is genuinely desirous of curing himself of his snobbery, but he goes about it snobbishly. And so we find him throughout his earlier literary life, in fact up to the outbreak of World War II, engaged in the idiotic quest of this mysterious dimension labelled 'working-class'. Incidentally we may note that, careful as he is to divide the middle-class into all sorts of fancy compartments, the frontiers of the working-class are for him the beginnings of an *outcast* region. For him there are no fine distinctions in this submerged humanity. Literally he does not discriminate between the workman earning a substantial wage and the vagrant living from 'spike to spike'. He has such a snobbish horror of the words 'working-class', that he lumps everything together that is without and below the Middle-pale. Thus, when he wishes to crack the nut of the working-class *Stink*, he plunges right down blindly to the resorts of out-of-work hotel personnel and others living on the fringes of absolute destitution.

CHAPTER XVI

 ORWELL'S RÔLE AS A SOCIALIST TAKES
DEFINITE FORM

IN this part, as I am going over his work, or rather his books up till 1939, it will be best to list them in their chronological order:

	<i>Down and Out in Paris and London</i>	1933
35	<i>The Clergyman's Daughter</i>	1934
	<i>Burmese Days</i>	1934
	<i>Keep the Aspidistra Flying</i>	1936
	<i>The Road to Wigan Pier</i>	1937
	<i>Homage to Catalonia</i>	1938
	<i>Coming Up for Air</i>	1939

This is the list of his full-length books prior to 1939. Of these I have not been able to obtain *The Clergyman's Daughter*, and am told that it was his especial wish that this should never be reprinted. In addition to the dates of these books it is useful to remember that he returned from Burma to England in 1928, that he was in Burma five years and consequently went there in 1923 or thereabouts.

Before considering these books singly, let me explain the sort of evolution they represent. The period in Burma, not celebrated until 1934 in book form, may be summarized as counter-Kipling. He repudiated the British Colonial Empire, over a portion of which he had gone to be a watchful policeman. These sentiments were no doubt the result of the 'pink' rash contracted at Eton. Back in England with the depressing family we have heard so much about, what did he do? I have no information on this score. As I have already said a job of some sort could doubtless have been obtained. But the great quest had begun. And so we next hear of him in a Paris slum, into which he had no doubt projected himself in a more or less direct way. This is where bugs first appear in great numbers. Next he is back in London, still hot on the scent

(and *scent* is the word) of the mystical working-class to whose welfare he was to devote his life.—First, however, having overcome his extreme repugnance to their peculiar odour. *Burmese Days* I have spoken of. Of the remaining four books two are novels, as is of course *Burmese Days*. They are *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* and *Coming Up for Air*. I have always been a slow reader and the memory of these two books is a very painful one. I have never been so bored by any work of fiction as by *Coming Up for Air*, and the *Aspidistra* was not far behind. They are two dreadful books. His rôle as a Socialist takes definite form, and his understanding of the word socialism is also made quite clear in *The Road to Wigan Pier* and *Homage to Catalonia*. In *Wigan Pier* he comes out into the open as it were, and may be observed for the first time engaged in his passionate quest for the elusive working-class. He goes up north where, of course, the *real* working-class is to be found. He goes to Wigan, one of the blackest industrial spots in Great Britain. He rubs shoulders with the grimmest of the grimy, with the permanently out of work, with the disease-ridden caravan dwellers; it may be described as his baptism of fire. Here he is in touch with the very working-class itself: no longer as in his *Down and Out* book with the eccentric fringes. He glories in the horrid details of squalor and industrial slavery for which Monopoly Capital is responsible. The impression that book leaves behind is of an honest and gifted man fantastically engaged in the sentimental pursuit of a chimera, or of a person doing a rather comic penance for a bad smell he ought not to have smelled.

After his adventures in Wigan come his adventures in Spain convulsed with Civil War; and the next book chronologically to *The Road to Wigan Pier* is *Homage to Catalonia*. In December 1936 Orwell went to Catalonia, originally intending to write articles supporting the anti-Franco Government. However, he found Barcelona in the hands of the revolutionary parties. All the city was painted red and black, or just red.

No well-dressed man or woman, no bourgeois, was in sight: only the hordes of the revolutionary working-class. This was of course very thrilling. It was a dream come true: the dream of the

boy at Eton of a blood-red Revolution, and his excitement may be easily imagined, for he was still a boy, though thirty-three.

'I had accepted the *News Chronicle*, *New Statesman* version of the war as the defence of civilization against a maniacal outbreak by an army of Colonial Blimps in the pay of Hitler' (p. 48, *Homage to Catalonia*). This extreme straightforwardness of Orwell's is what endears him to us more than anything else about him. Without disguise he presents himself to us as a simple reader of the *New Statesman* and the *News Chronicle*, under Kingsley Martin and Gerald Barry, papers of a violent sentimental 'pink', in the forefront of the press incitement to war or civil war in the interests of the popular front. (And popular front, we must remember, meant acceptance and support of the policies of Communist Russia.) Consequently as an excitable reader of the *New Statesman* and the *News Chronicle* he enlisted in the Militia and got very badly shot in the neck, the wound affecting his vocal chords. In writing of this enlistment he speaks as follows. 'I recognized it immediately as a state of affairs worth fighting for.' It was of course a *sensational* decision, not an act of reason. His boyish sporting instinct 'recognized immediately' that it would be great fun to be a 'Militiaman'.

His Spanish experiences had, I am quite sure, a decisive and most sobering effect upon Orwell. It is extraordinary, but he really *did* go to the Spanish Civil War for no very serious reason. He admits, without the slightest difficulty, that before he went to Spain he was a victim of press misrepresentation and press incitement, and when he reached Spain a victim of 'atmosphere'. ('In that atmosphere it seemed the only conceivable thing to do.') I cannot, I fear, without a long quotation, give any idea of his candour: and such quotation is necessary in any case as testimony that I have not selected isolated sentences favourable to my requirement, but that the entire text of *Catalonia* tells the same story of disillusionment and that he is quite indifferent as to what he lays bare.

This is how he explains the manner in which he drifted into the P.O.U.M.

At the beginning I had ignored the political side of the war, and it was only about this time that it began to force itself upon my attention. [By *this time* Orwell is referring to the period when he was at the front near Huesca.] If you are not interested in party-politics, please skip. . . . But at the same time it would be quite impossible to write about the Spanish war from a purely military angle. It was above all things a political war. No event in it, at any rate during the first year, is intelligible unless one has some grasp of the inter-party struggle that was going on behind the Government lines.

When I came to Spain, for some time afterwards, I was not only uninterested in the political situation but unaware of it. I knew there was a war on, but I had no notion what kind of a war. If you had asked me why I had joined the militia I should have answered: 'To fight against Fascism', and if you had asked me what I was fighting *for*, I should have answered: 'Common decency'. . . . The revolutionary atmosphere of Barcelona had attracted me deeply, but I had made no attempt to understand it. As for the kaleidoscope of political parties and trade unions, with their tiresome names—P.S.U.C., P.O.U.M., F.A.I., C.N.T., U.G.T., J.C.I., A.I.T.—they merely exasperated me. It looked at first sight as though Spain were suffering from a plague of initials. I knew that I was serving in something called the P.O.U.M. (I had only joined the P.O.U.M. militia rather than any other because I happened to arrive in Barcelona with I.L.P. papers), but I did not realize that there were serious differences between the political parties. At Monte Pocero, when they pointed to the position on our left and said: 'Those are the Socialists' (meaning the P.S.U.C.), I was puzzled and said: 'Aren't we all Socialists?' I thought it idiotic that people fighting for their lives should *have* separate parties; my attitude always was, 'Why can't we drop all this political nonsense and get on with the war?' This of course was the correct 'anti-Fascist' attitude which had been carefully disseminated by the English newspapers, largely in order to prevent people from grasping the real nature of the struggle. But in Spain, especially in Catalonia, it was an attitude that no one could or did keep up indefinitely. Everyone, however unwillingly, took sides sooner or later. For even if one cared nothing for the political parties and their conflicting 'lines', it was too obvious that one's own destiny was involved. As a militiaman one was a soldier against Franco, but one was also a pawn in an enormous struggle that was being fought out between two political theories. When I scrounged for firewood on the mountain-side and wondered whether this was really a war or whether the *News Chronicle* had made it up, when I dodged the Communist machine-guns in the Barcelona riots, when I finally fled from Spain with the police one jump behind me—all these things happened to me in that particular

way because I was serving in the P.O.U.M. militia and not in the P.S.U.C. So great is the difference between two sets of initials!

Although Orwell drifted into the P.O.U.M., and although to start with he took no interest whatever in the political differences between the parties, he unquestionably ended up with *one* party prejudice. He left Spain an active enemy of the Communists. He describes their policy as rightist, indeed so far to the right as to make Franco a bit of a Lefty. He was not yet, of course, the man who wrote *1984*. In spite of the extraordinary amount of enlightenment he had received his attitudes were still those of a *New Statesman* reader, though an uncommonly disgruntled one.

These two books, the *Wigan Pier* book and the *Catalonia* book, were Orwell's first essay in straight political writing. Their perusal should have enlightened anyone concerned with the organization of the Popular Front in England that this new recruit might prove extremely dangerous. In the sequel, he did in fact prove a far more effective debunker of insincere leftish claptrap than any detached critic could hope to be, simply because of his left-wing status, and his record in Catalonia as a man wounded fighting on the side of the *Frente Popular*.

CHAPTER XVII

PRE-WAR NOVELS

THE quality, or otherwise, of his pre-war novels which I am now about to consider is of secondary consideration. It is the evolution of Orwell's mind, with its essential weaknesses and peculiarities of which I am writing. I will examine, then, each of these documents in turn (for they will be rather documents than works of art), and the first on my list is *Burmese Days*. My earlier reference to this would suffice if my only interest in it were literary. It is juvenily 'enlightened', all the stale anti-imperialism of liberal England dished up in its most conventional form. Of books of this type, with an exotic colonial background and written with the object of presenting the white interlopers in a detestable light, *Burmese Days* may be compared with a book called *Samara* by Norman Lewis. Mr. Lewis's book was published very recently; it is as well written as Orwell's was badly written, it is full of fine observation and acute understanding of the situation involved in Berber North Africa. It provides us with a horrific glimpse into the bestialities of White Rule. I make this comparison partly in the hope that it will cause people to read *Samara*, but for the rest to indicate a book with similar backgrounds which is everything that Orwell's is not.

The plot of *Burmese Days* is reminiscent of the requirements of the Victorian public: there is a wicked 'swell' who arrogantly pushes his way into a little circle of commercial gents, of 'fellows', and carries off their most desirable female, giving a display of the rights of the seigneur in the depths of the jungle. The hero, no class, as graceless as the young lord is graceful, as gauche as the other is ignorant of inhibitions, this colourless figure marked down from the start for failure and disgrace, watches the young 'swell' carry all before him and take possession of his girl. This side of the plot would have satisfied the Victorian audience.

What is not Victorian—what is terrifically go-ahead—is the hero's scorn of the British Raj. It is in fact that of the *New Statesman* and the *News Chronicle*, whose compelling words at a later date, you will recall, led him to buy a ticket for Barcelona and plunge into the Spanish Civil War. I have noted the following passages in this connexion. Flory, Orwell's hero, has a Hindu doctor for a friend, against all the rules of White overlordship. During his rebellious visits to this creature of another clay, he is able to 'conspuer' the English club and to denounce the 'stink' of the British Empire. He will say: 'from my beloved fellow Empire-builders, British prestige, the white man's burden, the pukka sahib sans peur et sans reproche—you know, such a relief to be out of the stink of it for a little while'. Or again:

There's a kind of spurious good-fellowship between the English in this country. It's a tradition to booze together and swap meals and pretend to be friends, though we all hate each other like poison. Hanging together, we call it. It's a political necessity. Of course drink is what keeps the machine going. We should all go mad and kill one another in a week if it weren't for that. There's a subject for one of your uplift essayists, doctor. Booze as the cement of empire.

It is of course true that any intelligent person would find the society of the small group of drunken morons at the Kyauktada English club almost intolerable. But that goes without saying and what is worst about Orwell, perhaps, is the *moral agony* which almost invariably makes its appearance after an outburst like the above. It is 'living a lie' to which his hero objects. This is an expression which stamps little Mr. Flory, as 'of the same clay' as the other club members.

One more quote:

What was the centre of all his thoughts now, and what poisoned everything, was the ever bitterer hatred of the atmosphere of imperialism in which he lived. For as his brain developed—you cannot stop your brain developing, and it is one of the tragedies of the half-educated that they develop late, when they are already committed to some wrong way of life—he had grasped the truth about the English and their Empire. The Indian Empire is a despotism—benevolent, no doubt, but still a despotism with theft as its final object. And as to the English

of the East, the *sahiblog*, Flory had come so to hate them from living in their society, that he was quite incapable of being fair to them.

This is no doubt a very understandable *cri de cœur* of an 'enlightened' Etonian, brutally translated from the delectable atmosphere of Eton to a nasty little hill-station in Burma, condemned indefinitely to enjoy the society of a small group of drunken businessmen. And all the book no doubt adds up to just this: but the same criticism of the English character could have been staged anywhere in England itself, in the saloon bar or the local golf club of any provincial centre, or for that matter in any city office. Here it is mixed up with moral reprobation of white Empire in Asia in general. Associated with these two themes, namely the essential stupidity of the English and the wickedness of Imperialism, we find observations of the following type. 'It is a world' (i.e. that of British rule—that was in India and Burma) 'in which every word and every thought is censored. In England it is hard even to imagine such an atmosphere. Everyone is free in England.' Well, it is hardly necessary for me to analyse this. How wonderfully free we are in England is a belief that Orwell very creditably outgrew. That man should govern man, to turn to the question of white Empire in Asia, that he should have the power to order him about, that he should be his economic master, is wrong, even disgusting. But man was not ruling man more oppressively in Kyauktada than he was in London, Leeds, Liverpool, and Birmingham. Of the vast problem of man's government of man white Empire in Asia was but an insignificant item. What do we find, at the moment of writing, in England's Gold Coast colony? We find the rule of the sentimental British Empire-builder passing into the hands of a Communist-trained Black leader, who no doubt eventually will head a government which will be an outpost of Soviet Russia on the West Coast of Africa. Again England has left Burma, which, it does not require a very prophetic eye to see, will, several years hence, pass into the Communist hands. I will not extend this survey any farther. All I would say is that just a little sense of these larger realities would prevent anybody from taking too high a moral tone about mild-mannered, if besotted,

Anglo-Saxon intruders in parts of Asia. Such intrusion was so obviously a brief episode in the cosmic power-game. It is such considerations as these which make this performance boring and juvenile.

Next I come to his second pre-war novel. *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*. The mere writing of it manifests an even greater indifference to words and to the art of verbal expression than does *Burmese Days*. Its silliness is not made any more palatable because of this carefree manner of slapping any old word down on the page that first comes into the jolly old head. It recounts the wearisome embarrassments and miseries of a young poet, 'thirty but moth-eaten', who is obsessed by a hatred for money: just money, because it is vile and wicked in itself like treason or arson. This is a typical Orwell situation because the real horror latent in the word 'money' is not a thing of which the author or his hero show any consciousness. 'Money' just meant what it does for any man in the street disgusted with his luck. At the sexual climax of the book where the girl and boy, each of thirty, *almost* consummate their love, a typically comic Orwell situation occurs. It is a wintry scene in the middle of the English countryside. Rosemary, like all of Orwell's heroines when the hour strikes, has completely undressed herself and lies on the damp earth. All love with Orwell takes place out of doors, whether it be in 1984, in *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, in *Burmese Days*, or in *Coming Up for Air*: and it is always the same woman, a sort of land-girl, who is the leading lady. We have left Rosemary stretched on the soggy earth. Next, the frightful hero is there beside her, when suddenly she turns over and rebukes him softly. He springs up readjusting his garments, angrily inquiring what is the matter. Well, the absence of contraceptives appears to have been the cause of the hitch in the proceedings:

She lay looking up at him, her face full of distress, too overcome for the moment even to remember that she was naked. His disappointment had turned to anger. There you are, you see! Money again! Even in the most secret action of your life you don't escape it; you've still got to spoil everything with filthy cold-blooded precautions for money's

sake. Money, money, always money! Even in the bridal bed, the finger of the money-god intruding! In the heights or in the depths, he is there. He walked a pace or two up and down, his hands in his pockets.

'Money again, you see!' he said. 'Even at a moment like this it's got the power to stand over us and bully us. Even when we're alone and miles from anywhere, with not a soul to see us.'

What are we expected to do? Laugh, choke with rage at the thought of the wicked money god: or reflect that the rain-soaked winter landscape, a hardy female of the species, lying naked upon it, and a typical moralizing eccentric standing over her in a moralistic rigor, glaring at her, is perhaps a British scene *par excellence*?

'It was a kind of plot that he was nursing. He was as though dedicated to this war against money,' we are told. The form that his attack took was by slow degrees to destroy himself as an economic unit. When he has got as low as it is possible to get, and is lying on the garret bed on which we have seen him when I referred to this book in the first instance, the little Rosemary trips in, snuggles down beside him in the buggy bed, and that happens which should have happened upon the wintry earth some time before. When the little stranger is announced, the turning-point comes. He makes his peace with the money god, gets a good job as a copy writer, which has been conveniently awaiting him all the time: they rent a nice little flat off the Edgware Road, buy an aspidistra to symbolize respectability, and the story ends very happily indeed.

It is impossible to convey the silliness of this novel without large quotations. There are one or two points I would like, in conclusion, to mention. First of all, there is a passage which is a happy foretaste of the later Orwell; It proves that even then he had perceived the hook sticking out of the bait in the messianic politics which as a schoolboy had got him by the gills. Here it is.

Gordon [Gordon Comstock, the hero] and his friends had quite an exciting time with their 'subversive ideas'. For a whole year they ran an unofficial monthly paper called the *Bolshevik*, duplicated with a jelly-graph. It advocated Socialism, free love, the dismemberment of the

British Empire, the abolition of the Army and Navy, and so on and so forth. It was great fun. Every intelligent boy of sixteen is a Socialist. At that age one does not see the hook sticking out of the rather stodgy bait.

Another point I noticed was that even characters in his books smell that smell. The elegant woman friend of the rich young man of the book expressed herself as follows: 'Don't talk to me about the lower classes,' she used to say. 'I hate them. They *smell*.'

Orwell's last published book before the war, *Coming Up for Air*, is I think his worst. The principal figures in all his narrative books are insignificant, unattractive creatures, and usually colourless. But George Bowling, whose acquaintance we make here, possesses colour, but of so distasteful a kind as to make the reading of the book a peculiarly exasperating labour. Mr. Bowling was an insurance tout of the most aggressive type, and the vulgarity he exudes is, one feels, regarded by Orwell in some way as a virtue. The two authors who contributed most to the production of this book are Wells and Chesterton. 'Wells is the author who made the biggest impression on me,' this dreadful hero tells us, and it was evidently Orwell's idea (for he, like Mr. Bowling, had been greatly influenced by Wells) to fashion his hero after a Wellsesque pattern. But as he accompanies us from the first page to the last, since he is the 'I' that tells the story, confiding to us incessantly 'I know I'm fat' and such like things, even the most patient critic is in constant revolt.

The theme is Chestertonian. George Bowling placed a bet, and, unknown to his wife, found himself in possession of a windfall amounting to seventeen pounds. He decides not to tell his wife but, on some pretext, to take a week's holiday, and spend that time at his birthplace, which is just outside London. When he arrives, instead of the idyllic place known to him in his childhood, factory smoke fills the air, and it has been swamped with masses of jerry-built houses.

Orwell criticizes the use by Rudyard Kipling of the Cockney jargon of the common soldier, arguing that it is artificial and in any case that it impairs the poetic value of much of his work. I do not believe that this is valid, but it is quite certain that the

Cockney of George Bowling would ruin any book. Pathos, such as there is, is entirely lost.

'A period when civilization seems to stand on its four legs like an elephant' is the kind of idea Orwell sets before us, the peace and beauty of the world before 1914. With this he contrasts the unsightly world of *massenmensch*. And he chooses as his spokesman in this demonstration a blatant human product of the machine age and of big business: but one with a quite unexplained hankering after the rural beauties of the past. There is no more I can say about this book except that I heartily sympathize with any future student of contemporary literature who has to read it.

How so talented a man as Orwell could have come to write his *Aspidistra* book and *Coming Up for Air* I do not know, since I have no information about his life in the 'thirties. He was certainly 'a late colt', but no doubt his isolation in Burma and then the lack of suitable society on his return to England, had something to do with it. It must be left to one of those people who spend their lives poking about in other people's waste paper baskets finally to explain this.

CHAPTER XVIII

ESSAYS

UP to now it must often have seemed as though I were delivering an attack upon Orwell, I am afraid. But his published work before 1939 does not provide many openings for politeness. On the other hand, we are approaching a time when he emerges as a writer of great interest. As he moves through the 'thirties, becoming a 'hero and saint' in the Spanish War, with *Wigan Pier* taking his place as a serious 'left-winger', he persists in his plan to gain a reputation as a writer of narrative fiction. The quality, or no-quality, of these attempts was part of the picture, as well as the political colour to be found dispersed in them. As his reputation as a militant fighter in the ranks of the Popular Front, grew, his literary reputation naturally did not grow with it, because neither Mr. Comstock nor Mr. Bowling is the kind of thing that gains one a literary reputation. Meanwhile a firmer outlook somewhere in the background of his mind is taking shape, though this new understanding still lies almost submerged in the sentimental slush. He perceives that there is a 'hook in the bait' of socialism. But it is rather just the eye that registers the hook as an external fact. He as yet draws very few conclusions.

When the war came he was of course immediately in his element. He had been trained as a soldier, more or less. Moreover, he had been a militiaman in Spain and he must have recognized well enough that his main asset derived from his reputation as a man of action, from his possession of the aura of the militant. For the last thing that the host of excitable 'lefties', who travelled to Spain to get in a cheap thrill or two, thought of doing was to enlist as militiamen and risk a bullet in the neck.

The Diaries, printed in the *World Review* Memorial Number,

reflect, as one might suppose, his martial ebullience. He writes: 'Horrible as it is, I hope the B.E.F. is cut to pieces sooner than capitulate.'

He sees a company of Marines at Victoria Station, it is with a soldier's eyes he notes: 'Saw a company of Marines marching through the station to entrain for Chatham. Was amazed by their splendid bearing, the tremendous stamp of boots and superb carriage of the officers.' Then he always has a good word to say for war. He never seemed to learn that these total wars were immense orgies of destruction pulling down and trampling under their bombs our civilization. Typically he writes: 'How much rubbish this war will sweep away, if only we can hang on throughout the summer. War is simply a reversal of civilized life; its motto is "Evil be thou my good," and so much of the good of modern life is actually evil that it is questionable whether on balance war does harm.'

On the last page of the Diary, dated 28.8.41, we see a glimmer of light, for we read: 'We are in for a long, dreary, exhausting war, with everyone growing poorer all the time.' That the despicable prosaic *economic* aspect of war should find any place amid his Blimpish heroics is a speck of cold light in a martial murk. Perhaps *this* war, I thought as I read it, may complement the Spanish Civil War, and lead to his final enlightenment.

The obvious ruin of everybody (in the end even of the Americans) which was one of the authenticated functions of this war, may have had *some* influence. But we must look elsewhere, I believe, for the agencies responsible for the transformation of the author of *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* into the author of *Animal Farm*. I should imagine that the finishing touches were given by transatlantic, anti-Stalinist writers, in association with European Trotskyites.

When first reading articles by the Orwell of 1945, I naturally supposed that he had joined the ranks of the Trotskyites. Now that I have read all his works, I know that it is not quite so simple as that. He at no time became a Trotskyite I think. Prior to his enlightening experiences among the Spanish parties, he was, as

we have seen in one of my quotations from his *Homage to Catalonia*, a *New Statesman* addict, whose views, therefore, would be highly favourable to Russian communism. The information about the development of Orwell's mind which this essay has so far supplied, will enable the reader to follow me as I plot the well-marked stages by which his intelligence matured. You will recall the fact that although no I.L.P.-er he had I.L.P. papers, was posted to a P.O.U.M. unit; and among those embattled Trotskyite partisans on the Huesca front he must often have listened to talk about Stalin and Stalinism strangely different in tone from what he would read in the pages of the *New Statesman*. Then later, in Barcelona, the Communists displeased him a great deal by their arbitrary behaviour—eventually chased him out of Spain as we have seen, which made it even less likely that, the war over, he would return to the *New Statesman* fold. But as he had entered Spain profoundly uninterested in party, so he left it still detached from any party 'dogma'. He showed no sign at that time, I mean, of favouring Trotsky: but his remarks about Stalin grew less and less respectful. In his 1940-1 *Notebooks*, for instance, we find him writing: 'One could not have a better example of the moral and emotional shallowness of our time, than the fact that we are now all more or less pro-Stalin. This disgusting murderer is temporarily on our side, and so the purges, etc., are suddenly forgotten.'

Such remarks register a tremendous change between the year 1936 when he left England for Spain and the year 1940—when the pro-Russian orgies began in England.

But this revolution in his mind would have the result of making him not only a sceptic where the Great Russian Experiment was concerned, it would also tend to make him critical of socialism in England. For of course the majority of Intellectuals at that time were fellow-travellers, and consequently the low opinion he had of Stalinism would extend to them. Not that he ever became *openly* critical: he knew better than that. But such feelings must have existed underneath. He must have realized by this time that his success as a writer, and as a personality, depended

upon his adherence to the conventional Left Wing attitudes of his friends.

At this point I perhaps should turn to the question as to whether Orwell was really a typical Left Wing figure at all. One might regard him as a sort of Colonel Blimp gone wrong; a Kipling (Mr. Muggeridge compares him with Kipling) who ran a bit amok, spat on the Union Jack as an imperialist emblem, embraced the first dark-skinned person he met and took a running kick at the posterior of the first pukka sahib to cross his path. One might regard his early anti-imperialism as a boyish enthusiasm, and his socialism as an attitude adopted to keep step with everybody else. And indeed a good deal of his socialism was skin-deep. The man who set out to discover the working-class in his *Wigan Pier* book was no very profound Socialist.

There are a great number of facts which incline one to think that his left-wingery never ceased to be skin-deep. Had Orwell been of German nationality who can doubt that he would have been an S.S. man. Had France been his homeland it would have been in the ranks of General de Gaulle that we should have found him. In any country where there were as many militant Right Wing organizations as there were Left Wing it would be the militant Right that he would choose. But in deeply and indelibly Liberalist England, there is literally nothing militant except on the Left. Let us take Stephen Spender now: had Germany been the place of *his* birth, he would unquestionably have been a most aggressive *émigré*. When we regard the matter from this angle we can see why Orwell looks such an odd fish politically. A natural Patriot, he has to act seditiously; a born policeman he is obliged to protest that police-work is brutal; a natural Rightist, he has to play the part of a Left-winger. The patriotism of the ordinary club-man order of his 1940-1 *Notebook*, the joyous acceptance of war as a good purgative, 'la bonne guerre', is that of the extreme Right rather than the extreme Left. The small part that economics played in his political outlook is also significant. His left-wingery probably was a species of sport, as obviously as his plunge into the underworld of tramps was the

act of a sportsman, not that of a missionary. His experiences as a militiaman in Spain were an outcome, again, of the soldierly sporting-spirit. Consequently, to sum this up, his convulsive movement of opinion away from his early *New Statesman*-reading days to the state of mind that led him eventually to write *Animal Farm*, was not a movement from a depth over into another depth, but rather a sharp splash out of one shallows into another shallows, though the second of these plainly possessed more depth than the first.

I shall presently have something to say, of course, about Orwell's two important books, *Animal Farm* and *1984*. But I now would like to do some quoting from his collected essays. These are *Critical Essays*, and *Shooting an Elephant*. At the time of writing, this is all that is available in book form. His essays will ultimately take their place beside his last two novels, and with them make a slender but valuable body of work, representing a writer who stood out among his contemporaries as one belonging to the main movement of European thought, or rather of Western thought.

That Orwell was perfectly aware of the shortcomings of the English, owing to their insular situation, in the field of political literature is unquestionable; and indeed in his essay on Koestler (*Critical Essays*) there is a passage specifically stating that 'there exists in England almost no literature of disillusionment about the Soviet Union'; and he points out how it is always foreigners who write the books of real political enlightenment.

But let me quote.

One striking fact about English literature during the present century is the extent to which it has been dominated by foreigners—for example, Conrad, Henry James, Shaw, Joyce, Yeats, Pound and Eliot. Still, if you chose to make this a matter of national prestige and examine our achievement in the various branches of literature, you would find that England made a fairly good showing until you came to what may be roughly described as political writing, or pamphleteering. . . . I mean by this the special class of literature that has arisen out of the European political struggle since the rise of fascism . . . Some of the

outstanding figures in this school of writers are Silone, Malraux, Salvemini, Borkenau, Victor Serge, and Koestler himself. . . . Also they are all alike in being continental Europeans. . . . English writers, over the past dozen years, have poured forth an enormous spate of political literature, but they have produced almost nothing of aesthetic value, and very little of historical value either. . . . One result of this is that there exists in England almost no literature of disillusionment about the Soviet Union. There is the attitude of ignorant disapproval, and there is the attitude of uncritical admiration, but very little in between.

There is no question at all that Orwell learned a great deal from Koestler. The latter's *Darkness at Noon* helped him to write *1984*. The part of this essay where he is discussing the backgrounds of revolutionary degeneracy responsible for Rubashov's confession are especially interesting as showing how deeply he studied this book, which was a direct outcome of the Russian purges.

Turn to page 135 of *Critical Essays*.

The confessions obtained in the Russian State trials are capable of three explanations:

- (1) That the accused were guilty.
- (2) That they were tortured, and perhaps blackmailed by threats to relatives and friends.
- (3) That they were actuated by despair, mental bankruptcy and the habit of loyalty to the Party.

For Koestler's purpose in *Darkness at Noon* (1) is ruled out, and though this is not the place to discuss the Russian purges, I must add that what little verifiable evidence there is suggests that the trials of the Old Bolsheviks were frame-ups. If one assumes that the accused were not guilty—at any rate, not guilty of the particular things they confessed to—then (2) is the common-sense explanation. Koestler, however, plumps for (3), which is also accepted by the Trotskyist Boris Souvarine, in his pamphlet *Cauchemar en URSS*. Rubashov ultimately confesses because he cannot find in his own mind any reason for not doing so. Justice and objective truth have long ceased to have any meaning for him. For decades he has been simply the creature of the Party, and what the Party now demands is that he shall confess to non-existent crimes. In the end, though he has had to be bullied and weakened first, he is somewhat proud of his decision to confess. He feels superior to the poor Czarist officer who inhabits the next cell and who talks to Rubashov by tapping on the wall. . . . Like Bukharin, Rubashov is 'looking

out upon black darkness'. What is there, what code, what loyalty, what notion of good and evil, for the sake of which he can defy the Party and endure further torment? He is not only alone, he is also hollow. . . . He contrasts sharply with Gletkin, the young G.P.U. man who conducts his interrogation, and who is the typical 'good Party man', completely without scruples or curiosity, a thinking gramophone. Rubashov, unlike Gletkin, does not have the Revolution as his starting-point. His mind was not a blank sheet when the Party got hold of it. His superiority to the other is finally traceable to his bourgeois origin. . . . If one writes about the Moscow trials one must answer the question, 'Why did the accused confess?' and which answer one makes is a political decision. Koestler answers, in effect, 'Because these people had been rotted by the Revolution which they served', and in doing so he comes near to claiming that revolutions are of their nature bad.

The drama of *1984* is the same drama as *Darkness at Noon*. O'Brien is breaking down the bourgeois prejudices of the robot-hero, who clings to the typical belief in objective truth of the bourgeois world.

As we go along in this essay Orwell appears to be largely agreeing with Koestler's analysis. The Russian Revolution is for him just as disappointing an affair as it is for Koestler. But when it comes to saying that *all* Revolutions are certain to be equally unsatisfactory, and, after a blood-bath to develop into a disgusting tyranny, oh then Orwell ceases to march in step with his Hungarian contemporary. For he *will* still have his socialism, still wear his party badge. Nothing may turn out well, but anything may turn out *slightly* better than it was before. The following long quotation is necessary to show you the way in which his mind clicks back into the stock position:

Men can only be happy when they do not assume that the object of life is happiness. It is most unlikely, however, that Koestler would accept this. There is a well-marked hedonistic strain in his writings, and his failure to find a political position after breaking with Stalinism is a result of this.

The Russian Revolution, the central event in Koestler's life, started out with high hopes. We forget these things now, but a quarter of a century ago it was confidently expected that the Russian Revolution would lead to Utopia. Obviously this has not happened. Koestler is too

acute not to see this, and too sensitive not to remember the original objective. Moreover, from his European angle he can see such things as purges and mass deportations for what they are; he is not, like Shaw, or Laski, looking at them through the wrong end of the telescope. Therefore he draws the conclusion: This is what revolutions lead to. There is nothing for it except to be a 'short-term pessimist', i.e. to keep out of politics, make a sort of oasis within which you and your friends can remain sane, and hope that somehow things will be better in a hundred years. At the basis of this lies his hedonism, which leads him to think of the Earthly Paradise as desirable. Perhaps, however, whether desirable or not, it isn't possible. Perhaps some degree of suffering is ineradicable from human life, perhaps the choice before man is always a choice of evils, perhaps even the aim of Socialism is not to make the world perfect but to make it better. All revolutions are failures, but they are not all the same failure. It is unwillingness to admit this that has led Koestler's mind temporarily into a blind alley.

Orwell wishes as you see, to save socialism; for he cannot imagine himself abandoning that, and surviving in the atmosphere of present-day England. Koestler has no difficulty in convincing him that *all* revolutions, or almost all, are liable to be just as bad as the Russian Revolution. All revolutions are total revolutions, just as all wars are total wars: and it is this total quality (peculiar to our century, owing to the terrifying power of the industrial techniques which confer upon a little group of men a god-like dominion over the surface of the earth which is their realm)—it is this total power which makes the future look so hopelessly black. But after all, Orwell is an English left-winger. Whatever he may say, and he says it very well, about the limitations of the English political writer when compared with the continental, he fails when it comes to the point, to go as far as his continental contemporary. He will not agree that it is social revolution itself which, because of our XXth Century technical powers coupled with our inability to advance intellectually, must be condemned, just as in our day war must be condemned. Of course there will be more wars: but the intellectual, the true *clerc*, must denounce war. Orwell is to be convicted of merely personal, career considerations, in refusing to take this final step.

There is only one argument available to save him from

condemnation. His objections to Koestler's 'hedonism' are probably genuine. The greatest happiness of the greatest number, indeed happiness at all would not be apt to interest him. Like his hero Comstock he really possessed a capacity to enjoy the disgustingly uncomfortable and the suddenly unhappy. And this relish for the disagreeable would make him look upon what he agreed was a bloody tyranny rather differently from Koestler. But even this argument is unable to banish the belief that, in the last analysis, he was actuated by personal considerations.

Again, he describes Koestler as being driven back by the special nature of Stalin dictatorship, into a position 'not far removed from pessimistic Conservatism'. For Orwell, if you are not a Socialist you have to be some other kind of party-man. So Koestler becomes a *Conservative*.

But what I am saying throughout this essay is *not* that socialism is wrong, but that every party is wrong for a philosopher or for an artist. To make myself quite clear Orwell asserts, and I agree, that personal liberty for the intellectual or really for anybody else, depends upon possessing the right to say that two and two make four. To be in a position to say that one must have no political affiliations. One must inhabit the same strictly objective universe where the true man of science conducts his investigation.

My argument is that Orwell should have taken up a position of absolute detachment, upon having his eyes so thoroughly opened as to enable him to write *Animal Farm*. It is his failure to do that which places him, to some extent, in the same class as Sartre.

CHAPTER XIX

CLIMAX AND CHANGE

At last, in 1945, Orwell's literary ambition was realized. He wrote a good book, *Animal Farm*.

As this is not literary criticism, I need not say very much as to the literary quality either of *Animal Farm* or *1984*. Treating of a society of animals, the theme brings to mind the classical masterpieces, which might, one would say, have inspired him to stylistic emulation. But this is not the case. The language is business-like and adequate but that is all. It is, however, a considerable feat of political lampooning. It is direct and dry, often witty. His 'All animals are equal, but some are more equal than others' is a splendidly witty climax to the law-giving of the Pigs. And this little book, this sardonic parable, was a turning-point in the reaction. He showed the same courage in writing this as he had displayed as a 'fighter for Freedom' in Spain (which subsequently he found was not Freedom after all, but slavery). With *Animal Farm* he led the wavering lefties out of the pink mists of Left Land into the clear daylight. Few, it is true, can or will follow him very far.

But *Animal Farm*, by reason of its success, made it respectable to think clearly or to write without humbug, if a young man was so disposed. It was in a sense an iron curtain that came down on the period of literary fellow-travelling, the work of an ex-fellow-traveller.

But for himself, as I have just stressed, he remained with one foot on the *Road to Wigan Pier*: the other foot in that region which had been finally opened to him by those foreigners of whom we have read his unqualified praise. To the Europeans of course must be added Burnham, and all the Trotskyite intelligentsia of the United States.

1984 is Wellsian in form, Wellsian in the style of its writing,

Wellsian in the colourlessness and anonymity of the personae. I have discussed already, in passing, the reason for the insignificance of the humans who supply the drama in 1984. There is, in fact, very little drama, in consequence of the extremely un-electrical quality of the human material. O'Brien, one of the two principal figures, is an uninteresting business man. If all the other humans in Orwell's novels had not been of so uniformly devitalized and colourless a type, one would have assumed that in 1984 the human element had been keyed down to show off the inhuman inquisitorial machinery to best advantage.

The manner in which Orwell has utilized the knowledge he acquired of the Communist attitude to objective truth is admirable. His hideous palaces of Truth and Love are first-rate political creations. His elaborate bureaucratic monstrosities will quite likely one day be historical facts: this is one of those rare books in which we may actually be looking at something existing in the future. Those parts of Goldstein's secret text which we are shown are well written, clear, and plausible. The interminable torturing, culminating on the page with 'I Love Big Brother', is impressively chilly and logical. However, O'Brien and his victim are a comic pair sometimes: I think of the part where he bends over the truth-loving Winston and says 'How many fingers have I got?', and when the foolish Winston still insists on counting in the way he was taught to do in the good old days of 'two and two make four', the button is pressed and he receives a slightly more agonizing dose of torture than the last time. Here and elsewhere mirth is induced instead of terror, partly because an acute sense of the ridiculous is not Orwell's strong point, and then since the human beings involved are prefabricated and bloodless, we experience no sympathetic pang.

The book as a whole is a first-rate political document. There is only one thing I am obliged to point out. The old London lying all around this floodlit bureaucratic centre, this almost balletesque survival, full of the 'Proles' which are Orwell's speciality, does not (perhaps oddly) make the scene more real. It is unlikely, in a régime such as Orwell describes, that the millions of ordinary

people will be left unmolested, treated indeed as though they were not there. The appetite for power involves the maximum interference with other human beings.

But the hero's Orwellian enthusiasm for the 'Proles' ('Proles' meaning 'proletariat') imports a silliness into this book which is rather a pity. It is a silliness of the author of *The Road to Wigan Pier*; and that is not the author who was writing 1984.

This natural life surrounding the artificial lunacy of the votaries of 'Big Brother' is the real, unspoilt life of the people: that is the idea. It is the hero's belief that out of these vigorous, sane multitudes will come salvation. O'Brien, the powerful Commissar, is able to read Winston's thoughts. He says to him, 'You believe, Winston, that the Proles will revolt and destroy us all. This is an illusion. There is not the slightest possibility of their doing anything of that kind,' etc. etc. etc. Winston clings to Orwell's sentimental fancies. It is really Orwell who is on the rack. But he obstinately adheres to his love of the proletariat, whereas he should in fact be loving 'Big Brother'.

So that my meaning should not be mistaken, I consider a South-side publican, a garage hand, a docker, a city policeman, a window-cleaner, just as good as a Prime Minister, a Lord President of the Council, an Air Marshal, or a Captain of Industry. But I consider Orwell's romancing about the former group an insult to them, for he really thought that they were marked off in some mysterious way from the second group, which they are not. The whole of the *Wigan Pier* business was a very stupid affectation. I explained this at the time I was writing about the *Wigan Pier* book, but it is best perhaps to remind you of the nature of my criticism. One feels in the case of 1984 that it is as though a lot of William Morris bric-à-brac had got mixed up with the hysterical realities of the ghastly time we live in. The gutter-songs of the London children—'Oranges and lemons say the Bells of St. Clements; You owe me five farthings say the Bells of St. Martin's'—echo romantically through the book. But the London that existed when that song was written is no longer there—was no longer there in 1930. The bells of the various

churches rang out clearly once, when London was quite a small place, and everyone was familiar with their chimes. But this song is an archaeological relic; and to use such a song to symbolize the vast and roaring megalopolis of 1940 or '50 is absurd.

So we have the Old and the New contrasted. The Wellsian nightmare of a crazed totalitarianism stands for what socialism becomes when interpreted as Stalin has done: the delightful, old-fashioned London of the nineteen thirties, 'forties and 'fifties, with its hurdy-gurdies, its 'Oranges and Lemons', and anything else you can think of to make it like the London of Charles Dickens,—that stands for the socialism of Keir Hardie, or Lansbury, and of Orwell. For if, having seen what 'State' socialism is apt to turn into, we still remain Socialists, then this is no doubt the correct symbolical contrast.

No one any longer believes in the *simpliste* notion of workers charged with an easily recognizable identity, causing them to be as distinct as though all manual workers had black faces, and all who were not manual workers white faces. No one believes in the myth any longer of all these black-faced people rising in revolt, killing all the white-faced people and there being henceforth a black-faced world. No one believes this because they know that it is not an ultimate division, working-class and non-working-class; that there are deeper divisions which ignore these very superficial ones. They know that proletarian revolt must be engineered by members of the middle or upper class, who do this out of ambition. They know that when a revolution is over most of those who were manual workers before it are still manual workers; and few, if any, of the new leaders belong to the class of manual workers. The Orwell picture is of a long-out-dated socialism. His two humanities contrasted in 1984, of, on the one hand, a virgin virile world of workers, bursting with potential leadership, on the other, a ruling class on the Stalinist party-pattern, is really socialism in one of its XIXth Century forms (probably medieval and guildish confronting the stream-lined, ruthless, efficiency-socialism of today).

I for one would have considered 1984 a better book had the

'Prole' business been left out, and a more realistic treatment of the probable condition of the mass of the population been employed.

So, finally, I do not regard Orwell as *un malin* like Sartre, but a parallel with Sartre's case certainly exists. It seemed necessary to Orwell, in the interests of his reputation, not to withdraw from his conventionally leftish position. How conscious he was in following this line I do not know. But it is (and this is my argument) a false position, as with Sartre; and so, too, numbers of other writers obliged to toe a party-line of *some* sort.

In these politics-ridden times writers experience irresistible pressures, this way or that. Yet this pressure in a still free community can be almost as destructive as the writing-to-order in Communist Russia. Every writer should keep himself free from party, clear of any group-pull: at least this is *my* view of truth. My truth is objective truth, in other words. In England the entire intellectual atmosphere is impregnated with liberalism, or rather what liberalism transforms itself into so as to become more-and-still-more liberal. With us the pressure to achieve conformity is very great. Whether in the matter of costume, or hair-cut, or intellectual fashion.

Orwell possessed a very vigorous mind, he went much farther on the road to an ultimate political realism than any of his companions or immediate English contemporaries. But you have seen him noting the great advantage the political writer of European origin has over the Englishman. Orwell, I feel, *did* almost wrench himself free. But the whole of his history is one of misdirected energy, and when, at the end, he transcended his earlier self, it was still to retain a bit of the old sentiment, to show his heart was still in the right place, in spite of the cruel and horrible things he had said about 'The Great Russian Socialist Experiment'.

CONCLUSION

THE political situation today, throughout the world, leads one to believe that the individual may not be allowed for very much longer to express himself in writing. He will have to express somebody else's self, if he wishes to write; somebody of great political consequence. This somebody else will probably be called collectivity, the community or the time.

Poor Orwell appears to have been bullied a good deal by his fellow-travelling associates, or so one gathers from one of his essays. He was accused of egoism for expressing his own view on political questions. He was told that 'intellectual honesty is a form of anti-social selfishness'. In other words, to record your own point of view in a published work is an act of hostility towards the community to which you belong. Orwell changes it slightly, in a gesture of retaliation, where he says, 'The writer who refuses to sell his opinions is always branded as an *egoist*.' I have never been accused of selfishness myself, at least not to my face, but then I have never been a fellow-traveller nor have all my associates been left-wingers. My friends have mostly been egoists like myself, people who did not scruple to say, or to write, what they thought.

The term 'anti-social' may be paraphrased 'against society'. It is the kind of thing a Communist would say to any writer inclined to express views not dictated by his party. But of course the writer's party, or the 'society' against which he was supposed to be acting by writing down what he really thought about this or that—this party and this society are just a small group of people, or it may even be just one person (a small group of egoists, in other words, or one egoist) who hand out, quite indifferent as to whether they are called egoists or not, *their* point of view (or it may even be, as I have said, that of *one* of them).

It is always a good thing to repeat, in such a discussion, that the *individual* cannot signify one person because there is no such

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thing as one person. Intellectually, you and I are a great number of people, alive and dead. The individual, in the sense that you and I are individuals, is anything but an isolated speck, rigidly detached from all coeval minds. My opinion on most subjects is more or less shared by a respectable number of people. And however powerful a machine may be set to work to achieve a perfect conformity of opinion, there is never *one* opinion throughout a society, there are always a number of compartments or groups. So when I say that those who share my opinion represent a respectable number of people, I am saying that for all intents and purposes my opinions are those of a sizable group, that it is quite incorrect to regard me as an abstraction called the *individual*.

In most cases, I agree, there have been men of the extreme right or the extreme left, or, seeing that Left and Right are historically terms of very recent coinage, they have usually been the very reverse of neutral. But for great moderation, for a refusal to be partisan, for a true objectivity, no punishment can be too terrible in such an age as ours. Such a man is a far greater danger than any extremist.

Four or five hundred years ago it was the religious Absolute which was the writer's problem. Today it is the political Absolute. In the last few decades if a writer has been unable to count on either the Right or Left for support, if he violently has adhered to the Middle, always the Mean, his lot has been a precarious one. If a writer desires an easy life, he should be an extremist: if one could be mathematically at the point farthest from both extremes, which is of course impossible, one would be entirely alone. And any position near to this imaginary absolute of objectivity cannot but be an exceedingly uncomfortable one, for there is another extremism of the Middle of a much realer kind than the more usual extremes such as those of Left and Right.

By maintaining the highest technical standards in his work, and even more by austere refraining from all watering down, sweetening, or in other ways rendering more popularly palatable, and of course by never departing from the truth as it shows itself to him, a writer cannot receive more than the barest worldly

reward. But the place of honour, as I have never failed to recognize, is *outside*. Honours make any man suspect. At least of that I am blameless.¹

That the following is the normal process is a fact deserving special attention. The active writer of any merit *begins*, customarily, in the wilderness. It is most unusual for him to stop there. Few take up their station right away at the foot of the ladder placed in readiness for professional climbers (as in the monkey cages at the Zoo, a sham forestry is fixed to meet the requirements of the climbing instinct). Most recognize that, even for the writer most passionately anxious to climb that ugly ladder, it is wiser to look the other way at first—to start life with the ‘revolutionaries’ and the bums.

So, unpleasant as it is, you are certain to be poor if you remain truthful and write as well as you can. But then who but the vulgar will treat you with a lack of respect because they know you are poor? It is, as I may have helped to show, so hopeless to be at once truthful and other than poor.

Distinct from the question of money (enabling one to obtain justice for oneself—and there are no law courts so just as the English if you are well supplied with cash) is the question of power. This is involved with that of money, but is not identical. —The acquiring of power by the writer is no solution. It removes from him Liberty—is not a means of securing himself against molestation, since generally he buys it with his liberty of action. The acquisition of power, it is generally recognized, is costly—that is the deliberate acquisition. The various ways in which the critical judgement, or the integrity of artistic expression, risk adulteration are plain to see. There is the frequent drain involved by payment for personal service: the resort to a debased personal currency, as it were, to lubricate the phases of the long ascent to respectable levels: no values survive intact. Who is a man, and not a monkey, at the end of it? So much for the credit side of

¹ I hope that being made a Doctor of Literature of the University of Leeds (15 May, 1952) will not be seen, by the watchful, as a symptom of demoralization. It is so lonely an honour that it may be forgiven by the most austere.

being a ‘great outsider’. Now, what must be bracketed with the burden of politics for the writer is the unpropitious nature of the times, although these, in a sense, are one and the same thing: the decline in all intellectual values, and the merely physical handicaps of chaotic economic conditions. The civilized society of a great capital, like London, normally represents a public and an objective life, one comprising many independent individuals and groups, not connected with each other directly at all. Is not this in point of fact a definition of civilized life? Such plurality is one of its necessary conditions.

That formerly wide, ‘public’, multiple, autonomous life is not enjoyed at present. Our intellectual consciousness has shrunk to what is in fact a private and exclusive mode: the painter is not free, he is the superstitious bondsman of a fashion, the writer is not free, he is ideologically restricted. What remains of the old monied society precariously exploits its cultural fields. Criticism is becoming practically a personal affair: the controlling groups are anything but aggressively distinct. Six years of war, with the obligation on the part of writers to draw far closer together in order to secure the ‘survival of culture’—and an even greater necessity for the artists to organize for bare animal survival—has been productive of what we see. The responsibility for this organization, especially in the visual arts, passed automatically into the hands of a few rich amateurs and officials. The six years of war conditions were immediately succeeded by national bankruptcy, the constant threat of World War III, economic extermination of the middle-class, and the rest of it. The habits formed in war have, as a consequence, hardly been relaxed. The writer, and the artist, therefore, finds that his creative life is progressively more circumscribed, more at the mercy of committees.

This book is not about liberty to indulge in aggressive action as a writer, but the liberty to use, in the literary art, factual and speculative truth. This investigation takes no count of the moral advantages of what is true: that is not necessary. It is, in fact—such has been my contention—equally imperative (though with

other objectives) to be granted access to what *is*, for the artist as for the moralist, and the former's need is more comprehensive.

Politics may, at any moment, bring to an end all serious creative writing, just as religion can. In many times and places politics, as much as religion, have done just that, or prevented it from ever developing. Great literature depends altogether upon unobstructed access to the true—upon licence to make use of the material which appears to the writer to correspond to the truth. Naturally, the ability to *perceive* the true—which is under everybody's nose but not seen by everybody—is confined to people of considerable intelligence.

The factual is not just what lies there, to be picked up by anyone. It is what is perceived by the wisest—and it at once is, and is not, there for the short-sighted 'average man'. Indeed, it does not appear to be the factual at all to the person devoid of insight: or, if you like, there is *another* factual for him. Yet, of course, we are often dealing with a more complicated situation than that; i.e. a matter of the most rudimentary fact: such a fact, for instance, as the presence in a field of a cow; present to all men equally, whatever their intelligence. There have been long periods in recorded history when the cow was in the field, but no one mentioned the fact publicly because the writer was denied the right to do so. He was denied *verbal* access to the cow—unless, that is, he were the padishah. These were dark ages. The present is a private age in-the-making. It is all a question of how long we can fool ourselves, or others, that it is a public age: a *public* age, in my way of speaking, being a free age.

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