

THE FIFTH COLUMN IN POETRY

AN INTERLUDE

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THE Great War, 1914-18, ushered in a revolutionary period in world history. The political and economic ferment that resulted in the spectacular aspects of the historical process during these troubled times was also potent as a factor in the changing scene of art and literature. Just as the masses of the common people in all countries have been slow to grasp the significance of disintegration in national and international affairs so, during this period of transition, those interested in literary criticism have been bewildered by the attempt to undermine the culture of the western world. Gathering momentum and finally losing all sense of direction, the urge to revolt has, at least temporarily, lost sight of the constructive purpose of its ideal and has become a blind and raging torrent of destruction. Now, at this late hour, there is an awakening, a reaffirmation of values which have always existed. Is it too late to salvage the art of letters, and poetry in particular, from the tide that is sweeping over Europe and threatening to wreck civilization as we have known it?

In the twilight of these perilous days, it may be useful to trace the steps by which poetry has been driven from its ancient place of power and influence. When earth-shaking events are in progress it is surely meet to ask why so many of our poets are silent and to ask why the fire, enthusiasm, and prophetic ardor that should accompany a great historical change are strangely absent from their published works. If it be true indeed that poetry is the expression of the spirit of the age in which it is written, then there must be something radically wrong with our period of time—something which must be remedied if culture is to survive; or, if it be legitimate to view the matter otherwise, we must bring an indictment against those who have betrayed the cause of great art and have sold their divine heritage for the traditional mess of pottage. Before forming a conclusion, it may be well to examine the background of events preceding the debacle of today.

It is trite to say that there is a gulf between the world that existed before the first Great War and the world of to-day. We,

who have been privileged to live in the pre-war period and to continue on into the post-war period, know how true this is. In the upheaval beginning in 1914, the most significant event was undoubtedly the Russian Revolution. Embarking upon a daring experiment, one sixth of the earth's surface sloughed off the institutions that had seemed so permanent to us. Disciples of the new order saw in it not merely a sweeping economic and political revolution but a transformation and transfiguration of life itself—a new orientation that might eventually fulfill the dreams of all earth's sages and prophets from the beginning of time. While the merchant class of countries beyond the Soviet Union looked with fear and trembling upon the revolt and its aftermath, the dreamers, the thinkers, the artists, the creators, wherever they lived, were thrilled by the possibilities of humanity emancipated from the bondage of a system that placed monetary values above those inherent in the individual man or woman. Blinded by their own desire for the achievement of an ideal, their excited imaginations turned towards the Promised Land. They could see only the shining towers of the New Jerusalem so that the blood upon its streets did not impinge upon their vision. No convert, in the first throes of a religious experience, ever turned more gratefully or humbly to a saviour than did some of these devotees of the new faith.

With the ardor of conversion came the desire for instruction. Many intellectuals, who came under the spell of the Great Revolution, became students of economics, of science, and of history according to the materialist conception. They learned that to write anything which did not possess "social significance" was a prostitution of their talents to certain false deities who dwelt in an Ivory Tower. In their haste to align themselves with the forces behind events they unwittingly overlooked the fact that all authentic art has social significance and that it should be the husband and not the handmaiden of history. A few, who were more vital than others, threw themselves wholeheartedly into the struggle of the workers and became leaders and organizers, propagandists and pamphleteers. However, many were temperamentally unfitted for active participation in political movements. Others, too, were averse to action of any sort. But, no matter whether the writer or critic was in an editorial office, in a professorial chair, or in the position of a free lance, he was subjected to the influence of the new order that had been born in November, 1917.

Now, if it be contended that I have given altogether too much prominence to the world-wide influence of a single event upon human life when I have attributed to the Russian Revolution the various effects mentioned, may I be permitted to say that I am not unmindful of the implications of the Machine Age and of the changing economic and political scene of which that revolt was only an incident. Our age of science and machinery would, of itself, have radically altered the art forms of the twentieth century and, in essence, it would have revolutionized them. But it is also true that the forces of revolt in the arts were definitely canalized for a specific end by the propaganda emanating from Moscow. The fact that the Soviet Union was recognized as the embodiment and active centre of the world revolution is apparent when we realize that the entire capitalist system, existing in countries beyond Russian boundaries, was arrayed against it in 1917. In the world of ideas, recognition of the source of revolutionary influences was slower because of the obfuscation created by the mass production of printed matter and by a general preoccupation with the increasingly difficult task of living.

However, the poets who succumbed to the spell of an attempt to build Utopia cannot be condemned for yielding to an idealistic impulse. It is unlikely that they were familiar with either the theory or the process of revolution. In every age, the revolutionist has perforce been bitter, fanatical, and ruthless. Having succeeded in overthrowing a tyrannical regime, he has to face opposition that is equally harsh and cruel. As a result of this, his instincts have led him to destroy the obstacles in his path. The compassionate ones among his leaders have inevitably been compelled to give place to others who kept the revolutionary fires burning by annihilating opposing forces and with them values, intellectual, spiritual, and material, which seemed inimical to their safety and success. The natural result of this violence has always been a counter-revolution or a White Terror to withstand the Red. In Europe, Fascism arose as the answer to the threat of Communist revolution. In Russia itself, the idealistic point of view was lost while fear, suspicion, and fanaticism gave rise to the military dictatorship of today. Yet, as in all revolutions, something worthy of endurance will doubtless persist into the era that lies beyond the present period of transition. For the poets and other artists, who espoused the revolutionary cause, it has been a stormy passage and one in which they have temporarily lost sight of the capital values upon which all great art must be founded if it is to endure.

In the annals of the U. S. S. R. there is evidence to show that the impact of a materialistic philosophy and the attempt to fit poetry to the exigencies of economic planning can kill not merely poetic art but the poet himself. This fact was exemplified literally in the fates of Sergei Essenin and Vladimir Mayakovsky, Russian revolutionary and proletarian poets who were both driven to commit suicide. Their biographies reveal the course which genius must travel in trying to reconcile the validity of individual experience with political tactics which demand the control of the prophetic vision of the artist. Totalitarianism applied to poetry, then, may sometimes mean the total extinction of the poet. Of the bards who hailed the Revolution in Russia itself the two mentioned took their own lives, a few have been shot, and others have stopped writing. It is safe to say that those writers who are producing what is alleged to be poetry in the Soviet Union today are engaged in mechanistic exercises in prosody which are primarily designed as propaganda or as pompous eulogies of Stalin, the Dictator.

Having briefly glanced at the evolution and status of poetry in the fatherland of Communism, it may be interesting to trace the influence of revolutionary theory upon literature in our English tongue. All great transitional periods in world history have been fraught with a sense of impending change but not all minds have been reduced to the devastating sense of futility revealed in Sandburg's famous line, "The past is a bucket of ashes". However, a general psychological reaction to the historical process rendered it easy for the propagandist to attempt the burial of the past by heaping obloquy upon it and all its works. To "debunk" the ideals and achievements of pre-war years, decades, and even centuries became the task of hundreds of writers who blithely demolished the ancient shrines in the spirit of hoodlums stoning the stained glass windows of a cathedral. Small wonder that today, when the barbarians are at our gates, we cast about in vain for a slogan that will stir the hearts of a cynical generation. Slowly, but insidiously and surely, the secret agents of world revolution have worked their will upon the poets and artists who should be conservators of the eternal values so desperately in need of reaffirmation at this time. What might have been the salutary and cleansing fire of a great regeneration became a flame of destruction that spared no values within existing institutions. The voices of the inspired remnants of the poetic nation were drowned by the cacophony of the new verse that attempted by its formlessness

to extend the reign of chaos. Poetry, in its death throes, became the sinister craft of liquidating verbs and nouns, the dexterous juggling of type upon a printed page.

If they had not been so tragic the antics of the poets who danced to the "modern" tune would have been just cause for merriment. Even as the crowds in fashionable London drawing-rooms once basked in the revolutionary aura of Prince Kropotkin, so did the dowagers and literary parvenus of the twentieth century worship at the shrine of the Sitwells who sang of the "grasses that like goslings quack". Good people, who would shrink from the sight of a blood-spattered pavement or a barricade manned by bristling guns, were nevertheless induced by some pervasive influence beyond their ken to take part in the revolt against words. They were oblivious of the fact that words are symbols enshrining ideas and that ideas are the foundations of social and political systems. Later than the coterie in England represented by the Sitwells came the critics and camp-followers who hailed the advent of "proletarian" poetry.

The Imagists, the Dadaists, the Surrealists, the metaphysical school harking back to John Donne, have all helped to pave the way for the Left Wing group that now stands in awe before the mythos of the working-class which is to be the saviour of the world and the "grave-digger of Capitalism". I, who am a son of Martha, a humble unit in the masses who toil with hand or brain, have been forced to marvel at the Cambridge dons and the pseudo-Bohemians of Greenwich Village who have attempted the apotheosis of the proletariat in literature. That the poetry produced by these parlor-Bolsheviks contains little of interest to the people about whom they write is clearly revealed when one reads a poem by Auden or Spender to a group of workers. But this failure to communicate anything of value to the masses does not trouble these ardent revolutionists. "Government of the people for the people and by the people" may be an attractive slogan for the political arena but poetry of the people for the people and by the people evidently does not enter into their preliminary plan for a new social order. Nor has it occurred to the champions of social significance in art that authentic poetry of the working-class, as exemplified in the ballads and folk-songs of every nation is melodious, classical in its formal simplicity, and designed to appeal to the heart rather than to the brain. Following the ukase that imposes the will of a minority upon backward millions,

they aim at the establishment of a dictatorship in the realm of mind and spirit. Tangled in a web of economic theory, the soul of the individual poet can find utterance only in obscure mutterings, plangent discords, and grotesque verbal contortions. Poetry is strangled in order that the propagandist may adhere to the orthodox party line. Assuredly, this is a strange road to freedom!

Poetry in the concentration camp! Let us leave it there temporarily, knowing that it has power to break its chains, while we note other effects of political ideology upon the values inherent in its message. The decadence of democratic institutions has of late been the theme song of the dictators. The echo of that song of hate is felt in the cynical shrug of the shoulder and the covert sneer with which so many of our citizens accompany their criticism of parliament or politician. What have the poets of the English-speaking world done to counteract this assault upon freedom? Is it not true that the modernists have been prone to attack our shortcomings while neglecting to emphasize the hard-won rights and liberties that we have maintained as our most precious heritage? And yet, if we except the periods in which we have voluntarily curtailed our own privileges to win wars against aggression, Tennyson, if living today, could still say of England:

"It is the land that freemen till,
That sober-suited Freedom chose,
The land, where girt with friends or foes,
A man may speak the things he will;"

However, the writers who have fallen under the spell of the totalitarian concept seem incapable of understanding the process of social evolution. They launch their bolts against imperialism and capitalism without the slightest comprehension of the way in which "the old order changeth giving place to new". The gradual development of a federal system of free and self-governing nations in the British Commonwealth seems to be without significance for them. The progress of events is, to a great extent, the result of factors conveniently ignored in the formulation of their theory of economic determinism. How, then, can they be expected to appreciate the spiritual bond between the component parts of the British system which is dependent upon common traditions, a common culture, and a common ethical concept? They look past and beyond the "parliament of nations and federation of the world" prefigured

by our democracies to a totalitarian regime imposed upon the world by the will of an armed minority. Thus do they isolate themselves, in their so-called proletarian literature, from the significant movements that are working to create a new and better social order. Their poetry, for this reason, is reactionary and not progressive.

Among other devastating effects of their ideology we must perforce place the decline of romanticism and mysticism in the literature of today. Democracy involves acceptance of the supreme value of the human personality. However, human personality, viewed in a truly scientific spirit and as a whole, must include the unsolved mysteries of consciousness. It follows, then, that the vision of the poet, which sees man as an immortal soul slowly casting off his inhibitions in the struggle with material forces and finally emerging as master of his environment, is a more correct and complete picture of man and the universe than that which looks upon him as a temporary conglomeration of electrons. This concept of man is, of course, derided as romantic moonshine by the writers who adhere to the teachings of dialectical materialism.

Furthermore, no more pitiful or tragic result of the materialistic philosophies can be found than the hiatus in modern poetry so far as the emotion of love is concerned. Dispassionately the revolutionists look upon the primitive urge of sex as a biological phenomenon and discount as wishy-washy sentimentality the selfless ecstasy that produced "Sonnets from the Portuguese" and those immortal poems in which Shakespeare assures us that "Love's not time's fool". However, women, regimented in the totalitarian state, are chiefly useful for the production of sturdy additions to the industrial army or to the military forces. The aesthetic appreciation of love as an ennobling and civilizing influence in human life has no place in the literature which strives to accustom us to the atmosphere of the lavatory and the urinal. If it is indeed the intention of these writers to batter down the defences of civilization to admit the barbarians, no more powerful weapon could be used than this which attempts to poison life at its fountain-head.

In conclusion, we may note that the specific onslaught upon mysticism implies certain arguments which may prove embarrassing to the campaign of the proletarian poets. It ill becomes those who have accepted the mystical theory of value in "Das Kapital" or the myth of the working-class as the saviour of mankind to object to idealism in realms outside of the domain

of politics or economics. Nor can those with rapturous faith in a "Fuehrer" or in the intangible theory of "blood and race" justly accuse others of lack of realism in dealing with any problem whatsoever it may be. Although it is no longer fashionable to mention God in a poem, we may be pardoned if we prefer the worship of an all-wise and compassionate Being to the fanaticism which bows the knee to a Hitler or a Stalin. But—we must passionately attack the apathy of living poets who have failed to meet the challenge of a new religion that evidently can inspire men to die upon a battle-field. Only under the chastening rod of suffering—only when the blitzkrieg of the dark forces brought death to our own threshold have we slowly awakened to the need for a spiritual renaissance. Have the fifth-columnists so undermined our defences that poets are lacking to reaffirm the eternal things of the spirit in militant defiance of all the hosts of evil.

Frightened by the advancing armies of the Left Wing shall we take refuge in the creation of a Fascist breastwork to defend the stronghold of poetry? Shall we accept defeat with T. S. Eliot and sit chattering amid the ruins of a world that is crashing to destruction beyond hope of salvation by human hands? If we thus give up the fight before it is begun, we may follow the poets of the Waste Land into the wilderness; or, like Thomas à Becket, we may take sanctuary in the seeming safety of an authoritarian creed; or, like Robinson Jeffers, prophet of Point Sur, we may build for ourselves a lonely tower of the Ego beyond contamination from contact with the teeming democratic millions. In these days, when the world is dark with the shadows of impending change, a natural instinct stirs the artist to flight in order that he may preserve the precious values threatened by totalitarian war. He dreams of a place "beyond the horizon" where he may rest securely till the storm has passed.

Yet, if he be truly a citizen of the City Beautiful, he will not desert his post as prophet and leader in the battle for freedom. Knowing more surely than the politicians and militarists the meaning and plan behind the shifting temporal scene, he will be found in the vanguard of the fight to establish a just social order in which our mechanical inventions and scientific discoveries may be made the servants and not the destroyers of men. For, by the very nature of things, the poet is a democrat, the champion of intellectual and spiritual freedom. Like Byron, he will play the role of knight-errant in defence of culture against barbarism; like Shelley, he will be fired by the passion to over-

throw tyranny and oppression; like Hugo, he will face exile and death to preserve the inalienable rights of man. But, if truly a creative artist, he will refuse to be dragged in chains behind the chariot of a dictator nor will he sacrifice his God-given right to freedom of thought upon the altar of any political doctrine. Amid the shifting panoramas of material progress and decay, there is a fixed point where the eternal verities are preserved by the few artists—The Master Builders, who have erected their tower of vision upon foundations which reach downward to the unchanging values in the spirit of man. When hypocrisy and greed have devastated the garden of the world, the desert places will blossom once more when touched by the living waters of art.

But what of those who have been caught in the toils of political propaganda? If the bombing-planes of revolutionary nihilism are permitted to destroy our present world, they may be forced to rake over the "bucket of ashes" in order to find material out of which to make the beginnings of a new heaven and a new earth.