

## Dwight Macdonald / REFLECTIONS

ONE OF THE most interesting political documents in months is Professor Wolfgang Harich's "Testament of a Party Rebel," which appeared in the March 17th *Observer*. Professor Harich is thirty-six and held the Chair of Social Sciences at East Berlin University until recently, when he was given a ten-year sentence for treason. He is the leading spirit of a reformist movement among East German intellectuals. His *Testament* is a lucid and concrete exposition, but what makes it fascinating is its assumption that a Communist régime can be reformed from within, that is, by applying Marxist-Leninist principles. A few quotations will indicate its drift:

We hold that capitalism in Western Europe is obsolescent and socialism inevitable, but we do not think its victory demands a revolution [but rather that it] will take over from capitalism in a peaceful manner. We are, moreover, of the opinion that in many countries the Communists will have no part whatever in its direction.

The transition to socialism is an objective historical process; no party has a monopoly in it. We hold that in Western Germany only the Social Democratic Party can bring about socialism because the Communists have lost all influence on the West German working class. For the same reason, in Britain only the Labour Party, in Italy only the Socialist Party, can bring about socialism. . . . We reject, so far as Germany is concerned, the exclusive Communist claim to leadership because this conception is sectarian, unrealistic, and doomed to failure.

The countries of Eastern Europe are in need of political reforms but are in their economic structure ahead of most of Western Europe. Given radical de-Stalinisation, both the U.S.S.R. and the People's Democracies will gradually influence economic developments in Western Europe by their example. Simultaneously, Western conceptions of liberal democracy will influence the East and step by step enforce a retreat from political totalitarianism. . . .

After 1945 the Soviet Union has been both a

progressive and a reactionary factor in East Europe. It was progressive in ending capitalism and feudalism. But at the same time it exported a political system which had already become an impediment to further progress in the Soviet Union itself.

We want to reform the party from inside. We stick to Marxism-Leninism. We reject Stalinism. This means the theory of Marxism-Leninism must be broadened by taking account of the thought of Trotsky [!], and even more of Bukharin, of Rosa Luxemburg, and, partly, Karl Kautsky [!!] . . .

The domination of the party members by the party apparatus must be radically broken; "democratic centralism" must be made really democratic. . . . Production to be replanned with a view to raising the mass standard of living (Malenkov line). No more raising of working norms. . . . Workers' councils on the Yugoslav model in all socialist enterprises. . . . Restoration of complete freedom of thought. Peace with the Church, autonomy for the universities. Total restoration of the whole of law. Abolition of the State security police and of secret trials.

I don't know which is more striking about this document, the shrewdness and boldness with which it defines the major defects of Russian-style Communism, or the naïveté and timidity it shows in tracing their causes. It reminds me, to compare small things with great, of the documents we reformers inside the American Trotskyist movement used to produce. We, too, claimed to be the true Marxists, the restorers of the genuine tradition. We, too, blamed it all on the personal derelictions of individuals (Cannon was our Stalin), a most un-Marxist procedure by the way. Even the complaints have an old familiar ring: "We tried to acquaint the party leadership with this platform but found them unapproachable. . . . Internal party discussion is being strangled, the Press muzzled. . . . In such a situation, party discipline cannot be an end in itself. We take as our model Karl Liebknecht, who in 1914 and again in 1918 violated party discipline so as to save the party." But we were no more successful than Trotsky was

against Stalin (Trotsky, too, constantly proclaimed his loyalty to Marxism-Leninism) and for the same reasons: There is a totalitarian potential in Marx's theories and in Lenin's methods of party organisation which can always be exploited by the Stalins and Ulbrichts more effectively than the democratic side of Marxism can be used by their opponents. The distinction the Harich *Testament* makes between "progressive" collectivised economics and "reactionary" political totalitarianism, for example, is non-existent: Stalin prepared the ground for his total state in 1929-33 by collectivising agriculture (which took from the peasants their last bulwark against the centralised State—their own holdings) and by instituting the first Five Year Plan (which similarly extended political control over the workers).

All honour, then, to the Harich group for the courage with which they put forward the minimum essentials for a decent social order in East Germany. But, politically, they have still to reach the level of sophistication, bitter enlightenment but necessary, reached by Anton Ciliga (see his *The Russian Enigma*) and his fellow-prisoners in Stalin's Siberian "isolators" in the early thirties. Devoted socialists and revolutionaries, they slowly and painfully came to the conclusion that there was no contradiction, as Trotsky asserted, between economic collectivisation and political dictatorship, but . . . quite the contrary.

TO COLIN KENDALL, of Petersburg, Virginia, I am indebted for two American Dialogues. 1. A—"Have you found X's address in the files?" B—"Uh-huh." 2. A—"Do you have a date for lunch?" B—"Uh-huh." And to *The News of the World* for a further British Dialogue:

Mr. Parrish (defending): "What happened then?"

The girl: "I tried to push him off."

Mr. Parrish: "Did intercourse take place?"

The girl: "I don't actually know."

AFTER THE SUPERB five-volume *Poets of the English Language* which W. H. Auden edited with Norman Pearson, his new anthology, *The Faber Book of Modern American Verse* is rather of a let-down. There is an introduction in Mr. Auden's best speculative style, which is very good indeed, on the difference between English and American poetry—and on Anglo-American differences in general, his bit-champing, curvetting imagination running away with him as usual and with the usual unusual mixture of boldness and precision.\* And there are some

\* Two sentences, however, seem wrong: "America has always been a country of amateurs where the professional, that is to say, the man who claims authority as a member of an élite which knows

palpable hits: the almost complete omission of Carl Sandburg, our aged but not venerable Grass-Roots Bard, and the inclusion of light verse like Don Marquis' Archie the cockroach poems, Vachel Lindsay's "Factory Windows Are Always Broken," Phyllis MacGinley, and Ogden Nash, and some poems by younger writers which might be called light-heavy (or welter-weight) verse: Theodore Roethke's "Academic," Winfield Townley Scott's "Mr. Whittier," Elizabeth Bishop's "Roosters," Richard Wilbur's "Potato," and Anthony Hecht's "Japan."

But I disagree with Mr. Auden's handling of the two basic anthological problems: that of "anthology pieces," important but shop-worn poems; and that of the Few or the Many. On the latter, I agree with the late F. O. Matthiessen's introduction to *The Oxford Book of American Verse*, in which he argues for including more poems by fewer poets rather than the reverse. Except for the modern old-masters (Robinson, Frost, Stevens, Pound, etc.), Mr. Auden gives two or three poems, usually, and sometimes only one, for each author. The result is confusing and superficial; one cannot get any real sense of the individual poets from such snippets; there are too many standees in the rear of the omnibus. I think it part of the anthologist's job to discriminate between the best and the next-best and fully to represent the former, omitting wholly if necessary the latter; even if his choice be wrong-headed, at least one gets some idea of the poets he *has* chosen. Mr. Auden has met the second problem for the most part by simply omitting poems that have often appeared in other anthologies. But this seems too blunt a method. The problem is most acute with Frost, our most anthologised poet. Granted that "Mending Wall," "Birches," and "After Apple Picking" have been anthologised to death, it seems to me perverse to omit such slightly shop-worn but major poems as "Home Burial," "The Death of the Hired Man," "A Servant to Servants," "Out, Out," "Acceptance," "An Old Man's Winter Night," and "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" (all of them, by the way, in Mr. Matthiessen's *Oxford Book*), in favour of a dozen less familiar but also less important poems.

Mr. Auden's anthology suggests some reflections on modern poetry, if the rankest of out-

the law in some field or other, is an object of distrust and resentment. . . . One symptom of this is that curious American phenomenon, the class in 'Creative Writing.' I would say the contrary: that the professional, the "expert," is far more honoured in America than in England, and, as one who lately taught "Creative Writing," that such courses express a typical American itch for know-how, the idea behind them being that a professional writer helps the student rise out of amateurdom by teaching him the tricks of the trade.

siders, the merest of amateurs, may be allowed his two cents' worth. Although the editor, in keeping with his principle of covering many poets slightly rather than a few intensively, has cast his net wide, the poets represented are almost excessively mature, at least by Keats-Shelley standards. Out of eighty-one poets represented, fifty-five are over fifty and all but nine are over forty. This seems interesting, and possibly significant. I find that my comprehension—and therefore, in my case at least, my enjoyment—of the poets diminishes with ominous regularity as I read through the volume, which is arranged chronologically. Why is recent poetry so hard to understand? (The same thing happens with me, in art: the old masters of the modern—Picasso, Klee, Matisse, Gris, etc., who correspond to Robinson, Frost, Eliot, Cummings, etc.—are easy and pleasurable, but I just don't get their successors, the abstract expressionists and now the "action painters.") It may be, of course, that I've become used to the old-modern masters and that I'm blind to the merits of the really new, the new new, so to speak, as the Impressionists, Cézanne, and Picasso were successively rejected by old fogies habituated to the old new but not to the new new. It may also be that painting and poetry since the thirties has gotten into a dead-end of solipsist incommunication. I'm willing to call it an open question, but I do insist on that much of a concession. Which, of course, I won't get—all I'll be told is that they laughed at Watt and Fulton and they sneered at Cézanne and Picasso, and where are "they" now? But perhaps cultural history doesn't repeat itself forever, perhaps the new new is not the heir of the old new but its epigone. I find it suspicious that Mr. Auden excludes poets born since 1923, pleading "exigencies of space" and nervously adding: "This does not mean, of course, that I think no one under thirty worthy of inclusion." The explanation doesn't explain, and is contradicted by the apology. He describes it as "a necessarily arbitrary line" but doesn't explain the necessity, which is odd in so articulate a critic. *Why* draw an arbitrary line? If a twenty-one-year-old poet has written good things, and such things have happened in literary history, why not include him? Could this be prudence masking itself as necessity?

I HAVE BEEN warned that writing about British humour is dangerous even for an Englishman. But I feel I must state there is at present something lacking in it, namely, humour. There are exceptions: the *Observer's* Paul Jennings (also its self-parody contest—in general, the weeklies' readers' competitions turn up a surprising amount of humorous humour), the *Express'*

Giles, the *Spectator's* Strix (and its prophetic calendar for 1957), but not, no, not Mr. P. G. Wodehouse, nor yet again Mr. Claude Cockburn. These last two, beloved of *Punch*, illustrate what to this American observer at least appears to be the trouble: British humour has gone American. Or rather what is considered American over here—a leaning towards the crude, the overstressed, the unsubtle. This definition, in humour at least, is in fact an instance of a cultural time-lag; for these were the characteristics of American humour in the 19th (rather than the 20th) century. It was then that England had Lear, Carroll, and W. S. Gilbert, while we had backwoods grotesques like Josh Billings and Petroleum V. Nasby. With Mark Twain, a genius who was able to perform the miracle of refining, so to speak, the Petroleum tradition, American humour began to be funny. He was followed, at the turn of the century, by Finley Peter Dunne's Mr. Dooley monologues (when Henry James returned for his memorable re-examination of the American Scene, the only writer he wanted to meet was Dunne), and then by Ring Lardner, whose dead-pan, throw-it-away style marked the transition from the old exuberance to the new restraint. England held its own with Beerbohm and Saki until the twenties, but I am not aware of any first-rate British humorist since then. Their true successors are not Wodehouse, with his broad clowning and his mechanical class-humour formulæ (his dim-witted, right-ho-ing noblemen are as tiresome as Nasby's dim-witted by-gum-ing provincials) but rather the *New Yorker* wits of 1925–35: Benchley, Perelman, Ogden Nash, Thurber, White. I am assuming that restraint, subtlety, and precision are essentials in humorous writing. But even if this be not always true (uneasy memories arise of Rabelais, Aristophanes—and Shakespeare), there has certainly been a curious reversal of rôles between English and American humour in the 19th and 20th centuries.\*

WHEN IT COMES to humour on the stage, the contrast is even greater. British comedians strike the cold American eye as lacking in finesse and technique, like British heavyweights. They even laugh

\* It is only fair to add that the *New Yorker* humorists for years have been either dead or, except for Perelman and sometimes Nash, shadows of their former selves. Thurber in particular has shown an embarrassing vein of sentimentality, as cf. the difference between the picture of his home-town, Columbus, Ohio, in his classic, *My Life and Hard Times*, and in his recent reminiscences about Ohio State University. The cartoonists have held up better—the durable Arno, producing since 1925, Steig, Price, Darrow, the late Cobean, Addams, and the inspired Steinberg.

at their own jokes, a *gaucherie* that would not be tolerated in Sioux City, Iowa. Compare the antics of a Gracie Fields, who got her laughs the hard way, belching, scratching herself, bellowing, and cavorting around, with the professorial dignity of an Ed Wynn; or, to take two current examples, neither of them any great shakes, compare Jack Benny's weary, low-voiced delivery with the exuberant ingenuousness of Norman Wisdom. English audiences are much readier to laugh than American ones—sometimes it almost seems pathetic, this eagerness to be amused—and there is a *gemütlich* feeling between audience and actors that is quite lacking in New York (except for Harlem, another tight little island of racial homogeneity). This is very nice and warms the heart but it is a pity there isn't more to laugh at. What gusts and gales of merriment swept the theatre all through that astonishing period piece, *Hotel Paradiso*, a 1910-style French bedroom farce of uncompromising corniness. (When Alec Guinness emerged from a chimney, in which he had tried to hide from the Jealous Husband, with his face blackened with soot, what roars of mirth—and as for the half-hour, or so it seemed, during which, owing to a chain of circumstances too complex to unravel here, he was flattened against a bedroom wall while an augur-bit, wielded from the other side by the Jealous Husband, bored into his backside . . . well!) English comedies often sound as if they were being improvised on the spot, as last summer's *A Likely Tale*, a rickety "vehicle" for the considerable talents at hamming-it-up of Robert Morley and Margaret Rutherford. Their stage personalities expanded before one's eyes like fast-growing tropical plants in the warm atmosphere of affectionate enjoyment generated by the audience.

"Only one British institution could possibly appeal equally to the Queen, Dame Edith Sitwell, Prince Bernhard, a Russian Minister of Culture, the House of Lords, and every rugger club in the land," the *Observer* has observed, apropos "The Crazy Gang," a group of five comedians that has been convulsing the British Isles for twenty-five years. Their current production, *These Foolish Kings*, I attended at the

Victoria Palace in the interest of cultural research. The Crazy Gang are slapstick comedians, but not as we understand the term, not the ballet-like precision of Chaplin or Keaton or the Keystone cops, but rather just the opposite. They are so relaxed that one expects them to start a game of gin-rummy on the stage—and if they haven't, yet, it's because they haven't thought of it, yet. Theirs is the British amateur or muddling-through style at its worst. Thus the climactic, or what should have been the climactic, skit, was a burlesque Western drama which was interrupted so frequently by stooges in the audience that its form was irretrievably shattered; indeed, if they had been in the pay of a rival gang of comedians, the stooges could not have more successfully wrecked the production. The timing of these interruptions was consistently off, so that they collided violently with the onstage action, with disastrous results to both, and laughs were extorted from the nervous and bewildered audience only by the most primitive kind of shouting. There was also constant reliance on the pun (considered in America a rather *passé* form of wit) and on bathroom humour (ditto). My own view is that a chamber-pot is unfunny even when worn on the head as a Grecian helmet, nor have I ever been able to see the excretory functions as in themselves hilarious. My view is, further, that humour, like drama, is generated only by some kind of tension; and that in the case of humour, the tension comes from the unexpected violation of a form that has been established already in the audience's minds (it can be established either by the comedian or by the culture), and that if the violations are so excessive and incessant as to obscure the form, then the result is un-promising. So I found the Crazy Gang (the very name, I must confess, seems a little, shall we say, obvious) crazy enough but not very funny. However, the Queen, the rugger clubs, and Dame Edith Sitwell (who has also endorsed Colin Wilson's *The Outsider*—Dame Edith Sitwell seems to be handing out blurbs these days with the lavishness of a Manhattan traffic cop giving out parking tickets) all disagree, so The Gang must have something I've somehow missed.

# DISCUSSION

## Our Hydrogen Bomb

*"I could not conceivably vote for a motion which contained the words 'in the megaton range' when I have not the slightest idea what the 'megaton range' is."*

The Archbishop of Canterbury, quoted in the *Manchester Guardian*, April 3.

The latest developments about H-bombs as I write are the Bermuda Communiqué, the Prime Minister's statement in the House on April 2nd, and the White Paper on Defence.

In his statement, the Prime Minister defended the Bermuda Communiqué and enlarged upon it. He said: "I take a little pride in the fact that the communiqué was not cast in the rather highfalutin language which is sometimes thought necessary at the conclusion of such meetings. It set out in a precise form a number of specific points which had been dealt with." We are therefore entitled to examine it rigorously.

In Annexe 2, the Communiqué said: "We recognise that there is sincere concern that continued nuclear testing may increase world radiation to levels which might be harmful. Studies by independent scientific organisations confirm our belief that this will not happen so long as testing is continued with due restraint."

And again: "We declare our intention to continue to conduct nuclear tests only in such a manner as will keep world radiation from rising to more than a small fraction of the levels which might be hazardous."

The first thing to notice is the phrase: "confirm our belief." The Prime Minister and the President, therefore, believed that the H-bomb tests were harmless before they consulted the scientists at all. If this were really so, we should have to conclude that they were foolish and arrogant. If it is not so, we have to conclude that the Communiqué is careless.

The Communiqué speaks of a level of radiation in the world which "might be harmful" or "might be hazardous." The picture is of somebody doing something which is quite all right up to a well-defined point and then, click, after that the red light goes on. Now let us turn to the scientific report on which the Government has been relying. I quote from the Medical Research Council Report of last June, Cmd. 9780, at para. 127. "There is no known threshold for the induction of gene muta-

tions by radiation; that is to say, any additional exposure, however small, must be expected to raise the mutation rate." And again, at Annexe N: "It appears that each unit quantity of radiostrontium absorbed by the bone confers a certain probability of bone-tumour formation... On the whole, the experiments seem in favour of a proportionality between the frequency of tumours produced in a given length of time and the amount of radioactive material in the body even at low dose levels."

There is a clear contradiction between the Communiqué and the Report. Either, therefore, the Report is superseded (and we are entitled to know what by) or else the Communiqué, the basic policy document in this terrible matter, is once again careless.

In his speech on April 2nd the Prime Minister did in fact avoid these words, *harmful* and *hazardous*, and dwelt instead on the words *insignificant* and *negligible*. "The contribution to the external radiation hazard from bomb tests is very small, almost negligible." And, making a rather different point: "So far as our own tests are concerned... there will be no perceptible radiation outside the test area. This is my answer. I am satisfied from the medical and biological point of view that the radiation effects of this explosion" (read *these explosions*) "will be insignificant."

He did not say how much extra radiation would be inflicted on the world as a result of our tests, but invited us to accept his assurance that it will be negligible. But *negligible* is a subjective word; what A neglects, B may wish to pay attention to. An invitation to neglect an unknown quantity cannot be reasonably accepted and should not be pressingly extended, especially during the defence of a careless document.

To turn now to those passages in his speech where the Prime Minister justified the abandoning of the search for a way to stop all tests in the world. It is now for the first time thought possible to explode a bomb (of unspecified size) in such a way that the explosion would not be perceptible to measuring instruments thousands of miles away. The Russians might agree to suspend tests, and then go ahead without our knowing. Now big nuclear explosions can be detected in two ways; by the shock wave in the air and the earth, and by the increase in radioactive matter falling from the stratosphere. If the shock wave is imperceptible, the explosion is not