

# LITERATURE AND THE ATOMIC BOMB

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SYMBOL of destructiveness, the atomic bomb represents the last or penultimate link in a long chain of causation. The cataclysmic energy it finally let loose on two Japanese cities was set free by the cooperative genius and labour of mankind. Historians cannot tell us why a technological secret is discovered in one age and not in another, but there can be no doubt that one important factor is the determining pressure of social need. In this sense, therefore, the atomic bomb was born of culture-conditioned desire: it is the culmination of planned and intensive research on an international scale. The Shade of Freud may smile ironically as he watches from a foreign grave the development of a civilization whose suicidal and sadistic impulses he had analyzed so remorselessly; his speculative construction of a death-instinct in man seems to stand vindicated.

Exploring the *terra incognita* of the unconscious, Freud beheld a witches' sabbath, a mythology with fauna as monstrous as any fathered by the Greek imagination. He had been one of the prophets pointing to the irrational and destructive daemon in man. But this clinical demonstration of the abnormality of mankind was not taken with sufficient seriousness. The people of the world blundered on, grappling with forces beyond their control. Now humanity is at the cross-roads. One road leads to universal disaster; the other at least offers a chance for building a better world.

The individual of our time, however, feels helpless; there is no hope on the horizon and no substantial faith in his heart; he is caught in the grip of forces he can neither placate nor control. Decisions for shaping his own life have been taken out of his hands. The meeting of statesmen in Paris, the sessions of the United Nations, the enactments of Congress, may make all the difference between Armageddon in which the world will be reduced to radioactive cinders and another chance for life. Whichever choice is made, he can only stand by and watch impotently. Even though it is difficult to believe, as life follows its accustomed routine, that atomic warfare will break out without warning, he knows well enough that the menace is real and not speculative.

All this greatly intensifies the human need not only for certainty in a precarious and hostile world but also for some reassuring faith. Here we have powerful testimony to reinforce the now popular thesis that the old reliance on rational insight has failed to work out. The ideal of living by reason alone results in the impoverishment of the personality. People now suffer from a terrific amount of destructiveness. The more hemmed in they are by frustrating circumstances, the more destructive they become, and their energy, instead of finding an outlet in creative channels, takes a diabolical turn.

Modern civilization, complex, technological, megalopolitan, crucifies the individual on a tree of doubt; he feels alone and insignificant. Though the trammels of external authority have been thrown off, he possesses no genuine internal freedom. The emotions are driven underground where they seek a spurious satisfaction. The sense of tragedy is destroyed—a loss that Joseph Wood Krutch documented so poignantly in *The Modern Temper*. But this fearful denial of death in the atomic age has to be paid for; it cripples the personality and cruelly limits the possibilities of life. Fear of death persists, however, and haunts the mind terrifyingly. Modern man, concludes Erich Fromm in *Escape from Freedom*, has given up his spontaneity, his selfhood, with the result that he is not only crippled intellectually but also emotionally starved. As life loses its meaning and the individual is reduced to nothingness, overwhelmed by a loneliness no drugs can drive away, he becomes more and more desperate.

He had thought to gain strength and assurance by identifying himself with some power outside of himself: the Leader. Others had embraced the Marxist cult of salvation by revolutionary action. When these solutions failed, modern man began to yearn for some mystical synthesis which would swallow up his individuality, destroy the self, and merge in some "higher" form of being. This is the faith which is to transcend his sense of nothingness, his feeling that he is a stranger and afraid in a world he never made. Faith alone can now save him. The individual abandons the quest for certainty and find peace in complete submission to a stronger power. Here we behold the disintegrating influence of doubt on the modern personality, and the imperative need to silence it, at no matter what cost.

The bursting of the atomic bomb added the last touch of horror to the Second World War. Since there is nothing for modern man to believe in, he must purge the self of worldliness

and, by seeking the Absolute, become pure spirit. Mr. Aldous Huxley, for example, goes back for inspiration to the esoteric writings of the older mystics, discovers in their work a hidden but sublime meaning. Scholar, critic, sophisticated aesthete, literary playboy of the Western World, then pacifist and militant mystic, Huxley has run the whole gamut of intellectualism. The author of *Brave New World* now rejects the scientific method and espouses "the perennial philosophy." Man, he declares, must humble himself before the mystery incarnate, chasten himself before the greatness of God. What must first be achieved is the subordination of the tyrannical ego. The analytical intellect must be silenced, the separate self annihilated.

It is a commentary on the intellectual pilgrimage of Huxley that in his later years he should devote himself with such ardor to "the perennial philosophy," which is nothing less than a philosophy of mysticism postulating a divine Reality that informs the world of things and thought. The perennial philosophy which he preaches so devotedly is the science, not of the personal self as psychology examines it, but of the eternal, transcendental Self which is a container for all other individualized selves. The divine Ground of being is based upon direct experience and is accessible to those who have reached to an understanding of the Absolute Principle of all existence: "That art thou." Huxley thus pursues a goal which is beyond all time. Politics is the cause and breeding ground of war. The Kingdom of God is within us, not in political reforms or secular organizations. This exaltation of the Inner Light is a retreat from the world of action, a plea for quietism and resignation. Science, technology, progress, have proved our undoing. The solution is to give up these interests, to live in and for God. Peace between nations will come when this transcendence has been achieved. The idolaters of progress had better heed this warning before they involve humanity in catastrophic ruin, of which the atomic bomb is the horrible harbinger.

Aldous Huxley's *Science, Liberty and Peace* plays the same foreboding tune. What is responsible for the threat to liberty and peace? Vividly he pictures the catastrophe that will surely befall us if we do not repent of our sins. Though he recognizes that science is a time-binder, steadily moving ahead, he still insists that the fruits of scientific research are invariably appropriated by the few for their own profit and gain. The theory of the progressive improvement of society is a fraud, but credulous people, swallowing the myth of a coming Golden

Age, identified happiness with material gadgets and technological efficiency. The result? Science has regimented life. The individual is reduced to a rubber stamp; the masses are "scientifically" co-ordinated. Science, Huxley maintains, does not present us with a complete picture of reality. It is grotesque, he says, that human beings should be regarded as machines or as blind aggregations of chemical elements. It is this sacrifice of human values by science which accounts for the dulling of conscience, the disregard of life, the indiscriminate but supremely efficient slaughter of the population, in modern warfare. Huxley's most damaging indictment is that "Up to the present time applied science has not been used mainly or primarily for the benefit of humanity at large . . ."

The writer of our time is being forced to choose between the Yogi and the Commissar. In Germany after the First World-War a wave of spiritualism set in. It seems as if our post-war world is going to repeat the process on a greatly magnified scale. In times of crisis, the intellectuals lose faith in the established values and cast about for a religion that will withstand the shocks and vicissitudes of life. This frantic search for mystical and supernatural panaceas is born of the union of fear and frustration. Disillusioned with the play of politics and the unfulfilled theories of progress, the intellectuals turn to the Absolute for salvation. The betrayal of politics and the failure of revolutionary hopes have led them to the belief that the Kingdom of Heaven is within.

Like Aldous Huxley, they have given up the "brave new world" in despair and invested all their spiritual capital in the Kingdom of God. There are, as Mr. Joseph Needham points out in *Time, the Refreshing River*, four logical possibilities into which this concept of the Kingdom of Heaven may be divided:

1. Here and now;
2. Here but not yet;
3. Not here but now already;
4. Not here and not yet.

The most fundamental distinction lies between those who seek to establish this Kingdom on earth and those who believe it represents a state of otherworldly fulfillment. Huxley, and there are others who share his views, seems to accept the third possibility: The Kingdom may be attained, but not by depen-

dence on material things. We must abandon our materialism, our faith in technics, our political programmes, our economic reforms. Human beings will achieve supreme happiness when, by a process of non-attachment, they accept the will of God.

Other intellectuals suffer from a neurosis induced by alienation. The writer's personality is often neurotic because he must stand aloof, refusing to accept any closed system of thought. Since he belongs to a minority, he is placed in a situation which breeds neurotic patterns of behaviour. A society that is uncomprehending and hostile completes the process of alienation. The neurosis of the intelligentsia, Koestler maintains, is an occupational disease and should be accepted as such. In addition, Koestler, like Erich Fromm, insists that the myth of the rational man must be exploded. Modern men are victims of split personalities, suffering from a conflict between thought and feeling, reason and emotion. The psyche is not a precise instrument of rational control.

Like Aldous Huxley, but for altogether different reasons, Koestler refuses to swallow the doctrine of determinism. He cannot believe in a predetermined and unalterable destiny. Scientific determinism reduces man to the status of an automaton, the resultant of the twin forces of heredity and environment. Quantitative explanations have their limits. This does not mean, however, that there is some mystery we cannot explore, nor is it an invitation to mysticism. Science has simply had to revise its laws of universality; there are different levels of organization.

In a brilliant essay Koestler analyzes the gravitational pull of two antithetical life-attitudes: that of the Commissar who believes in curing all evils by revolutionary means, and that of the Yogi who has lost all interest in the material world. The former concentrates on determining the dynamic relation between the individual and society, the latter is interested exclusively in the relation between the individual and God. According to Koestler, the Communist fixation has ended up with a Yogi conversion. Psychology has disclosed many irrational features in man, of which the nineteenth century was serenely unaware. Strangely enough, Koestler contends that the eruption of the irrational was caused by the work of the scientist. Physicists have travelled from the material and the empirical to indeterminate and the uncertain, from the factual to the postulational. A countermovement against materialism and rationality has

set in, a protest against scientific determinism and the tyranny of logic.

The repercussions of the atomic bomb have not yet made themselves felt in imaginative literature, though the prelude horror is there in abundance. The time for creative assimilation has been too short. The writer has not yet grasped all that is involved in the discovery of the atomic bomb. He fails to comprehend that the application of atomic energy is a social and political, not scientific, problem. The uses of science, whether humanly beneficent or malignly destructive, depend on the organization of society, the character of the culture in which science operates. Science is a function of society. The report issued by the United States Strategic Bombing Survey on "The Effects of the Atomic Bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki" did not arouse as much public interest and discussion as it deserved. The reason for that is simple enough. It is not an indictment but an objective military document concerned primarily with devising protective measures against the atomic bomb whereas what the people want is the elimination of the atomic-bomb threat by the outlawry of war. Everyone seems to realize that if the atomic bomb is not checked, civilization, certainly urban civilization, is doomed.

The imaginative writers, however, instead of working energetically to effect international means of control, have sought to escape from the phenomenal world altogether. The military mentality is interested in preparing concrete and steel structures and underground shelters which will withstand atomic assaults; many of the writers, even before the atomic bomb was hatched, fled in panic to the underground shelters of mysticism.

W. H. Auden, in *For the Time Being*, has gone into the depths and it remains to be seen whether he will emerge and under what conditions. Like Donne and T. S. Eliot, he has seen the skull beneath the flesh. The old Auden is dead. A new Auden makes his appearance on the literary stage more serious, more concerned with history, tradition, the religious consciousness, eternity. Times change, governments pass, nations go to war, famine settles upon a land, there are revolutions and despotisms, but the face of eternity is untroubled. Man walks on to his doom alone, hunting for a meaning, a source of faith, a God.

This is the obsession that greets us in "The Sea and the Mirror, A Commentary on Shakespeare's *The Tempest*."

Humanity is waltzing across the tightrope of life "As if there were no death or hope of falling down." Science may offer explanations and seek to exorcise the ghosts that haunt us, but the terror remains. In the story of *The Tempest* Auden discovers the symbolism with which to freight his meaning. Prospero is the symbol of the intellectual who in his pride of individualism seeks to be unique, to gain absolute power. Ariel, the spirit of freedom, reveals the truth to us if we believe in him. We have but to abandon desire. As Prospero says, he never suspected that the way of truth was the way of silence, and that speech betrays the soul. Caliban is the self we all harbor but fail to acknowledge, the monster within. In "Caliban to the Audience," we behold the pass to which modern man has come: the end of wonder, the emergent feeling of fatigue and futility. Science, Religion, Business, Art, these are fictions which have ceased to matter vitally. Industrial civilization is a curse from which man must be delivered, for it hides from him his true condition. It keeps him from true understanding. He seeks salvation, but cannot attain it.

"The Meditation of Simeon" pictures our doom. How is man to choose? Which is Reality and which is Appearance? Modern man has reached the ultimate boundary of consciousness. Beyond it he cannot go. Tragedy is now universal, since we are all smitten with the primal curse of self-love, tainted with the pride that led to the Fall. As Simeon says: "The Word could not be made Flesh until men had reached a state of absolute contradiction between clarity and despair in which they would have no choice but either to accept absolutely or to reject absolutely . . ." At the end the Narrator declares that modern man, inhabiting a great void, seeks to bear some burden of evil so that he may be redeemed.

"For the Time Being," A Christmas Oratoria, is full of mystical intuitions, perceptions of the mystery that lurks all around us. Reality vanishes, the self loses its identity:

"That is why we despair; that is why we would welcome  
 The nursery bogey or the winecellar ghost, why even  
 The violent howling of winter and war has become  
 Like a juke-box tune that we dare not stop. We are afraid  
 Of pain but more afraid of silence; for no nightmare  
 Of hostile objects could be as terrible as this Void.  
 This is the Abomination. This is the wrath of God."



And there is this confession by the Narrator as the poem goes on with its doom-haunted reflections:

"Alone, alone, about a dreadful wood  
Of conscious evil runs a lost mankind,  
Dreading to find its Father lest it find  
The Goodness it has dreaded is not good;  
Alone, alone, about our dreadful wood."

If one could only discover the fountainhead of meaning, the centre of Being. Man in the atomic age, facing the spectre of doom, is feverish in his quest for the unattainable, his search for answers to impossible questions, his protests, his hunger, his rebelliousness, his frustrated aspirations.

Arthur Koestler is fairly sanguine in his pessimistic conclusions. It is not alone the writers who are neurotic. Contemporary literature reflects a civilization that is pathologically disturbed. The symptoms of irrationality are widespread. Our most striking confirmation of contemporary irrationality is the institution of war. The crashing of the atomic bomb was a fitting epilogue to the madhouse drama of our time. Catastrophe looms before us, but we go on stampeding the stores for nylon hose and competing for the privilege of purchasing a new car. We are living illustrations of what psychoanalysts call "psychic suicide": people who wish to die but who fail to take their own life. Instead they commit suicide within themselves.

When the atomic bomb fell on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, a new world as well as a new age was born. The doomsday blast that razed these two cities produced a reaction of awe followed by panicky fear. Such neurotic anxiety gradually gave way to a feeling of reckless fatalism. What the devil! Mankind cannot live in a perpetual state of alarm. As Dostoyevski realized after his experience in Siberia, man is a creature who can endure and grow accustomed to anything.

But the writer feels helpless as well as hopeless. What can he do to avert catastrophe? The formulas of science are beyond his scope of understanding. He is a layman. He recognizes the danger, but he is baffled by the language and instrumentalities of science. And this development of science is a threat to his security as a writer. If international control of atomic energy is not devised, civilization may survive, but the work of the writer will perish. In the past the artist was sustained by the proud thought that though his body might rot, his creations would endure beyond the crack of doom. In the atomic age such consolations are a hollow mockery. In the coming war for



which preparations are going on behind the scenes, nothing will be spared. The trump of doom will soon sound. Our civilization will be one with Nineveh and Tyre.

Few writers have spoken out. Yet the reaction is bound to come—and soon. It is one world—or none. The mystics have been among the first to cry "*Mea culpa.*" But their strategy unfortunately is one of hysterical retreat. Science, which brought the first atomic bomb into being, is responsible for man's sin and all his woe. The cure, therefore, is to impose a moratorium on scientific activity. Let man repent of his enormities by merging with the spirit of the Absolute. What must be changed fundamentally is the heart of man. Salvation is to be found not in the United Nations but in union with God. Mysticism is the only escape from ultimate and universal disaster.

Other writers, as they study the drama of destruction about to be produced by Horror, Incorporated, will be led increasingly to speculate on the philosophy of death. A metaphysics of death, not necessarily morbid but obsessive, will replace their normal interest in traditional literary themes. The "tragic sense of life" will no longer be the monopoly of a Spanish writer like Unamuno, but will become the dominant trend of thought of Americans who as a rule are not given to such gloomy pre-occupations.

Then there are writers who, realistically appraising the danger confronting civilization, will come to the conclusion that the only hope for the future lies not in combating scientific progress but in allying themselves with those enlightened scientists who are militantly waging a campaign to establish international controls over the manufacture and use of atomic energy, so that the fruits of science may be a blessing instead of a curse to humanity. The task of the future is to harness the genius of science to humane and constructive ends. If the battle for the prevention of war is not won, then are the literary mystics justified in their despair, if not in their emergency prescription. In any case, if the battle is not won, it does not matter what new directions literature will take.

Norman Cousins's *Modern Man Is Obsolete* is an eloquent and moving appeal to modern man to awaken to the challenge of the scientific revolution. The tempo of technological change has proceeded so rapidly that our institutions and cultural habits can no longer keep up with them. Today the alternative is clear and imperative: while yet there is a brief breathing-spell, we must take the necessary steps to insure the safety and

preservation of civilization. Otherwise we shall perish as the result of our own greed and fear. That is the collective anxiety neurosis from which modern man suffers. He must put an end to war or the next war will wipe him out. Modern man is rapidly growing obsolete. Revolutionary changes are swiftly transforming the world in which he lives. He alone remains retarded, his intellect as yet unable to bridge the gap between power and wisdom.

What decision will he make? Has he the will power to choose wisely when the means of adaptation and control lie within his hands? There is still time, there is still a fighting chance. Man, if he so will it, can build an economy of abundance for all, or he can keep on his old course of fratricidal wars which will, this time, end in world disaster. The atomic energy that can blow us all to Kingdom Come can also assure us peace and plenty. As Norman Cousins points out, we must come to some sort of understanding as to the kind of life we wish to lead on earth. The attachment to the hoary myth of national sovereignty must be broken and the myth interred for all time. If literature in the atomic age has any high function, it is to bring to crucial awareness the fact that modern man is obsolete and to create the consciousness which will make possible the emergence of "the new man."